

No. 6

No. 6

Part One

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Beyond

Side Stories

Afterwords

No.6

Part One

A novel by
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Translated by
Nostalgia on 9th Avenue

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No. 6 is a nine-volume Japanese novel series written by Atsuko Asano and published by Kodansha between October 2003 and June 2011. It was subsequently adapted as a manga drawn by Hinoki Kino and as an anime television series produced by Bones.

The present edition is based on the English translations created by Nostalgia on 9th Avenue, which can be found at 9th-ave.blogspot.com/p/no-6.html. All nine volumes of the novel are included; as well as the special *Beyond* volume, the side stories *Days in the West Block* (included with volume 4 of the manga) and *Flowers for beautiful days* (volume 6 of the manga), and the author's afterwords found in several volumes.

As these translations are neither authorized nor licensed, please refrain from buying or selling this book. To support the author, consider buying the original novels or the manga. You can also contact Kodansha Children's Books at children.kodansha.co.jp/contact to get *No. 6* published in English.

In preparing the present edition, a few decisions were made to adapt the translations to a printed book: First, the story was divided into three parts, each comprising several volumes of the novel, to have appropriate book-sized parts. In addition, the side stories were moved to part three, as they do not contribute to the main story. For similar reasons, the author's afterwords for each volume were collectively moved to the end of part three. Regarding the text, not all of the many notes and references added by the translator are present; instead, only selected footnotes deemed relevant for understanding the story were included. At last, some changes regarding formatting and presentation were made to improve the reading experience.

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Volume I

The year is 2013, in the city of No. 6 — the city that embodies the highest ideals of humankind. Shion has been raised here as a high-ranking elite since the age of two, but on the night of his twelfth birthday, his fate is turned upside-down when he meets a boy who calls himself Nezumi. *Why did I open the window that night? I would never have needed to know what it was like to fight, starve, or suffer in anguish...*

1

NEZUMI, DRIPPING WET

NEZUMI WAS in a tunnel. In the darkness, he drew a quiet breath. The air smelled faintly of moist dirt. He inched his way forward carefully. The tunnel was small. It was just big enough for Nezumi to squeeze through, and it was dark. Light was nowhere to be seen, but it soothed his soul. He liked dark and small spaces. In these spaces, no large living things could come to capture him. Momentary relief and tranquility. There was a dull pain from the wound on his shoulder, but it wasn't enough to concern him. The problem, rather, was with the amount of blood he had lost. The wound wasn't deep. It had only grazed a little bit of his shoulder. By now, the blood should have begun clotting and closed the open wound. But the wound was still... He felt a warm and slippery sensation. It was still bleeding.

—Anticoagulant. They had coated the bullet with it.

Nezumi bit his lip. He wanted something to stop his bleeding. Throm-

bin, or aluminum salt. No, not even so much as that. At least, clean water to wash his wound.

His legs buckled. Dizziness overcame him.

—Not good.

Fainting from lack of blood, maybe. If it was, that would be bad. Soon, he wouldn't be able to move at all.

—But maybe I wouldn't mind.

He heard a voice inside him.

Maybe it wouldn't be so bad to curl up, unable to move, shrouded in damp darkness. He would nod off to sleep, a long sleep — and peaceful death. It wouldn't hurt, not that much. It might feel a little cold.

No, that would be taking it too lightly. His blood pressure would plummet, he would have trouble breathing, his limbs would be paralysed ... of course it wouldn't be painless.

—I want to sleep.

He was tired. Cold. Hurting. Unable to move. He only had to suffer for a little while, he told himself. Stay still, rather than struggle fruitlessly. There may be people pursuing him, but none who would rescue him. Then, he should just put an end to living. Curl up here, and just go to sleep. Just give up.

His feet continued forward. His hands ran along the walls. Nezumi gave a forced smile. His voice was telling him to give up, but his body still doggedly carried on. How troublesome it all was.

—An hour left. No, thirty minutes.

Thirty minutes was the time limit for any free movement he had. In that time, he had to stop his bleeding, and secure a spot to rest. The bare requirements to keep living.

There was movement in the air. The darkness before him was gradually becoming lighter. He took each step painstakingly. He emerged

from his dark and narrow side-tunnel to a wider area surrounded by white concrete walls. Nezumi knew that this was a part of a sewer tunnel that had been in use until ten and some-odd years ago, the end of the twentieth century. Contrary to the ground above, No. 6's underground facilities were not very well-maintained. Much of it had been left in the same state as they were from the last century. This sewer tunnel was just another one of those, abandoned and forgotten. Nezumi couldn't have asked for a better environment. He closed his eyes and visualized the map of No. 6 that he had extracted from the computer.

There was a good chance that this was the abandoned route K0210. If it was, then it should extend close to the high-income residence area called Chronos. Of course, it could very well also lead to a dead end. But if he had decided to live, then moving forward was his only option. Nezumi in his current state had neither choice nor time to deliberate. The air shifted. It wasn't the stale dampness of before, but fresh air carrying plenty of moisture. He remembered that it was raining hard up above. This passage was definitely connected to the upper world. Nezumi inhaled, and smelled the scent of rain.

* * *

September 7, 2013 was my twelfth birthday. On this day, a tropical low pressure-system, or hurricane, that had developed a week ago off the southwestern area of the North Pacific Ocean, made its way north, gathering power, until it hit us directly in the city of No. 6.

It was the best present I had ever gotten. I was filled with excitement. It was only past four in the evening, but already it was getting dark. The trees in the yard bowed in the winds as leaves and small branches were torn off. I loved the clamorous noise they made. It was the

bare opposite of this neighbourhood's usual atmosphere, which hardly involved any loudness.

My mother preferred small trees over flowers, and through her enthusiastic planting of almond, camellia and maple trees all over the place, our yard had grown into a small grove. But thanks to that, the noise today was unlike any other. Each tree made a different groaning sound. Torn leaves and branches smacked against the window, plastered to them, and then were whipped away again. Time and time again, gusts of wind burst against the window.

I itched to open it. Even strong winds like these were not enough to crack the shatter-resistant glass, and in this atmosphere-controlled room, humidity and temperature remained stable and unchanged. That was why I wanted to open the window. Open it, and bring in the air, the wind, the rain, a change from the usual.

"Shion," called Mother's voice from the intercom. "I hope you're not thinking of opening the window."

"I'm not."

"Good... did you hear? The lower lands of the West Block are flooding. Terrible, isn't it?"

She didn't sound like she felt terrible at all.

Outside No. 6, the land was divided into four blocks — East, West, North and South. Most of the East and South blocks were farmland or grazing pastures. They provided for 60% of all plant-made foods and 50% of animal food products. In the north, there was an expanse of deciduous forest and mountains, under complete conservation by the Central Administration Committee.

Without the Committee's permission, none could enter the area. Not that anyone would want to wander into the wilderness, which was completely unmaintained.

In the centre of the city there was an enormous forest park that took up more than a sixth of the city's total area. In it, one could experience the seasonal changes and interact with the hundreds of species of small animals and insects that inhabited it.

A vast majority of the citizens were content with the wildlife inside the park. I didn't like it much. I especially disliked the City Hall building that loomed in the centre of the park. It went five stories underground and ten stories above, and was shaped like a dome. No. 6 had no skyscrapers, so maybe "looming" was a little exaggerated. Nevertheless, it gave off an ominous feeling. Some people called it The Moondrop from its round, white shape, but I thought it resembled more of a round blister on the skin. A blister that had erupted in the centre of the city. As if to surround it, the city hospital and Safety Bureau building stood close by, and were connected with pathways that looked like gas pipes. Surrounding that was a green forest. The forest park, a place of peace and tranquility for the good citizens. All the plants and animals that inhabited this place were minutely monitored, and all flowers, fruits and small creatures of each area in every season were thoroughly recorded.

Citizens could find out the best time and place to watch or gaze at these through the city's service system. Obedient, perfected nature. But even it would be raging on a day like this. It was, after all, a hurricane.

A branch with green leaves still attached smacked into the window. A gust of wind followed, and its roar resonated for some time. At least, I thought I could hear it resonate. The soundproof glass cut me off from any outside noise. I wanted the window out of my way. I wanted to hear, to feel, the raging wind. Almost without thinking, I threw the window open. The wind, the rain, came blowing in. The wind rumbled as if coming from deep within the earth. It was a roar I

hadn't heard in a long time. I too, raised my own hands and let out a yell. It would scatter on the storming winds, and reach no one's ears. Yet still I shouted, with no meaning. Raindrops flew into my throat. I knew I was being childish, but I couldn't stop. It began raining harder. How exciting it would be to take off all my clothes and burst out into the rain. I tried to imagine myself naked, running around in the torrential storm. I would definitely be declared insane. But it was an irresistible temptation. I opened my mouth wide again, and swallowed the droplets. I wanted to repress this strange impulse. I was afraid of what lurked inside me. At times, I find I'm overwhelmed by a tumultuous, savage surge of emotions.

Break it.

Destroy it.

Destroy what?

Everything.

Everything?

There was a mechanical warning sound. It was notifying me that the atmospheric conditions in the room were deteriorating. Eventually, the window would close and lock automatically. Dehumidification and temperature control would commence, and all wet things in the room, including me, would be dried instantly. I wiped my dripping face on the curtain and made my way to the door to turn the air control system off.

What if, at that moment, I had obeyed the warning sound? Sometimes, I still wonder about it. If I had closed the window, and chosen to stay in the adequately dry comfort of my room, my life would have been entirely different. It wasn't regret, not anything like that. It was just a peculiar thought. The one thing that changed my whole world, so

meticulously controlled up until now, happened from that one small coincidence — that on September 7, 2013, on a stormy day, I by chance had opened the window. It was a very peculiar thought.

And though I don't have a particular God I believe in, there are times when I do feel a certain conviction toward the term 'Divine Hand'.

I turned the switch off. The warning sound stopped. A sudden silence fell over the room.

Heh.

I heard a faint laugh behind me. Instinctively I whirled around, and gave a small cry. There was a boy standing there, soaking wet. It took me a while to realize that he was a boy. He had shoulder-length hair that almost hid his small face. His neck and arms that protruded from his short-sleeved shirt were thin. I couldn't tell whether he was a boy or a girl, whether he was very young or older than he looked. My eyes and conscience were too focused on his left shoulder, which was stained red, to think about anything else.

It was the colour of blood. I had never seen anyone bleeding as profusely as he was. Instinctively I was extending my hand out to him. The intruder's figure vanished at my fingertips. At the same time, I felt an impact, and I was slammed against the wall with a strong force. I felt an icy sensation on my neck. They were fingers, five of them, closing around my throat.

* * *

"Don't move," he said.

He was shorter than me. Choked from below, I strained to get a look at his eyes. They were a dark, yet at the same time, light, grey. I'd never seen a colour like that before. His fingers clenched. He didn't look strong at all, yet I was completely unable to move. It wasn't

something a normal person could do.

"I see," I managed to gasp. "You're used to doing this."

The pair of grey eyes were unblinking. Their gaze still fixed, they grew calm like the gentle surface of the ocean, and I could read no colour of menace, fear or murderous intent from them. They were very quiet eyes. I could feel my own panic subsiding.

"I'll treat your wound," I said, licking my lips. "You're hurt, aren't you? I'll treat it."

I could see myself reflected in the intruder's eyes. For a moment, I felt like I would get sucked into them. I averted my gaze and looked down, and repeated myself.

"I'll treat the wound. We have to stop the bleeding. Treat. You understand what I'm saying, right?"

The grip around my neck loosened slightly.

"Shion."

My mother's voice carried over from the intercom. "You have the window open, don't you."

I sucked in a breath. I felt alright. It was alright, I reassured myself. I could talk with a normal voice.

"The window?... Oh, yeah, it's open."

"You'll catch a cold if you don't close it."

"I know."

I could hear my mother laughing on the other end.

"You're turning twelve today and you're still acting like a little boy."

"Okay, I get it... Oh, mom?"

"What?"

"I have a report to write. Can you leave me alone for a bit?"

"A report? Hasn't your Gifted Curriculum just started?"

"Huh? Oh... well, I have a lot of assignments to do."

"I see... don't overwork yourself. Come downstairs at dinnertime." Cold fingers drew away from my throat. My body was free. I stretched my hand out to restart the air control system. I made sure to leave the security system off. If I didn't, it would detect the intruder as a foreign presence, and would set off a piercing alarm. If the person was recognized as a legitimate resident of No. 6 that wouldn't happen, but I couldn't imagine that this soaking intruder would have a citizenship. The window closed, and warm air began to circulate in the room. The grey-eyed intruder half-collapsed into a kneel, and leaned against the bed. He let out a long, deep breath. He was weakened considerably. I took out the emergency kit. First I took his pulse, then tore his shirt open, and started cleaning the wound.

"This..."

I couldn't help but stare. I wasn't familiar with this type of injury. It had carved out a shallow ridge in the flesh of his shoulder joint.

"A bullet wound?"

"Yeah." It was a casual answer. "It just missed. What's your term for this? A graze wound?"

"I'm no specialist. I'm still a student."

"Of the Gifted Curriculum?"

"Starting next month."

"Wow. High IQ, huh?"

There was a tinge of sarcasm in his voice. I lifted my gaze from his wound, and looked him in the eye.

"Are you making fun of me?"

"Making fun of? When I'm being treated by you? Never. So what's your specialization?"

I told him I specialized in ecology. I had just been accepted into the Gifted Curriculum. Ecology. It had the least to do with how to treat

a bullet wound. My first experience. It was a little exciting. Let's see, what do I have to do first? Disinfect, dress... oh yes, I had to stop the bleeding.

"What are you doing?"

He stared as I took a syringe out of the disinfecting kit, and swallowed.

"Local anaesthesia. Alright, here goes."

"Wait, wait a minute. You're gonna freeze it, and then what?"

"Sew it."

Supposedly I had said this with such a grin that I looked like I couldn't have been enjoying myself more. It was something I found out much later on.

"Sew it! Can you get any more primitive than that?"

"This isn't a hospital. I don't have state-of-the-art facilities, and besides, I think a bullet wound is pretty primitive itself."

The crime rate in the city was infinitely close to zero. The city was safe, and there was no need for the average citizen to carry a gun. If they did, it would only be for hunting. Twice a year, rules were lifted for hunting season. Olden-day firearms slung over their shoulders, hobbyists would venture into the northern mountains. Mother didn't like them. She said she didn't understand how people could kill animals for enjoyment, and she wasn't the only one. In periodic censuses, 70% of citizens expressed discomfort at hunting as a form of sport. Killing poor innocent animals—how violent, how cruel...

But the bleeding figure in front of me was no fox or deer. It was a human.

"I can't believe it," I muttered to myself.

"Believe what?"

"That there are people who'll shoot at other people... unless... don't tell me that someone from the hunting club shot you by mistake?"

His lip curled. He was smiling.

"Hunting club, huh. Well, I guess you can call them that. But they didn't shoot by mistake."

"They knew they were shooting at a human? That's against the law."

"Is it? Instead of a fox, they just happened to be hunting a human. A manhunt. I don't think it's against the law."

"What do you mean?"

"That there are hunters, and the hunted."

"I don't get what you're talking about."

"I figured you wouldn't. You don't need to understand. So are you seriously going to give me a needle? Don't you have spray-on anaesthetic or something?"

"I've always wanted to try giving a needle."

I disinfected the wound, and applied the anaesthetic with three injections around the wounded area. My hands shook a little from nerves, but somehow it went smoothly.

"It should start getting numb soon, and then—"

"You're gonna sew it."

"Yeah."

"Do you have any experience?"

"Of course not. I'm not going into medicine. But I do have basic knowledge of vessel suturing. I saw it in a video."

"Basic knowledge, huh..."

He drew a deep breath, and looked at me directly in the face. He had thin, bloodless lips, hollowed cheeks, and pale parched skin. He had the face of someone who had not lived a decent life. He really did look like an animal prey who had been chased relentlessly, exhausted, with no place left to run. But his eyes were different. They were emotionless, but I could feel a fierce power emanating from them. Was

it vitality? I wondered. I had never met anyone in my life with eyes as memorable as those. And those eyes were staring unblinkingly at me.

“You’re strange.”

“Why would you say that?”

“You haven’t even asked for my name.”

“Oh, yeah. But I haven’t introduced myself either.”

“Shion¹, right? Like the flower?”

“Yeah. My mother likes trees and wildflowers. How about you?”

“Nezumi².”

“Huh?”

“My name.”

“Nezumi... that’s not it.”

“Not what?”

That eye colour wasn’t that of any rat. It was something more elegant. Like... the sky just before the crack of dawn — didn’t it look like that? I blushed, embarrassed at catching myself spouting off like some lame poet. I purposefully raised my voice.

“Right, here goes.”

Remember the basic steps of the suture, I told myself. Set down two or three stable threads, and use them as support threads to make a continuous suture... this must be conducted with utmost care and precision... in the case of a continuous suture...

My fingers trembled. Nezumi watched my fingertips in silence. I was nervous, but a little excited too. I was putting what used to be just textbook knowledge into action. It was exhilarating.

Suture complete. I pressed a piece of clean gauze onto the wound. A bead of sweat slid down my forehead.

¹shion / 紫苑 / シオン, Japanese for *aster*

²nezumi / 鼠 / ネズミ, Japanese for *mouse* or *rat*

“So you *are* smart.”

Nezumi’s forehead was also damp with perspiration.

“I’m just good with my hands.”

“Not just your hands. That brain of yours. You’re only twelve, right? And you’re going into the Gifted Curriculum of the highest educational institution. You’re super elite.”

This time, there was no tinge of sarcasm. Nor any hint of awe. I silently put away the soiled gauze and instruments.

Ten years ago, I was ranked highest in the city’s intelligence examination for two-year-olds. The city provides anyone who ranks highest in skill or athletic ability with the best education they could wish for. Until the age of ten, I attended classes in an environment outfitted with the latest facilities amongst other classmates like myself. Under the eye of a roster of expert instructors, we were given a solid and thorough education of the basics, after which we were each provided with our own set of instructors to move into a field of specialization that was suited for us. From the day that I was recognized as the highest ranker, my future was promised to me. It was unshakable. No small force could make it crumble. At least, that was how it was supposed to be.

* * *

“Looks like a comfortable bed,” Nezumi murmured, still leaning against it.

“You can use it. But change first.”

I dumped a clean shirt, a towel, and a box of antibiotics into Nezumi’s lap. And then, on a whim, I decided to make cocoa. I had enough basic cooking appliances in my room to make a warm drink or two.

“Not exactly fashionable, is it?” Nezumi sniffed as he plucked at the plaid shirt.

“Better than a dirty shirt that’s ripped and covered in blood, if you ask me.”

I passed him a steaming mug of cocoa. For the first time this evening, I saw what looked like a flicker of emotion in his grey eyes. Pleasure. Nezumi sipped a mouthful and murmured softly—good.

“It’s good. Better than your suturing.”

“It’s not fair to compare like that. I think it went pretty well for my first try.”

“Are you always like that?”

“Huh?”

“Do you always leave yourself wide open? Or is it normal for all you Petri-dish elites to have zero sense of danger?” Nezumi continued, holding the mug in both hands.

“You guys can get along just fine without feeling any danger or fear toward intruders, huh?”

“I do feel danger. And fear, too. I’m afraid of dangerous things and I don’t want anything to do with them. I’m also not naive enough to believe that someone who comes in through my second-floor window is a respectable citizen.”

“Then why?”

He was right. Why? Why was I treating this intruder’s wound, and even giving him hot cocoa? I was no cold-blooded monster. But I also wasn’t teeming in compassion and goodwill enough to extend a hand to anyone who was injured. I was no saint. I hated dealing with hassles and disagreements. But I’d taken this intruder in. If the city authorities found out, I would be in trouble. They might see me as someone lacking in sound judgment. If that happened...

My eyes met with a pair of grey ones. I felt like I could see a hint of laughter in them. Like they could see right through me, everything I was thinking, and laughing at me. I clenched my stomach and glared back at him.

“If you were some big, aggressive man, I would have set the alarm off right then and there. But you were short, and looked like a girl, and was about to fall over. So... So I decided to treat you. And...”

“And?”

And your eyes were a strange colour that I'd never seen before. And they drew me in.

“And... I wanted to actually see what sewing a vessel was like.”

Nezumi shrugged, and drained the rest of his cocoa. Wiping his mouth with the back of his hand, he ran a palm across the bedsheets.

“Can I really go to sleep?”

“Sure.”

“Thank you.”

Those were the first words of gratitude I'd heard since he had come into my room.

* * *

Mother was sitting on the couch in the living room, engrossed in the flat-screen television mounted on the wall. She noticed me coming in, and pointed at the screen. A female newscaster with long, straight hair was broadcasting a warning to all residents of Chronos.

A convict had escaped from the Correctional Facility in the West Block, and was last seen fleeing into the Chronos area. With regards to the hurricane as well, the area was to be put in a lockdown that night. Everyone in the area, excluding special cases, was forbidden to go outside of their homes.

Nezumi's face appeared on the screen. Underneath, the words "VC 103221" floated up in red letters.

"VC..."

I lifted a spoonful of cherry cake into my mouth. Every year without fail, Mother baked a cherry cake for my birthday. It was because Father had brought home a cherry cake on the day I was born.

From what Mother said, my father was a hopeless case who indulged lavishly in money-spending and women, but above all, the bottle — he was just a step away from being an alcoholic. He had come home one day, in his drunkenness having bought cherry cakes — three of them — that were so good she couldn't help but remember their taste every time September 7th rolled around. My parents divorced two months after the cherry cake. So unfortunately, I have no memory of my hopeless case of a father who was one step away from an alcoholic. But it was no inconvenience. After being snagged as a top ranker, Mother and I received the right to live in Chronos, along with complete insurance of our living conditions, including this modest but well-outfitted house. There was no inconvenience at all.

"I just remembered, the yard's security system is still turned off. No harm in leaving it off, right?"

Mother raised herself slowly. She had gained a lot of weight recently, and it seemed like an effort for her to move.

"It's such a pain in the neck, that thing. Even a cat jumping over the fence sets the alarm off, and people from the Security Bureau come every single time to check. What a hassle."

Almost as if in correlation with her gaining weight, she had started to call things "a pain in the neck" more and more often.

"But look at him, he's still so young. A VC... I wonder what he's done."

VC. The V Chip. It was short for Violence-Chip, and was originally a term used in America for a semiconductor that was used to censor television content. With this chip, you could set the television not to display violent or disturbing scenes. If I remembered correctly, this term was first used in the 1996 revision of the Telecommunications Act.

But in No. 6, the term VC carried a heavier meaning. Perpetrators of murder, attempted murder, robbery, assault and other violent crime were subject to having this chip planted inside their body. This enabled computers to track every location, condition and even emotional fluctuations of the convict. VC was a term we used for violent criminals.

—*But how did he take the chip out?*

If the VC was still inside his body, his location could be instantly pinpointed with the city's tracking system. It should have been easily possible to arrest him without any citizens noticing. To make news of his escape public, and to enforce a lock-down would only mean that they hadn't been able to find his location.

—*Could that bullet wound have...? No, that can't be.*

I'd never seen a bullet wound on a human before, but I could tell it definitely came from being shot at a distance. If he had blown the chip off himself along with the flesh of his shoulder, he would have had a more serious wound, with burns and all. Much more serious.

"Rather dull, isn't it? A shame, since it's your special day."

Mother sighed as she sprinkled parsley flakes into the pot of stew sitting on the table. "Dull" was another word Mother used more often these days.

Mother and I were very similar. We were both a little over-sensitive, and didn't like to socialize much. The people around us were nice, so nice there was nothing bad to say about them. My classmates, the citizens around us, were genial, intelligent, and minded their manners.

No one raised their voice to insult anyone, or treated people with hostility. There were no strange or devious people. Everyone kept up such meticulously healthy lifestyles that even slightly plump figures like my mother's were rare. In this peaceful, stable and uniform world where everyone looked the same, my mother grew fatter, every other word "a pain in the neck" or "dull"; and I began to find the presence of other people oppressing.

Break it.

Destroy it.

Destroy what?

Everything.

Everything?

The spoon slid out of my hand and clattered to the floor.

"What's wrong? You were miles away."

Mother peered inquisitively at me. Her round face broke into a smile.

"That's rare of you, Shion, spacing out like that. Want me to disinfect that spoon?"

"Oh, no. It's no big deal," I smiled back at her. My heart was racing so fast it was hard to breathe. I gulped down the mineral water in one go. Bullet wounds, blood, VC, grey eyes. What were all these things? They had never existed in my world until now. What business did they have, so suddenly intruding into my life?

I had a fleeting premonition. A feeling that a great change was coming. Just like a virus that enters a cell and mutates it or destroys it altogether, I had a feeling that this impostor would upset the world I lived in, and destroy it entirely.

"Shion? Really, what's gotten into you?"

Mother peered into my face again, her expression concerned.

“Sorry, mom. That report is bothering me. I’m gonna eat in my room,” I lied, and stood up.

* * *

“Don’t turn on the light.”

A low voice commanded me, as soon as I entered the room. I didn’t like the dark, so I usually left the lights on. But now it was pitch-black.

“I can’t see anything.”

“You don’t need to.”

But if I couldn’t see, I couldn’t move. I stood helplessly, with the stew and cherry cake in my hands.

“Something smells good.”

“I brought stew and cherry cake.”

I heard a whistle of appreciation in the dark.

“Want some?”

“Of course.”

“You’re gonna eat it in the dark?”

“Of course.”

I carefully inched my foot forward. I could hear a quiet snicker.

“Can’t even find your way in your own room?”

“I don’t happen to be nocturnal, thanks. Can you see in the dark?”

“I’m a rat. Of course I can.”

“VC 103221.”

In the darkness, I could sense Nezumi freeze.

“You were all over the news. Famous.”

“Hah. Don’t I look so much better in real life? Hey, this cake is good.”

My eyes were getting used to the darkness. I sat on the bed, and squinted at Nezumi.

“Can you get away alright?”

“Of course.”

“What did you do with the chip?”

“It’s still inside me.”

“Want me to take it out?”

“Surgery again? No thanks.”

“But . . .”

“It doesn’t matter. That thing is useless now anyway.”

“What do you mean?”

“The VC is just a toy. Disabling it is like a piece of cake.”

“A toy, huh.”

“Yup, a toy. And let me tell you something, this city itself is like a toy, too. A cheap toy that’s pretty only on the outside.”

Nezumi had polished off the stew and cake. He gave a sigh of content.

“So you’re confident that you’re going to escape when the city’s on high-alert?”

“Of course.”

“But there’s a strict security check for trespassers who aren’t registered. There’s an entire system in place throughout this area for people like that.”

“You think so? This city’s system isn’t as perfect as you think it is. It’s full of holes.”

“How can you say that?”

“Because I’m not part of the system. You’ve all been programmed nicely to believe that this holey fake mess is the perfect utopia. Or, no, maybe that’s what you guys want to believe.”

“I don’t.”

“Huh?”

“I don’t think this place is perfect.”

The words tumbled out of my mouth. Nezumi fell silent. In front of me, there was only an expanse of darkness. I couldn't feel his presence at all. He was right, he was like a rat. A nocturnal rodent, hidden in the darkness.

"You're strange," he said quietly, in a voice even lower than before.

"Really?"

"You are. That's not something for a super elite to say. Aren't you in trouble if the authorities find out?"

"Yeah. Big trouble."

"You just took in an escaped VC and didn't report it to the Bureau. ... If they find that out, that's even bigger trouble. They're not gonna let you off easily."

"I know."

Nezumi suddenly grabbed my arm. His thin fingers dug into my flesh.

"Do you really? I mean, it's not my problem what happens to you, but if you end up being wiped out because of me, I wouldn't like that. I'd feel like I did something horrible..."

"That's considerate of you."

"Mama always told me, 'don't cause trouble for other people,'" he said lightly.

"Then are you gonna leave?"

"No. I'm tired, and there's a hurricane outside. And I've finally got a bed. I'll sleep here."

"Make up your mind."

"Papa always told me to separate my public manners from my private feelings."

"Sounds like a great father."

His fingers withdrew from my arm.

"I guess I was lucky that you were strange," Nezumi said softly.

“Nezumi?”

“Hm?”

“How did you get to Chronos?”

“Not telling.”

“Did you break out of the Correctional Facility and get into the city? Is that even possible?”

“Of course it’s possible. But I didn’t get into No. 6 on my own. Someone let me in. Not like I wanted to come here, though.”

“Let you in?”

“Yup. I was being escorted, you might say.”

“Escorted? By the police? To where?”

The Correctional Facility was located in the West Block, a high-security zone. Anyone who wanted to enter No. 6 from there had to apply for permission from the bureau. Those who had special entry permits were free to go in and out, but new applicants I heard had to wait at least a month for their form to even be accepted — and usually only less than ten percent are admitted. The number of days allowed inside the city were also severely restricted. Naturally, people began to accumulate in the West Block. More people waiting for their permits to be processed meant more accommodation and dining establishments lined the streets to serve them. Still more people poured in to work or make business there. I’ve never been to the West Block myself, but I’ve heard that it’s a haphazard but lively place. The crime rate there is high. The majority of VCs that fill the cells in the Correctional Facility are residents of the West Block. Sentences ranging from one year to life are given based on age, criminal history, and the degree of violence of the crime. There is no death penalty. The West Block served as a sort of fortress that contained all people and things of criminal nature, and prevented it from entering the city.

So for a VC to be escorted from there to within city walls — where were they headed? And for what reason?

Nezumi crawled into bed.

“Probably the Moondrop.”

“City Hall!” I exclaimed. “The centre of the city? Why?”

“Not telling. You probably shouldn’t know, anyway.”

“Why not?”

“I’m tired. Let me go to sleep.”

“Is it something you can’t tell me?”

“Can you guarantee that you can completely forget everything once you’ve heard it? Pretend you didn’t hear? Outright lie that you don’t know anything? You might be smart, but you’re not an adult. You can’t lie as well as that.”

“I guess, but . . .”

“So don’t ask me in the first place. In return, I won’t tell anyone either.”

“Huh? About what?”

“About how you were yelling out the window.”

He had seen me. I could feel my face burning with embarrassment.

“It totally caught me off-guard. I snuck into your yard and was wondering what to do next, and suddenly the window opened and you stuck your face out.”

“Hey, wait a minute—”

“I was watching for what you’d do next, and then this time you started screaming. I was caught off-guard again. I don’t think I’ve ever seen anyone screaming with a face like—”

“Shut up!”

I lunged at Nezumi, but all I felt was the pillow as I fell on top of it. In a flash, Nezumi was up. He slid a hand under my arm, and with

a quick twist, I was effortlessly flipped over onto my back. Nezumi climbed over me and pinned both my arms down with one hand. His legs straddled my hips and pressed them down hard. For an instant, I felt a tingle of numbness run through my legs all the way down to my toes. It was impressive. In the space of a split second, I had been trapped, immobilized, and pinned to my own bed. With his free hand, Nezumi spun the soup spoon around. He pressed the handle against my throat, and lightly slid it across. He crouched so that his lips were at my ear.

"If this was a knife," he whispered, "you would be dead."

A muscle in my throat twitched. Amazing.

"That's amazing. Is there a trick to doing that?"

"Huh?"

"How can you immobilize someone so easily? Are there special nerve points you press down or something?"

The force pinning me down relaxed. Nezumi sank down on top of me, trembling — he was laughing.

"I can't believe this. You're hilarious. What a natural," he gasped.

I circled my arms around Nezumi and stuck my hands up the back of his shirt. It was hot. His burning skin was damp with sweat.

"I knew it... you're catching a fever. You should take those antibiotics."

"I'm fine... I just wanna sleep."

"If you don't bring your fever down it'll drain you even more. You're burning up."

"You're pretty warm too."

Nezumi gave a deep sigh, and murmured absent-mindedly.

"Living people are warm."

He became still, and not long after, I could hear quiet, measured breathing coming from him. With his feverish body still in my arms, before I knew it, I too was drifting off to sleep.

When I awoke the next morning, Nezumi was gone. The plaid shirt, towel, and emergency kit were gone with him.

2

A QUIET BEGINNING

Index Case (First Discovered Example)

Male, aged 31 years. Employee at a biotechnology firm. Engineer.
Already dead upon discovery. Confirmed address...

THE MAN sank into a bench in the Forest park, and sighed. He wondered how many times he had already sighed that morning. He sighed, and looked at the head of lettuce in his hand. It made him sigh again. Crisp, green leaves firmly wrapped the head of lettuce — as far as quality went, it was first-class. He tore off a leaf, and brought it to his mouth. It had a delicate taste, and the texture was excellent. First-class, indeed. Then why wasn't it selling?

The lettuce was this man's piece of work. He had long worked in the development of biotechnology to produce fresh produce, namely leafy vegetables. He believed that these safe, affordable and delicious bio-vegetables were the solution to the rising food crisis, and would

soon become a mainstay in food distribution. He had the confidence it would. But market sales were not doing as well as he expected, and the man was losing hope. Buyers seemed to prefer produce trucked in from the fields of the Southeastern Blocks, rather than his bio-vegetables. The trend was especially strong for leafy vegetables, like cabbage and lettuce. If this continued, his boss had told him, he would have to start thinking about discontinuing production.

The base of his neck itched. It had been itching for a while now. The man was prone to getting rashes when he was tired. By tonight, a red rash would probably have spread to his whole body. Too many unpleasant things were happening today. He sighed again. The lettuce in his hand felt heavy.

A beeping sound rang from his breast pocket. The mobile telephone screen on his ID card lit up, and young woman's face appeared.

"Greetings from the Municipal Information System. This is to notify you of the results of the Children's Examination you have registered for. To confirm your account, please enter your Citizenship Number..." Before the woman was even finished speaking, the man began to key in his number. Today was the day of his two-year-old daughter's Examinations. She was a bright and adorable little girl. He had never dared to say it out loud, but he secretly harboured an expectation that she might be acknowledged as a top ranker.

"Thank you. We have confirmed your fingerprint and registration number. Your information is as follows..." His daughter's name was displayed, followed by a set of detailed numbers. Weight, height, bust measurement, condition of health, condition of nutrition, development stage, ranking of various skills... all grades ranged in the average A to C. She was neither overly behind, nor outstandingly brilliant. That was it. The man gazed at the screen for a moment, and then put his card back into his pocket. He thought of his daughter's smile.

Oh well.

The man spoke to himself, and grinned at the head of lettuce in his hand. Gifted or not, his daughter was still his daughter. He cherished and adored her. And that was good enough.

Suddenly, an idea sparked in his head. Had he, perhaps, been too trapped in the idea of the best, most perfect? It was true — there was nothing to complain about this lettuce. But maybe its perfection was also the bane of it. If these identical, perfect heads of lettuce were piled up row after row, consumers might not feel as inclined to buy it. What if its perfection was actually scaring consumers away?

A cleaning robot was approaching. On its metallic body sat a round head, and two arms extended to pick up trash, and throw it inside the dust box located in the middle of its body. Yes. This lettuce was like that robot. It was clean and orderly, but too artificial. The vegetables that the consumers wanted were more unique, more natural... The lettuce rolled out of his hand. The man quickly bent down to pick it up, and furrowed his brow.

Huh?

His fingers stiffened. His vision blurred. It was hard to breathe. The robot picked the lettuce up, and paused. A young male voice prompted him.

“May I dispose of this as trash?”

The man opened his mouth to speak, and was overcome with a fit of coughing. Along with it, something white spilled out of his mouth. Teeth. His teeth were falling out.

“Are you sure? I will dispose of it now.” The lettuce was thrown into the dust box, and the robot moved away.

— *Wait, help me...*

The man reached out, and gave a cry of horror. The whole length of his extended arm was riddled with spots. His body grew heavy. The

man staggered, and collapsed on the ground between the bench and the hedges.

* * *

“Shion, take a look at this.”

It was past six when Shion was called over by his co-worker, Yamase. The two were the only people at the Park Administration Office. Together they operated and maintained the three cleaning robots that patrolled the park. Labour robots such as these were still at the prototype stage, and even simple cleaning robots were prone to breaking down. Operating them was a hassle too, because they weren’t good at distinguishing trash. After recording an object as trash in the computer’s memory the first time around, it was supposed to recognize it automatically every time afterwards. But the robots sent back “indistinguishable object” errors all the time. There was one half an hour ago, in fact. The image sent back to him looked like a head of lettuce, and Shion had hesitated for a moment about what to do. He had encountered other things before that he wondered if he should call trash, like a baby chick that had fallen out of a tree, or a hat with a rather extravagant feathered decoration. Lettuce, though, was a first. “Something the matter?” He stood behind Yamase, who was sitting at the operation panel.

“Hmm... Sampo’s acting strange.”

Yamase liked to call the three robots by their nicknames. Sampo¹ was Robot No. 3. Today, it was working in a corner in the deeper recesses of the park. Sampo was also the same one that picked up the head of lettuce. The screen in front of them displayed a flashing red error notifying them of an indistinguishable object.

¹three steps, or a *stroll*

“What’s the image like?”

“Yeah, about that. It’s not very clear, but ... it’s strange.”

“Strange?”

Yamase was twenty — four years older than Shion — and quiet by nature, seldom ruffled by anything. The calm nature of his co-worker was one of the two reasons why Shion liked this workplace. The other reason was that because his job dealt mostly with machines, he didn’t have to talk to people.

“Here, you take a look,” Yamase said, switching the screen over to the camera.

“Can you focus in a little more?”

“Sure,” came the answer, and Yamase’s hands moved swiftly over the control panel. The image became clearer.

“What ...” Shion leaned in closer, and his breath caught in his throat. Feet? A pair of trousered legs were protruding from behind the bench. He could see a pair of brownish shoes outfitting them.

“You think he’s sleeping ...?” Yamase’s voice trembled.

“Any signs of life?”

“Huh?”

“Can you raise Sampo’s sensors to the max level?” Sampo was outfitted with several receptors that could sense heat, sound, and texture. Yamase’s voice shook more violently.

“Oxygen, heat emission ... zero. No signs of life.”

“I’ll go check,” Shion said abruptly.

“I’m coming too.”

They leapt on their bicycles, and pedalled as hard as they could. Bicycles had become explosively popular in the last few years, and statistics showed that the average citizen owned 1.3 bicycles. Jogging shoes were also selling well. Rather than convenient and effortless modes

of transportation, it seemed like more people were choosing to walk, pedal, and otherwise use their own bodies. Popular or not, for a student like Shion, something this affordable that manoeuvred easily and didn't cost anything to fuel was more of a necessity.

There were speed limits even for bicycles within the park. Shion pedalled full-throttle through a path he would usually only stroll down. Most vehicles nowadays were equipped with a restraint mechanism that automatically kicked in when the vehicle went over a certain speed. Bicycles were no exception, and the mechanism was usually built into the brake lever. But Shion's bicycle was an older model, and wasn't equipped with speed restraints. He would have to pay a fine if the Transportation Bureau found out, but right now, he was glad he could go as fast as he could.

He reached a quiet area secluded by trees. Beneath a canopy of swishing leaves, Sampo was standing still. His head joint, slightly tilted to the side, made him look either pensive or baffled.

"Sampo." In response to Shion's voice, its LED eyes lit up green. Shion peered behind the bench, and froze.

"Shion, what's going on?" Yamase arrived slightly later, and made a muffled noise in his throat.

The man lay behind the bench, as if to hide behind it. His mouth was open and his eyes wide and staring. His expression resembled surprise, rather than fear or pain. He looked like he had seen something shocking moments before he died. His hair was snowy white, and on his cheeks there were spots that looked like senile plaque. His wrinkles were pronounced. He was quite aged.

—*That's a pretty flashy shirt for his age, though.*

Shion remarked inwardly at the light pink shirt the man was wearing.

"Yamase-san, can you contact the Security Bureau?"

“Huh? Oh... oh yeah, of course. Sure. Give me a minute... Hello? Um, this is the Park Administration Office...” Half-listening to Yamase’s shaky voice as he explained the situation, Shion reached out cautiously to touch the man. Rigor mortis had spread to his whole body.

“That’s impossible,” Shion muttered almost automatically in disbelief.

—*It was too soon.*

Rigor mortis usually began taking effect at least an hour after death—two or three hours, in most cases. It started at the jaw and spread gradually downwards to end at the legs. Judging by that, this man would have been dead at least several hours. But 30 minutes ago, this body wasn’t here. If it was, Sampo would have noticed it. He knew that there had been a living person sitting on the bench. After confirming the lettuce, Sampo’s sensors had registered a living human presence. Of course, he had no evidence to prove that these two were the same person. No, there was no way it could be. There was no way a person who was alive 30 minutes ago could go through complete rigor mortis in this short time. Then—was someone else sitting on this bench, oblivious to the dead man?

—*Impossible.*

Shion let go of the man’s arm, which felt stiffer and colder than Sampo’s mechanical one. It was impossible. Even if the man had lain dead without being noticed, Sampo would have picked him up. Indeed, Sampo had reacted to his presence, and sent an “indistinguishable object” error just minutes ago. That meant that 30 minutes ago, there was no dead body here.

Shion thought he saw the body move. Of course, it was just his imagination. But — Shion stifled a cry of horror. The jaw of the man, stiff only minutes ago, was starting to loosen. He thought he could even smell a faint odour of rot. The man was face-down, and behind

his ears Shion could see a blackish-green stain begin to spread. That was definitely not there before. Certain not visibly to the naked eye. Shion leaned in closer.

“They’re coming,” Yamase sighed in relief. A Security Bureau car was approaching soundlessly.

* * *

“So in the space of ten-some-odd minutes, you saw complete rigor mortis—and it started rotting right afterwards? That’s impossible,” Safu concluded simply, after she had swallowed her mouthful of chocolate doughnut. The fast-food joint where they sat, located near the older parts of town was bustling with people of every shade and colour.

“And if you’re saying you smelled rot, then that means decomposition by bacteria had already started, right? That can’t be. Even in the middle of the summer, it would take at least 30 hours— right? — for rigor mortis to dissipate completely.”

“Under a fixed set of conditions, it would take 36 hours in the summertime, 3–7 days in the winter, and 60 hours in the weather we’re having now. That’s what the textbooks say,” Shion replied, dropping his gaze from Safu’s face and taking a sip from his cup of tea. He felt melancholic. And tired.

“Did the Security Bureau give you a hard time?” Safu peered into his face. Her short, cropped hair framed her delicate face and large eyes, which gave her a mysterious, androgynous sort of allure. Safu was also among the top-ranking in intelligence during her Examinations for Two-Year-Olds. She was one of the several classmates he studied with at the same school until the age of ten. And presently, at age sixteen, she was the only one whom Shion shared a close relationship with. She specialized in physiology, and was set to go on exchange soon to

another city.

“It was an unnatural death after all, they must’ve been suspicious. They probably interrogated the heck out of you because of that, didn’t they?”

Safu as Shion knew her in the classroom was a small, quiet girl. She was probably still the same in the lab. But when she was alone with Shion, Safu smiled often, ate well, and relaxed her formal tone. Shion drained his tea, and slowly shook his head.

“Nah, it wasn’t as bad as I thought.” Truth be told, the Security Bureau’s interrogation was surprisingly short. All they did was seize the data that Sampo had recorded of the body, and demand an explanation of the situation from each of the two. The official spoke sharply when he found out that Shion’s registered address was located in the old-town district, close to the West Block, but Shion was used to that kind of treatment and thought nothing of it.

“Then why do you look so down about it? You’re the picture of the troubled young man right now.”

“It... just doesn’t seem right.”

“The rigor mortis and its dissipation time?”

“Right. You said so yourself, Safu. It’s not possible. You’re right. There was no condition present that could have accelerated the rigor mortis and dissipation to that extent.”

“You mean no condition in terms of temperature or humidity, or some other external influence, right? You won’t know until you perform an autopsy if there might be an internal cause that accelerated it.”

“Internal cause, huh... like what?”

“For example, if that person was severely debilitated, he wouldn’t have stiffened up as much, and it wouldn’t have lasted as long. In people with phosphorus poisoning or in infants, they say it’s almost nonexistent...”

“He was definitely not an infant, I can tell you that.”

Safu sniffed indignantly and glared at Shion.

“It was just an example. You’re as sarcastic as ever, aren’t you? That hasn’t changed at all. But I guess there’s not much we can make of it if we don’t have any data.”

“Yeah...” Shion nodded vaguely, and unconsciously bit his lower lip. Data, textbooks, manuals... there were times when they became completely useless. What he once believed to be so certain and absolute would be overturned ever so easily, and crumble before him. He experienced that four years ago.

* * *

“Shion.” Safu put her elbows on the table, and folded her hands over each other. She placed her chin on them, and gazed at Shion.

“I want to ask you something.”

“What?”

“Four years ago — why didn’t you enroll into the Gifted Curriculum?” It was as if her question saw right through him. Shion broke off a piece of the blandly sweet apple pie with his hands. The filling oozed out onto the plate.

“Why’re you asking now?”

“Because I want to know. Even from an objective point of view, you were a stellar student. You absorbed information well and knew how to apply it. All the teachers had high expectations for you.”

“You’re giving me too much credit.”

“It’s the truth. The numbers prove it. Do you want me to show you your Skill Test results again from four years ago?”

“Safu.” He had a bitter taste in his mouth. It felt like it was welling up from the very core of his body.

“What’s the point of asking me this now? Four years ago, they decided I wasn’t qualified for the Gifted Curriculum, so I lost all special privileges. I didn’t *choose* to not enroll, I *couldn’t*. Now I work for Park Administration to pay for my tuition, and I’m taking trades courses from the Labour Bureau. But my attendance hasn’t been good so I’m not even sure if I can graduate. That’s reality. That’s the truth you’re talking about, Safu.”

“And why did you lose your privilege?”

“I don’t want to talk about it.”

“But I’d love for you to tell me.”

Shion finished licking the pie crust from his fingers, and closed his mouth firmly. He didn’t want to talk about it. Or, rather, he couldn’t think of any explanation that would make Safu understand.

The reason was simple. He had taken a VC under his wing for the night, and let him escape. The Security Bureau had found that out. They had thought it suspicious that his mother Karan had left the security alarm off, and Shion had left the foreign-object detection system off in his own room. The security systems of each house were connected to the Central Administration Bureau’s computer system, and could be easily tracked.

Not one hour had passed after Nezumi had disappeared when officials from the Security Bureau were knocking on his door. It was the start of their long and persistent interrogation.

You knew that he was a VC, then?

Yes.

Why didn’t you call the police immediately?

Well...

Answer my question. You don’t need to rush. Just give us a clear and accurate answer.

It was because he looked about the same age as me, and he was seriously injured. So I felt sorry for him...

So you sympathized with this VC, didn't contact the police, but instead treated his wounds and helped him escape.

It ended up as so, yes.

The Security Bureau's Investigations and Interrogations official was named Rashi. He spoke gently throughout the whole meeting, never once raising his voice or his fist in violence. When their gruelling two-day investigation was over and Shion was released, he even gave him a friendly clap on the shoulder and said, "It's been hard, I know. Thanks." But Rashi's eyes never smiled once, and Shion had noticed. Even now, four years later, those unsmiling eyes came into his dreams, their gaze boring into him. He would awake in the morning, shaken, and soaked with sweat.

He concealed a criminal and aided his escape. Shion wasn't sentenced for this crime, but he was deemed severely deficient in appropriate judgment skill and ability to take action, and as a result all his special privileges were removed.

When the hurricane passed, Shion and Karan were cast out onto the streets, under a blindingly blue sky. They had no place to live, nor any means to make a living. Shion's Gifted Curriculum in ecology had become something more far away and unreachable than the clouds that floated in the sky above them.

A certainty, a definiteness he had in his hands only yesterday, only moments before, had vanished. They had scattered on the winds, more frail than the leaves he had watched whipped around in the storm. It was a sense of loss he was feeling for the first time in his life.

No. 6 had no welfare system. There was only a hierarchical insurance system based on the level of contribution that a select few of the citizens had to offer to the city. Shion and Karan, far from contributing

to the city, were treated as people who had failed to serve their responsibility as citizens. They were at the lowest possible rank. That meant that, apart from being allowed to remain in the city, they were excluded from any aid or insurance.

Petri-dish elite. Nezumi had used that term that night, and it was true. He realized the weight of it after he had been thrown out of his enclosed and sheltered container. No. 6 was none other than a caste society. The vertical dynamic of the population was neatly ordered into a pyramid structure. Once you tumbled off the top tiers, it wasn't easy to crawl back up.

* * *

"Look at you, so serious." Safu laughed. "I get it. If it's that hard to explain, then I won't ask."

"Sorry." Shion held up a hand and ducked his head in apology. He was relieved that she didn't question him further. The events were easy enough to explain. He did want to tell Safu, for her to know about the dramatic events that had turned his life upside-down. But what Shion couldn't grasp, couldn't seem to find the words to explain, were his own feelings. He even surprised himself with what little regret he felt. He did feel shock at the fragility of his position, and he did more than once find himself curled up, unable to grapple with his sense of loss. But now, after four years of living through it all, he pondered. What would he do if he could turn back time to that day, on his twelfth birthday? Would he have called the police? Would he have set his security alarm off? The answer was always "no".

Even if he had the chance to return to that night, he would have done the same thing. He would have taken in the wind and rain, and the intruder that came with it. He felt it with certainty, and his certainty

put him at unease. It wasn't like he found his life now more satisfying than before. He still had deep attachments to ecology, his state-of-the-art learning environment, his comfortable life — and shamefully enough, even the accolades, the words of praise and encouragement, and gazes of admiration that he was the centre of. But even so, he would have done the same thing. If accepting Nezumi meant his own destruction, then to destruction he would have trodden again and again. He had no regrets about what he did. But he couldn't explain why. Since that night, other hurricanes came and went. Listening to the excited murmurings of the leaves in the wind, Shion felt not regret, but a sense of longing. It was a yearning to see him again.

Shion didn't have the confidence that he could explain it to Safu well enough. He had no other option but to remain silent.

"Shall we go then, Shion?" Safu stood up. The restaurant had become even more crowded, and now they could barely hear each other's voice.

"I'll walk you to the station," Shion offered.

"Of course. You would have to be really tactless to let a girl go home by herself, wouldn't you?"

"Oh come on," retorted Shion, "we both know how strong you are, even though you might look small and skinny. And you're speedy. I always thought you were more fit for martial arts than physiology, actually."

"You know what, you're right. I've been told off once about how I emotional I can get all of a sudden, when I'm usually so quiet. Maybe I'm not meant for lab work after all."

They walked side-by-side down the road to the station. Excluding a few restaurants, late-night business was banned in the city. In a matter of hours, the throngs of people walking up and down the streets now would disappear. Shion gave Safu's back a light push. Her last words

had sounded somewhat dejected to his ears.

“Is that supposed to be the voice of someone who’s passed the exams and is about to go on exchange?”

Safu raised her face, and grinned.

“Jealous, aren’t you?”

“Yeah.”

“That’s awfully truthful of you.”

“Be true to yourself, be kind to others. It’s been my motto these days.”

“Liar.”

“Huh?”

“You’re not jealous at all.”

Shion stopped. Safu was staring at him challengingly. Just as he was about to call her name, he was suddenly grabbed by the shoulder from behind.

“Excuse me.” Shion turned around. A man was standing there, smiling. He was about a head shorter than Shion, and was wearing a Security Bureau uniform. It was navy blue from top to bottom and made of a special material called superfibre, which had impressive qualities for its unremarkable appearance. With durability that was tenfold that of steel, it served the purpose of a bullet-proof vest well enough; at the same time, it let air pass through easily so the garment could breathe. There was an increasing number of these uniformed Law Enforcement officers from the Security Bureau the closer they neared to the West Block. Shion calmly brushed the man’s hand off his shoulder and spoke.

“Can I help you?”

“Ah, well... I just want to ask you two a couple questions... how old are you?”

“Sixteen.”

“The both of you?”

“Yes.”

“You do know that those under eighteen are prohibited from being outdoors after nine?”

“Yes, but it’s still before eight.”

“Shion,” Safu whispered sharply. She was telling him not to argue. But the Security Bureau uniform standing before him brought back to memory the eyes of that interrogation officer who called himself Rashi. Instead of feeling intimidated, Shion was compelled to retaliate.

“Your ID cards, the two of you, please.” Perhaps he had taken notice of Shion’s rebellious attitude. The man wiped the smile clean off his face and demanded their identification cards expressionlessly. Safu passed her silver card to him. Shion silently did the same.

“Your Citizenship Numbers, in order.”

“SSC-000124GJ.”

“Qw-55142.”

The man pulled the cards out of his portable card-reader, and turned to give Safu a slight bow.

“A Gifted Curriculum student like yourself shouldn’t be roaming these areas at such a late hour. I advise you to go home.”

“I was on my way . . . I was walking to the station.”

“Let me walk you there.”

“No thank you. He’s going to.” Safu clung to Shion’s arm.

“I’ll take her,” said Shion shortly. “That’s where we were headed in the first place. Let’s go, Safu.”

Snatching the cards from the officer’s grasp, Shion grabbed Safu’s hand, and strode swiftly away. When he turned around some moments later, the man had already disappeared into the bustling crowd.

"That scared me." Safu clutched her chest. "I've never been scolded by the Security Bureau."

"It happens all the time," replied Shion. "If you didn't have your Gifted Curriculum ID, he would have grilled us even more."

"Really?"

"Really," said Shion grimly. "Like the train that you're about to get on. With that ID card, you can bypass the General car and ride in Special Class. That's the kind of city we live in. Everyone's sorted out into categories based on skill, wealth, and all these other factors."

"Don't talk about it like that," Safu protested. "You don't 'sort' people like you 'sort' garbage and merchandise. People are people. They're humans."

"Safu, in this city it doesn't matter whether we're people or not. It matters how useful you are to the city. That's it."

"Shion..."

"Back there you called me a liar. I'm not. Of course I'm jealous. You've got all your privileges, and you're allowed to study and experiment to your heart's content. I'm envious, Safu. I resent you, even. You have everything that I don't have."

Shion paused, and let out a long breath. He had gone too far. It was shameful. Low. Embarrassing. Pathetic. He clicked his tongue at himself in frustration.

Safu sighed as well.

"You're still a liar."

"Huh?"

"Did you not hear me? You're. Still. A. Liar. I can add 'big' on top of that, if you like. You're only pretending to be envious of me. Or do you not even realize that you're lying? What a dense boy I've got on my hands."

“Safu, what—” Shion began in exasperation.

“If you were really envious and resentful, you wouldn’t be able to stand going out to eat with me. But you, you’re laughing, eating, making conversation, cracking jokes like it’s nothing.”

“Hey, I have some pride too. Obviously I’m not going to be openly jealous.”

“Shion,” said Safu firmly. “My specialization is in cognitive functions, brain activity and their relationship with hormones.”

“I know.”

“Good, because if you didn’t, I would’ve been mad. I haven’t told you this over and over for nothing. Anyway,” she continued briskly, “say you are hiding your resentment and pretending to be enjoying your time with me. It would be stressful, right?”

“I guess so . . .” Shion replied dubiously.

“It *would* be stressful. And when you feel stress, your adrenal glands release steroid hormones called corticosteroids that influence your brain. And what it does to brain activity is—”

“Okay, Safu, I get it.” Shion interrupted. “That’s enough. Save your lecture for next time and I’ll listen carefully—”

“Listen to me. You’re not feeling any stress. You’re not resentful of me at all. Shion, what is it that you want to do?”

“Huh?”

“If you do want to continue your studies, you can be resentful of me. But you’re not. You said I have everything you don’t have. Then what is it that you have? You can’t say you have nothing,” she added hastily. “People who have nothing — no — people who *think* they’ve got nothing left, can’t smile like you do. Or talk like you do. For your emotions not to have any influence on your actions, to have that level of perfect control, it takes special training. You’re not getting any special training. I don’t think you’re an overly emotional person,

but I also don't think you have the ability to control 100% of your emotions either. The only reason you can have a regular conversation with me and laugh around me is because you have a certain level of emotional security."

"Safu, what you just said is all armchair theory. Humans have complex emotions. They're not like lab rats. I don't think you can explain how emotions influence people's actions that easily. It's arrogant to believe that science can explain everything about human nature."

Safu shrugged. They were approaching the station.

"I didn't know you wanted to become a writer."

"Safu," Shion said wearily.

"Then I'll say this in a literary context. Emotional security... so I'm talking about hope, or dreams. You have those. That's why you don't feel the need to resent me. Shion, what is it that you hope for?"

* * *

Hope. He repeated the word silently. It was a word he hadn't used for years. It was neither sweet nor bitter, but it slowly warmed him from deep inside of his body.

Hope. What do I hope for?

His promised future had collapsed. What was left to him now were his mother, the meager wages from his job, and his own sixteen-year-old body. What hope resided in those? He wasn't sure. But he was sure that he hadn't completely lost hope either.

They entered the station. The old-town district where Shion lived was located adjacent to the West Block and the city border, and functioned as a sort of buffer zone between the city centre and the West Block. It was called Lost Town. A far cry from the tranquility of the city centre, it was a squalid place, dense with people. The station they were in

was also very crowded. The faint smell of deep-fried food and alcohol wafted in the air.

"I'm fine from here." Safu stopped. There was a black winged insect on her shoulder. Brushing it away, Shion asked a nonchalant question.

"Be careful. Oh, when are you off for your exchange again?"

"In two days."

"Two days!" Shion exclaimed. "Why didn't you tell me sooner?"

"Because I didn't want to. Would you have thrown me a farewell party if I did?"

Safu jutted her chin out defiantly.

"Shion, I want to ask something from you."

"Sure, if I can manage to get it to you in time..."

"Your sperm."

Safu looked Shion in the eyes as she said those words. She didn't blink once. Shion gaped at her open-mouthed.

"Did you hear me? I want your sperm."

"Uh— what? Safu... um—"

"Out of all the people I know, you would probably be the most superior sperm donor. Your sperm and my ovum. Don't you think it would produce the most perfect child? I want it, Shion. I want your sperm."

"Artificial insemination needs permission from the city," Shion answered cautiously.

"Getting permission would be easy. The city encourages artificial insemination between people who possess excellent DNA and superior skills."

Shion swallowed, and turned away. The winged insect crossed his line of vision, buzzing incessantly. Irritation welled up inside him.

"Safu, I don't know if I told you this, but I've never known my father. I don't know his personality, his stature, or if he had any illnesses."

"I know. But parents don't matter. Ninety-nine percent of the human genome has been decoded already. I can find out anything I need to know about your genetic information."

"And then... if you do get the information, and there's something in there that you don't want, what are you going to do?"

"Well..."

"Safu, what are you trying to get at? Do you think a human being is entirely what his DNA base sequence tells us he is? Sure, you can look up my DNA, analyze my genes, but what's that going to tell you about me? You talk about having kids like it's easy, but—"

"I know a lot more about you than you think!"

Safu's voice cut him off shrilly. People turned their heads as they passed.

"We've been together since we were two. I know what kind of person you are, what you like to do... I know. I know, and I'm still telling you this— you're the one who doesn't know anything."

"What?"

Safu mumbled something, but he couldn't catch it. He bent toward her slightly so he could hear better.

"I want to have sex with you."

Her words rang clear in Shion's ears.

"Safu..."

"I don't want your sperm. I don't want artificial insemination. I don't care about having kids or not. I want to have sex with you. That's it."

"Wait, uh— wait a minute... Safu, I—"

"Right now."

Shion inhaled. The greasy scent of fried food wafted into his nostrils. The clock chimed eight o'clock.

"Not now."

“Why not? Because you’re not interested in me? Or not interested in sex?”

“I’m interested in both. But... I don’t want to do it, not now, with you.”

“So it’s because it’s with me?”

“No— my body would probably respond no problem. Even now I’m... but— but that’s why I don’t want to. I don’t want to sleep with you on a spur of the moment.”

“You know that’s like saying you’ve never seen me in that way before.”

“Yeah. I always thought of you as a friend.”

“I can’t believe it.” Safu sighed in exasperation. “Why are you such a kid? Whatever. I’m going home.”

“Safu, in two years—”

“Hm?”

“Your exchange is for two years, right? When you come back, I’ll ask this time.”

“If I want to have sex?”

“Yeah.”

“You’re a bonafide idiot if I ever saw one. I don’t know how you could have come this far being that laid-back.”

“Stay safe. Don’t work too hard.”

“Oh, you can count on me working hard. I’ll work so hard, it’ll keep all the boys away.”

With a casual wave of her hand in farewell, Safu turned around, and gave a small shriek. A small grey animal darted past Safu’s feet and scurried up Shion’s body.

“A mouse!”

A small mouse about the size of Shion’s pinky sat on his shoulder, twitching its nose.

"I'm surprised to see mice in this city. But it *is* kind of cute," Safu mused.

"Pretty friendly, too."

The mouse brought its face close to Shion's ear.

"Still a natural," it whispered.

He felt an electric shock run through him. He grabbed at the mouse, but it slipped through his fingers, bounded off his shoulder and shot toward the station exit. True, this was an older district—but Lost Town was still within city limits, and mice were rare. The Health and Hygiene Bureau saw to the complete removal of all pests, animal or insect. People weren't used to seeing the mouse that sped past their feet. Shrieks of surprise and bursts of anxious buzzing rose from the crowd.

And at the very end of it, Shion saw a pair of grey eyes. It was for a fleeting instant. A jolt pierced through his body again.

"Nezumi!"

"Shion, what's wrong?"

"Safu, you can make it home by yourself, right?"

"What? Of course. I was just about to, wasn't I? What's wrong? Why are you so agitated?"

"Sorry—"

After they parted here, he wouldn't see Safu again for two years. He knew he had to give her a proper sending-off. At the very least, watch her retreating back until it disappeared into the jostling crowd. Whether they were going to have sex or not, didn't change the fact that Safu was important to him. He knew well that this was nearly not the proper farewell that she deserved. He knew. But what he thought he knew so well was swept away instantly. His body moved on its own, defying his rational thought. Yes, he had experienced this four years ago— even though he knew reason always had the right answer.

Turn the security system on. Notify the Security Bureau. Remove the foreign presence. He had defied all of it. It was the same now. He was letting his emotions control his actions.

It had begun raining outside. Raindrops pelted his cheek. In the crowd of people briskly walking to and fro, not a familiar face was to be seen. “Shion!” Karan greeted her son at the door, and widened her eyes. “You’re soaked through! What were you doing?”

“Walking.”

“In this rain? From where?”

“The station.”

“And why on earth did you let yourself get this wet?”

“I was cooling off.”

“Cooling off, hmm? Laid back as always, aren’t you?”

Safu has used the same words only moments before. Shion chuckled to himself and began towelling off his hair. It had suddenly grown very cool since it started raining; the old kerosene fan heater was humming to keep the room warm. Karan yawned. It was already time for her to sleep. Tucked away in a corner of Lost Town, Karan ran a modest bakery. It was small, with only one showcase. But people seemed to be drawn to the aroma of freshly-baked bread that wafted from the doors early each morning, and business was booming. She opened early, and so slept early too. It was rounding nine o’clock, which for Karan was like midnight.

“I’m thinking of increasing the batch of butter rolls tomorrow. And maybe be a little adventurous and try selling some simple cakes, on top of the muffins that we sell. What do you think?”

“Like cherry cake?”

“That’s the one. A little something that people can buy as a snack, but a little more higher-end than bread or muffins. A small souvenir for a special day, or something like that.”

"That sounds great," Shion enthused.

"Don't you think so? And I think having cakes in the display case would liven things up a little."

Shion nodded, and began to leave the living room. In this house, they didn't have the luxury of private bedrooms. Karan slept in a corner of the living room, and Shion in the storage cellar.

"Shion," his mother called. He turned around.

"Did something happen?"

"Huh?"

"Did something happen to you that would make you need to cool off?" Karan continued without waiting for Shion's answer. "When you came home, you seemed a little dazed. You didn't even seem to realize you were wet. And... even now—"

"Now?"

"You look absent-minded, but then again a little agitated... it's a strange face you've got on. Do you want me to bring a mirror?"

Shion exhaled shortly.

"Someone died in the park today."

"What? In the Forest Park? There was nothing in the news about that."

Nothing in the news? Did that mean that the man died of natural causes? Although sudden, maybe it was explainable. Not enough to make the news, just a normal death — Shion shook his head. Of course not. The time it took for that body to become rigid, the expression on his face, the green stain. It was all too abnormal.

To the Security Bureau he had only explained what he found at the scene. He pretended that he hadn't noticed the rigor mortis or the stain—he felt like he had to. He didn't know why, but a voice inside him had told him to play dumb, to lie. Just as a small animal might

sense danger and hide itself, his instinct had warned him. Instinct — there it was again. He was acting not on reason, but on whim. He was turning away from logic and sense only too easily to succumb to instinctive emotion. Shion sighed deeply. It was a little hard to breathe.

“And that’s why you’re agitated?”

“Well, yeah. I’ve never seen a dead body before.”

I’m lying, mom. I saw those eyes again today. I saw Nezumi. I have a feeling that something’s going to happen. That’s why—

Karan smiled and wished him good night. It was a gentle smile. He wished her good night in answer, and left the living room.

Karan’s stature was still plump, but she looked much younger than before. It seemed like she hadn’t taken the move from Chronos to Lost Town too harshly. She often smiled as she talked about how enjoyable it was to bake bread, and how uplifting it was when people bought them. It wasn’t just out of kindness or a desire to reassure her son. Karan wasn’t despairing at all about their life here. In Chronos, everything was given to them, but their life in Lost Town was something Karan had built up with her own hands. That was why Shion didn’t want to destroy it. He didn’t want to uproot her entire life as he did four years ago. He didn’t want to get her involved in trouble again.

Shion collapsed into bed. He felt a faint chill, and there was a dull pain at the back of his head. When he closed his eyes, a flurry of images rushed past his eyelids. The greenish stain, the abandoned lettuce, the pink shirt, Safu’s face. *I want to have sex.* The mouse that had scurried up his body. *Still a natural.* The core of his body grew hot. His heartbeat quickened. It was no dream. It wasn’t an illusion. Nezumi did exist there, in the crowd people at the station. *That was some flashy appearance you made back there.* “Jerk,” he muttered under his breath.

What was he supposed to expect from that short appearance? What was Nezumi planning to do?

Shion sat up in bed. Safu aside, were the body in the park and Nezumi somehow connected? On the same night that he discovered the body, Nezumi appeared. Was that a coincidence? If they were related, how were they—

A chime interrupted his thoughts. The mobile telephone on his ID card was ringing. It couldn't be. He knew it couldn't be Nezumi, but his heart raced. His fingers trembled as he grasped the card. White letters flashed on the display—Safu. He tapped the Talk button and the screen switched to Safu's face.

"Shion, were you asleep?"

"Ah—um, no."

He had forgotten. He should be the one calling her back, and to finish saying the farewell that he had left hanging.

"Safu, I'm sorry about back there. I—"

"That person was that important to you, huh?"

"Huh?"

Safu's face had broken into a wry smile. It was both serene and beautiful.

"I've never seen you look like that before. Do you know what kind of expression you had on?"

"Huh? Wait—did I look that bad?"

"It was very interesting indeed. It kept me entertained the whole time. First, it was astonishment, and then—well, let's see—what could you call it? Joy? Raptness, maybe. Enough to wipe everything else out of your mind. And then you beelined out of the station, leaving me behind all by myself. Sad story, huh? I know."

"I'm so sorry. I can't apologize enough."

"I'll say. You're welcome. At least I got to see a new side of you—I've never seen you with that face before. So, Shion, who is it that makes you look like that? Was she² that important to make you drop everything and chase after her?"

"Yeah."

He even surprised himself at his prompt affirmation.

"Um, Safu, don't get me wrong. It's not a girlfriend, or anything like that. Uh—I can't really explain it well, but..."

"Also my first time seeing you stumble over yourself trying to explain things. That's alright if you have a girlfriend. I don't mind if you've already got someone on your mind. —No, that was a lie. Look at me, I always try to put up a strong face in any situation. It's a bad habit of mine."

"That's not true," Shion retorted. "You're always truthful to yourself."

"Only in front of you." Didn't you realize? Safu continued, and her expression grew serious.

"Safu, really, um—take care of yourself. When we meet in two years—"

"I love you, Shion. More than anyone else."

The line died without waiting for his answer. He could hear the pitter-patter of rain. He thought he saw something move in a corner of the room.

"Nezumi?"

Amidst the bags of flour and sugar piled in the storage room, only the sound of rain echoed. Shion hugged his knees and sat silently in the darkness, lending an ear to its continuous drizzle. The rain showed no signs of either worsening or letting up, and continued through the rest of the night.

²In Japanese, this can be taken as *he* or *she*.

3

FLIGHT FOR LIFE

SHION INSERTED his ID card into the card reader of the Park Administration Office. The door opened soundlessly, and the air filtration system and temperature control started up. There was no one inside the office yet. It was odd that Yamase was not here already. Shion turned on the switch of the park administration system. It was the start of another work day.

“Good morning.” An image of City Hall, The Moondrop appeared along with the greeting. “Your unwavering allegiance to the city—” He placed his hand on the image of the Moondrop and recited slowly. “I pledge hereon and ever my unwavering allegiance to the city of No. 6.”

“Our gratitude for your loyalty. Engage in your day’s labour with sincerity and pride as a good citizen of the City.” The Moondrop disappeared, and was replaced with a report of the living conditions

of all the organisms in the Park. Shion breathed a sigh of relief. The daily allegiance rituals had become a source of discomfort for him. Although it was among the farthest branches, Park Administration Office was still under direct affiliation with the City. All employees were required to pledge allegiance to the City every morning. If they refused, they would lose their job.

It was no big deal. All he had to do was cast his hand over the display, and recite the same words. Shion tried to brush it aside, but the worn and banal words of the pledge, and the sheer ridiculousness of the ritual itself always filled him with disgust. And for repeating this banal and ridiculous ritual every morning, Shion's injured pride stung. He remembered Safu complaining of the same thing. The laboratory where Safu worked also operated under the City, so an allegiance ritual was mandatory as well.

Shion lightly blew on his palm. It was no use complaining. As long as he was to be a citizen of No. 6, as long as he was going to continue living here, it was no use fretting about pride. So he kept telling himself.

The office door opened, and Yamase came in. Behind him stood a woman who looked about in her twenties. Yamase called over to her softly, but she shook her head, bowed slightly, and left in a hurry. She was a small woman with long hair.

"I see..." Shion stopped his hands over the control keys and turned to stare into Yamase's square, angular face.

"It's rare to see you with a woman, Yamase-san. Could she be—" He went on to say 'your girlfriend', but promptly shut his mouth. Yamase was sitting at his control panel, reciting the pledge of allegiance to the city. His expression was tense. Shion could tell from his face that this wasn't the right time for teasing.

"Yamase-san, is something the matter?"

“Shion, that lady...” Yamase paused, and turned to Shion. “She’s the wife of yesterday’s body.”

“Huh?”

That would make them a couple of enormous age difference. No. 6 had no strict regulations for marriage, as long as it was between two consenting registered citizens. Even if the couple had not gotten an official marriage certificate, it was not a problem. The problem was more with whether they would be able to prepare an appropriate childrearing environment if they were to have children. Childbirth was not permitted for people who didn’t meet the city’s criteria of standards. Shion didn’t know what those criteria were. Nevertheless, people were free to marry, and a couple or two with this much age difference was nothing out of the ordinary.

“She says they’re only three years apart,” said Yamase quietly. Shion didn’t understand. “He was three years older than her,” Yamase repeated.

“Three years... but—”

Yamase nodded. “That body was only 31 years old.”

“No way!” exclaimed Shion incredulously. “That can’t be. That body was an elderly man, no matter how you look at it.”

“Yeah,” said Yamase heavily. “I was surprised too. But the body hasn’t come back to the madam since. They’re keeping it over at the Bureau.”

“Keep? So you’re saying an autopsy wasn’t enough to find out how he died?”

“I guess that’s what it means.”

They couldn’t find the cause of death. Shion couldn’t imagine a cause of death that No. 6’s front-line medical technology couldn’t decode. Medicine had long had full bearings on organism analysis to the nanometre scale. An average cell measured approximately 20 micrometres. A micrometre was 1000 times larger than a nanometre.

Any disease at the cellular level should be more than easy to find and analyze.

Shion felt a chill. Abnormal rigor mortis, its dissipation, and the body it left that was unmistakably that of an elderly man—what did it all mean? He didn't know. At present, Yamase's low voice spoke again.

"The madam was told that he died from an accident in the park, and to wait for further notice until they figure out his cause of death. She came here today asking if she could at least see where the accident happened."

"Accident? Bullshit!"

"You're right, it's a load of bull. Them telling her it was an accident is a huge lie," Yamase replied, and scratched his neck vigorously in irritation.

"Yamase-san, why does the Bureau have to lie about it? And isn't it strange that they can't seem to find a cause of death?"

"Yeah... this incident is full of unanswered questions."

"If the Bureau can't explain it, could it be a cause of death that's never had any previous case?"

"No previous cases?"

"That man died from something that was completely unknown up until now, something no one's experienced before — is that possible?"

"Shion! What are you..." Yamase trailed off. His face was pale. Shion figured his own face must look the same.

"Let's have some coffee, shall we?" Yamase suddenly stood up as if he couldn't bear the tense atmosphere any longer. Shion hastily stood up after him.

"Oh, let me—"

"No, I'll do it. You like lots of milk in yours, right Shion?"

"Thanks." Shion paused. "So—but anyone could look at the body and tell it wasn't an accident, right?"

Yamase turned toward him. His usual gentle face was strangely contorted.

"Yamase-san?"

"Shion, bodies can be modified."

"Huh?"

"I—" Yamase stammered. "Before I started working here, I used to work at the Municipal Central Hospital. My job was to modify dead bodies."

"Modify—what do you mean?"

"I wasn't planning to tell this to anyone, but..." Yamase hesitated.

"Shion, have you ever seen a dead body before?"

"Once, at a funeral for my grandfather on my mother's side. I saw his body in a coffin at the viewing."

"How was it?"

"How...? He looked peaceful. Don't they all look like that?"

"You think so?"

"Are you saying they don't?"

Medical technology had made enormous progress not only in the fields of disease treatment and prevention, but also in the removal of pain. Technology of the present day could remove anything, whether it be from accident or illness, ranging anywhere from pain during surgery, to breathing trouble, severe pain and seizures experienced in the moments leading up to death. People ended their lives free of suffering, and all died with peaceful expressions on their faces. That was what Shion had been told.

Yamase handed him a cup of coffee. He lowered his gaze and bent his neck to scratch it, as if to avoid Shion's gaze.

“All this about front-line medical technology goes right over my head,” Yamase said slowly. “But all I know is that . . . no matter how much technology develops, it’s impossible for everyone to die a peaceful death. That much I’m sure of.” Yamase’s face contorted even more. The hand which held his own mug trembled slightly.

“I worked for a long time in the basement of the Central Hospital. My job was to modify the bodies that were brought there.”

“Yamase-san, so what’s this about modifying bodies?”

“It’s an easy job. When the body’s been confirmed dead and brought down, I would coat its face with a special chemical and cover it with this apparatus. And then—”

“Then?”

“Then it would smile. All of them did. They would all look like they were having some wonderful dream.”

Shion almost let out a cry. It was just as Yamase had said. He was nine years old when he saw his deceased grandfather’s face, and he had been smiling.

“It’s almost like he’s having a wonderful dream,” he remembered his mother whispering through her tears.

“Of course,” Yamase continued, “the majority of people that die don’t need to be modified. They’re all people that have been able to get proper palliative care, and have really died a peaceful death. But it’s still only a majority — not the entire population. There are a small number of people, though, that die tragically, their faces all stiffened up in pain.”

“For example—?”

“Huh?”

“What kind of people die like that, Yamase-san?”

Yamase exhaled shortly, and drained the rest of his coffee. “I don’t know. My job was only to coat the faces with the chemical and cover

them with the apparatus. I didn't know why these people had to die with such suffering and sadness in their faces, and no one would tell me." He paused. "But— there was this one time, a middle-aged man was brought in . . . I usually have to wipe the face before applying the chemical, and I noticed that the man had tear streaks on his face, and — and I thought — maybe he'd been crying right up until he died. I wondered if he'd been crying the whole time while he was dying. And then I just had this thought that— maybe this man had killed himself." "Killed himself? A citizen of this city—?"

"You think it's impossible?" Yamase asked flatly.

"Of all causes of death in the last ten years, suicide has only been 0.05%. And most have been impulse cases due to temporary psychosis, so they technically don't even fall into that criteria. According to the city's statistics, anyway."

"According to what the city has published as statistics, yes," Yamase rephrased.

Despair did not exist in No. 6. All citizens lead a secure and hospitable life. There was no starvation, no war, no anguish. Not even any pain in the moments leading up to death.

You guys have been programmed to think this holey mess is the ideal utopia. Nezumi had spat these words out four years earlier. Now, Shion was experiencing its reality word for word. Lost Town was full of people who had abandoned hope. They had enough to eat, and enough to keep living. But they had no hopes for the future. Lost Town wasn't the only place—maybe the same could be said for Chronos. How many people could die with a real smile on their face, and say they've lived a fulfilling life?

"Yamase-san, are you saying that the Bureau is manipulating information?"

"Shion!" Yamase warned, knitting his brow and shaking his head

violently. “Don’t say stuff like that out loud. We’ve been hired by the City. We’ve pledged allegiance. We shouldn’t be talking about our suspicions. I don’t know what’s gotten into me. Forget everything I said. Just forget it.”

“Alright,” Shion replied uncertainly.

“Right then, let’s get Sampo and the rest moving. Where were the main regions today?”

“Areas JK02 to ER005. Mainly cleaning up foliage.”

“Alright, let’s get to work.”

“Right you are.” They began to tap the control keys for the robots. Yamase gave a short grunt of pain.

“Yamase-san?”

“Ah, it’s nothing. It’s just—my fingers are strange.”

“Hurt?”

“No, no... it’s like they feel stiff...” He stood up unsteadily, and then suddenly crumpled to the floor, his face in his hands.

“Are you alright?”

“My eyes... I can’t see... they’re blurry...”

In the midst of reaching out to support Yamase, Shion froze. He couldn’t move. Yamase’s hair was turning white. Spots were beginning to spread over the hands that covered his face.

“Shion... what’s—what’s happening to me...?”

Frozen in horror, Shion watched as Yamase aged with astonishing speed before him. He curled up as he lay on the ground, and his back contracted in violent spasms. He was having trouble breathing. Shion lunged for the emergency intercom.

“We have an emergency. An ambulance, please. Quickly!”

Yamase coughed weakly. *What was happening? What was going on?* Shion couldn’t believe what was unfolding before him. Everything

seemed surreal. His mind was in a panic — he didn't know what to do, how to deal with it. But still another part of him remained unsettlingly calm. *Observe. Analyze. Watch. Don't take your eyes off of him. Take in everything you can and absorb it as knowledge.*

Shion swallowed, and lifted Yamase in his arms. After a few weak spasms, Yamase's body was still.

"Yamase-san?" His face was unmistakably that of an old man. And it was no longer that of one who was living. Shion checked his pulse and pupils. Yamase's body grew colder by the minute. His mouth was open as if in astonishment, like the man from yesterday.

Shion, how can this happen? I can't believe it. Shion could almost imagine those words tumbling out of his parted lips.

I have to close his eyes, at least. Shion pressed his fingers on Yamase's eyelids. They didn't close. Rigor mortis had already begun to take its course.

Shion crouched beside Yamase, clenched his fists, and continued staring at his colleague with whom he was having a conversation only moments before. Feelings of fear, sorrow, or pain were curiously absent. It was as if all his feelings had gone numb.

Observe. Analyze. Watch. Don't take your eyes off of him. Take in everything you can and absorb it as knowledge. And memorize it. Memorize. Memorize—

Cessation of respiratory and cardiovascular activity. Decrease in body temperature. Rigor mortis. Death spots. Dissipation of rigor mortis. Postmortem phenomena that usually took dozens of hours was taking place in a mere fifteen, sixteen minutes. It was if he was watching a film on fast-forward.

Shion watched unmoving, his eyes wide open, biting his lip in concentration. He could predict what was going to happen next. He was

sweating. A warm bead of perspiration slid from his temple down his cheek. Its heat reassured him that he was still alive.

Living people are warm. You were right, Nezumi. People are warm because they're alive. Four years ago, you knew this.

A stain appeared on Yamase's neck. It was dark green, almost black. Shion bit his lip harder. The taste of blood spread inside his mouth. There it was, it was starting—what was previously unknown, what no one had ever experienced before. He leaned forward. The stain moved. The skin over that portion swelled slightly, and stirred.

A buzzer went off. Sampo was sending an Indistinguishable Object signal. Oblivious to the changes that were happening in the office, it seemed like Sampo and the rest were going about their cleaning duties as usual. Shion ignored it. He had no attention to spare. All the nerves in his body were focused on the stain. His eyes were glued to it, and he couldn't break his gaze.

Shion let out a muffled cry of horror. He clutched his chest, and felt his own heartbeat thudding against his palm. He jumped back. An insect had eaten its way out from under the skin of Yamase's neck, and was wriggling to get free. It was the same colour as the stain it had come out of. It had thin silvery wings, six legs, antennae, and a needle-like ovipositor.

"A bee..."

A bee had just eaten its way out of a human body. How could that—The insect took flight. He followed it with his gaze, and saw the Medical Bureau's ambulance pull up in front of the office. A sudden darkness veiled his eyes.

He was fainting from shock.

The black insect was darting around in his darkening vision. Shion groaned, and curled up on the floor.

Shion awoke to a blinding light stabbing at his eyes. He heard a quiet male voice speak.

“Awake?”

Light was streaming through the window, and the man had his back to it. His face was thrown in shadow. The shadow spoke again.

“Get up. I have something to ask you.”

It was a voice he’d heard before. Shion came to, and noticed he was lying on the office sofa. Yamase, wrapped in a white cloth, was being carried out of the room. It seemed like he had fainted for only a few minutes.

“Yamase-san.”

Shion called the name of his colleague almost without thinking. Yamase’s smiling face crossed his mind. Fragmented memories — how he loved coffee, and drank several cups of it a day; his quiet demeanour; his habit of sheepishly looking at his feet — all at once burst forth in his mind.

They weren’t particularly close. To Shion, he was just a senior colleague. He had never confided in Yamase, nor had they ever had a deeply personal conversation. But Shion had liked Yamase. Yamase never intruded unheeded into anyone’s personal space, but that didn’t mean he was disinterested. He was a good person. But he was no more.

“Yamase-san...” His eyes began to sting. He was tapped lightly on the shoulder.

“Let’s get emotional later, shall we?” The man spoke lazily and without emotion. Shion’s heart jumped unpleasantly.

“Can you explain the situation to us?” This voice, these words. He had heard them before.

“You’re...”

“It’s been a while, hasn’t it. It’s nice to see you still remember me.”

It was Rashi, the Interrogations Officer from the Security Bureau. He had the same gentle tongue and unsmiling eyes as four years before.

“You’ll tell us everything you know, won’t you?”

Shion found himself nodding automatically. He could feel his mind begin to unravel slowly. His head and body felt heavy, and his own voice sounded as if it was coming from far away.

This is bad.

A warning signal sounded in a corner of his mind. But he couldn’t regulate himself as well as he could yesterday. Each question that Rashi asked dragged words forth helplessly from his mouth.

“A bee?” Rashi furrowed his brow. He gazed around the room, and cocked his head to one side in perplexity. There was no insect, bee or otherwise, to be found in the room.

“I’m not buying it.”

“Check Yamase-san’s neck, there should be a scar—” He swallowed his words. There should be a scar. There should have been one, the same, on the neck of the man yesterday. The Bureau had investigated that body as an unnatural death, there was no way they could have overlooked it. They had noticed, but had told his bereaved wife that it was an accident. They didn’t want the real cause of death to be known — that was what it boiled down to.

Shion turned his head to the side, as if to avoid Rashi’s gaze. He had spoken too much. He had divulged everything he knew, which might have been something that the Bureau intended never to reach outside ears — classified information that they were intent on covering up. If that was the case—

“You used to specialize in ecology, correct?”

“I intended to, but I never did. I have nothing to do with it now.”

“And were you interested in the biology of insects as well?”

“Ecology encompasses everything that has to do with interactions of species with their environment. Insects weren’t the only thing I was interested in.”

“Ah, is that so? And specifically, what do you mean in terms of relationship between organisms and their environment?”

“Well—”

Shion could feel himself breaking into a cold sweat. A thin smile played on Rashi’s lips while he spoke, his words light, his tone conversational. But his gaze never left Shion once. Two officials of the Security Bureau came in. One of them whispered in Rashi’s ear. Momentarily, Rashi spoke.

“I hope you won’t mind coming down to the Security Bureau for a bit.”

“Huh?”

“It’s nothing really, we just want to hear more of your story. It’ll be over in minutes. I promise we won’t take much of your time if you come with us.”

“I—”

A buzzer sounded. Sampo was sending an Indistinguishable Object error.

“I’m sorry, I have to operate the cleaning robots...”

“Put them away. In any case, you won’t get much work done today.”

Shion ignored him. He minimized the error display, and switched over to the camera. A small grey mouse appeared on the screen. It was scurrying up and down Sampo’s arm. Its mouth was open wide, and it was mouthing something incessantly. Shion brought the earphones to his ear and turned on the sound sensor.

“Shion.” Nezumi’s voice flowed through to him. “Get out of there. You’re in trouble.”

What?

“Get out.”

Click. He heard a sound behind him. Shion turned, and found himself staring down a pair of gun barrels. He couldn’t distinguish what model they were. But he knew that these were no high-tech stun guns, no, none of that sort — they were older models, highly effective in the kill. Sport-hunting hobbyists liked to use these kinds of guns. Shion slowly flicked Sampo’s speaker switch on. Now, Nezumi’s end would be able to hear his voice.

“Are you forcing me under arrest?”

“I guess you could call it something like that. Regardless, you’re coming with us.”

“Don’t you need a reason to arrest me?”

“A reason? None of that. But if you insist . . . your bicycle, perhaps?”

“My bike?”

“You were using a bicycle without speed-limiters. That’s a breach of the law, and more than enough reason to put you under arrest.”

“What—how—for such a ridiculous reason, without even going through the proper procedures? Using violence? Is this how you arrest a citizen of the city? What happens to my rights?”

“A citizen? Rights?” Rashi sneered. A violent chill ran down Shion’s spine.

“You really think you have any of those?”

He could hear Nezumi click his tongue. *Tsk.*

“Guess I didn’t make it in time.”

Shion exhaled, and began shutting down the operating system. Just before it turned off, he heard Nezumi’s short message ring out clearly.

“Shion, don’t panic. I’m coming to help you.”

He was right. Don’t panic. Calm down. Be of sound mind. He had to buy more time. Shion relented.

“Please don’t use any violence on me.”

“We won’t, of course. As long as you co-operate with us.”

“It wouldn’t be any use to retaliate anyway, would it?”

“Is it your policy not to take useless action? There’s a good lad, he knows what he’s talking about. It’s a waste, really.”

“A waste? What is?”

“For you.”

“I don’t understand what you’re talking about.”

“You’ll know in good time. You’ve always been smart and quick to understand, like you were four years ago.”

Flanked by two Bureau officials, Shion climbed into the car. Above them was an expanse of clear, blue autumn sky. The sun was bright. The birds were chirping. A gentle breeze blew past them. Times of peace and tranquility they were.

* * *

The car glided forward.

“Nice weather today,” commented Rashi from the passenger seat, without turning around. The official sitting on Shion’s right side nodded in response. “It looks like we’ve been having more warmer days than usual lately.”

Rashi turned to Shion and smiled.

“And yourself? Do you have a car?”

“No. I usually take my bike or walk.”

"That's a good thing. Young people like you need to move their bodies more. By the way, what we're riding right now is a battery-operated car. Quite comfortable, don't you think?"

"Excellent I would think, if it wasn't for the situation I'm in right now," Shion replied sarcastically. In means of retaliation, it was the best he could muster. Rashi shrugged lightly.

"As I was saying, this car runs on fuel-cell batteries. Any idea how they work? We aren't too well-versed on the scientific side of things, I'm afraid."

"I don't know much either."

"What sort of things do you know about it?"

"Not much... I mean, I don't really have a lot of scientific knowledge."

The officials on both sides of him moved at once. He was grabbed firmly by the arms. Rashi's tone changed to that of an interrogator.

"Then just tell us what you do know."

"Like I said, what I know— it's all just general knowledge."

"Such as?"

The conversation was short, clipped and void of frivolity, but Shion felt a sort of strangling heaviness about it. He felt like someone was choking him slowly with a soft, damp piece of cloth. He felt nauseous.

"So... through electrolysis, alcohol is separated into oxygen and hydrogen, and by fusing them together again, energy is—"

"Energy is what?"

"Where are we going?" Shion asked suddenly. He rose, but was yanked back and shoved into his seat.

"Aren't we going to the Security Bureau? This isn't the way." The Bureau was located beside City Hall. From the Park Administration Office, one only had to cut through the park to get there. By car, it

was a few minutes' distance. But the scenery out the window showed him the car was heading in the opposite direction.

"Where do you think we're going?"

"That's what I'm asking you right now," said Shion testily.

"You're not entitled to ask any questions."

"What—how could you—why—"

"Haven't I told you? You're a top suspect in this case."

"What case?"

"The death that happened today, and the other one from yesterday. You're on suspicion of murder."

Shion had lost his voice. He could hear the rush of blood in his ears as it receded from his face.

"You're a dangerous suspect. You have extensive knowledge and an intelligent brain to put it to use. I could tell just from our conversation. And to top it off, you're dissatisfied with your situation and feel a strong resistance against the City. Superior ability and hostility toward the City. Take either one, and they aren't of concern by themselves. But you have both. Dangerous, indeed."

"Those are false accusations."

"False? I beg to differ." Rashi's hand extended to a silver button beside the steering wheel. Shion's and Yamase's voice began to play from the speakers.

'Yamase-san, why does the Bureau have to lie about it? And isn't it strange that they can't seem to find a cause of death?'

'Yeah... this incident is full of unanswered questions.'

Shion closed his eyes. It was the conversation they'd had only minutes ago. They were being tapped the whole time. Had a microphone been hidden in the control panel? But for what purpose?

'Yamase-san, are you saying that the Bureau is manipulating information?'

'Shion!'

Rashi pressed the button lightly again. The voices were cut off. For a moment, a cold silence fell in the car as if the very air had frozen over.

"Care to hear a little more?"

"Please... stop... I can't believe this."

"Can't you?"

"I didn't kill anyone," said Shion flatly.

"So you're saying that this *bee* that you were talking about is the real murderer?"

"Yes."

"Preposterous. A rather contrived story for someone of your intelligence."

"What reason do I have to kill Yamase-san?"

"That's what we're going to figure out. My guess is that you wanted to start a commotion."

"—Huh?"

"A commotion. You wanted to start a huge one, enough to shake the very roots of the city, and bask in its glory. You must have regarded yourself as some kind of genius fallen upon ill fortune, haven't you? So you loathed the City for not favouring you as you deserved, and felt hatred toward its citizens. You believed you deserved more attention, so you thought of this method of murder, this unnatural death, to take society by storm. You had the medical and biological knowledge to do it. It was very well possible that you used some kind of special chemical to commit murder."

Shion sank deeply into the car seat. All energy had left his body. He realized it was a trap. He had walked right into its cunning grasp. He licked his lips. They were parched and dry.

"I see," he said coolly. "So it's all been scripted already. Rather *contrived* story yourself, maybe even more than mine."

"We'll see how contrived it is once we get through questioning you." There was a metallic clang. The official on Shion's left had handcuffed him.

"There's a transmitter on those, and it lets us know where you are. When we get there, you'll get to take them off." Rashi's words gave Shion an idea of where he was going. The West Block. The Correctional Facility. If he was undergoing investigation there, he was sure to be locked up right afterwards as a convict. In exchange for removing his handcuffs, he would have a V-chip implanted into him.

—*Nezumi, it's too late. I can't get away.*

He closed his eyes, and took a deep breath.

"There's a good lad. Keep quiet."

Shion remained slumped, and bit his dry bottom lip.

I'm coming to help you. Nezumi's voice echoed in his ears. His heart grew calm. His legs trembled, though not from despair or fear, but rage. Rage at the people who had tricked him. Nezumi's voice kept that rage afloat. The car entered Lost Town.

—*Mom.*

"Are you worried about your mother?"

"My mother—what—what'll happen to her?"

"Happen? Nothing. She won't be stripped of her citizenship just because her son is a convict." Rashi whispered something to the driver. The car veered to the right. A familiar scenery of the streets came into view. The car stopped silently at the curb.

"Look."

Rashi pointed. Karan was in the midst of handing a small girl a wrapped loaf of bread. She said something to her, and the girl nodded.

Both Karan and the girl were smiling. Enveloped in the amber light of autumn, the two looked as if they were part of a painting, or a scene from a drama. Shion leaned forward.

“Your mother looks like a gentle lady. Get a good look at her while you can.” Rashi motioned with his chin, and the car began to move. “You may never see her again.”

Rashi chuckled with his back to Shion.

“It’s nothing to be so troubled about. Sure, at first your mother will be shocked, and she’ll feel sad. But she’ll get over it. That’s how life is. Well, it’s not like anything would come of you worrying about her anyway. Soon you’ll find you’ll have things more serious to worry about.”

Rashi’s words sliced at Shion’s heart. His breath caught in his throat. The rage and rebellion simmering inside him slowly began to dissipate. He would never be able to return to his normal life again. He had been separated from it forever. Seeing his mother etched the feeling of despair deeper into him.

They had calculated it all. They didn’t stop the car near Shion’s house out of pity for him. They had done it to deal him the final blow, the blow that knocked him down and told him, give up, lose hope, you’re never going back again. It was a cunning and cruel trick to make him lose the will to retaliate.

“I’m coming to help you. I’m coming to help you.”

Shion opened his mouth and repeated the words to himself.

I’m coming to help you. Just a short sentence. But Nezumi’s voice had been steady with confidence.

What did he look like again? He wondered, and tried to visualize Nezumi’s face. He could only remember a pair of light grey eyes.

—*Will I see you soon, Nezumi?*

“What’s that?” Rashi turned around, and furrowed his brow.

“Are you smiling?”

“Smiling? Of course not,” Shion replied. “I don’t have the courage to smile in this kind of situation.”

“In this situation, huh... you seem rather calm about it. I hope you do understand exactly what kind of situation you’re in right now.”

“Almost too well.”

“Aren’t you calm and collected in spite of that.”

“I’m a natural.”

“A what?”

“A natural,” Shion repeated. “I’ve been told that by someone once. That I’m a natural at not getting it.”

Rashi stared at Shion in silence. The car was exiting Lost Town and approaching the western border. It was Shion’s first time here, because regular citizens were not allowed to enter into this area. No. 6 was a citadel—a wall made of special alloy circled the city and enclosed it. In most parts of the city, the wall was camouflaged well with trees, but in the West Block it stood bare. The car bypassed the Access Control Office.

“Aren’t you going to enter the West Block from here?”

“There are two gates. That one was for entering and exiting the city. The other one is especially for entering the Correctional Facility, it leads directly into it. The Correctional Facility is a special kind of facility, even in the West Block. We keep it completely isolated from all general citizens. I bet you didn’t know that.”

“No, I didn’t.”

“You’ll find out even more soon enough.”

The path narrowed. An increasing number of trees blocked the sunlight.

“Once we’re through the woods, there will be nothing but wastelands. Past the gates it’ll be the same. It’ll probably be the last time you see any greenery, so I advise you engrave it into your memory well.”

The car stopped.

“What’s the matter?” Rashi asked.

“Ah, it’s just...” The driver pointed to something in front of them. A silver-coloured lump was laying across the middle of the road. Slowly, it raised itself.

“Sampo?” Shion swallowed.

“What’s this? What’s a cleaning robot doing here?”

“Maybe it has orders to clean the forest area?”

“I haven’t heard anything about it.”

Sampo was scooping up fallen leaves with his metal arms.

“Keep an eye on the suspect.” Rashi ordered the officials, and got out of the car. He approached Sampo. Sampo swayed, its arms grabbing ahold of Rashi. Clinging to him, it fell forward.

Rashi gave a short cry, and was dragged by Sampo to the ground amongst the trees.

“Ah!” The driver raised his own voice in surprise, and opened the door to lean forward. The next moment, two small shadows darted into the car. They were two grey mice. In a flash, they each latched onto the throat of a Bureau official.

“Don’t move,” a low voice commanded. A person slid into the passenger seat. A grey cloth covered his head and was wrapped around his shoulders. From them, a brown mouse sprang onto the base of the driver’s neck.

“These guys have small bombs planted in their bodies. Try anything funny, and you can count on your heads being blown off.”

The driver whimpered in terror.

“Take his handcuffs off. And the three of you, get out of the car.”

No one moved.

“Quickly!” he ordered sharply. “I’m impatient. Do you want me to set them off?” There was a metallic sound from the mice that were latched onto each throat. Click. Click. Click. The handcuffs fell from Shion’s wrists. The three men tumbled out of the car, bleeding at the neck.

“Nezumi!”

“Greetings later.” Nezumi gripped the steering wheel. The car spun around in a U-turn, and hurtled down the road at full speed.

“Nezumi, are you really going to make them explode?”

“Idiot. You think I would plant bombs into my faithful friends? That was just to scare them.”

“Were those robot mice? They looked just like the real thing. And with Sampo, how did you—”

“Shut up,” Nezumi growled. He yanked the cloth off his head, and threw it to the backseat. “Wrap that over your head and stay curled up.”

“Is this superfibre? Why do I have to wrap up in this?”

“Because I’m going to crash it.”

“Crash what?”

“The car.”

“What!? Why—”

Nezumi’s fist pounded the steering wheel.

“Just shut up, alright? Is asking questions all you’re good for?”

“But we can just escape with the car.”

“I was planning to, but—”

“But what?”

"It went too well." They were approaching the wall that separated the West Block from No. 6. The car showed no signs of slowing down. "It shouldn't have been this easy to rescue you."

"Really?"

"You're naturally dense, you wouldn't know. It doesn't get any more dangerous when something's gone too well. That's why we're going to dump this thing. When I tell you to, wrap up in that cloth and jump out of the car. I'm gonna crash it."

"How about you?"

"I'm used to this kind of thing. No need for the dense boy to worry about me."

"I can't just leave you!"

The wall was looming closer.

"Get out, open the door!" Nezumi yelled. Almost simultaneously, the tires screamed as the car screeched to a halt. Shion's body floated up. The next minute, he was being slammed back against the seat. If it weren't for its shock-absorbing material, he probably would have broken a few bones.

"Damnit!" Nezumi kicked the door hard. It didn't move.

"Is it the automatic brake system?" Shion winced at his bruised shoulder as he asked.

"I disabled that a long time ago. I disabled the alarm system, the collision sensor system, everything. This car's being controlled remotely," Nezumi said angrily.

A chuckle resounded throughout the interior of the car. It was Rashi's voice.

"I won't have you underestimate the Security Bureau. The car that you boys are riding is actually an escort cruiser, though you might not have noticed. It's not something you can control so easily."

Nezumi swore.

"I didn't know you had an accomplice. That was something I didn't expect. It was quite the spectacle, very impressive. Why don't we have a nice talk, and I can hear all about it."

The car changed directions, and began to move on its own.

"Rather quiet, hmm? Can your friend not talk? Or does talking pose some kind of problem? Ah, your voice sample must be in the system, which means you have a criminal record."

"I think *you're* talking a bit too much." Nezumi's hands moved swiftly. "I'm sorry, but I don't have time for pointless conversations with old men." Nezumi moved to the back seat and pushed Shion down. "Duck and get under the cloth. Hold on tight."

"Hey! What are you doing?" There was a note of panic in Rashi's voice.

"See ya, old man. Say goodbye to your high-tech escort cruiser too."
"What—"

There was a blast. A wave of impact slammed into them.

"Get out!" The short command burst at Shion's ear. The door opened. A gust of hot air swept over them. *Outside. I have to get outside.* Shion screwed his eyes shut, and leapt into the outside world. He hit the ground, and rolled. Behind him, he heard an enormous explosion. The car was on its side, its wheels in the air spinning helplessly.

"Good job," Nezumi whistled. "You rolled pretty well for someone with such a big head. Not hurt, are you?"

"I scraped my arm pretty badly. You?"

"I told you, I'm used to this."

"What did you do?"

"I destroyed the steering system."

"How?"

“Escort cruisers might be durable on the outside, but they’re delicate on the inside. As long as you set it in the right place, any small bomb will put it right to sleep.”

“You seem to know a lot about it.”

“Like I said, I’m used to this. Right, now to get out of here. Can you run?”

“Of course.”

They emerged from the wood to see several Security Bureau cars approaching in the distance. The area had probably been put under emergency alert.

“Throw your ID card away,” Nezumi ordered quietly. “Hurry up, there’s no time to waste. That thing is only going to be a danger to us.”

Shion knew. His ID card carried all his personal information, and it was connected to and stored in the city’s administrative computer system. The computer could instantly pull up his latest information, or pinpoint his location from the weak radio waves that his card emitted. Carrying his ID card was like waving a large flag and telling everyone where he was. It was a dangerous device for anyone who was on the run, in hiding, or aiming to go underground. Nezumi was telling him to throw it away. But—once let go, he would never be able to get it back again. He would be throwing his whole life in No. 6 away. A card was needed for everything from shopping, bill payments, and communication to entering and exiting the workplace or school, and using public transportation. Those who couldn’t prove their citizenship in the city were not allowed to live there.

“Throw it away,” Nezumi repeated, in the same low voice.

If he didn’t toss it, there was no chance for them to escape. But if he did, he would never be able to return. The pair of grey eyes were fixed on him. They were neither clouded in panic, nor glinting in

challenge. They were calm, and unreadable. Shion let go of his ID card. A grey mouse appeared, picked up the card in its mouth and disappeared again into the undergrowth.

“He’ll get rid of it for us. That should keep the Bureau busy for a while trying to find our location. Not much of a distraction, but it should buy us some time. Let’s go.”

A Security Bureau car turned right and disappeared into the forest. It had picked up the radio waves emitted by the ID card. They ran in the opposite direction.

“Hurry. Once the Bureau switches to their satellite surveillance system, they’ll be able to see everything on land. We have to get away while they’re still on the tail of that ID card.”

“Where? How—?”

“Well for starters, we’ll use that.” A small truck was parked up against a beech tree. It was a Park Administration truck. A cleaning robot was loaded on the back.

“Sampo— no, that’s Ippo¹.”

“Yeah. They said they wanted to help you and wouldn’t listen, so I brought them along. They ended up being pretty useful.”

The truck began to move.

“Nezumi, this area’s probably under high alert now. If we keep hanging around here without a card, they’ll find us out.”

“We have a card.”

“Where?”

“He has it,” Nezumi jerked his chin at Ippo.

“Ippo? Oh, right.” Robots were also required to be registered with the city. Robots like Ippo and Sampo, which were used by city orga-

¹one step, first step

nizations, were registered in detail according to their various uses, and implanted with a chip.

“His chip should get us through the inspection system.”

“But Ippo’s chip only shows that he’s a cleaning robot. If he’s found roaming an area that has nothing to do with it, they’ll get suspicious.”

“We’re roaming an area that has *everything* to do with it.”

“Huh?”

They were approaching a pair of silver gates. The moment they passed through, they would be automatically scanned, and if the contents of the chip deemed them unfit to pass, the gates would close, and the truck would be forced to a halt.

The truck sped through the gates without slowing down. The hazard lamps at the gate remained unlit. Shion let out a breath. Nezumi chuckled.

“Don’t get worked up just yet. This is only the beginning.”

“Sorry, I’m not used to this kind of thing.”

“You’ll get used to it in no time. Then you can sit back and enjoy the ride.”

“This isn’t really my idea of ‘enjoyable,’” Shion muttered.

“Oh, really? The look on your face says you’re enjoying this quite a bit.”

Shion sighed deeply again, and gazed at Nezumi’s profile.

“Admiring my good looks?”

“No, I just noticed you’ve gotten taller.”

“So have you. It’s been four years. Our four years is a long time. Gotta expect some changes. It would be unnatural not to have changed at all.”

Four years was a long time. For Shion, it was long and turbulent. But compared to the dizzying events of these past few hours, he felt like

they were the most peaceful days of his life. A weariness overcame his body. Nezumi smirked.

“So have you noticed?”

“What?”

“I’m taller than you.”

“Lies,” Shion objected.

“It’s the truth. What have you been eating? You’re like a twig. I don’t know how you would be able to get naked in front of your lover with a body like *that*.”

“That’s none of your business,” Shion replied irritably. “Have you even seen me naked? Don’t go making things up.”

“What if I said I have?” The cloth wrapped around Nezumi’s shoulders shook as he continued to laugh. Shion had treated a wound on that same shoulder four years before. Those shoulders were now broader and more muscled. His once-long hair was shorter, just covering his ears, and his jawline and neck were still slender, but not pitifully thin. He carried no remnant of the weakness that stirred Shion’s protective instinct four years ago.

“Nezumi, have you been keeping watch on me?”

“What’re you talking about?” said Nezumi innocently.

“Don’t play dumb. You appeared right there as if you knew this was going to happen to me. What’s going on? Were you keeping me under surveillance?”

“Now, don’t think too highly of yourself. I don’t have that kind of time on my hands.”

“Then explain why.”

“You’re always like that, aren’t you,” Nezumi said. “You can’t take any action unless you understand everything in your head. You need an explanation and interpretation for everything.”

“What do you know?” Shion replied angrily. “Don’t act like you know everything about me. I need to find out why this happened— what’s going to happen. I can’t move in this confused state.”

The truck came to a halt. Shion was grabbed by the collar and shaken violently.

“You’re going to move,” Nezumi hissed. “Don’t ever let me hear you whining about not being able to move again. Those guys don’t see us as human beings. They can get rid of us as easily as crushing an ant under their feet. You remember that.”

Shion caught his breath, and stared into Nezumi’s face. His words clicked into place like puzzle pieces.

Rights? You really think you have any of those? The Security Bureau’s Investigations Officer Rashi had said those words, not moving a muscle on his face. What he had said in meaning was that he could dispose of Shion as easily as stepping on an ant. Wipe him off the face of the earth.

“Get out.” Nezumi opened the door. “We’re walking from here.”

The vacated truck made a U-turn and slowly coasted along the way that they had come. It had switched to auto-pilot and was returning to the Park Administration Office. On its loading deck sat Ippo, and for a moment, it looked like its head was bowed in dejection.

They were standing inside what doubled as a waste disposal plant and Refuse-derived Fuel (RDF) factory. Here, all the garbage gathered from the city were sorted into those to be turned into RDF, those to be forwarded to other recycling facilities, and those to be discarded as waste. 80% of No. 6’s energy supply came from solar power. In Chronos, every house was equipped with solar panels and its own thermal storage system. In Lost Town, however, it was more common to use the cheaper RDFs. RDFs were blocks of solid fuel, about the size of an adult thumb. Once burned, they emitted a faint odour,

which blanketed the town.

“I see. It would be no problem getting into a waste disposal plant with a cleaning robot’s chip.” If it had been a nursing robot or pet robot, they would not have been able to pass.

“Nezumi, was this all part of your plan when you brought Ippo and them along?”

“More questions?” Nezumi’s shoulders hunched slightly in exasperation, his back to Shion, who trailed behind. Shion noticed that there was now a grey mouse sitting on Nezumi’s shoulder.

“If I had them with me, I wouldn’t look suspicious driving around the city. The inspection system wouldn’t catch me as long as I was heading west in the direction of the waste disposal plant. They were pretty useful, I’ll say. The transport truck was kind of slow, which pissed me off. But those old guys took a detour to your house, right? That bought me a little time. But...”

“But?”

“But I would have wanted to get away on the Security Bureau car,” Nezumi sighed. “Well, that just shows you can’t get everything you want. Watch it, things are gonna get a little rough from here.”

“Huh?”

There was an explosion. Shion turned to see a cloud of white smoke. Nezumi furrowed his brow.

“The truck got destroyed at the gate.”

“Which means Ippo’s chip was read and—”

“Yeah. They must have sent out a destruction order to all the gates. It’s because we left that other robot behind. They figured us out.”

—*So Ippo and Sampo are both gone.*

Shion was suddenly grabbed by the wrist.

"They'll find out soon that we're in here. We're gonna make a run for it. Hurry."

His grip was so strong that Shion's fingers began to go numb.

"Nezumi, it hurts."

"Shut up. Keep close to me."

"I get it, let go. You're gonna break my wrist."

He heard Nezumi *tsk* in frustration.

"That's the problem with delicate little boys like you."

"I'm not a delicate little boy," Shion said indignantly. "I'm different from four years ago."

"Are you? You know, you can be really irritating sometimes. You might get killed at any time, you understand that right?"

"Yeah."

"Lies."

"I'm not lying."

Nezumi's tone grew harsh.

"Then what was that face back there, huh? Is this the time to be feeling sorry for those robots? You don't understand anything. You're just an oblivious little boy." Nezumi's fingers dug in harder. The grip on his wrist tightened painfully. Shion gritted his teeth and bore it silently. He couldn't stand to let himself whimper pitifully after all that Nezumi had said.

Nezumi's fingers withdrew from his wrist.

"Keep up with me if you don't wanna die. Stay close, no matter what." Nezumi broke into a run. The waste disposal plant was deserted. There were surveillance cameras scattered throughout, but most were older models and didn't seem to be doing their job very well. Shion guessed that they probably didn't need them because no one would think of sneaking into the waste disposal plant in the first place.

Nevertheless, Nezumi combed the path cautiously as he searched for a route that kept them out of view of the cameras.

An enormous funnel-shaped disposal machine was giving off a steady hum. Waste that could neither be recycled nor used as fuel were turned into dry chips here to be sent to the incinerator. Wastewater dripped from the spout of the machine into the pool below. The water flowed slowly toward the filtration facilities outside. It was murky, like a river after a bout of heavy rain. But in this river there were no living things. As they descended the stairs and drew closer to the water, an acrid smell assaulted Shion's nostrils. The floor beneath their feet was coated with slime, and threatened to trip him up any time. Nezumi stopped, and tossed something at Shion.

"Goggles?"

"Yup. They have infrared sensors, so you should be able to see even in this water."

"In here?"

Nezumi pointed at the sewage. "Happen to like scuba-diving?"

"So we're diving in here, huh..."

"That we are."

Shion took a deep breath. The odour filled his lungs. Without another word, he put on the goggles.

"Wow, you're picking up quickly," Nezumi remarked in mild amusement. "I thought you'd whine and stamp your feet."

"I don't wanna die," said Shion firmly. "I'm not going to be stepped on like some ant. I'll do anything if it'll save me, and that includes diving into wastewater too."

Nezumi turned to Shion and gave a slight smile.

"Then follow me."

"Of course."

The low hum of the machine stopped. The ceiling lights lit up at once. The sound of footsteps could be heard above them.

“They’re coming.” Nezumi extended a hand to the river of sewage. A mouse scurried down it and leapt into the water.

“He’ll be our navigator. Try not to splash. Get into the water slowly.” Shion did as he was told. He sucked in a deep breath before going in. Just before he hit the water, an image of his mother’s face crossed his mind.

4

OF FATHOMLESS TERROR

THE FLOW of sewage was faster and deeper than what Shion had expected. Indiscernible objects floated past his face. Once in a while, something would cling to his goggles and block his vision. He could smell an odour unlike anything he had smelled before. Amidst the overarching smell of rot was a mix of sickly sweet scents and harsh odours that stung the nose. In this brownish murk, he could barely follow Nezumi, who swam in front of him. And more than anything, it was hard to breathe. His heart thudded, and his chest strained painfully.

Nezumi drifted to the side, and pointed at a handle that was attached to the wall. Shion reached out and grabbed it. Together, they turned it and pulled as hard as they could. A round opening appeared.

He couldn't breathe. He was at his limit. His consciousness was fading away. The next instant, he was sucked into the hole. He was pulled

along, pushed up, and thrown out on dry land. His body was slammed ashore, and he could feel the shock from it tingle to his toes. But he no longer felt like he had a wet cloth over his face. He could breathe. He felt a momentary relief, and then was overcome with a fit of coughing. He felt nauseous, and the inside of his mouth felt sticky. Shion yanked off his goggles and closed his eyes. For several moments, he couldn't move.

"It's a little early for bed-time," Nezumi quipped, but his breathing was laboured as well. Shion opened his eyes, and saw a bare concrete surface.

"Where are we?"

"In the sewage pipes. Artifacts of the 20th century. Maybe not artifacts, since they're still being used." Nezumi shook his head vigorously from side to side. Water droplets flew from his hair. "When the amount of sewage goes over capacity, they open that door back there to flush it down these pipes."

"They flush sewage down here? Without filtering it?"

"Yup. Your beloved City tends to do that sometimes."

"Where does it go?"

"The West Block."

"So they flush dirty water— how could they..." Shion was at a loss for words. Nezumi stood up.

"The West Block isn't part of the city to him. It's in the margins. He probably only sees this place as some kind of garbage dump."

"He?"

Nezumi was standing still, staring unblinkingly before him. At the end of his gaze was the sewage outlet that they had just been washed out of. Sewage still trickled in thin streams across the concrete.

"Let's go." Nezumi bent down to scoop up the mouse scurrying about his feet, and turned his back to Shion. Shion stood up hastily. He

still felt nauseous, but he had some strength left in his legs to stand. *I still have enough strength. It'll last me. I'll be alright.* Shion mentally encouraged himself. On Nezumi's shoulder, the mouse that had been their navigator cheeped amiably.

"Ah!" Shion brought a hand to his neck. He felt something faintly odd. On the base of his neck, there was a small part that felt numb. Shion felt the area with his fingers. There was a pea-sized blister growing, and it was itchy. He scratched it lightly. A chill wind blew through the centre of his body. Shion could feel his heart contract.

This gesture — scratching the neck — he had seen someone do this before.

"Yamase-san." Yamase's image floated up clearly in Shion's mind, pouring coffee, making conversation, always scratching his neck through-out. "Don't tell me—"

Nezumi turned around.

"What's wrong?"

"No, nothing."

"You better not be whining that you can't walk anymore."

"On the contrary," said Shion, "I could do with a little more exercise. Want me to piggy-back you while I'm at it?"

"Nice of you to offer, but no thanks."

The mouse on his shoulder was chirruping. Shion walked faster to catch up with Nezumi.

He was thinking too much. It was just a blister. The scrape on his arm and his bruised body were much worse than this. It was a blister, for goodness sake. Just a blister...

"Why the serious face? Missing your mama?"

"My mother..." Shion murmured. "Nezumi, do you think I'd be able to get in touch with her?"

“Forget about it.”

“How are you so sure?”

“You know well enough. Right now, your house is probably being searched top to bottom by the Security Bureau, down to the contents of your garbage can. Unless you have telepathic powers, there’s no way you can get in touch with her.”

“I guess you’re right.”

—*I’m sorry, mom.* He could only apologize. —*I’m safe. I’m alive. So please*— He didn’t want her to despair. He didn’t want her to grieve.

“Bullshit,” Nezumi spat.

“What is?”

“You. You’re full of it.”

It was the first time Shion had been insulted to his face.

“What do you mean?”

“What I’m saying is that you’re full of bullshit for carrying this baggage, this crap, like it’s the most precious thing in the world.” Nezumi narrowed his eyes and fixed Shion with a hard gaze. His eyes were piercing, and filled with an emotion almost leaning toward animosity. Shion opened his mouth to question him further, but Nezumi had suddenly begun to scale the wall. Upon a more careful look, Shion could see that there was a rusted metal ladder fixed to it. When he emerged at the top, he was greeted with an evening sky. He was above ground again. The sky was painted vividly in the colours of the sunset, and a chilly air settled upon him.

The place looked like an entrance to the West Block. In the distance, the outer walls of No. 6 glittered as it reflected the setting sun. Because of the West Block’s lower elevation, No. 6 loomed even larger before them. It was breathtaking to see the sprawling city encircled by shining walls. Shion even thought there was a sort of godly air about it.

Nezumi began to walk in the opposite direction. They emerged from a sparse wood and soon came upon the ruins of a house. There was smoke rising out of it, and voices could be heard inside.

“Are there people living in there?”

“Lots of them,” Nezumi replied.

Past the ruined house were a row of several barracks.

“This way.” Shion was dragged by the arm to another ruins of a building. This one looked like it had been a warehouse before. The building had been quite spacious, but half of it had crumbled away into rubble.

“We’re going underground again.” Nezumi pressed a section of the wall, and it soundlessly moved aside to let them through. Beyond, there was a flight of stairs made of bare concrete like those in the sewage tunnels. The mouse bounded down the stairs. At the foot of them was a door. Inside, it was pitch black. There was a click, and the room was bathed in dim light.

Shion caught his breath and was rooted to the spot.

There were mounds and mounds of books, piled precariously high. Most of the room was buried in them.

“Are these all... books?”

“Do they look like food to you?”

“I’ve never seen this many.”

“Let me guess, you’ve only read off electronic paper before.”

“Yeah, well, not really, but... but wow, this is amazing.”

“And to take another guess, you’ve probably never read Molière, Racine or Shakespeare before. And you probably don’t know anything about Chinese classics or myths of the Aztecs.”

“I don’t.” Shion didn’t argue otherwise. He was too overwhelmed.

“Then what do you know?” Nezumi asked, running a hand through his wet hair.

“Huh?”

“What have you studied up until now? Systematic knowledge, front-line technology, how to decode specialized scholarly papers, and what else?”

“A lot else,” Shion replied indignantly.

“Like what?”

“How to bake bread, how to make coffee, park maintenance and cleaning . . . not to mention, now I know how to scuba-dive in sewage.”

“You forgot ‘how to reject someone when she asks you to have sex and you’ve only ever thought of her as a friend’. You didn’t do a great job at it, though.”

Shion raised his chin defiantly and glared at the pair of grey eyes.

“If you have time to be making fun of me, will you let me wash up?”

“I’m first.” Nezumi pulled a towel from in-between some books, and tossed it at Shion. “Don’t be mad,” he said. “What I actually meant is that you’ve come pretty far since four years ago. You’ve learned a lot more useful things other than how to make cocoa.”

“I’m humbled by your kind compliments.”

“Hey, really, don’t be mad.”

Nezumi disappeared into the pile of books. Momentarily, Shion could hear the muffled sounds of a shower. He took a good look around the room. There were bookshelves on every side, and they were filled to bursting with books. They didn’t look like they were sorted in any order, and books of all sizes were shoved haphazardly into open spaces on the shelves. Shion felt from them the same kind of hustle and bustle that he would from a crowded train station. The faded carpet looked like it had once been some shade of green, and it was also covered

in piles of books. Nestled amongst them was a bed. There were no windows. There was no kitchen, and no signs of other furniture.

Cheep cheep.

A mouse squeaked at him from atop a book. Shion took the book in his hands, and flipped open to a page. He smelled the faint scent of paper. He remembered, long ago, he had smelled the same thing. He was sitting on top of something soft and warm— his memory wavered. He couldn't remember it well. The mouse scurried up to his shoulder. It twitched its whiskers, and chirruped persistently.

“You want me to read this?”

Cheep cheep.

There was a bookmark in the middle of the book. Shion turned to it, and began to read aloud.

*Here's the smell of the blood, still. All the perfumes of Arabia
will not sweeten this little hand. Oh, oh, oh!
—What a sigh is there. The heart is sorely charged.
—I would not have such a heart in my bosom
for the dignity of the whole body.*

Another small mouse had appeared at Shion's feet. It had charming grape-coloured eyes. The brown mouse that had been sitting on the book nodded its head vigorously as if to urge him on.

*To bed, to bed, There's knocking at the gate.
Come, come, come, come, give me your hand.
What's done cannot be undone.
— To bed, to bed, to bed!*

Shion felt a presence behind him, and turned around. Nezumi stood with a towel hanging around his neck. He gave a deep bow.

“To the showers, if it so pleases your Majesty. Your change of adornments awaits you here.”

“Nezumi, this book—”

“It’s Shakespeare. *Macbeth*. Ever heard of it?”

“Only the title.”

“I figured as much.”

“Are all these books classics?”

“Nay, your Majesty. We also have introductory books to ecology, and scientific journals to please your fancy.”

“Are these all your books?”

“Is it interrogation time again?” Nezumi said exasperatedly. “Run along and take a shower, and then I’ll give you something to eat.” He ended abruptly, and obstinately turned his head aside.

* * *

The shower was old, and it was difficult to control the temperature. The flow was punctuated with bursts of frigid water, but for Shion it still felt nice. It had been a long time since he enjoyed a shower this much. The itch on his neck had miraculously disappeared as well.

—I’m alive. I’ve been saved.

Shion thought to himself as he let the hot water run over his body. He didn’t know about tomorrow. But he was alive right now, and was well enough to take this shower.

—I didn’t thank him yet.

He had been rescued, and Nezumi had risked his life to save him. But not a single word of gratitude had escaped his lips so far. Realization set in. Soon after exiting the bathroom, one of the mice came scampering up to him again.

“He’s taken a huge liking to your reading.” Nezumi was stirring something in a pot over the kerosene heater. There was steam rising from it, and it gave the room a feeling of homey warmth.

“Oh!” Shion suddenly exclaimed. He remembered now, what was behind the nostalgia and warmth he felt when he opened the book.

“What? What’re you shouting for?”

“No, I just remembered. A long time ago, my mother used to read to me.”

“She read *Macbeth* to you?”

“Of course not. I was really young then. I remember sitting in Mother’s lap, and she’d read to me.” *What kind of story was it again?* The page was being turned slowly. Karan’s voice echoed in his ears, first high, then low; subdued, then full of strength. He could feel the warmth of her body. He could smell the scent of paper.

“You’re going to destroy yourself,” said Nezumi quietly. His voice was cold.

“What?”

“I’ve said this before. Carry all this useless baggage, and one day it’ll be the end of you. It’ll weigh you down until it squashes you flat.”

“Useless? Like what?”

“Memories. Attachments to being a citizen of No. 6. Your comfortable life, your overestimation of your own skills, your misconceptions of being some kind of chosen one, pride. The list goes on forever. But the worst is your mother. Do you have some sort of Oedipus complex? If you’re being haunted by your mother that much, goodness knows what you’re going to do next. Maybe you’ll start saying you want to go back to the city to see your dearest Mama.”

It had touched a nerve.

“Is it a useless thing to think about my parents?” answered Shion tensely. “I know what kind of situation I’m in right now, and I know

there's no way to get in contact with my mother. But I'm free to think about her, at least. That's not something for you to say anything about."

"Throw it away." Nezumi's voice has turned even icier, and had almost a metallic ring to it. "Throw away useless feelings like those."

"Why— Why are you saying..." Shion said in disbelief.

"Because they're dangerous."

"My feelings? Dangerous?"

"Back there, you threw away your citizenship card because it was a danger to us. So are feelings for other people. You get dragged around, pulled this way and that, and before you know it, you're in dangerous territory. Your mama, papa, your grandma, whoever— they're all strangers now. There's no emotional room in you to be concerned about strangers. Your hands are full enough trying to keep yourself alive."

"And that's why I should throw everything else away?"

"Toss it. Cut yourself away from all the baggage you've carried until now."

Shion clenched his fists at his sides. He took a step closer to Nezumi.

"Then what about you?"

"Me?"

"Why did you help me, then? I'm just a stranger, but you stepped into dangerous territory to save me. You're not exactly practising what you preach."

"Some personality you've got," retorted Nezumi. "If you really feel that you've been rescued by me, why don't you try to be a little more modest when you say things?"

Nezumi's hand extended to grasp Shion's collar. He was pushed against the bookshelf.

"I owe a debt to you," his low voice hissed at Shion's ear. "Four years ago, you saved my life. I'm paying back that debt. That's all."

"Then you've paid enough. Too much, even." Shion gripped Nezumi's wrist to pry it away from his collar. But Nezumi's taut muscles showed no signs of relaxing.

"Let go."

"Make me, little boy."

"I'll bite your nose off." Shion clicked his teeth. There was a split second of hesitation. Shion didn't miss it. He slid a hand around the back of Nezumi's neck.

"Biting noses off is my specialty."

"Huh? Wait a second, that's dirty—"

"I forgot to mention, over these past four years, I've also learned how to fight."

"Hey, knock it off," Nezumi said nervously, "biting is the worst—
whoa—!"

Nezumi lost his footing, and the two fell flailing into the sea of books. Pile after pile toppled over, and books rained down on them from above.

"Ow," Nezumi grimaced. "This is the worst. I think I hit my head on an encyclopedia... Shion, you alright?"

"Yeah... what's this? *Chumayel's Chilam Balam*?"

"It's a Mayan spiritual text — a story about gods and humans. You probably wouldn't be interested in it." Nezumi smiled wanly as he began to stack the fallen books.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"It's true, isn't it? Have you *ever* had any interest in other humans, or gods, or tales before?"

Humans? Gods? Tales? He had never thought deeply about any of those. Not once. But that was before.

Shion gazed all about him, and breathed in the warm scent that filled the air. Here was a world that he didn't know. In the days to come, what would he see, hear, learn, and ponder? His heart raced, but he didn't know why. For a single moment, his soul had danced with an anticipation, much like the feeling of seeing the ocean for the first time. Then he thought of the look he must have on his face. He felt embarrassed for letting it show, and not wanting Nezumi to see, he bent down and nonchalantly picked up a book laying at his feet.

"What's this?"

"A collection of Hesse's poems," Nezumi replied.

*My soul, you frightened bird,
Over and over you must ask:
When after so many turbulent days
Comes peace, comes calm?*

"—Heard it before?"

"No."

"I figured as much."

"Don't ask if you already know," said Shion sourly.

"It's your job to learn it if you don't know."

"And these aren't useless things?"

"It'll come in handy one day," Nezumi said casually. "Anyway, enough of that, the soup's gonna get—" Nezumi swallowed his words. His eyes widened.

"What's wrong, Nezumi?"

"Shion, your hand."

"Huh?"

“Your hand . . . when did those spots . . .”

Shion’s shirt sleeve was rolled halfway up his arm. There were dark spots were beginning to spread over its bare skin. They had not been there when he was taking a shower. They had definitely not.

“What? What is this?”

He was screaming. At the same time, he felt a vicious pain pierce his head.

“Shion!”

The pain came in waves. They receded for a moment, then attacked, bearing ruthlessly down on him. His fingers stiffened. His legs began to convulse.

“Shion, hang in there, I’ll get a doctor—”

Shion willed his uncooperative body to reach as far as it could. He grabbed ahold of Nezumi by his clothes. There wasn’t enough time. It was useless to call a doctor.

“What should I do? Shion, tell me what—”

“My neck . . .” Shion said weakly.

“Your neck?”

“The blister . . . cut it open . . .”

“But I don’t have any anaesthetic.”

“I don’t need any . . .” he grimaced. “Hurry . . .”

He was fading out of consciousness. He could feel his body being lifted. *Don’t pass out. If you do, you’ll never wake up again.* He didn’t know what made him feel so strongly, but he was almost sure of it. The pain ebbed away for a short while, and an image drifted into his mind of Yamase as he collapsed to the ground and lay still.

—But Yamase-san didn’t suffer.

He didn’t roll around in pain. He aged instantaneously, and passed away like a withering tree. Yamase’s symptoms were different from

his. *Maybe that means I still have a chance—*

His brain was pierced by smouldering red needles. They were countless, and came from all directions. His body writhed in pain that he had never experienced before. His own screaming turned into scorching splinters that stabbed through him. He began to sweat profusely. He felt a strong wave of nausea. Blood and stomach fluids welled up inside his mouth, and spilled over his lips.

It hurts, it hurts, it hurts.

Shion no longer wanted to be saved, or to be spared death. He wanted to be released from this pain, this suffering. He didn't need to open his eyes. He didn't need to live. He wasn't asking for much. He just wanted to be released—

He felt like someone had grabbed him by the hair from behind, and was dragging him into the darkness. He felt relieved. All he had to do was lend himself to it, and he would be taken to a better place. He would finally be able to sleep.

A thick, bitter liquid was being poured into his mouth. It was hot. It slid down his throat, and Shion could feel himself rise up out of the darkness. But it also meant that he was being pulled back into the throes of suffering.

“Keep your eyes open.” A pair of grey eyes were peering into his face.

“Nezumi... I can't take it...” Shion implored faintly. “Let me go...”

He was slapped sharply across the face.

“Don't bullshit me. You're not going anywhere. Drink up.” The strong and bitter liquid was forcefully poured into his mouth again. The darkness was lifting. Weak pulses of pain throbbed in his head.

Nibble nibble nibble... nibble nibble...

Shion thought he heard a sound— or was it a hallucination? It was the sound of his brain being eaten alive. There was a mass of countless

black little insects. They crawled all over his brain, making nibbling sounds,

Eating. Eating. Eating.

Was it a hallucination? Or was it . . . it hurt terribly. He couldn't bear it. And he was terrified. A scream tore through his throat.

"That's it. Yell. Don't give up. You're still sixteen. It's too early to throw in the towel just yet."

Shion felt the strength leave his body. He felt heavy, as if he was being tied to a lead weight. He felt suffocated. But the pain had receded just a little.

"Keep screaming. Stay conscious. I'm going to cut it open."

There was a silver scalpel in Nezumi's hand.

"I don't have anything fancy like an electronic scalpel, just to let you know. Don't move."

Whether it was because half of his nerves had gone numb from severe pain, or because all the strength had left his body, he didn't know, but Shion didn't move a muscle. He couldn't move.

There were three mice, sitting side-by-side atop a pile of books. Above them, a round clock was hanging on the wall. It was an analog clock. Tick, tick, tick. He could hear its sound. It was his first time hearing the sounds of time passing by. A second passed, then a minute. Time engraved itself. It passed, gentle, meandering, and vague. The world before him blurred. His cheeks were hot. A tear slid down, touched his lips, and was absorbed, still hot, into the sheets.

"It's over." Nezumi let out a long breath. Was the metallic clink the sound of the scalpel hitting the floor?

"The bleeding isn't too bad. Does it hurt?"

"No . . ." rasped Shion. "I just wanna go to sleep . . ."

"Not yet. Hang in there for a little more."

Nezumi's voice faded away. Shion could only hear the sound of the clock ticking.

"Shion."

He was being shaken.

"Keep your eyes open. Just a little more—please—open your eyes."

Shut up, he wanted to say. *Shut up, shut up. A little more? How long is a little more?*

"Don't give me this shit. You put me through all this trouble— you can't just go off on your own. Shion, you know what that means? Your mama's going to cry. What're you gonna do about that girl, huh? Safu, or whatever her name is. Have you ever even slept with a girl before? What a waste it was to turn down that invitation."

Shut up. Stop talking. Just stop...

"You don't know anything yet. About sex, or books, or how to fight properly. And you still think you don't need to go on living? Shion! *Open your eyes!*"

He opened his eyes. He saw four pairs of eyes staring back at him. One pair was grey, and they belonged to a human. The other three pairs were grape-coloured, and belonged to the mice.

"There's a good kid. I'll praise you for that."

"Nezumi..."

"Hm?"

"I... didn't get your name..."

"My name?"

"Your real... name..."

"Well, there's one more thing you don't know. I'll tell you when you recover completely, and that'll be your get-well present. Look forward to it."

He was fed the bitter liquid several more times. He drifted off to sleep only to be woken up again. Shion felt like he had repeated this countlessly. He broke into a fever. He perspired heavily, and vomited again and again. It felt like all the moisture in his body was being wrung out of him.

“Water...”

He pleaded repeatedly, and each time, a cool draught watered his throat.

“It tastes good...”

“Doesn’t it? The world’s not such a bad place after all.” Nezumi’s hand slowly caressed Shion’s hair.

“It’s alright now. Go to sleep.”

“Can I...?”

“Yeah. You’re past the worst of it. You’ve won. That’s quite something.” The fingers that stroked his hair were gentle, as was the tone of Nezumi’s voice. Relief washed over his body. Shion closed his eyes, and dropped off into a slumber.

* * *

With a hand still laid on his hair, Nezumi was checking Shion’s breathing as he slept. It was a little weak, but relaxed. It was not erratic.

—*You made it through.*

It was quite something. He wasn’t exaggerating out of politeness or encouragement. Shion housed a lot more vitality than his looks gave away. It was a vitality that was tenacious and strong. Nezumi gazed at Shion’s sleeping face— exhausted and weakened, but still breathing regularly nonetheless— and realized how tired he himself was as well. He was mentally, not physically, exhausted. He could neither

understand nor come to terms with what he had just experienced. A sense of unease consumed his mind and made his very blood tingle.

—*What's happening in there?*

No. 6. Something was beginning to brew in the interiors of what they called the Holy City. Something that exceeded the depths of human imagination was being born, and developing slowly but surely. Nezumi dug into the very back of a shelf and pulled out a petri dish. It contained something he had removed from under Shion's skin when he had cut the blister open.

—*I can't believe this.*

Yes, unbelievable things happened sometimes. Reality betrayed people almost too easily, and yanked people's lives at whim in unexpected directions. At times, it flung them to the depths of despair. It was cruel and violent. Absurd, even. It couldn't be trusted. Anything could happen at any time.

Nezumi knew it well. But he couldn't help being perturbed by this reality. Was it possible for something like this to happen? —But the truth was that it had already happened. It was something that couldn't be brushed away, and he couldn't turn a blind eye to it now.

Nezumi returned to Shion's bedside. He lightly stroked Shion's hair again.

—*When you wake up, will you be able to believe this reality?*

Would he be able to handle it? Here was a boy who had been cradled and sheltered in the Holy City's core until the age of twelve. Until sixteen, he lived in Lost Town — the outskirts of the city, but still part of it nevertheless — and as a citizen, he was treated as such. Would someone who had been housed in such a protective shell be able to handle reality? Was he strong enough?

—*Probably not weak enough to be crushed, though.*

But he didn't know. He didn't know how much strength or weakness resided in the boy sleeping quietly before him. Whether he would withstand it, or collapse —Nezumi didn't know. But Shion had survived, and that was another reality. To survive, you had to sink your teeth into Life and hold fast. No matter if it was unsightly or harsh — those who desired Life most greedily were the ones that survived. Nezumi, from experience, was painfully aware of this fact. The boy before him possessed that avarice. It was far more difficult to survive in an unsightly manner than to die a beautiful and heroic death. It also held much more value. Of this fact as well, Nezumi was painfully aware.

—You'll be alright.

Nezumi moistened Shion's parched lips with water. Then he quietly opened the door and slipped outside. Dawn was breaking. The sky was lightening from black to purple, and a sprinkling of stars winked in the sky.

"No. 6." Nezumi addressed the mammoth city darkly looming in the distance. "You just wait. Some day, I'll carve out that infection of yours, and lay it out in the open."

A streak of light shot across the sky. A flock of birds took flight. The sun was rising. Morning was coming. The West Block was still thrown in the depths of darkness, but the Holy City, bathed in the light of the rising sun, glittered as if to laugh in contempt at it. Nezumi stood still, facing the City in silence.

* * *

The streets below were brimming with light. He never tired of gazing out at the morning scene from this room; that was how magnificent it was.

—*Exquisite.*

The orderly streets, and the lush colours of the abundant trees that lined them were beautiful. It was a place of full functionality and vigour. Nowhere could one find anything wasteful or ugly. This was a product of human hands, the highest possible—

There was a chime. A monitor set into the wall flickered, and displayed the long, thin face of a man.

“I apologize for disturbing you so early in the morning.”

“No need. I’ve been waiting for you.”

“The investigation is complete. I would like to report the results to you directly, in person.”

“In person? That’s rather cautious of you. Is there something amiss?”

“The suspect has escaped.”

“It seems so— I’ve heard. But surely that’s not of overt importance.”

“He was involved in it. He aided in the suspect’s escape.”

The man on the screen pushed his glasses up his nose. They were rimmed black, and visibly old-fashioned. Perhaps he was under the impression that they suited him best, because he had not changed his frames once for the past ten years.

“Are you sure of that?”

“We’ve confirmed it. The vocal signatures match.”

“Aiding in escape, huh... and his method?”

“I’ll report all the details to you shortly.”

“Understood. I’ll be waiting.”

“If you’ll excuse me, then.”

The image disappeared, and the monitor faded back into the wall. The man let his gaze wander around him, then out the custom glass panels of his window to the sky that expanded beyond. It was a deep blue that pierced his eyes. The seasons were taking their course again.

—*So you've come back.*

What did he return for? Why did he show himself again? A single petal loosened itself from the bunch of roses displayed on his desk, and fluttered silently to the floor.

—*You should have stayed quietly where you were... idiot.*

He crushed the crimson petal with his foot. It smeared on the lush carpet, leaving a stain that reminded him of blood.

* * *

Yamase was squatted on the floor, hugging his knees, his head bowed. He looked like a child sulking after being scolded.

"Yamase-san." Shion called over to him. There was no answer.

"Yamase-san, what's wrong?"

Yamase dissolved into tears.

"Yamase-san, don't cry."

Shion placed a hand on Yamase's shoulder. Yamase's anguished sobbing tore at his heart. It was painful just to listen to him.

"What's making you cry like this? Is there anything I can do?"

"There is." Yamase's hand grasped Shion's ankle.

"Shion, I don't want to be alone. Why did you have to get saved?"

"Huh?"

"Come with me," he pleaded. "You will, won't you?"

"Yamase-san, what—?"

The hand grasping his ankle changed colour. It was beginning to rot. Chunks of flesh decayed and fell away from Yamase's arm. Shion could see his bone peeking through.

"We'll go together... right?"

Shion's ankle was being tugged harder. He was being dragged into total darkness. Yamase's arm continued to rot as it grew in length, and wound around Shion's torso until it finally reached his neck and began to choke him.

"No—stop—"

"Shion..."

Shion reached out as far as he could. He felt something firm and definite, and closed his hand around it, gripping hard. And he screamed.

"No!"

Shion awoke with a start. His throat was painfully dry.

"No, what?" Nezumi was peering into his face with a serious expression.

"Nezumi..." Shion murmured dazedly. "Oh... I'm alive..."

"You are. Congratulations on your safe return. And I'm sorry for ruining your moment, but can you let go of my hand? You're holding on pretty tight, and it hurts."

He had been grasping Nezumi's hand, so strongly that his fingers were digging into his flesh. He had clung to this hand to escape from the darkness.

"Want some water?"

"Yeah," Shion said gratefully.

The water was cold, and quenched every corner of Shion's body.

"I remember you giving me water like this... again and again." Words formed slowly on Shion's lips, and left them in awkward fragments.

"There's a spring nearby that's not too bad. It's free, so you don't need to worry."

"You... saved me again."

"I'm not the one that saved you. There aren't any adequate doctors or medical facilities here anyway, and even if there were, they wouldn't

have done any good. No one could have saved you. You brought yourself back. You put up quite the fight. I'm a bit impressed, actually. I promise I won't call you a little boy anymore."

"It's all... thanks to you..."

Shion brought his hand up to his face to gaze at it. It felt somewhat dry and rough, but there were no spots or wrinkles on it. It was still the same young hand. He breathed a sigh of relief.

"I had a bad dream..." Shion began softly. "I wanted someone to help me, and I reached out as far as I could... and I grabbed onto your hand."

"That frightening, huh?"

"Yamase-san was there— he told me I can't be the only one to be saved... his arm was wrapping around me, from my torso to my neck..." Shion trailed off to feel at his neck. It was wrapped in bandages.

"From your torso to your neck?" Nezumi gave a short intake of breath. He lowered his gaze, and moved away from the bed.

"Yamase-san was never the kind of person to say that..." Shion continued reflectively. "He would have been happy for me, that I was saved... why would he come into my dreams and..."

"Because you feel guilty about it," Nezumi said shortly, wrapping the superfibre cloth around his shoulders. A mouse leapt up onto one shoulder from a pile of books. "That Yamase guy died, and you survived. You're feeling guilty over it, and that's why you're having stupid dreams like that."

"Everything's stupid or useless to you, isn't it..."

"Whoever lives wins. Don't feel guilty about having survived. If you have time to be feeling guilty, work on living a day longer, a minute longer. And once in a while, remember the ones that died before you. That's good enough."

“Are you saying that to me?” Shion questioned.

“Who else could I be talking to?”

“It sounded like—” Shion hesitated. “Almost like you were telling it to yourself...”

Nezumi blinked. He stared at Shion for a moment, and then muttered “ridiculous” under his breath.

Shion tried to lift himself up on the bed. He still couldn’t move his body as well as he wanted. He noticed that his entire torso was wrapped tightly in bandages.

“Why are there so many...”

“You were tearing at yourself in pain, that’s why. Lie down, it’s still too early to move around. And take the medicine by your pillow. When I get home, I’ll treat you to some soup.”

“You’re going out?”

“I have work.”

Nezumi turned his back to Shion, and briskly left the room.

Shion swallowed the white pill as he was told to. A brown mouse squeaked at him from beside a glass of water.

“Thanks.”

The mouse nodded as if it understood his word of thanks, and perched on Shion’s chest as he lay back down.

“What kind of work does your master do?”

Cheep cheep.

“What’s his name? What kind of life has he lived until now? Where was he born, and what...” he trailed off. He was getting drowsy. It seemed his body was in want of a little more quiet rest. Shion nodded off to sleep. This time, he had no dreams. When he awoke, the heaviness and lethargy in his body had disappeared. He didn’t feel

any discomfort other than a dull pain from the wound on his neck. His body was recovering quickly.

There was no one else in the room. It looked like Nezumi had not returned yet. A dim darkness had settled, and it was quiet. Shion turned his head to see the three mice curled up fast asleep by his neck. He rose quietly, and put on his shoes. He wanted badly to catch a breath in the outdoors. He wanted to fill his lungs with fresh air. Shion took several cautious steps. He was sweating underneath the bandages on his neck and chest. He unwound the ones around his neck. Now it was much easier to breathe. His feet were light, and he didn't feel dizzy or nauseous. Shion opened the door and climbed up the stairs. A cold draft of air stung him. The world at ground level was bathed in a reddish light. It was dusk. Coloured leaves were falling from the trees. They danced in the wind, and with a dry rustling sound, fluttered to the ground. Looking above, he could see the dark branches of the trees, mostly bare, cast in stark relief against the sky. In the distance, he could see No. 6.

Shion felt a hot pricking at the back of his eyes. It wasn't from nostalgia for the city where he was born and raised. It was the sights of late autumn, this unremarkable scene, that had tugged at his heart. The faint rustling of the fallen leaves, the smell of earth, the colour of the sky, all resonated in his heart deeply as if to coax the tears from him.

—He'll have another good laugh if he sees me like this.

Shion bit his lip to hold back his tears. He inhaled deeply.

He heard the sound of high voices raised in laughter behind him. Shion turned around, and saw three children amongst the trees, coming up the slope toward him. There were two girls and one boy. Did these children live in the ruined house that he had seen earlier? They all had similar round faces. He didn't know what they were laughing so joyously about, but Shion felt his own feelings lift just watching

them. Karan loved children, and always used to hold sales that went by names like “Half Price for Children Under Ten”, so the bakery was always filled with the voices of small children. That was inside No. 6. This was outside No. 6. But despite how bizarre the world on this side of the wall was, the sound of children’s laughter was still the same.

The girl, who looked the oldest out of all of them, noticed Shion first. She stopped in her tracks and opened her eyes wide. Her face stiffened. Shion didn’t meant to scare her. He raised his hand in greeting and spoke first.

“Hi there.”

The small boy standing behind the girl burst into tears.

“Huh? Oh, don’t cry—” Shion made to take a step closer. The girl’s face contorted.

“Snake!” she shrieked.

Hastily scooping up the boy in her arms and taking the other girl by her hand, she clambered back down the slope. Her shriek echoed high into the sunset. Shion stood in stunned silence.

—*Snake? What did she scream for? What snake?*

He didn’t understand the girl’s words.

—*What did she see?*

He turned around. There was nothing save for the scenery of late autumn. There were no snakes, or birds. There was no sign of any living thing.

—*Did the shadows of the branches look like a snake to her?... No, that girl was looking straight at me. She was looking only at me.*

Shion shivered. His scalp was tingling. He ran a hand roughly through his bangs, and pulled hard. It was a habit of his when he was agitated.

“What—”

Shion's breath caught in his throat. There were a few hairs clinging between his fingers. They were an almost-transparent shade of white. They caught the light of the setting sun, and glimmered.

"How—what—"

He raked his head, pulling out more hairs. They were all the same. He felt his face. The skin under his palm was firm. There were no wrinkles or sags. But he felt a strange sensation on his neck. There was a slight swell under his skin that was winding around his neck. Shion half-tumbled down the stairs in haste.

—A mirror, I need a mirror...

He knocked over a pile of books. The startled mice darted underneath the bed. He found a wooden door next to the bathroom. He opened it, and found a space about big enough for one person to lie down or stand up. The back wall looked like a mirror. There were various things hanging on the other walls, but Shion was in no mood to check. He turned on the light, and moved closer to the mirror. His legs quaked. His hands were trembling. But he forced himself to gaze into the mirror.

He gave a faint cry of horror.

What was he seeing in the mirror? What was this... this...

Snake!

The girl's shriek welled up and echoed in his ears. He needed air, else he felt like he would suffocate. He couldn't breathe. Shion staggered, and leaned heavily against the wall. He stared at himself in the mirror. His eyes were glued to it, and they would not move. He couldn't look away.

His hair was white and shining. And there was a snake. A red serpent, about two centimetres wide, was coiled around his neck. That was what it looked like. He had no doubt about it.

"This can't be..." He shed his clothes. He tried to tear off the bandages that wrapped his entire body. They had been wound tightly with care, and they tangled and knotted as if to mock Shion's fumbling hands. When at last the ends of the bandage had fallen away from his body, Shion gave a strangled cry. The crimson band that had risen up on his skin began from his left ankle, coiled up his leg and extended across his crotch and torso, wound past his armpit and reached up to his neck. It was, literally, like a snake that was strangling him. It was slithering over his naked body. A red meander scar. The strength was leaving his knees. He sank slowly onto the unravelled bandages.

White hair and a red serpent. This was the price he had paid to survive. "Do you enjoy looking at yourself naked?" a voice spoke, so low it was almost a whisper. Nezumi was leaning on the door behind him. "Nezumi— this—"

"It appeared just as your fever went down. The affection is only skin-deep, it's not because your veins are engorged. Which means there's been no damage to your circulation system. Isn't that nice?"

"Nice? What's *nice* about this? This is..."

"If you don't like it, you can get rid of it," Nezumi said quietly. "Skin grafting is no big feat in this time and age, right? As for your hair, you can dye it another colour. I don't see any problem. But just letting you know—" he shrugged slightly, "we can do something about your hair, but you won't be able to graft your skin here. We don't have the technology or facilities for that." His voice was calm and emotionless, and contained not the smallest hint of sympathy. Shion remained sitting where he was, absentmindedly gazing at the bandage that was tangled around his leg.

"Shion."

"... Yeah..."

"Do you regret being alive?"

It took a moment for Shion to respond.

“—What?” he said vaguely. “Oh— did you say something?”

Nezumi sighed and knelt down in front of Shion, hooking a finger on his chin. He forcefully tilted Shion’s face up.

“Stop looking down, and look at me. Snap out of your daze and listen to what I’m saying. Are you lamenting it?”

“Lamenting...? What?”

“Being alive.”

“Lament... you mean... like wishing it didn’t happen, right...”

“Obviously. No,” said Nezumi sarcastically, “I was speaking French, like *la menthe*, for mint. Really? Get a grip on yourself. Has something happened to that gifted brain of yours?”

Regret? Toward living? Was he lamenting the fact that he was alive and sitting here, looking as he did now? Shion slowly shook his head.

“No, I’m not.”

He didn’t want to die. Even if he had been struck down, he would have crawled across the ground to stay alive. He had no clear goals or hopes. He had no sight of the future. His body had changed startlingly, and his soul was in turmoil. But he still did not want to die.

Life was in the delicious taste of the water that quenched his throat. It was in the colour of the sky that spread before his eyes, the tranquil evening air, freshly baked bread, the definite sensation of someone’s fingers, soft, secretive laughter; ‘Shion, what do you hope for?’, the unexpected confession, uncertainty and hesitation. All these things were connected to being alive. No matter what his appearance became, he didn’t want to be cut away from any of these.

“Nezumi...” he whispered. “I— I want to be alive.”

The tears that he had held back until now gave way. A single droplet spilled over his cheek. He hastily brushed it away.

“It’s no use hiding it, stupid,” sighed Nezumi softly. “How can you cry so openly like that? Aren’t you embarrassed?”

“I just let my guard down, okay?” said Shion crossly. “I’m having trouble controlling myself because I’m not emotionally stable yet. I’m a recovering patient, so stop making fun of me.”

Nezumi silently gazed at Shion’s face, and then reached out to gently grasp at his hair.

“If it bothers you so much, I’ll dye it for you later. But it looks pretty nice on its own. And besides—” Nezumi’s fingers moved to trace the red scar across Shion’s chest.

“Think about it, you’ve got a red snake coiled around your body. Quite alluring, I’ll say.”

“I’m not flattered at all.”

“Well I don’t enjoy seeing you naked either,” Nezumi retorted. “Put some clothes on. I’ll treat you to some hot specialty soup and meat.” Come to think of it, it had been a long time since he had eaten any food. There was a burning sensation around Shion’s stomach as hunger suddenly gnawed at him.

“What kind of soup? Need any help?”

Nezumi blinked.

“You bounce back pretty fast, don’t you?”

“Huh?”

Nezumi’s voice suddenly dropped low and hoarse.

*Round about the cauldron go.
In the poisoned entrails throw.
Toad, that under cold stone
Days and nights has thirty-one
Sweltered venom sleeping got,
Boil thou first i’ the charmèd pot.*

“What’s that?”

“*Macbeth*. The scene where the three witches are brewing newt eyes, frog feet, and bat wings in a cauldron, making their special soup. Charming, isn’t it?”

“If that’s your idea of specialty soup, I’ll have to say no thanks.”

“Instead of bat wings we’ll use chicken, and instead of newts we’ll toss in lots of fresh vegetables. We’ll substitute the frogs for a clove of garlic. Just a moment’s wait, your Majesty.”

Nezumi’s specialty soup was piping hot, and more delicious than anything Shion had ever tasted.

5

THE CITY OF LIGHT

AFTER THEIR meal, Nezumi placed a petri dish and a pair of tweezers in front of Shion.

“I extracted this out of your incision. Try opening it up. This is probably right in your field.”

“My field?”

In the petri dish was something black and stringy, about two centimetres long. Shion plucked it up with the tweezers. The slimy black object dangled from them, and looked half-melted. Upon closer scrutiny, Shion could make out evidence of something filmy at the end of it.

“These are— wings?”

“Looks like. I have no idea. There’s one other thing I pulled out too,” Nezumi added. “What do you have to say about this?”

It was another black lump. This one was hard, and resembled a seed. There was a hole in it as if something had eaten its way out.

“A pupa— I think,” said Shion slowly.

“Pupa? Like what moths and butterflies make themselves into? Oh wait, butterflies make cocoons.”

“Cocoons are the outer shell of pupae,” Shion explained. “Embryo, larva, pupa, and imago— most insects go through their development stages in this order. This one . . . is probably some kind of bee.”

“You can tell?”

“There are signs of wings beginning to form. The membranous qualities, the fact that there are four of them . . . and more than anything—” Shion swallowed. “I saw it with my own eyes— a black bee flying out of Yamase-san’s neck.”

“And that bee and this black thing are the same thing?”

“If I’m not mistaken, probably. This one couldn’t complete its metamorphosis in the pupal stage. It managed to eat its way out of the shell, but it couldn’t become a fully grown imago. It failed.”

“Why?”

Why? He was right, why was that? Why was same bee that had hatched, undergone metamorphosis and become an imago inside Yamase unable to break out of its pupal stage here? Was it a coincidence, or— Shion shook his head.

“I don’t know. All I know is that this is a parasitic organism, and it feeds off humans.”

Nezumi stared unblinkingly at the petri dish.

“A parasite bee . . .” he muttered. “I thought bees only fed off flower nectar.”

“Those are just one species of bee, like the honey bee. Most bees — or wasp, in this case — are hunters, and solitary by nature.”

“And there are parasitic wasps too?”

Shion nodded. Nezumi’s questions were simple and brief, and were easy to answer from Shion’s knowledge. But none of the questions were off the mark. They tread lightly but accurately on the point of focus. With each question he answered, Shion felt a growing uneasiness like he was being backed into a corner. He felt like he would unwittingly slip and let something horrific escape from his lips. *But you can’t be afraid*, he told himself. He couldn’t turn a blind eye and let things slip past him. He couldn’t pretend that nothing had happened, and refuse to enquire, to take action. He stood in the position of one who had experienced it. He had been host to the parasite, fought with it, and prevailed. And like a symbol of this battle, he bore the red serpent on his body. Yes, this was his imprint. Nezumi’s face was peering into his. Shion returned his gaze steadily, and spoke.

“There are said to be about 200,000 different species of parasitic wasps. Hymenoptera such as bees and ants are highly specialized insects, and there are still tens of thousands of species that are undocumented. This is particularly so for parasitic wasps— or so I’ve heard.”

“Which means we don’t know what we’re gonna get.”

“We can’t say what species for sure.”

“But we can still predict.”

“If we have any foundation for a basis of prediction,” Shion answered.

“Why, *you’re* the best foundation there is,” said Nezumi with mock enthusiasm. “So how was it, being a host to a parasite wasp? Could you tell if it was a new species?”

“You’re really disagreeable sometimes, did you know that?” Shion replied irritably.

“Well, you piss me off *all the time*. ‘We can’t say what species for sure’, he says. Don’t mess around. Don’t you have any sense of danger? These wasps are killing people.”

“Most parasitic wasps do.”

“What?”

“Wasps that are classified as parasites are actually more parasitoid. To reach full growth, they only need to attach themselves to one prey... their host. And ultimately, without fail, they consume and kill it.”

Ultimately without fail, they consume and kill the host. It sounded even more grotesque when put into words.

“Host? Like what kind?”

“There are lots. Moths, butterflies, ant larvae, fruits... a species of ichneumonoidea called *Rhysella approximator* lays eggs in the larva of another species, xiphydriida, and makes it its host.”

“So a wasp leeches off another wasp.”

“Not only that, but another species of the same ichneumonoidea called *Pseudorhyssa alpestris* lays eggs in the same xiphydriida right after the *Rhysella*, and its larva eats both the larva of the *Rhysella* and the xiphydriida.”

“So they kill each other even if they’re from the same species... wow, I thought only humans killed their own kind. So?”

“Hm?”

“Are there parasite wasps that attach to humans as hosts?”

“I’ve never heard of any,” replied Shion. “There are other organisms that are parasitic to humans — viruses, bacteria, ticks, fleas, and the like. I’ve heard once of a warble fly that laid eggs in a boy’s head, and one of them invading his brain, but that was an unusual case, I think... I’ve never heard of any wasps doing that. The question is,” Shion said thoughtfully, “how was it able to lay eggs in a human body in the first place? How did it pierce the skin with its ovipositor without being noticed?”

“You have no memory of it?”

“No. I didn’t feel any pain or itch. It never crossed my mind that I’d been stung by a wasp.”

“So they can lay their eggs without their host noticing at all.”

“Not only that, they also grow with astonishing speed. And when they do, they must excrete some sort of substance that rapidly accelerates ageing in the host, and inevitably leads them to death. Even the process of rigor mortis and dissipation gets sped up. And finally, as a full-grown imago, the parasite wasp eats its way out of the body and escapes outside.”

There was a moment of silence.

Shion and Nezumi looked at each other, and exhaled at the same time.

“I’m surprised you lived through it.”

“Yeah. I’m starting to get the cold sweats just thinking about it.”

“There are too many things we don’t know,” said Nezumi. “Where did this guy come from? What is it?”

“Hey—” Shion said suddenly. “Have there been any similar incidents like that here?”

“No. I did a little research because it was nagging me too. There were guys who got shot to death fighting, or people who got drunk and drowned in a ditch, but no one who suddenly turned old and died. There’s no media control or censorship here like No. 6,” Nezumi added, “so if anything out of the ordinary happens, it should spread like wildfire.”

“Then if it’s happened in another Block—” suggested Shion. “The Southeastern Blocks, maybe? That environment is probably the most suited for a new species of insect to appear.”

Nezumi shook his head slowly.

“I can’t imagine that happening. If it did, the city should close all the gates leading in. But they haven’t shown any signs of doing that.

Produce is still being shipped in from the Southeastern Blocks as usual. The North Block is the same.”

“Then the wasp definitely must have come from No. 6 . . . I can’t believe it,” Shion muttered to himself.

“Unbelievable— you’re certainly right about that.” Nezumi’s fingers lightly tapped the petri dish. His shoulders shook slightly.

“Nezumi?”

Nezumi’s head was bowed, and a quiet chuckle escaped his lips. It soon turned into howling laughter. It echoed in the underground room that overflowed with books. Nezumi collapsed on the bed, holding his stomach and laughing harder still. Shion lunged for a pitcher of water, and emptied it on Nezumi’s head.

“Hey!” Nezumi sprang up. “What the hell are you doing?”

“Are you alright?”

“*Alright?* I’m soaking wet here.”

“I just— I thought you were undergoing a fit of hysteria or something, so I . . .”

“What do I have to throw a hysteric fit for?”

“Well, you started laughing randomly, I just thought . . .”

“I only laughed because it was funny.”

“Funny? What is?”

Nezumi shook his head violently. Shion’s face was pelted with water droplets.

“It’s hilarious, isn’t it? Where did this thing originate? No. 6. There’s a mysterious man-eating wasp flying around in this utopian model city, the *Holy City*, if you will. This is city of the future, the epitome of modern science. And it’s being eaten by *bees*. Hilarious.”

“It’s not something to laugh about. People are dying.”

Nezumi stood up. He walked over to Shion, and drew up to him face-to-face. Nezumi was right, Shion thought. He was tall. He easily exceeded Shion in height by several centimetres.

“What?” Shion unconsciously took a step backwards. He drew himself up and squared his shoulders as best he could in spite of the wall of books behind him. He had seen something flash in Nezumi’s grey eyes with a savage, piercing glint. It was only for a fleeting instant, but he had not missed it.

“Forgive my foolish question,” Nezumi said in an expressionless voice. At the same time, a set of fingers closed around Shion’s throat.

“Have you killed anyone before?” Nezumi’s thumb slowly dug deeper into Shion’s neck.

“Never...” Shion said faintly. “Of course I haven’t...”

Nezumi’s thin lip curled slightly in a cold smile.

“I would’ve figured. But keep this in mind. The wasp might kill its host in order to keep itself alive, but humans can kill other humans for much smaller reasons than that. And *you* were almost killed by another human.”

“I know.”

“You liar. You don’t know anything.”

“I do know!” Shion said angrily, clenching Nezumi’s wrist. “I know. If I’d been taken to the Correctional Facility as planned, I would have been made out to be the murderer in the wasp’s place. At best, I would have gotten a life sentence. At worst, I would have been executed...” He paused for a moment, then continued determinedly. “The Bureau wanted to buy more time. They needed time to decode the truth about Yamase-san’s cause of death— and by making me the suspect, they wanted to file it away as a simple murder case for outside eyes. Am I right?”

Nezumi's fingers withdrew. The spot on Shion's neck burned where Nezumi's thumb had dug in.

"Good answer, full marks," he said breezily. Then his tone dropped in mock seriousness. "It seems this unbalanced young man, tumbled from the ranks of the elite, engaged in this crime out of resentment for the city. He allegedly concocted a special chemical to use repeatedly in multiple criminal acts. Thanks to the efforts of the Security Bureau, however, this young man has been put under arrest. We would like to reassure the citizens of the city that they are perfectly safe. —It was probably scripted somewhere along those lines," he broke off. "What a ridiculous farce. I'm guessing your knowledge and history fit the role of 'dangerous criminal' perfectly."

"The City has full access to all the citizens' personal information," Shion answered. "It was probably easy to find a person to fit the role they wanted."

"More like you were being marked from the beginning."

"Huh?"

"Ever since that day you helped me, the city's been marking you as a cautionary suspect. They've been scrutinizing your daily life down to every minute detail. Who you met with, what you talked about, what you ate... so I thought this murder case was something the city devised to arrest you. I was wrong, though, and we know that now."

"But why? For what purpose—"

"Because you're not a loyal citizen," Nezumi replied as he towelled his hair off. His profile was delicately chiseled. It looked almost like an artificial creation. It was all too different from a face that had skin and blood coursing through it, and carried bodily warmth, with swells and dimples of flesh or fat, the occasional eczema; a face that changed with joy, anger, grief or mirth, shone with sweat, or stained with tears. This was no human face— it looked like a doll that had been crafted

with utmost precision.

But even so, Shion thought, and clenched his fist. The wrist he had grasped minutes ago had been warm, and throbbing with a steady pulse.

“You’re spaced out again. Am I boring you?”

“Huh? Oh, no— of course not. I was just wondering what you meant by... not loyal.” Shion’s face flushed, though he didn’t know why. Nezumi sniffed dismissively.

“That city only accepts people who pledge absolute loyalty to them. They don’t allow people who resist, object, or retaliate. They make sure any foreign object is removed completely. That’s how it’s thrived up until now.”

“And I’m the foreign object this time.”

“You’re more than foreign to them— think about it. You housed a VC, you held suspicions against the city for manipulating information, and you saw the cruelty behind their façade. As a citizen, you fail the test. You’re an unwanted candidate. The city was just waiting for the right opportunity to get rid of you. —Hey,” Nezumi said abruptly. “Tell me, what does the immune system do when a virus invades a human body?”

“Huh?” Shion was caught off-guard. “Well, first the natural killer cells— that’s a type of lymphocyte— find the cells that have been infected with the virus, and destroy them. Then the ribonuclease become active and suppress the spread of the virus. Next—”

“That’s enough,” Nezumi interrupted. “Geez, I set you off explaining something, and you don’t know when to stop. That’s why people get pissed off at you.”

“You’re the only one that seems to get irritated at me.”

Nezumi ignored him and gave a short, derisive laugh.

“So basically, to the city, you’re a virus. And that’s why they tried to erase you.”

“I’m a human. I won’t be erased that easily.”

Nezumi sighed deeply in exasperation.

“It’s easy for humans to kill other humans, you know.”

Shion clenched his fists tightly again.

“But they can save people too.”

“What?”

“You saved me. Nezumi,” he said earnestly, “parasite wasps don’t help each other out. But people can save other people. Am I wrong?”

Nezumi smiled briefly, and his gaze slid away from Shion.

“You’re as stupid as they come. Hopeless. Where did you think of that sickening cliché? I told you, I’m only repaying my debt.”

“And I told you, you’ve already paid enough.”

“How generous of you to have such low estimations of my debt,” said Nezumi sarcastically.

“Then you must have had pretty high estimations.”

Nezumi let out a long breath, and looked up at the ceiling. He bit his lip in silence as if to grope for the right words. The mice gathered around his feet.

“You don’t understand,” he said momentarily. “No amount of words would probably make you understand. That day, four years ago, I’d mostly given up. Giving up means the end of you. I knew that. But there was no way anyone would help me, or lend me a hand— that’s what I honestly thought. I couldn’t ask for help, I had nowhere to run... I snuck into Chronos, so tired I couldn’t move, and I thought about how it was only a matter of time until I was caught...” he paused, then spoke quietly. “I felt so— humiliated. I wondered if the

whole reason I'd been born was just to die in humiliation like this... don't laugh."

Shion would never have been able to. The sounds of that night four years ago were echoing in his ears. The sounds of the wind, the trees, and the whipping rain meshed and undulated, rising vivid and sharp in his mind. And amidst the din and darkness, a sopping wet boy was curled up on the floor.

"And then the window opened. You threw it open wide, didn't you. And then you spread your arms open."

"Yeah, I remember. I felt really restless, and I wanted to scream."

"To me, it looked like you were calling, beckoning for me to come in. I thought— this was unbelievable, and it was happening right this moment. And you even left the window open when you ducked back inside."

"I was going to turn off the atmosphere control system."

"I don't care for what reason. That window you left recklessly open was my stroke of luck. And the fact that you didn't call the Security Bureau on me, but instead treated my wound and even gave me food was another miracle. I found out for the first time that things like this could happen. That a helping hand could be extended miraculously like that... you were the first one that taught me. Like all of these—" Nezumi slowly looked about his room.

"— These thousands of stories here, you taught me that sometimes we encounter the most unexpected things. And that's why I was able to survive..." he lapsed into momentary silence. "So you're right. There are times when people are saved by other people. And you're the one that taught me that. You were the only one that taught me that. The debt I owe for that is high— unfortunately for me."

Nezumi's voice was so quiet it was almost a murmur, but it was deep and clear, and rang pleasantly in Shion's ears. So that's what it was,

Shion thought, and spread his fingers as he looked at his palm. That night, when he threw the window open with these hands, he had called in a miracle along with the wind.

“Don’t get too carried away,” said Nezumi, his words quickly turning brusque. “I’m giving you the guest treatment because I owe you. If you get carried away and start acting cocky, I’m going to kick you out.”

“Fine by me,” said Shion mildly. “I don’t know if you’ll take my word for it, but I’m not the type to get carried away too easily. But how did you find out I was in danger?” he asked curiously. “It’s not like you were keeping constant watch over me these four years, right?”

Nezumi plucked a grey mouse up and held it out at Shion. It was the smallest among all the mice.

“Take a close look.”

Shion held the mouse in his palm, and brought it close to his face.

“Is this... a robot?”

“Pretty well-made, isn’t it? It has a set of built-in sensors. This thing is small enough that it can slip through the city’s surveillance net and move around quite a bit. Depends on the area, though.”

“Did you make this?”

“Well, yeah,” he said casually. “While I was away from No. 6, this guy was the one sending me data about you.”

Shion lightly closed his fingers around the mouse in his hand. It had none of the warmth and softness that was characteristic of living things. Conversely, he scooped up one of the mice scurrying about his feet and held it in his palm too. This one had a faint but definite warmth and pulse.

“I didn’t know when or how the city was planning to get rid of you,” Nezumi continued. “You’re smart and young. You still had plenty of usage value. I couldn’t imagine that they would kick you out so

easily. I figured once they discovered how useful you could be, they'd take full advantage of it. Writing you up as a murderer was probably a piece of cake for them. You were their scapegoat," he sneered. "They were keeping you enclosed in a corral until the ceremonial day, when they would drag you out in front of everyone and make a flashy show of chopping your head off."

"So I've gone from being a virus to a goat, huh. Not much of an improvement."

"Hey, goats are cute. More lovable than you, anyway."

"I appreciate the compliment," said Shion unamusedly. "So this little guy sensed the change going on around me and came to notify you."

"Yup. It started that day when that man died of unnatural causes at the park where you worked. After that, the Bureau started stepping up their surveillance on you. And like adding icing to the cake, your co-worker got killed too. It was the perfect opportunity to put you under arrest."

"Surveillance—I didn't even know I was being watched."

"They do it so you don't notice. Once you do, it's too late."

"That's scary."

"You're noticing *now*?" Nezumi sniffed in derision. Shion raked his bangs up. He was confused— about what had happened, what was about to happen, and what he was supposed to do from now on. He knew almost nothing. And it was terrifying not to know. But there was one idea, although it was a mere speculation, that had sparked in Shion's mind.

* * *

"Nezumi."

"Hm?"

“Could it be the park?”

“The what?”

“The Forest Park in the centre of the city. My workplace— could that be where the parasite wasp originated?”

“Why?” said Nezumi. “That park is right in the middle of the city. It might be a forest, but it’s still artificial. All the wildlife is managed and controlled by the city. If a parasite wasp sprung out of nowhere, they’d notice.”

“That’s true, but ... out of all places in the city, the park would be the most adequate environment for a new species to appear. And all the victims so far, including me, were in the park when it happened. Of course—” Shion hesitated. “I don’t know if there’s been casualties anywhere else— but I think part of the reason why the city suspected me was because the incidents were concentrated in that location. But if that’s the case—”

“That monster must have been born there somehow without being noticed by the control systems.”

“It’s plausible, right? And what’s more, the park is where lots of people gather.”

“No shortage of hosts,” said Nezumi grimly.

It was a park that was beautifully and conveniently crafted for the citizens. If a species that preyed on humans actually did inhabit it, then—

“Spring,” Shion murmured.

Spring? Nezumi echoed in question.

“Once winter comes, the wasps will cease activity as they enter a dormant stage. The eggs that have been laid already will probably pass the winter as they are.”

“Inside people’s bodies.”

“Yeah. And when spring comes, they’ll be able to resume activity as an imago. Then they’ll hatch all at once.” In a season abundant with sunlight and flower blossoms, a mass of black wasps would simultaneously break out of people’s bodies to take flight. How many would they be? How many people would be sacrificed?

“We have to do something.”

“And how are you gonna ‘do something’ about it?” replied Nezumi bluntly. “Don’t even think about going back to the city. You’ll be killed. You’re an amateur, you can’t pull any fancy tricks like slipping past surveillance. Ten-to-one, as soon as you step inside the city, you’ll be shot dead. We don’t have a trump card to pull out, you know.”

“Actually— I think we might.”

Nezumi narrowed his eyes.

“I survived that wasp attack. There’s a chance that I’ve developed antibodies that resist the toxin. If I have, then it’ll be possible to make a serum out of my blood.”

Nezumi shot an appalled look at Shion and hunched his shoulders exaggeratedly.

“And then what’re you gonna do? Go waltzing into the city’s Health Bureau and say ‘Please check my blood. And if you like, please make a serum out of it’? That’s idiotic. They’ll probably suck all your blood out and throw you in the trash with the rest of their organic garbage. Sure, what you’re saying is impressive, but are you prepared to risk losing your life for these people?”

“I don’t want to die.”

“Then don’t think about useless things. Whether you have antibodies or not, once you’re caught, you’re going to get killed anyway. It’s just a matter of how soon or how late.”

“Then what should I do?”

“Don’t do anything. Just leave them to fend for themselves.”

Shion lifted his face.

“Leave them?” he asked quietly.

“Yeah. What a magnificent stage it’ll be,” Nezumi sneered. “You can watch the Holy City crumble into ruin, glowing in the light of spring. And you’ll have the best seats in the house.”

“Nezumi!” Shion raised his voice sharply.

“Whoa, don’t go dumping water on me again.”

“Are you under the impression that the West Block is safe from this?” he said incredulously. “We’re human beings, the same as them. There’s no knowing when the wasps might attack us too.”

Nezumi fell silent. A crooked smile played on his lips.

“We’re not the same.”

“What—”

“The people inside the city sure don’t see the residents of the West Block as the same human beings. You still don’t know what kind of place this is, do you? This is the Holy City’s garbage dump. No. 6 has thrived by throwing everything it doesn’t want out here. You should take a good look and see for yourself.”

“Nezumi...”

“This is just my hunch, but listen,” he continued. “That monster is probably only going to choose residents of No. 6 to be its host— the people who have pushed everything dirty into the hands of others to live in that perfectly hygienic environment, well-nourished and in excellent health. Mr. Monster has gourmet tastes.”

“How can you be so sure?”

“I have no clue about the biology of insects, Shion. But I’m probably right in guessing that any bee, wasp, ant or grasshopper will appear most in places where there’s the most food. In terms of population density, we’re much higher than the city. But do you see any sign of

the monster here? No. Which means that there are simply no prey, no hosts here. Right?”

Shion was at a loss for words. His thoughts were becoming tangled, and there was a dull pain throbbing at the back of his head. Nezumi’s hand touched his cheek.

“Sorry—” he said softly. “I didn’t mean to give you a hard time. I forgot. You’re from the other side, the inside of the wall.”

“I don’t understand what you mean by inside and outside.”

“Of course you wouldn’t,” Nezumi said gently. “That’s normal. You guys have probably never tried to understand what was going on outside your walls, have you? You probably weren’t even curious about it. Oblivious, arrogant, blissful people... But you, poor thing,” he murmured. “You’ve fallen off that pedestal.”

Which means I can no longer be oblivious, arrogant or blissful anymore. Is that what you want to say? Shion let his gaze speak for him as he looked Nezumi in the eye.

If arrogance is knowing nothing and never having tried to know, and if my blissful life until now has been built upon this arrogance, then sure, I don’t mind throwing everything away. Falling off my pedestal would be the best thing that could have happened to me.

“Nezumi,” he said steadily.

“Hm?”

“I want to know the truth. I want to know what’s real, what’s happening to this world I’m living in. I want to see its true face.”

Nezumi hunched his shoulders and flashed him a wry smile.

“Such youthful words.”

“We’re the same age.”

“I have more life experience than you. Geez, I don’t know who else would rattle off a line as embarrassing as ‘I want to know the truth’.

Except Hamlet, maybe.”

“Who’s that?”

“A prince of Denmark. I think you should balance out that knowledge bias before working on knowing the truth. You really know next to nothing about classics, huh?”

“Well, I’ve never needed them before . . .” frowned Shion. “The Arts weren’t encouraged much, so . . .”

Nezumi reached into the shelves and pulled out two books.

“If what you’re saying is true, then once winter comes, the commotion will die down. Which means we have a moratorium until spring.”

“Probably.”

“Then there’s no need to get worked up,” he said airily. “Nothing will come of it. So until you recover and you’re well enough to move around, you can read him these.”

“Him?”

A brown mouse scurried up onto Shion’s knee, and stood on its hind legs.

“He loves *Macbeth*. The other is *Faust*. Ever heard of it?”

“No.”

Nezumi grimaced, and heaved an exaggerated sigh.

*If feeling prompt not, if it doth not flow
Fresh from the spirit's depths, with strong control
Swaying to rapture every listener's soul,
Idle your toil; the chase you may forego!*

“—is how it goes. You should give your brain a break and work on training your soul. Your Mama used to read to you, right?”

“Yeah.”

The mouse squeaked insistently.

“Oh, right. Speaking of Mama, I have a message from yours. I almost forgot.”

“Huh?”

A faint colour rose in Nezumi’s cheeks as he obstinately turned aside.

“Well, since you managed not to die . . . I figured it wouldn’t hurt to tell your mother that you’re over here now. ”

“You went to see my mother?”

“Not me,” he said brusquely, “I stayed in the underground tunnel. This guy—”

The brown mouse tilted its head to one side.

“—He went for me, with the note in his mouth. One of the oldest tricks in the book, but surprisingly, it got past surveillance without being noticed.”

“Thank you.”

“Stop that.” Nezumi pulled a face. “Don’t give me that teary-eyed look. Aren’t you embarrassed at all?”

“I was talking to this little mouse here.”

“Oh— well, then.”

Shion really was grateful. Now that he knew how difficult it was to get past the wall, he felt grateful from the bottom of his heart that Nezumi had taken the same risk again just to deliver the message to his mother. *So this is what it means to gain knowledge.*

“Your mom’s got some guts,” Nezumi remarked. “She managed to give me a reply without getting caught.” Nezumi tossed him a rolled-up strip of paper that was about half the size of his finger. There was a message hastily scribbled onto it that he could barely read.

Arnd LK-3000. latch Bl. 3F. Not sure. -K

“What does this mean?” He and Nezumi looked at each other in bewilderment.

“It’s a letter that your Mama wrote to her beloved son,” said Nezumi.

“Don’t you have any clue what it might be about?”

“Not really,” replied Shion doubtfully. “‘K’ probably stands for my mother’s first name, but this...’not sure’...?”

“It’s probably an address. Not that building numbers would do any good here... Latch Building, huh. I guess I’ll look into it.”

“So that must mean my mother knows someone who lives in the West Block.” It was a surprise to him. He had never heard Karan utter a single word about anyone who lived here. Nezumi snapped his fingers smartly.

“Oh— I know.”

“Huh?”

“Maybe he’s your dad.”

“Fat chance,” retorted Shion. “Look who’s had one too many stories to read. Aren’t you embarrassed at all?”

Nezumi *tsked* in disappointment.

“You’re getting better at your comebacks. —But, well, I guess you’re right. It’s your typical script for a cheap melodrama. A father and son reunite in tears after sixteen years of estrangement.” Nezumi’s voice turned deep and burly.

“I’ve missed you, son.”

“Me too, Father.” Shion bounded into Nezumi’s widespread arms. They circled around his back. It was warm. For an instant, the frigid touch of Yamase’s dead body flashed back in his mind. But it was this warmth here, not that coldness, that he wanted to remember; and Shion vowed never to forget the heat of the body that was in his arms. He wished all beings, himself included, could continue to be living

beings. He didn't want his life unfairly wrenched away from him. He could feel it— the pleasure of living, breathing, and possessing a body of warm flesh— soak into the depths of his core. Nezumi gently detached himself.

"You're getting better at picking up your cues," he said approvingly.

"I know. I've come pretty far in a short time, haven't I?"

"Quite an excellent pupil. Shall we go, then?"

"Where?"

"Outside."

Darkness had fallen outside. Here in the West Block, night and complete darkness seemed synonymous. A chill wind nipped at Shion's skin.

"Look," Nezumi pointed. No. 6 was carved out in the darkness, bathed in light as it glowed in the distance.

"It's always shining like that, morning, day, and night. Pretty, isn't it."

"Yeah."

"But where you're going to be living from now on is here." The land was sunken in darkness, with a sparse scattering of lights here and there. They burned forlornly, and made the surrounding dark look even more inky black. The clouds above broke, and the moon peeked out. It was a crescent moon. A thin sliver, almost like a clipped nail, floated in the empty sky.

Nezumi crouched down to pick something up.

"Look at this." It was a dead wasp.

"This looks like just a regular paper wasp."

"You were right, it looks like the season for wasp activity is over."

"By springtime..." Shion trailed off.

It was possible that the city would hold out somehow until spring. It gave him a few months' grace period until the fatal judgment would

fall.

"If you're serious about fighting the parasite wasps, I won't get in your way," Nezumi said. "But if that means helping No. 6, I'm backing out."

"Do you have a grudge against No. 6?"

There was no answer. The wind blew stronger. The canopies above creaked and rustled as they swayed in the darkness.

"Shion."

"Hm?"

"That city where you were born and raised in— that's the biggest parasite."

"Huh?"

"It latches onto the host, sucks out all its nutrients, and devours it whole. That's the kind of city it is. A Parasite City... do you understand what I'm saying?"

"No."

"You'll find out soon. You said you wanted to know the truth. But once you know, you'll never be able to go back. I would prepare myself if I were you."

"I've already come too far to go back anyway, wouldn't you think?"

"I guess so."

Nezumi's quiet laughter carried on the wind. His voice was dry and hollow, as if to complement it.

"If you find out the truth, and still want to protect No. 6— then,"

In the darkness, Nezumi's face turned to his. Shion could feel his gaze. He could almost see the grey of his eyes just as vividly.

"Then you're my enemy too."

Boy, it's chilly out here. Let's head back in. Nezumi's tone was light. It was as if nothing had happened. He turned his back to Shion, and began whistling as he descended the stairs.

"Nezumi."

The whistling stopped.

"You haven't told me your name yet."

"Nezumi it is, and Nezumi it shall be. Good enough."

"But it doesn't suit you. And it was a promise. You said you'd tell me your name if I survived."

There was a soft laugh, which quickly turned into whistling again. The door closed, and a silence settled over the darkness. Shion stood alone, rooted to the spot. The wind caressed his white hair. He could hear a dog barking somewhere in the distance.

He gazed up at the city that bejewelled itself in light. The Parasite City. The city whose name Nezumi had spat with disgust was shimmering and beautiful.

Shion averted his eyes from the light, and took a deep breath. Then he descended slowly down the steps to the room below.

Volume II

It is 2017. After being chased from No. 6, sixteen-year-old Shion sees the outside world, and its reality, for the first time. *What was it that I thought I knew? What have I been seeing all this time?* Shion strives to live through every day he spends with Nezumi, but he is confronted with a fateful question— “Me, or No. 6 — which one do you choose?” Fate accelerates, and bears down upon the two.

1

OF LIFE AND DEATH

*Thou livest; report me and my cause aright
To the unsatisfied.*

HAMLET, ACT V SCENE II

SHION CLOSED the book. He could hear the sound of rain.

This underground room was cut off from most outside sounds. But for some reason, the sounds of the wind and the rain always seemed to seep through the walls.

A mouse scurried up Shion's leg and perched on his knee. It twitched its whiskers and rubbed its front paws together as if in request.

"You want me to read this book to you?"

Cheep.

"You really like tragedies, don't you. Why don't you pick something more fun?"

The mouse looked up at him and blinked its grape-coloured eyes. Shion adjusted himself in his chair and crossed his legs, with the mouse still on his knee.

The chair had once been quite a fine piece of furniture. It was evident from its sturdy build and the delicate patterns carved into the chair-back. But now, it was worn and old; the colour was peeling in various places, and the cushion had faded so much it was impossible to tell what colour it had been before. Still, it was one of the few pieces of furniture that this room had. A week ago, Shion had dug it out from among the books that covered two-thirds of the room's floor space.

"There might be an even bigger treasure hidden in these books, if you sorted them out." Shion had meant to sound serious, but Nezumi scoffed.

"Why don't you worry about building up some strength before thinking about stupid stuff like that? You're a little boy who's probably never had to do any physical labour since the day you were born. You're pale and skinny enough as it is."

"I was in charge of cleaning duties at the park. I had to do physical labour all the time."

Nezumi's shoulders hunched. His voice was tinged with contempt.

"Cleaning duties? Does cleaning count as physical labour in No. 6? All you had to do was operate the robots that did the maintenance and cleaning. What physical labour is, little boy—"

Nezumi grabbed Shion's arm and dug his fingers in so hard that he winced. Nezumi's fingers, slender at first glance, had a surprisingly strong grip.

"—is using these arms, your legs, and putting your back into it. Using your own body. Remember that."

Nezumi's biting and sarcastic way of speaking didn't bother Shion much anymore after he had gotten used to it. In its harshness and cynicism, there was often a truth that he couldn't help but agree with, and oftentimes he would come away more persuaded than offended. It was true, the work that Shion did in the Holy City of No. 6 was

just to tap the keys of the control panel. He had never experienced the kind of labour that made his own body creak under its burden. He had no experience of what it was like to be damp with sweat, to have the skin of his hands blister and tear, to have his muscles ache from exhaustion; to be famished unbearably, and to fall into a comfortable slumber after a day's work.

He had never experienced it once.

"That's why I'm going to do this," Shion said determinedly, pointing at the mountains of books that piled high all over the room. "I'm going to organize them, sort them out, and shelve them in order. If that's not physical labour, I don't know what is."

"It'll take you a hundred years."

"I'll do it in a week."

Nezumi shrugged his shoulders again. "As you wish," he sighed.

"Do what you want. But stick with the books and bookshelves. Don't touch anything else."

"You don't have much other than books and bookshelves in here."

"Like you said, you might find some amazing treasure. To tell you the truth, even I don't know what's buried under these books."

The mice were chattering to each other from the nooks and tiny spaces between the books. Shion picked up a small, light-green volume.

"Nezumi."

"Hm?"

"How long have you been living here?"

These bare concrete walls, thousands of books, this underground room— it didn't seem well-suited to be a human dwelling.

"You didn't grow up here, did you? Where were you—"

He closed his mouth. He noticed that Nezumi's grey eyes were harbouring a steely glint.

“I’m— I’m sorry.”

Nezumi snatched the book out of Shion’s hand and threw it aside.

“If you plan on staying here—” he wrapped his shoulders in the super-fibre cloth, and gave an impatient sigh. “Then do something about that interrogation habit of yours. I don’t know how much more I can take of you nosing around every little part of my life.”

“I’m not nosing around. I just wanted to know.”

“Sniffing around and questioning people for every piece of information you want is called nosing around. Remember that too.”

Shion felt a jab of irritation at the way Nezumi’s words seemed to push him away. Indignation welled up inside him. He wasn’t nosing around. He grabbed Nezumi’s arm as he made to leave the room.

“I barely know anything yet. That’s why I wanted to know.”

“And I’m saying that’s called—”

“If it was something I could get by without knowing,” Shion interrupted, “I wouldn’t want to know about it. But I do want to know. To me, this is something I need to know. I want to know, and that’s why—*ach*—” He bit his tongue. He clamped a hand over his mouth and squatted on the floor in pain. Tears stung at his eyes and the pain smarted in his mouth. Nezumi burst out laughing.

“Geez, does clumsiness come naturally to you too? I never get tired of looking at you. —You alright?”

“Somewhat. Biting your tongue is really painful.” When he had been in No. 6 — that was from when he was born, to the age of sixteen— Shion had never once tripped over his words enough to bite his tongue. And it was the first time, too, that he had grabbed someone’s arm without thinking, out of desire to say what his heart raced to tell, his words unable to keep up with his thoughts.

“So?”

Nezumi knelt down, and peered into Shion's face. The light in his eyes, which had the sheen of finely-woven cloth, had subsided to a gentle glow.

"What do you want to know?"

"You—" Shion answered. "I want to know about you."

Nezumi's mouth fell open. He blinked several times.

"Shion, have you been reading any strange books lately?"

"Strange?"

"Like romance novels, the kind that are cliché and over the top. You know, where a prince comes to rescue a damsel in distress, or when lovers who are torn apart overcome trials and tribulations to reunite again."

"I don't think I've read any of those."

"Then where the hell did you come up with that line? '*I want to know about you*,'" Nezumi echoed in disbelief.

"I don't have to learn that from anywhere to say it."

"Are you serious about what you just said?"

"Of course. Nezumi—" Shion wiped his lips, and looked directly into his grey eyes. "I want to know. I want to know because there are still so many things I don't know. All I know about you is that you've saved me. I don't know your real name, or how you grew up, or why you're living here alone— or what you're thinking of now, or what you're planning to do — I have no idea. I don't know a single thing about you."

He was grabbed by the wrist. Nezumi's fingers were always cold, and rigid.

"Then I'll tell you something. Put your hand here." Shion did as he was told, and placed his hand on Nezumi's chest.

"What do you feel?"

“Feel—? Well, it feels like a man’s chest, for one. It’s hard, and flat.”

“I know, I know. Too bad for you, I don’t have big breasts. What else?”

“Well...”

What did he feel on his palm through the rough fabric of Nezumi’s shirt? It was his heartbeat, his warmth, and the firmness of his flesh. Shion hesitated to put it into words. He didn’t know why. He withdrew his hand, and curled his fingers over his palm. Nezumi chuckled quietly.

“My heart was beating, and it was warm. Right?”

“Of course. You’re alive. It’s normal for your heart to be beating and for you to feel warm.”

“It is. I’m alive, and I’m right here in front of you. That’s all you need to know. What more do you want?”

Nezumi stood up, and looked down at Shion. His gaze, like his fingers, was cold.

“What you want is information,” he said icily. “My birth date, my development history, my height, weight, index of my intelligence, DNA data. You just want information that you can convert into numbers. That’s the only way you ever try to understand other humans. That’s why you can’t understand the living people that are standing right in front of you.”

Shion stood up as well. He clenched his fist harder.

“You’re big on sarcasm, and love to make fun of people. You don’t like fish, and you’re a restless sleeper.”

There was a moment of silence.

“—Huh?”

Shion continued.

"You have an enormous amount of knowledge, and a wide range of it too— but none of it is systematic. Sometimes you're fickle and over-sensitive, but other times you're lazy and careless about the details. You adore piping-hot soup, and you get really grumpy when it doesn't have the right amount of salt. And last night, you kicked me three times in your sleep."

"Hey Shion, wait a minute—"

"Since coming here, this is what I've learned about you. They're not numbers. I would never substitute you for numbers. That's not what I want to do."

Nezumi's gaze slid away from him.

"I'm just a stranger to you," he said. "You shouldn't be interested in strangers. Four years ago, you saved my life, and I owe you a big debt for that. So that's why, this time, I helped you out. So if you want, you can stay here for as long as you wish and do what you want to do. But never think of wanting to know more about another stranger."

"Why not?"

"Because it gets in the way."

"Gets in the way? Knowing things gets in my way?"

"Yes, for people like you. You're good at cramming knowledge, but you give in easily to your emotions. You're quick to trust in people, and try to attach yourself to them. I told you before, didn't I? Cut yourself off, and throw away everything you don't need."

"Yeah, but..."

"But what you're doing right now is just the opposite. You're starting to take interest in me and want to know more. You're trying to add even more to your burden. You're hopelessly stupid, just hopeless."

Shion couldn't understand what Nezumi was saying. It was more confounding and difficult to grasp than any scholarly book he had read.

“Nezumi, I don’t understand what you’re talking about.” He voiced his feelings truthfully. Nezumi shrugged slightly.

“The more you know, the more emotionally attached you’ll get. Then we can’t be strangers anymore. And that’ll be trouble for you.”

“For me? Why?”

“When we become enemies, you won’t be able to kill me.” There was a hint of a laugh in his voice. Shion dug his feet firmly into the worn carpet.

“While you’re busy being caught up in your emotions, I can go ahead and stab a knife into your heart. You know, a knife is a really ancient weapon, but it can come in handy sometimes.”

“Why do you and I have to become enemies? That’s just absurd. *That’s* what’s stupid, if anything.”

“Really? I think it’s pretty plausible.”

“Nezumi!” Shion said heatedly.

There was a loud toppling noise as a pile of books fell over. A mouse hopped onto Nezumi’s shoulder.

“Well, if you’re really gonna organize these books, you better get cracking. One week will be over in no time. I’m going to work.” Nezumi turned nimbly on his heel and walked out the door. Shion felt all the tension leave his body. He was cold and clammy. Conversations with Nezumi sometimes made him so wrought with nerves that he broke out in a cold sweat. Shion licked his dry lips.

“I don’t even know what kind of job it is that you do,” he muttered to himself. “I only wanted to know. Who’s the stupid one here?” He let his words hang for a moment, then set out to organize the stacks of books.

“Shion.” The door opened, and Nezumi’s voice called him. A pair of work gloves were tossed his way.

“You’ll crack a nail if you use your bare hands.” The door closed before Shion could say thanks, and silence settled over the room again. This casual act of kindness, or those cold, dispassionate words from a few minutes ago— which one was he to believe? Shion couldn’t grasp him. That was why he wished could reach out and take firm hold. Shion pulled the gloves over his hands, and lifted some books off the floor.

Of course. It’s good to wear gloves when doing this kind of work. That’s another thing I didn’t even know.

You just want information that you can convert into numbers. That’s the only way you ever try to understand other humans. The words that had been slapped in his face minutes before still remained stubbornly in his ears. This method of analyzing people through their data was something Shion had learned all his life in No. 6, ever since he had been deemed top-ranking in the Childrens’ Examinations and was given a top-class learning environment.

The human body is made up of 274 different types of cells, numbering 60 billion in total. He remembered perfectly the names, shapes, and functions of each. He knew the locations and functions of each organ, and had also learned about the transmission paths of signals between the amygdala, perirhinal cortex and the hippocampus.

But it was no use to him. No matter how much he put his knowledge to work, he was unable to understand the person with whom he’d been living for almost a month.

Was Nezumi honestly thinking that they were going to become enemies some day? That they would end up killing each other— was that possible? Nezumi’s words and actions were always shrouded in mystery, and confused Shion greatly.

He couldn’t grasp him. That was why he wished could reach out and take firm hold. He wanted to know the part of Nezumi that couldn’t

be substituted for numbers or symbols. Shion shook his head. The mice scampered busily about his feet. *I have to stop. Brooding over it isn't gonna help. Right now, I have to wage war with these books.*

He was soon damp with perspiration. His back ached, and his arms felt heavy. But what interrupted Shion in his work was not in his bodily ache or exhaustion, but in the pages of the books he went through. He would casually flip to a story, and find himself sinking to the floor to read the rest. Wholly engrossed, he would soon lose track of the hour. And each time, a little mouse hopped up onto the page in stern reprimand.

"Give me one more minute. I'll put it away as soon as I'm finished reading this part."

"Cheep cheep!"

"Alright, alright. I'm getting on it, okay? Are you satisfied now?"

And on the third day, he found it, under an old copy of a science journal. A small, silver box. His emergency kit.

On that stormy night four years ago, Nezumi had appeared, sopping wet, a sudden intruder in Shion's home. His shoulder stained with blood, the dripping boy before him looked as if he was about to collapse. Shion had extended his hand without thinking. His protective instinct had stirred so strongly in him that he had even forgotten to feel fear toward the intruder. Even after finding out that he was a VC—considered a violent and dangerous criminal in No. 6—that feeling did not change. Shion took Nezumi under his wing, and provided treatment for his wound and a momentary respite. He didn't hesitate to. He couldn't help but do what he did. As a result, Shion lost most of what he had, as well as a large part of his secure and privileged life. That night, Shion had treated the wound, painfully evident of the bullet that had caused it, with the tools and medication in this emergency kit. The next morning, there were four things missing in Shion's

presence— the red checkered shirt, the towel, the emergency kit, and Nezumi himself. Of them, two were back in his hands. Or, rather, emergency kit aside, perhaps it wasn't right to say that Nezumi had "come back" into his hands. Shion was the one who had fallen into a trap, and was about to be hauled to the Correctional Facility by the Security Bureau— Nezumi was the one who had saved him, and brought him outside No. 6.

He wasn't the one that came back. I was the one that burst in and took refuge here. That was the reality of it. He had fallen from the Utopian City— even called Holy by some—into this underground room, where no sunlight shone. He would probably never be able to return to No. 6 legitimately again. He had left his mother there. Was Karan still thinking of him, even after he had been cast as an escaped criminal? Shion knew it was fruitless to think about it, but his heart ached nonetheless.

He couldn't throw it all away like Nezumi. He couldn't cut himself off. He couldn't live without. He had to cling to something, else he would crumble and fall. He had to have someone in his heart always, else he would go insane.

Shion opened the lid of the box. It looked like the automatic sterilizer was still functioning. A scalpel and a roll of gauze glowed dimly under the faint reddish light of the sterile lamp. A nostalgic feeling welled up in his chest as if he was meeting an old friend.

"Cheep-cheep! Chit-chit-chit!"

"What? I know, I know. I'm getting there. Geez, you're strict." Shion laughed. As if in response, the mouse raised its front paws and chittered.

* * *

By the time a week rolled around, Shion had managed to organize almost all of the books that had been dominating most of the floor. Of course, it was impossible to find shelf space for all of them, and many piles of books still remained on the floor — but it had cleared up a considerable amount of living space.

“So what do you think?” Shion puffed out his chest proudly. Nezumi was draped lazily over the chair. He yawned.

“The emergency kit, a couple blankets, a mug, and an old heater. Is that all you managed to find?”

“That’s a lot,” Shion replied indignantly.

“Too bad you couldn’t find an entry permit into No. 6.”

Shion moved in front of Nezumi, and looked him directly in the eye. If he was going to speak in earnest, he mustn’t avert the other’s gaze. It was one of the things he had learned in his one month of living with Nezumi. Shion bent over, and clasped each hand around the armrests of the chair.

“What?”

Shion was now blocking Nezumi from the front. Nezumi shifted uneasily in his seat.

“Nezumi, my mother is still in No. 6. She’s my only blood relative. I don’t care how much you laugh at me for it, but I’ll never be able to cut her off. But— but let me say this. I have no attachments to life in that city anymore. Even if someone told me I could go back in time, I wouldn’t want to go back to when I had the privilege to live in No. 6 as its legitimate citizen. I’m serious— I wouldn’t want to return one bit.”

The grey eyes on the other end of Shion’s gaze didn’t blink once.

“You said that my life in No. 6 was fake. Now I’ve experienced it for myself. And I never, ever want to return to a life that’s fake, and only peaceful and privileged in appearance.”

“So you’re prepared to live life outside of the Holy City, is that what you’re telling me?”

“Yeah.”

“Do you know what kind of place this is?”

He hesitated to answer. Nezumi’s lips twisted into a cold smile.

“You don’t know anything,” he said softly. “You don’t know what it’s like to starve, to shiver in the cold, to groan from a wound that’s festered because it’s been left untreated too long; you don’t know the suffering that follows when that wound becomes infested with maggots, and you start rotting alive; you don’t know how it feels to watch someone die in front of you, while there’s nothing you can do to help them. You don’t know a single thing. You’re just rattling off pretty words. You’ve experienced it for yourself, you say? You’ve only peeled the surface of that city and sniffed at it, and already you’re acting like you know everything about it. It might be a city of lies, but in No. 6 you have a warm bed, plenty of food and clean water. You have fully-equipped medical facilities, recreational facilities, educational institutions. Everything that residents here would never be able to have, no matter how hard they wished. And you say you have no attachments to those? That’s arrogant of you. So arrogant it makes my skin crawl. Either that, or you’re a liar.”

Shion drew a breath. He tightened his grip on the armrests.

“It might be arrogant— but I’m not lying. Regardless of what kind of place is, I still want to continue living here. It’s not because I got chased out of No. 6 as a criminal. Even if I wasn’t— no matter how horrible this environment turns out to be, I want to stay here.”

“What’s your reason?” Nezumi shot back. “If you’re not lying, and if you’re not trying to impress me with a model answer, what lead you to make that decision?”

“I’m drawn to you.”

“Huh?”

“You know things that I don’t know. You’ve taught me things that no one has ever taught me before. I can’t say it well, but—” he hesitated. “I’m drawn to you. A lot. That’s why I want to stay here. I want to see what you see, eat what you eat, and breathe the same air as you. I want to hold in these hands what I would never have been able to get in No. 6.”

Nezumi slowly blinked twice. Then, he placed a palm on his forehead and shook his head slowly in exasperation.

“Shion, I’ve been noticing this for some time now, but—”

“Yeah?”

“Your language ability is worse than a chimpanzee.”

“I’ve heard before that the genome of a human and chimpanzee are only different by 1.23%,” said Shion, unfazed. “I don’t think you should mock chimpanzees.”

“I’m mocking *you*. Idiot. Don’t you have any idea what proper expressions to use?”

“Was there something weird about what I said?”

“Don’t use words like ‘drawn to’ so easily. It’s a very weighty, important word. You’re only supposed to use it for a special, irreplaceable person in your life.”

“Then how am I supposed to say it? Do I say I love you?”

Nezumi heaved a long, exaggerated sigh. “Never mind,” he muttered. “It messes me up when I talk to you. Here,” he pushed a thick book into Shion’s hands, and stood up. “*Hamlet*. Read it.”

“I already have.”

“Then read it again. Give that crippled language ability of yours some good, hard training. Learn some words.”

“Was I off-the-mark that badly?”

Nezumi's words quickened.

"You're just fascinated by new and unusual things. You're like a scholar who's discovered a new planet, or a new kind of bacteria. You're just itching with curiosity because you've met someone who's different from all the people that used to surround you. That's it. You're not drawn to me, and you're not in love with me. You're just excited about the exotic animal you've discovered. Can't you even tell the difference?"

They were harsh words. They became sharp thorns that stabbed at Shion's eardrums.

"I don't trust you," Nezumi said.

Shion raised his face, and his gaze collided with Nezumi's. He had been biting his lip without thinking.

"I don't trust anything you say. You're someone who's been living in artificial abundance since you were born. And you're arrogant enough to be able to say you can throw away that fortune easily. —Shion," he said suddenly. "When you used to do that cleaning job at the park, you had to do that ritual every morning, didn't you?"

The ritual was always the first task in Shion's work day. He had to lay a palm on the image of the City Hall — or Moondrop, informally — that was displayed on monitor of the maintenance system, and pledge his allegiance.

"I hereon and ever pledge my unwavering allegiance to the City of No. 6."

"Our gratitude for your loyalty. Engage in your day's labour with sincerity and pride as a good citizen of the City."

That was it. Every morning, he had repeated the same task. It had been a sore discomfort for him. His youthful pride stung for having to repeat these banal and grandiose words, and for this ritual itself, which seemed foolish.

Nezumi gave a short laugh.

“You hated it, didn’t you.”

“Yeah.”

“Felt suffocated, didn’t you, being forced to declare your loyalty.”

“Yeah... now that you mention it.”

“But you put up with it,” Nezumi said. “Instead of retaliating, you recited this pledge every morning, not meaning a single word of it, and pretended it didn’t bother you. Let me tell you something, Shion: words aren’t things that you can toss around casually. You can’t let yourself be forced to say something, and just put up with it. But you don’t know that. So that’s why I’m not going to trust you.”

Nezumi’s hand suddenly extended toward him. His palm touched Shion’s cheek.

“Did that hurt?” he asked gently.

“Quite a bit.”

“—I don’t have any grudge against you. And I don’t hate you, either.”

“I know...” Shion answered quietly. “That much I can tell.”

“Shion.”

“Hm?”

“Feel like going outside?”

His fingers caressed Shion’s hair.

“You’re fully recovered, now, aren’t you? Feel like seeing for yourself the place you’ve decided to continue living in?”

Nezumi’s hand slowly drew away. Several strands of white hair clung to his long fingers. Shion’s hair still had some lustre despite being drained of its colour, and to certain eyes he figured it might look pretty. But he felt its beauty to be cruel. In a single night, the colour had faded from his hair, and he had been scarred with a red band that slithered like a serpent over his entire body. He had been seen by children, who

had shrieked at the sight of him. He couldn't forget the look in their eyes. They were filled with dismay and horror like the eyes of one who beheld a deformed monster. But he had to go outside. He wanted to see the world he was going to live in with his own eyes, hear the sounds with his own ears, smell with his nose, and feel it on his own skin. Then, maybe, he would speak to Nezumi about it again.

No matter what kind of place this is, I want to keep living here. Rather than being surrounded by falsities, and being forced to swallow banal words, I want to live here— even if it means I have to struggle—

"We can dye your hair, if it'll make you feel better at all," Nezumi said. "Black, brown, green— whatever colour you wish. What do you wanna do?"

"No, it's fine."

"You're going to keep it?"

"Yeah, I'll keep my hair like this. White hair isn't so bad. I figure it's better than being completely bald."

Nezumi lowered his face. His shoulders were trembling.

"You're really funny, you know that?" he said, his voice shaking from holding back a laugh. "Seriously. I mean, really."

"Am I?" said Shion dubiously. "No one's ever really told me I'm funny..."

"You're a natural comedian. You should toss the theory books and study comedy instead."

"I'll think about it."

"You should. Right— tomorrow, then, I'll show you around."

"Alright," Shion agreed.

"And there's one place you definitely need to go to."

"Latch Building," Shion answered for him.

Arnd LK-3000. Latch Bld. 3F. Not sure. -K

It was a memo from Karan, and it was a cryptic one— Shion didn't know where it pointed to, or who was going to be there.

"Did you find out where Latch Building is?"

"Nope," Nezumi replied. "We don't have any fancy numberings for our buildings here. But once upon a time this place used to be a decent town, and I was able to get a map from then. And there's a region that's marked LK-3000."

"You looked all of this up..." Shion murmured in awe.

"Just to kill some time."

"I didn't think you had time to kill. You always seem so busy—"

"Oh, and write a letter," Nezumi interrupted nonchalantly.

"Huh?"

"To your Mama. But keep it within 15 words. Just a simple note. The mouse here says he misses your mother's homemade bread."

"You'll deliver the letter for me?"

"More like a memo," he said brusquely. "Under 15 words. I can't guarantee it'll get there safely."

"Nezumi."

"What?"

"Thank you."

Nezumi shrank away from Shion and fixed him with an appalled stare.

"Please, can you not look at me like that? It gives me the willies. What'll happen tomorrow will happen tomorrow. I'm gonna take a shower. Oh, and before you write a letter to your mama, read the poor little guy a story. He's been waiting all this time."

Nezumi disappeared into the bathroom. Shion curled up in a chair, and opened the book he had been passed earlier. There was a faint

whiff of the smell of paper. He was drawn in instantly, and soon lost himself in its pages.

*If thou didst ever hold me in thy heart,
Absent thee from felicity awhile,
And in this harsh world draw thy breath in pain
To tell my story.*

Hamlet drew his last breath in the arms of his friend. Shion slowly closed the book. There was the sound of rain. He wondered why it always seemed to seep through the walls into this underground room. It seeped through and reverberated, like the soft sound of music.

And in this harsh world, draw thy breath in pain— maybe that's what living on in this world meant— to suffer in pain. And Nezumi knew this. It had been ingrained into his body. A mouse chirruped at his foot.

"Oh, sorry about that. Which one do you want me to read?"

The mouse climbed up onto his knee, and rubbed its front paws together.

"You want me to read this book to you?"

Cheep.

"You really like tragedies, don't you. Why don't you pick something more fun?"

He crossed his legs, with the mouse still perched on his knee.

"Read him the tragedy," Nezumi's voice spoke from behind him. He hadn't even noticed Nezumi coming out of the bathroom. He hadn't heard a sound or felt any presence.

"You have a good voice. This little guy loves to be read to. And he loves to listen to you read tragedies."

"Really?"

The mouse blinked its grape-coloured eyes at him. Shion guessed it was his way of saying yes.

“Okay, okay. Then from the top of Act Five—”

“Shh—” Nezumi’s damp hand pressed over Shion’s mouth. “I hear something.”

“Huh?”

Before Shion could ask what it was, it reached his own ears. The sound of footsteps clambering down the steps. The heavy door was being banged. Someone was knocking on the centre of the door, and its sound was frantic, though not altogether strong.

A child.

A child was knocking desperately on the door. Shion stood up, and made for the entrance.

“Not so fast.” Nezumi stopped him. Under his wet bangs, his grey eyes beheld the door warily.

“Don’t open the door yet.”

“Why not?”

“It’s dangerous. Don’t open the door without any defense.”

“It’s a child knocking. And it’s urgent. Something must have happened.”

“How can you be so sure? An armed soldier can knock on the bottom half of the door, no problem.”

Shion’s gaze travelled from Nezumi’s face to the door.

Help me.

He thought he heard a weak voice cry out in plea. He swallowed. He unlatched the door, and gripped the handle.

“Shion!”

He opened the door. A cold draft blew into the room. It was getting dark outside, and a chill wind was blowing.

A girl was standing in the gathering dark. Her eyes were filled with tears as she looked up at Shion. He had seen her before. She lived in the barracks in the hollow under the slope. She was the girl he had not been able to forget— the girl who had shrieked at Shion's whitened hair and red scar that snaked up his neck. For the first time, in this gaze, he had been beheld like a deformity. But now, her large eyes were brimming with tears, and contained no hint of terror. Instead, they were bright with frantic urgency.

"Help me— please— he's dying."

Shion swiftly took the girl by her hand, and began to clamber up the stairs. He hastily yelled over his shoulder.

"Nezumi, bring the emergency kit, and some blankets!"

Then he burst outside, into the wood of bare branches and fallen leaves.

2

THE PLACE OF THE GODS

*Then the goddess Hannahanna decided to use her last resort.
She gathered not several, but hundreds, thousands of bees, and said,
“You are small and nimble, and fly as swift as the light,
so you shall surely be able to find the god Telepinu. Now, go.”*

THE DISAPPEARANCE OF TELIPINU, HITTITE MYTH

THERE WAS a person collapsed at the foot of a spindly tree whose bark was whiter than the rest. He was a little boy, even smaller than the girl in size. He was writhing in pain. Shion took him in his arms and sat him up. Even in the settling dusk, he could tell that the boy was deathly pale. He was clawing at his throat, and his mouth was open, but his lips were bloodless.

Suffocation. He was choking from something stuck in his throat. There was no time to waste. Supporting the boy's belly with one arm, Shion thumped his back with the palm of his other hand.

“Spit it out. Come on,” he urged. Twice, then a third time, he kept hitting the boy's bony back. Four times, five times...

The boy wretched, and vomit spilled out of his mouth. There was a dark, round object mixed in with it. The boy twitched slightly.

“Water! Bring water!” Shion commanded Nezumi again. He lay the boy down, and brought his own cheek to the boy’s mouth. He could feel definite breathing. *He’s alright, he’s breathing.* He didn’t need to clear the boy’s airway, or give him artificial resuscitation. But his consciousness—

“Call his name.”

The girl responded quickly to Shion’s words. She bent over the boy, bringing her face close to his, and called his name.

“Rico, can you hear me? Rico.”

“Rico, can you breathe?” Shion called after her.

The boy’s chest swelled largely. His eyelids fluttered and opened. A tear spilled over and rolled down his cheek.

“—Sis—”

“Rico!” Shion gently restrained the girl as she tried to throw her arms around the boy. He slowly raised Rico’s upper body off the ground, and brought a cup of water to his mouth.

“Can you drink this?”

“Yeah.”

“Good boy. Drink it slowly. So your name is Rico, huh?”

“Yeah.”

“Rico, can you hear your sister’s voice and my voice clearly? Can you see us just fine?”

“Yeah— and the water tastes good.”

“You’re a good boy,” Shion enthused. “You’ve done a really great job. Does your stomach feel alright? Does your chest hurt at all?”

“My throat...”

“Hm?”

“My throat hurts...”

Rico had probably torn at his throat in pain, for it was covered in scratches which were beginning to bleed. Shion retrieved some gauze and rubbing alcohol from the emergency kit. They were four years old, but now, this was all they had.

“This is going to sting. Don’t cry.”

“I won’t.”

He swabbed the wounds, pressed a fresh piece of gauze to them, and wrapped Rico’s neck with a bandage. Shion could only give him the most basic of emergency procedures. This was the best he could do. If he had said anything along the lines of ‘to the hospital’, Nezumi would have laughed in his face. Shion knew very well that in this area, the West Block of No. 6, there was no such thing as a decent medical facility. From what Rico had vomited out, Shion picked out what appeared to have been blocking his airway.

“A nut?” It was small and round. “Why would this be—”

Rico hung his head. Nezumi folded his arms as he stood, and gave a short sigh.

“He was hungry.”

“Huh?”

“He was probably so hungry he couldn’t bear it anymore. That nut—if you grind it into flour, it’s— well, it’s edible. He was probably in the middle of gathering them when he got hungry. He got so hungry he decided to put one in his mouth, which was all good until he swallowed it by mistake— is my guess of what probably happened.”

“Rico’s always hungry,” the girl said. “Even if Mum gives him part of her bread, he’s still hungry.”

“It’s such a tiny piece of bread,” Rico protested. “One bite, and it’s all gone.” He dissolved into a fit of coughs. His voice was raspy, and his face was still pale. Shion wrapped his body in a blanket.

“Keep warm. If your neck still hurts, I’ll treat it for you. Come again anytime.”

“Take them home.”

Shion raised his face at Nezumi’s words.

“Me?”

“Yeah, you. You helped them, so finish your job and see them through. They live in the house down this slope, it’s not too far. Their mother is probably getting worried right about now.”

That meant he would have to show himself to an adult. Shion stood up. He didn’t know why, but he had started to shake.

“But I—”

“You’ll have to go out there one day anyway. If you’re getting scared now, you’ll never be able to walk the streets. —Well, not that it’s any of my business. But if we stay out here in the rain any longer, someone’s going to catch pneumonia.”

He had forgotten that it was raining. Shion finally noticed its coldness. It seeped right into his bones, and reminded him that winter was approaching.

“Well, I’m off. The prince can do as he pleases.” Nezumi turned his back to them and descended down the steps below. Rico sneezed. The girl extended her small hand and grasped Shion’s fingers.

“Thank you.”

“Huh?”

“Thanks for saving my little brother.”

“Oh— no, I— It’s not—” Shion stammered. “You don’t have to thank me. What’s your name?”

“Karan.”

“Karan? That’s the same name as my mother.”

“Really?”

“Yeah.”

The girl smiled. Shion could feel the warmth of the girl’s hand as she clasped his fingertips. He scooped Rico up, blankets and all.

“I’ll take you two home. Kalan¹, lead the way.”

* * *

There was steam rising out of the pot on the kerosene heater. Inside it was soup. As he stirred the broth of vegetables and meat, Nezumi gave a sigh. He flinched when he realized he had sighed without thinking. A few droplets of soup splashed out of the pot, and hissed as they hit the RDF heater.

He hated sighing. Sighing on purpose was a different matter— but this kind of sighing, the kind that escaped his lips without his knowing, irritated him.

“Never sigh in earnest. Never cry. You’ll be taken advantage of by demons.” He had been told that by an old woman, so far in her years that age seemed not to matter. “Sighing creates an opening, a vulnerability. If you want to stay live, keep your mouth shut. Never let anyone see your weak spot. Let your heart warm to no one. Never trust anyone but yourself.”

They were her dying words. She had been shot through the chest and was frothing bloodily at the mouth, but her words had rung clearly in his ears. Nezumi didn’t think of ever forgetting them. Even if he did, her voice would not let him. It clung tenaciously to his mind, and refused to let go.

But he had turned his back on it. He had let an unheeded sigh escape his lips without even realizing. *All thanks to him.* He *tsked* his tongue in frustration.

¹The spelling was changed to distinguish her from Shion’s mother.

Maybe it was a mistake to bring Shion here. He seriously thought so. Shion had opened the door without hesitation. He had thrown it open wide, without even checking what was on the other side, or concealing himself in shadow. If they had been unlucky, he would have lost his life. Even if the visitor had not been an armed soldier, it may as well have been an armed robber using a child as bait. Here in the West Block, it would not be an uncommon thing. But that was something Shion didn't know. He didn't know how to be suspicious or cautious, or to be afraid. It was the ignorance and recklessness of one who had grown up in safety and security.

He honestly felt that he had taken a dangerous and troublesome burden under his wing. No one had forced him to. He had born the burden of his own will, because he wanted to return the favour he owed. There was no way he could have let him die — Shion, who had saved his life, expecting nothing in return.

There was no way of returning a favour to the dead, and Nezumi didn't want to carry a debt that he would never be able to repay. That was why he rescued and brought Shion here. But now he thought it may have been careless for him to do so. Maybe he had brought with him a bigger risk than he had imagined. An oblivious and careless, dangerous and troublesome—

He threw a glance at the door.

But if Shion had not opened the door that time, Rico would not have been saved. It didn't take a lot of time for a choking young child to lose his life. Swift action and appropriate treatment — thanks to that, Nezumi hadn't had to see a small body with its face permanently contorted in pain. A life had been saved. It was the same as the stormy night four years before. That time, it was him— this time, it was Rico. Shion, both times, had taken them in recklessly and as a result, saved them.

Shion knew the world only through theorems and rationales. He was naive and hadn't even learned how to doubt the trustworthiness of others. He was naturally oblivious, he was clueless, idiotic, and didn't even know who Hamlet was. But Shion was also definitely above him in some ways. Not in knowledge or skill, but — but what?

"I'm drawn to you."

Was it the power to attempt at this embarrassing confession, and to believe that his sincere feelings would actually get across? Was it the power to lend a hand to a total stranger without thinking of the risk it reflected on himself?

He didn't know. All he knew was that Shion was, indeed, dangerous and troublesome. He was very— there were footsteps. Knocking. The door opened soon afterwards. Shion had come home.

"If you're gonna knock, wait for an answer before opening the door," Nezumi said curtly.

"Not like you would answer anyway, right?" replied Shion lightly. "But I noticed you left the door unlocked for me."

"Huh?"

"The lock. I thought you'd lock the door, but you kept it open."

He was right. He hadn't locked the door. How reckless of him.

"Look at me, I've fallen under your horrible influence," Nezumi said woefully.

"What's that? —Hey, look, I got some grapes as a thank-you gift."

The grapes were small and the whole bunch was rather pitiful.

"She offered me dried fish too, but I told her no thanks."

"Oh?" said Nezumi sardonically. "So even you felt bad about receiving handouts from the poor."

"No. It was because you don't like fish."

“Me? I’ll eat fish. I’m not fortunate enough to be picky about my food.”

“But you told me once you didn’t like it much.”

“What I said was that I can’t eat raw fish. Meaning, this place is way too unhygienic to even think about eating fish raw.”

Shion blinked, and put a hand to his hair.

“Oh. Oh well. —But I’m glad, though.”

“About what?”

“Kalan’s family— oh, Kalan is the girl’s name, by the way—”

“I know.”

“Oh, you knew? It’s the same name as my mother’s.”

“Your mother’s name isn’t any of my concern, but . . . So? Did it bring back memories of your Mama and bring you to tears? Poor thing.”

He had meant it as a sarcastic remark, but Shion shook his head gravely.

“No, that’s not it. There was another child there, a girl, younger than Rico. I think that fish was supposed to be their supper. One dried fish, for the three of them. It would have been alright not to accept that, right? But their mother insisted that I accept the grapes. She was really grateful. It kind of made me happy.”

“You really think so?”

“Huh?”

“If that kid had died, there would be more to eat for Kalan and the other girl. Even for Rico— wouldn’t you have thought it would be better for him to die rather than grow up in constant hunger? Maybe you haven’t actually done them a favour at all.”

Shion sat down in front of the heater. His white hair, leaning more on transparent, was tinged red with the colours of the flame. His youthful hair had lost its colour, but still retained its shine. *It’s beautiful*, Nezumi thought.

Shion's head of hair glimmered as it reflected the light of the things around it, and Nezumi extended his fingertips to touch it. His hair felt slightly coarse, but ran through Nezumi's fingers easily. It felt like ordinary hair, no more, no less.

"You told me to live," Shion said quietly, his face still turned to the flames. "Nezumi— you said there's meaning to being alive, and that's why I should live. That's what you said."

"I just said whoever lives wins."

"That's the same thing, isn't it?"

"How should I know?"

The dead could not speak. All they could do was lay there as a corpse, and return to the earth from which they came. They had no way to speak of the hatred, the cruelties, anguish, loathing or grief they went through. That was why he had to live. He would live, preserving everything in his memory, and pass it on.

No. 6.

It was like an artificial flower that left no seeds behind. It bloomed on the blood and corpses of a countless number. *I'll pull you right out of the ground one day. Then you'll have no choice but to hear the voices of the dead, their hatred, their hardship, their anguish, their loathing, as it wells up out of the very ground and soaks the earth. I'll make sure you hear, even if you plug your ears. Until then, I'll live and remember. To forget is not a choice.* His own self didn't allow him to.

"I got complimented." Shion looked up at Nezumi, and grinned.

"Complimented? For what?"

"My hair. Kalan's mother said it was nice. She said it was really unique, and really pretty."

Nezumi shrugged.

"Well, it's unique, for sure. There are tons of kids around here that

have white hair from malnutrition, but no one with a whole head of snowy hair like you.”

“She didn’t just say it was unique. She said it was pretty.”

“Are you *gushing* about how someone complimented your hair? What are you, a girl?”

“But— well, you know, it gives me a bit of confidence,” said Shion happily. “For when you show me around town tomorrow.”

“Who said I was going to show you around?”

“You said so.”

He did say so. He had said that he was going to show Shion around. Nezumi felt like a sullen child. He averted his gaze from Shion.

“I’m going to go about my own business. You go about yours.”

“Okay. I’ll mind my own business and tag along. Oh, and one more thing—”

“What now?”

“I promised Kalan and Rico I’d read to them when I have time. I found a lot of picture books in your stash, so—”

“You’re gonna read to them here?”

“If it’s sunny, I can take them outside.”

Nezumi came close to sighing again, but he caught himself in time to seal his lips and hold it in.

“Are you trying to make this place a kindergarten?”

“Are there that many children around here?”

“Oh yeah, tons. But this is my place. Don’t go around doing things without my permission, and don’t think you’re entitled to everything.”

His words turned crude. There was a stinging irritation within his chest. Being with Shion irritated him. He felt like his restraint would snap any minute. It wasn’t because Shion was being reckless or imposing, he admitted that Shion wasn’t— it was because he couldn’t see

through him. There was no way to predict what Shion was thinking or what he would do. His actions and words always seemed to hit Nezumi out of the blue. It was tiring.

Shion was setting plates out on the table. The soup was finished, and its gentle aroma filled the room.

"I wasn't thinking I was entitled to anything—it's just that, since Kalan, Rico and I are friends now—"

"Huh?"

"Friends," Shion repeated. "They're the first friends I've made since coming here. Well, not that I had many friends back in No. 6," he added as an afterthought. "I think Safu was the only one."

"She said she wanted to sleep with you. You don't call that 'friends'." He remembered the ends of her short hair that draped prettily on the back of her neck.

Shion, I want to have sex with you.

She had put her all into this confession, and Shion had not been able to handle it. *What a guy you've fallen for, huh*, he remarked in his mind to the girl he barely knew. For some reason, he was suddenly overcome with the urge to laugh.

"What?"

Shion cocked his head to the side. Two mice sitting atop a pile of books tilted their heads too, as if to imitate him. Nezumi burst out laughing. He squatted to the ground, and gave in fully to the wave of mirth that bubbled up inside him.

* * *

The rain let up before noon but the clouds still lingered, and the ground remained cold as dusk approached. Nezumi was walking briskly through the throng. Shion was doing his best to keep up

behind him. He was out of breath. He was jostled, bumped, and yelled at; he felt the gaze of countless curious eyes raining down on his head; the smell of a dozen things reached his nose, so mingled and melded into each other that he couldn't tell what they originally were; the muddy ground tripped up his feet; a sprawl of barracks and tents lined the road, and from them, thick smoke billowed rudely into the passerby; in the air, angry bellows, seductive coos, and merchants' cries clashed clamorously. He felt dizzy.

The older district of Lost Town, which was where he took up residence after being forced from Chronos, was also bustling and lively. But compared to what he was seeing now, it seemed like a tranquil getaway. In No. 6, there were designated roads and paths for both people and vehicles going in each direction, and as a fundamental rule, stopping suddenly or going the opposite way was prohibited. Everyone walked in the same direction, in the same orderly fashion. It was rare to ever bump into anyone, or be stopped by an acquaintance. Nothing occurred suddenly or unexpectedly. Everything was managed to prevent such things from occurring. No. 6 was that kind of place.

A roar of voices suddenly erupted close by. Shion was shoved violently aside. He lost his footing, and fell forward onto his knees in the mud. Several men thundered past him. Something fell from one of their arms, rolled, and came to a stop in front of Shion. It was an orange. "Thief!"

A man burst out of one of the shops in the barracks, holding a gun. He was towering, and very fat.

"Them thieves!" he roared. "Someone catch 'em!"

No one moved. Some smirked as they looked on, others showed no interest at all, others were shouting unintelligibly; and all the while, the so-called thieves were retreating further away into the crowd.

Shion's breath caught in his throat. The gigantic man was taking aim

with his gun. Passers-by who saw him squatted hastily to the ground to take cover.

Is he nuts? Shion couldn't imagine this man being in his right mind to open fire into this crowd of people. But the man's face was set in determination. The long muzzle of his outdated firearm was pointed straight before him. The fleeing men bumped into an old woman and pushed her aside as they continued running. She yammered something at them, then returned to hobbling down the centre of the road. She was oblivious to the gun that was pointed her way. The giant's thick finger wrapped around the trigger.

Shion threw himself at the man just before his hairy knuckle jerked to fire the gun. With as much strength as he could muster, he knocked the muzzle of the gun upwards.

He felt a heavy impact slam his hand, and a shot blasted in his eardrums. The muzzle of the gun spewed fire into the darkening sky. Shion staggered. His feet were swept from under him, and he was slammed to the ground. His breath died on his lips.

"The hell do you think yer doin'?"

The man towered over him with his gun raised, filling every inch of his vision. Shion rolled quickly to the side. The giant moved nimbly for his appearance, and Shion was met with a firm kick in the ribs.

Shion grunted in pain. He couldn't speak. His stomach lurched.

"One of their little friends, eh?" the giant snarled. "Little fucker, takin' a swipe at my merchandise."

The man's boot gave off a greasy, animal smell. And it was swinging straight toward his stomach again.

"I'm not one of them!" Shion screamed, barely dodging the blow. *I have to scream, or else he'll really kick me to death.* There was no hint of hesitation in the blows that showered down upon him.

"I'm not—I'm not one of them," Shion persisted.

“Shut up!” the giant bellowed. “Now those bastard thieves ’re gone. Thanks to yer gettin’ in the way.”

“If I didn’t intervene, someone could have been killed,” Shion protested. “Opening fire in a place like this — what if you’d hit someone?”

To his astonishment, the man started laughing. Laughter rose from the crowd that lined the streets as well.

“And so what if I did?” the man roared, emanating his beastly odour. “What’s that got to do with me, eh?” His expression suddenly darkened, and he roughly grabbed Shion by his hair. “You and yer strange mop o’ yers. I don’t like the looks o’ you.”

He was pulled to the ground forcefully. His scalp burned with pain, and it felt like it was being torn off. But even stronger than the aches on his body were the feelings of wrath and humiliation that seethed within him.

“Stop it!” Shion yelled.

Stop it. Let go of me. How dare you treat me like cattle.

Shion threw himself at the man again, and slammed his body into him as hard as he could. He felt his elbow dig firmly into the man’s swollen gut. The man let out a muffled groan and fell on his knees. The crowd had formed a ring around them. Clapping, whistling and raucous laughter erupted periodically.

“That’s the spirit, young’un. Give ’im what he deserves!”

“Kill ’im off, ol’ man! There’s no use wastin’ time here!”

No one tried to stop them. Everyone was enjoying the spectacle from a safe distance. Shion searched the jeering crowd for a pair of grey eyes. He couldn’t find them.

“You little—”

He heard a booming roar that sounded more animal than human. Then he felt a blow bludgeon his cheek. Sparks burst before his eyes,

and his vision went dark for a short instant. Something warm was filling his mouth. Unable to bear it, he spat it out. Saliva mixed with blood splattered and oozed over the dirt.

“Playin’ funny tricks!” The man’s face was flushed red, and he was shaking in rage. His eyes were bloodshot, and his veins were raised and throbbing over his skin like a crimson web. The murderous intent that radiated from him was unmistakable.

“Yer gonna pay for this,” he growled. The gun was aimed right between Shion’s eyes. Shion couldn’t close his gaping mouth. He felt like his heart was going to burst out of his chest. And still, no one stopped him. In this crowd of people that surrounded them, not a single one stepped in to stop the man. He felt nauseous. He couldn’t tell whether the muzzle before his eyes was real or just an illusion.

“Hey,” a deep voice punctuated the din. It belonged to a man who was roasting meat at the front of his store. Pieces of blackened meat covered the grill, which was billowing thick, sooty smoke. “Don’t be makin’ a mess in front of my store,” he said.

“I en’t makin’ a mess,” the man growled.

“You were ’bout to, you were. If you go blowin’ brains and blood all over the place, everyone’s gonna lose their appetites, they is. Take it somewhere else.”

The giant scoffed. “No one’s gonna have any appetite for yer half-rotten meat anyway.”

“Whassat?” The man shot back. “Rotten meat? You’s the one selling rotten fruits and vegetables, you’s sure one to talk.”

“Our produce is fresh.”

“You must be kiddin’ me! Even i’ this season, theys flies swarmin’ all over ’em. If they’s not rotten, theys must be right withered.”

“What? You little—”

The men lunged at each other. Shion raised himself off the ground and started running.

“Hey! Damnit, you come back ’ere!” The man bellowed angrily. Shion had no time to turn around to check. His body bristled in fear of being shot from behind at any second. He tripped.

“This way.”

He was grabbed by the arm.

“This way, quickly.”

He was dragged into a narrow alleyway between two buildings. Shion leaned back heavily against the wall, and drew several deep breaths.

“Doing alright there?”

He lifted his face. A woman was smiling at him. Her red painted lips floated up vividly in the dim gloom. The lips parted wide again.

“Oh, dear. You’ve cut your lip, it’s bleeding. Looks like you had a hard time back there. Poor thing.”

The strong smell of her perfume filled Shion’s nostrils.

“Thank you for helping me,” Shion said to her, after his breathing had returned somewhat back to normal. There was a few seconds of silence, after which the woman suddenly burst into laughter.

“I wonder how long it’s been since someone last thanked me,” she chuckled. “It feels like years. By the way, you’ve got interesting hair, sweetie.”

“Huh—? Oh... I’ve been through a lot of, er, things...”

“We’ve all been through a lot of things. And so have I, here—”

Despite the biting cold, the woman was clad only in a thin dress that bared her shoulders. She pulled her neckline down to show him, and a pair of voluptuous breasts appeared. Their whiteness stood out even more than her red lips. Shion’s eyes stung.

“Look, you see there’s a burn mark? A man did that to me with a hot metal rod, a long time ago. It was hell, I’m telling ya. But look, see, doesn’t it kind of look like a snake? Like a snake is slithering over my chest.”

I’ve got a snake too, and it’s coiled around my whole body.

He thought so, but he didn’t put into words. The woman continued giggling softly.

“Sweetie, don’t you have any experience with women?”

“Huh?”

“Shall I give you a lesson? My place is just up ahead. Why don’t you come over, and we can have a good time. How’s that sound?”

“What?” Shion repeated dumbly.

“I’m asking if you if you want to come over and have a good time.” Irritation crept into the woman’s voice. “I haven’t got anything to do until nighttime either. Don’t worry, it won’t cost too much. So why don’t we enjoy ourselves, hmm?”

The woman’s arms reached around Shion’s neck. He was pushed back against the wall. Her lips pressed firmly against his. The strong scent of her makeup washed over him. He felt faint. Her warm tongue glided in between his teeth and mingled with his own. Shion found himself reflexively pushing the woman away.

“What was that for?” she said indignantly.

“No, I— Well— this isn’t...”

“What’re you mumbling on about? I helped you, didn’t I? Being my customer is the least you can do.”

“Customer? But... I—”

“I’m not gonna force you if you don’t want to. But you still owe me money for the kiss.”

“What?” Shion asked incredulously.

The woman's lips twisted, and her voice turned sugary sweet.

"Now, don't be disagreeable," she purred. "You're a man, aren't you? Come on, let's take it easy. I'll make sure you have a good time, so come on over to my place, sweetie."

"N—No thanks, it's really..."

Her white arms came clinging onto him again. Shion was frozen rigid even more than when the gun had been pointed at him. He couldn't move.

"Would you mind?" a voice spoke. "That one belongs to me."

Nezumi was standing at the entrance of the alleyway. The woman furrowed her brow.

"What?"

"He's mine. Could I get him back?" Nezumi extended his hand as if to beckon Shion over. The woman drew her chin up and smiled thinly in realization.

"I see. No wonder I was getting such a slow reaction. Sweetie here isn't interested in women."

"What? Actually that's not true, I'm—"

Nezumi pressed a hand over Shion's mouth and smiled at the woman.

"That's right. He's so head-over-heels for me, even the most beautiful girl couldn't attract his attention right now."

The woman hunched her shoulders as if to say 'oh well'. She glanced at Shion. "Money," she said.

"I don't care which way sweetie swings, but I still need payment for that kiss. One silver coin."

Nezumi laughed softly.

"One whole silver for that kiss? That's pretty expensive."

"That's how much it's worth. If sweetie can't pay for it, you better pay up for him. You're his lover, aren't you? Footing the bill once

isn't gonna do any harm."

"I guess you're right. Yeah, sure. Could I get change, then?"

"Change?"

Nezumi leaned in toward the woman. He grabbed her arm as she tried to back away, and drew her close.

"What—"

The woman's lips, parted in mid-sentence, were met by Nezumi's. It happened right before Shion's eyes. The woman resisted for a moment, then was still. Only her bare and exposed throat contracted slightly as she swallowed. A dog was barking somewhere in the distance. A sewer rat scurried its way past Shion's feet and disappeared. Nezumi drew away from the woman.

"How was it?" he asked.

"Not bad," the woman replied. "But not enough to give you change."

"That's unfortunate," Nezumi said ruefully. "Then this here, for m'lady." Nezumi placed an orange in the woman's hand, and turned his back to her. He pulled Shion by the arm. "Right, let's get going." The woman called after them with her arms crossed.

"Sweet-cheeks, don't let yourself get too involved with that man. It's a waste, you know. Make sure you get a taste of what it's like to have fun with a girl."

They weaved back into the crowd. The bustle and mixture of smells that had agitated Shion only moments before were now a source of relief.

"Why?" he muttered to himself. Nezumi drew up by his side.

"Why what?"

"Why am I 'sweet-cheeks' when you're 'that man'?"

"Must be because I have more life experience."

"And she said I was slow," Shion grumbled.

"You are slow. And dense. Especially concerning women. I hope I didn't ruin your first experience by walking in on you," Nezumi snickered.

"Nezumi."

"Hm?"

"How long were you watching for?"

"Probably sometime around when you started attacking the fat guy." Shion stopped in his tracks. He was bumped into from behind, and yelled at angrily.

"Why didn't you come help me?"

"I did. You were this close to being eaten alive by a witch. *Gobble-gobble*, head-first, too."

"But before that, I was being held at gunpoint—"

"That's your fucking mess," Nezumi said scathingly. His grey eyes glittered harshly like the blade of a sharp knife. Nezumi's smile always seemed to fade instantaneously.

"Let me tell you something, Shion. If you're going to keep being naive and think that someone will always jump in to help you, you'll never survive here. Depending on other people isn't gonna keep you alive. You make sure you get that straight."

Nezumi turned his face away and started walking faster. Shion could feel the heat rising in his cheeks. Nezumi was right, he was being naive. He had thought it was only natural that Nezumi would come to help him. Shion had been leaning on him all this time, an insolent burden that was dragging him down. Here he was, hoping to be treated equally, yet at the same time expecting to be defended as if it was something he was entitled to. Shion was overcome with shame. He trailed close behind Nezumi, who had his superfibre cloth wrapped around his shoulders like a cape.

“But you did manage to defend yourself back there,” Nezumi said, slowing his gait slightly.

“Back there?”

“With the fat guy. You waited for the right chance to get away.”

“Oh, that,” Shion said. “No, I was just desperate that time. He looked like he was seriously about to shoot.”

“He probably was. If you were unlucky, you probably would’ve had half your head blown off, and you’d be lying there on the street.”

“I don’t even want to imagine. It’s giving me the chills.”

He really was shaking. There was mud smeared over the knees of his pants, and the hem of his sweater. He tried to brush it off, and tripped over something.

“Whoa—!”

He fell forward, but managed to regain his balance in time to turn around. There were a pair of legs. Their feet were bare. The upper half of the body was lying face down, swallowed up by the darkness of the alleyway. *Is he sleeping? Here?*

“Um— hello? Can you hear me?” Shion called over to him. He was yanked from behind.

“Will you stop doing that?” Nezumi said in annoyance. “If we don’t hurry up, it’ll get dark in no time. Geez, do you have a thing for making detours?” Nezumi clicked his tongue.

“But this man— he’s going to catch a cold if he sleeps out here like this.”

“He isn’t gonna get any colder than that. He’s dead.”

“*What?*”

A woman called over to them nearby from her clothing shop.

“Oy, are ya two acquaintances with this here? If you are, mind cleanin’ it up? It’s blockin’ the way, makin’ a mighty nuisance outta itself.”

Nezumi shook his head slightly.

“Of course not. I’ve never even seen this old man before.”

“It’s a woman, an old beggar lady. Out of all places, she bloody had to snuff it right in front of my store, the git.”

“My deepest sympathies,” Nezumi said solemnly. “Make sure you get her cleaned up.”

“That’s enough o’ yer cheeky attitude, little bugger!” The woman bleated, swinging around a red piece of cloth. Her arm was as thick as Shion’s thigh. *I’d go flying if I got punched by that*, Shion thought to himself.

He was yanked along by Nezumi. The sight of those legs, like withered twigs, overlapped with another pair of legs, wrapped in a fine pair of trousers and wearing leather shoes. They were the legs that protruded from behind the bench, in a secluded corner of the Forest Park inside No. 6. It was the first dead body that Shion had born witness to, and the first victim that *it* had claimed.

“He wasn’t killed by it,” Nezumi smiled wanly, as if to read Shion’s thoughts. “That old man— or woman, was it? She wasn’t eaten by any parasite wasp. It was either hunger, or the cold — maybe a combination of both — that carted her off to heaven. There’s a whole season for that, and it’s coming soon.”

“Season for what?”

“Where people freeze to death. Old people, children, the infirm ... the weak ones die out first. It’s the season of Natural Selection.”

“Natural selection ...” Shion murmured the words. They were cold, like a frozen confection. But they were neither sweet nor delicious like one. They were just cold. The tip of his tongue felt numb.

“Shion, you said there would be lots of casualties in the Holy City when the parasite wasps become active again in the spring, right?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, here, people die every day, especially in the winter. Which one do you think is easier to go through, being devoured by a wasp, or starving and freezing to death?”

Shion had put a hand to his neck without thinking. There was a scar at the base of it, where the incision had been made. Underneath was *the thing*. It had failed in hatching, and was half-melted when it was found, but it had been struggling to eat its way out from this spot. The vicious pain, the suffering and despair from that time was still fresh in his mind. He never wanted to go through the same thing again. But he had no way of comparing this with the elderly woman’s death. He had no idea what it was like to starve or freeze.

“Nezumi, what’s going to happen to her?”

“Her?”

“That— body. It’s not just gonna get left there, is it?”

“Of course not. It might get cold out here, but bodies will still rot if they’re left out like that. Then wild dogs and crows will come to pick at them until it’s impossible to do anything, so they usually get cleaned up before then.”

“So there must be a communal cemetery, or something?”

“Cemetery? There’s no land here that we can put aside for dead people. The Disposers come. See, over there. The guys that are sitting there eating meat. See them?”

In the direction where Nezumi pointed, there was a ripped tent under which there were several burly men sitting, talking loudly and devouring meat glistening with fat. A scraggly, pitifully thin dog was lapping desperately at the juices that dripped from them onto the ground.

There was a strange vehicle parked beside the tent. It was a bicycle, strapped to a flat cargo bed on wheels. Sitting on top of it was a large basket.

“They’re the Disposers. In exchange for money, they get rid of dead bodies. It’s people like that old hag back there that eventually cough up the money to get it done. They don’t want a body lying around their store, but they’re too disgusted to pick it up and toss it onto someone else’s property, or they feel guilty about doing it. So they dismiss it as their unlucky day, and call up the Disposers to get rid of it. I hear it’s a pretty lucrative business. I guess it would be, since there are people that die all the time on the road who have no friends or relatives.”

“Do they bury the bodies properly?”

“They burn them. They gather them all in one place, and set them on fire. I guess you can call it some sort of cremation, if you want. They don’t get anything fancy like a requiem or prayer of repose, though, that’s for sure.”

Shion’s eyes met with a man who was in the midst of ripping a chunk of meat off the bone with his teeth. He grinned widely, and grease dripped from his sparse whiskers. Then he stood up, and started making his way toward them. He tossed the bone carelessly on the ground, and the scraggly dog pounced on it.

“Hey fellas, how’d you like to join us?”

His arm reached out, and before Shion could dodge it, he was grabbed roughly by his hair.

“So it’s real, huh. I thought it was a wig. Pretty interesting hair you got.”

“Stop it,” Shion yelled. “Let me go.”

“Hmm, not bad. I never seen this kinda hair myself. Kinda pretty, actually. You almost look like a doll of some sort, little fella.”

Vulgar laughter erupted from his group of companions sitting behind him. Shion turned to look beside him. There was no sign of Nezumi, who had been there moments before.

“Let go,” he repeated loudly.

“No need to make a ruckus, now. Why don’tcha join us for some drinks? We got meat too.”

“I said let go,” Shion said through clenched teeth.

The bulky man showed no signs of loosening his grip. Shion could feel the man’s breath on his cheek, putrid with the smell of alcohol and meat. He turned his face away.

Nezumi. He bit his lip hard, and resisted the urge to call out his name. He had to try to defend himself first, or no one would come to help him. Shion let his body relax.

“Fine.”

“Hm?”

“I give in. I’ll join you just for one drink.”

“That so? There’s a good fella. This way.”

The man’s arm relaxed just slightly. Shion lifted his leg, aimed at the man’s groin, and kicked as hard as he could.

Ngh. The man let out a muffled groan, and doubled over as he collapsed to the ground. Shion leapt over his curled back and broke into a sprint.

Running away is all I’ve been doing today. The fleeting remark crossed his mind, but soon disappeared. He tore through the street as fast as his legs would carry him. There were less people milling about, which made it easier for him to thread his way through. *No more alleyways for me,* he thought, and concentrated on keeping straight to the road. If he stopped, he felt like he would be grabbed by the collar from behind.

“—Agh!—”

His foot slipped, and his body floated up momentarily. Then he was slammed to the ground. The pain jolted through his body from head to toe.

“Whoa—” Now he was sliding downwards. He was on a slope of grey concrete, though now it felt like more of a steep slide. He hurtled downwards. Shion closed his eyes, and brought his arms over his head to protect it. The action made him lose his balance, and he tumbled forward in a somersault.

His vision went dark. Just as he was about to scream, the smell of moist dirt reached his nostrils. He was thrown out onto the ground. Clods of dirt flew into his mouth. Shion lay coughing for several moments, and then stretched out on his back. His heart was thudding frantically, and it was hard to breathe. Dull and sharp pains alternately throbbed all over his body.

The taste and sensation of dirt still remained in his mouth. He had never imagined that dirt could taste this sweet and fragrant.

He could see the stars: they were winking in the settling dusk. The sky was neither black nor blue, but closer to indigo, with a wash of purple—it was stunningly beautiful. He felt his soul getting sucked into its beauty. He had never thrown himself out on the ground like this to stare up at the sky. Had something as beautiful as this always existed above him?

He heard quiet footsteps padding toward him. A wistful whimper. A warm tongue slowly licked his forehead and his hair.

“You—”

It was the dog, the skeletal dog that had been hanging about the group of men. It lapped at his head persistently.

“Are you worrying about me?” As soon as the words were out of his mouth, Shion noticed something else. When he had been grabbed by the man, his hair had been smeared with grease and meat juices. The dog was licking that spot with enormous concentration.

“Okay, that’s enough, that’s enough,” Shion said. “I don’t want your slobber all over my hair instead.” Shion propped himself up off the

ground, and stood up carefully. He didn't feel any severe jabs of pain. It looked like he had managed not to sprain anything or break any bones. He let his gaze take in everything around him. He inhaled sharply.

"This—"

He was in the midst of a ruin.

3

SIN AND SANCTITY

Humans are shapeshifters; there's naught that's not in this world.

IHARA SAIKAKU, SAIKAKU'S TALES FROM VARIOUS PROVINCES

THE SLOPE that Shion had skidded down turned out to be an enormous pillar tipped over on its side. Upon closer inspection, he could see that the base was carved out with the figures of several women robed in thin, translucent cloth. Rusty metal foundations were all that remained of what probably used to be an arched ceiling, and several withered vines feebly clung to them. The wall had collapsed entirely, and chunks of stone in all sizes were scattered hither and thither.

If he had accidentally struck his head on one of those— Shion shuddered.

The scene before his eyes was something Shion was seeing for the first time. Naturally, there were no such dilapidated buildings to be found in No. 6. All buildings were built accordingly to their purpose, with efficiency and functionality prioritized above all. Remains such as these, which had drifted through time, exposed to the wind and rain, were synonymous to illusion, and were not a product of reality.

He drew a breath, and let his gaze wander about him again. The wind whipped about in a fierce dance. As if continuing its journey toward yet a more ruinous state, a portion of the wall made a dry, crackling sound as it crumbled right before Shion's eyes.

"Nezumi," he called. It wasn't a plea for help. He had just wanted to call his name. "You're there, aren't you? Come out already."

"You're getting sharper," said a voice somewhere from above. Shion looked up to see Nezumi sitting on a window ledge several metres up. Nothing remained of the window itself except for the frame. The rectangular void, which was bordered in black, looked like a yawning mouth on the face of the crumbling wall, opened wide to let out a scream.

Nezumi jumped down from his spot several metres up. He landed squarely on the soft dirt.

"You're light on your feet," Shion commented.

"I am most humbled by your gracious compliments, your Highness."

"Quite something," Shion quipped. "Not to mention how amazingly fast you seem to disappear when you get into a tight spot."

Nezumi shrugged his shoulders slightly, and gave a soft chuckle.

"You've even learned how to be sarcastic. Quite something, yourself. Grown up a bit, haven't you?"

"I must've gotten ten years' worth of experience from walking through that market."

Nezumi's hand waved languidly in front of Shion's face.

"So you nearly got mowed down by a gun, got seduced by a woman, tripped over a dead body, and got hit on by an old man. Well, I guess for a little boy like you, that counts for about ten years. But—"

"Hm?"

"You really *have* gotten better at running away," Nezumi said approvingly. "Way better than your last try with the fat guy."

"The Disposers, you mean?"

"Yup. It looked like that geezer was seriously into you. To be honest, I thought you'd be good as gone if you managed to get dragged inside."

"You disappeared awfully fast for that."

"I don't get involved in more trouble than I need to," Nezumi laughed silently. "But you did a good job of making a getaway. Let me tell you, though, those guys don't give up easily. And you stand out on your own as it is. I'd be careful if I were you."

"It is with utmost gratitude that I accept your words of advice, your Majesty."

"Oh dear, and your comebacks have gotten better too," Nezumi laughed out loud this time, but softly. The thin dog was sprawled out on the ground, wagging its tail from side to side. The squalor of the market felt like a dream. A silent stillness pervaded the place as if the mountains of debris were absorbing all the sound around them.

"Nezumi, where are we?"

"Take a guess."

"I don't have a clue— looks like it used to be a pretty big building..."

"It's a hotel. There used to be a hospital across from here. Beside that was a playhouse, I think— I don't know much about this place, either."

A hotel, a hospital, a playhouse...

"So this really used to be a decent town."

"I guess so. I mean I don't really know what a decent town is supposed to look like, but there probably weren't bodies everywhere, to say the least. At least back then."

"Back then?"

"Before No. 6 was established."

Shion wasn't surprised. He had expected as much. He closed his fingers lightly over his palm.

"I've learned about the history of No. 6, and how it came to be. It was one of the very first classes we took."

"Mm-hmm," Nezumi replied offhandedly.

"A series of large-scale wars erupted all over the world as the last century was coming to a close. It was before neither of us were born. As a result of the massive amount of bombs and biological weapons that were used, the land was utterly destroyed and the climate deteriorated severely. The majority of all landmasses, with just a few tiny exceptions, lost all ability to sustain human life. There were an enormous amount of casualties. The people that remained vowed never to war again, and in those regions that were spared destruction, they founded six utopian cities. And No. 6 was one of them."

"That's what you learned."

"Yeah."

"And you've always believed it to be true?"

"That's the truth that we were taught to believe."

"You remember what you said on the day we first met?" Nezumi said.

"You said you didn't think No. 6 was perfect."

"I did."

"Was that a lie?"

"No," Shion answered. "I honestly thought so. But before I met you, I didn't realize that was how I really felt. I met you— and that's when I finally knew."

He had met Nezumi, and realized. He had finally heard the sound of his own conscience creak as it strained against its shackles. He had always felt suffocated. In No. 6, he had everything. He had plenty of food, a warm bed, and full access to medical care at his fingertips. And

it didn't stop there— at the age of two, when he had been acknowledged as a top-ranking individual in his Examinations, he had acquired the privilege to live in the luxury neighbourhood of Chronos. All its residents were provided a first-class environment on many facets.

Before he had met Nezumi on that stormy night of his twelfth birthday, he had been surrounded by everything he could wish for, all of first-class quality. But that day, gazing at the wind and rain that rumbled out his window, what Shion had felt was a destructive impulse that seared him to the very core.

He had felt unbearably suppressed. Like a corralled animal that instinctively rams itself against the fence, Shion had wanted to be released from the invisible cage that trapped him. At the very bottom of the deepest part of Shion's subconscious, a voice had been resounding.

This is a facade.

Here, everything is given to you.

But there is nothing here.

You can't live here anymore.

So escape.

Break it.

Destroy it.

Destroy what?

Everything.

Everything?

When the voice within him had overlapped with Nezumi's words, Shion had finally understood. *I don't know the truth. I don't know anything.*

Nezumi's gaze slid away from Shion as he turned his back to him. Shion grabbed his arm.

"Nezumi, tell me."

Tell me the truth. Not a lie, or a haphazard excuse. Tell me its true form—of the Holy City, of No. 6.

His fingers were shaken off roughly.

"I'm not your nanny. If you want to know, then find out for yourself."

He was shaken off again. No matter how many times he tried to grasp at Nezumi, he was always pushed away. Rejected ruthlessly. But still, Shion kept extending his hand.

The dog was pressing its body against him. It was so thin its ribs jutted out, but it was still warm. Very warm. It had the warmth of something who was alive.

"Are you feeling sorry for me, by any chance?"

The dog twitched its drooping, light-brown ear. For a moment, it looked like it grinned at him. Then it lumbered ahead of him to Nezumi's side. Nezumi's hand slowly and gently petted the dog's head.

"So you're nice to dogs, huh."

"Dogs don't act like babies."

"But dogs can't sew."

"What?"

"Dogs can't suture a wound. I noticed the suturing kit was still in tact in the emergency case. If you ever get hurt again, I'll sew that wound right up for you."

“Why, thank you,” Nezumi said sarcastically. “Your offer is so great it’s sending chills down my back. That face came into my dreams for quite a while after that day, you know.”

“Did I look that great?”

“You were grinning. You had this look on your face like you were having the time of your life. Every time I dreamt about it I had nightmares.”

“Well, it was the first time in my life doing a suture. I remember being really excited. Say,” said Shion enthusiastically. “So did you take out the stitches yourself?”

“Of course. It was easier than making soup.”

“Did it leave a scar?”

“Yeah. But I won’t show you.”

Shion stuck out his lip.

“Don’t be stingy.”

Watch your feet, Nezumi interrupted loudly.

“The stairs start here. We’re going up.”

The sun was setting lower, and darkness was setting in thickly. A large part of the stairs had crumbled away like the wall, and what was left of it wound upwards in a wide clockwise curve. Here, the ceiling was still in tact. It looked like it had originally been painted white, and although most of it had peeled away, there were white flecks of paint still left over here and there. A chandelier was hanging over the stairwell, and to Shion’s surprise, it was relatively undamaged.

“So this place really was a hotel.”

“It still is.”

“Huh?”

“This place is still used as a hotel.”

“No way.”

They emerged at the top of the stairs and were greeted by a large, vacant chamber. It had probably been the lobby. The walls were set in glass from floor to ceiling. The panes in the top half had been shattered and strewn over the floor, but the bottom panes still remained unbroken. Ripped and faded drapes hung lifelessly over them. Vines that had probably intruded through the broken windows clung densely to the walls, criss-crossed like a network of capillaries. Leaves were falling from them, adding to the thick layer that had already carpeted the floor.

It was thanks to a dim light in the room that Shion had been able to decipher this much despite the settling darkness. It came from a candle that was burning on top of a stone table.

“Nezumi, do you smell something?”

“The candle burning, maybe?”

“No, it’s not wax. It smells— almost like some animal . . .”

Nezumi gave a laugh.

“You really have come a long way. Your nose has gotten sharper. Now let’s try working on your eyesight. Look.”

“Ah—”

A shadow moved in the darkness where the light could not reach. It was not a human. It had four legs, two pointed ears, and was growling menacingly.

“A dog,” he whispered.

It was a large dog, covered in short, dark-brown fur, with a fierce glint in its eye. Its throat was rumbling in a low growl. Shion took a step backwards.

“He’s not the only one,” Nezumi added.

There was a note of amusement in his voice— he was enjoying Shion’s reaction. Shion resisted the urge to turn and give Nezumi a glare. He had no attention to spare for that.

With the first dog in the lead, several dogs of all shapes, sizes, and colours were emerging from the darkness. They were far from what would be called pets. They were dirty, their eyes glinted viciously, and their teeth were bared.

“Is this a nest for wild dogs?”

“Might be. What do you wanna do? Run away? If you don’t decide soon, you’ll get your throat torn out.”

The dark-brown dog approached him warily. It wasn’t growling anymore. It silently but steadily drew up to him, without ever lowering its gaze.

Shion gazed back into the set of caramel eyes that were the same colour as its fur. Behind the savage light in its eyes, there resided something surprisingly gentle. Shion could feel its presence there.

Intellect?

Shion lowered himself into a kneel. The shattered glass crunched underneath his denim-clad knee. Nezumi fidgeted. Shion didn’t move. Crouched on the ground, he stared straight at the dog.

The dog stopped. It stood still in front of him. It opened its mouth, lolling its pink tongue, and licked the tip of Shion’s nose. Then it lay down on the spot, and gave a yawn. All the other dogs began moving about on their own. Some began to groom each other, others sprawled out on the floor; still others began sniffing at their surroundings, and none of them seemed to have any concern for Shion’s presence.

“I passed the interview,” Shion grinned as he looked up at Nezumi. Nezumi clicked his tongue, and turned away.

“Didn’t the wild dogs scare you at all?” he said sourly.

“They did. But wild dogs don’t light candles.”

Nezumi sniffed in derision. “You’ve never even seen a candle before.”

“I just did for the first time. It was brighter than I imagined it to be. Hey, Nezumi, does someone live here?”

Laughter rang out. It echoed off the ruins, and faded into the darkness. “Pleased to have ya, guest.”

It was a human voice, but he couldn’t see who it belonged to. The voice was echoing from so many directions that he couldn’t tell from whence it came. It ricocheted and overlapped in countless layers. Just listening to it made him feel dizzy.

“Stop shitting around.” Nezumi bent down. He picked up a piece of debris, and flung it straight into the darkness where the dogs had come from. It was sucked into the gloom, but he could hear a definite sound in the distance as it hit the floor.

“Watch it.” The focus of the voice settled to one point in the darkness. It was a young voice. A light flickered in the inky-black pool.

“That’s some violent way to greet someone, Nezumi. You’ve got no manners.”

“You could use some manners yourself, if that was what you call the proper way to welcome a guest.”

A figure was weaving through the dogs toward them with a candle-holder. Even by the candle’s flame, the person looked like he was thrown in shadow.

His waist-length hair, his eyes, his trousers that were ripped at the knees, and his baggy sweater were all black. He had tan skin.

Was he a boy? A girl?¹

Shion couldn’t make the distinction. The stranger’s pointed chin and round eyes reminded him of a small rodent. He was very small and thin, and reached only up to about Shion’s shoulders in height.

“He lives here,” Nezumi said. “I don’t know his real name. We just call him Inukashi.”

“Like— dog lender²?”

¹Japanese pronouns make no gender distinction; Shion assumes Inukashi is male.

²inukashi / 犬貸し, literally means *dog lender*

"That's the one," the stranger answered. "Lending dogs is my trade. Nice to meet ya, Shion." Inukashi grinned. Shion was taken by surprise.

"You know my name."

"I'm quick to catch onto things around here. As long as I have my dogs, getting any information about these parts is a piece of cake. I know your name, and I know that you kicked the Disposer guy in the nuts before you came running here. This guy told me everything."

The emaciated dog wagged its tail from its place beside Inukashi.

"You can speak with dogs?"

"I'll hold conversations with anyone, as long as they're not human. Whenever you want any information, feel free to come to me." Inukashi extended his hand with a smile. He was wearing a thick, silver ring. It matched well with his tan skin.

"Nice to meet you, too." Shion also extended his own hand.

It had been a while since he had shaken hands with someone. So far, his experiences had only consisted of running away, yelling, or rolling around. Inukashi's face was open and affectionate, and reminded him of a puppy.

A sharp pain ran through his palm.

"Agh!"

Shion withdrew his hand hastily. At the base of his index finger, there was a small wound about the size of a pinprick. Blood was already starting to well up from it. It ran down the palm of his hand in a single, red stream. He thought he felt the tips of his fingers go numb. Inukashi threw his head back and cackled.

"What was that for?" Shion said in disbelief.

"What was that for' he says!" Inukashi crowed. "Haha, what a surprise! You fell right into that handshake, and you're turning on *me*

and asking me 'what was that for'? Classic."

Inukashi showed his palm to Shion, and bent his fingers slightly. A tiny needle-tip poked out of the middle of the ring. When he straightened his fingers, it retracted again.

"It's been used as an assassination weapon for ages. Well, the proper way to use it would be to coat the needle-tip with poison. But I haven't done anything to these, so you can relax."

Shion pressed hard on the base of his finger. He licked his dry lips, and opened his mouth in question.

"Why would you do that?"

"Oh dear," said Inukashi exaggeratedly. "Now he's asking me, *why would you do that?*"

Inukashi's gaze moved to Nezumi, who stood by silently.

"Haven't you taught this guy *anything* about how to live here?"

"That's not my responsibility."

"You picked him up and brought him home, didn't you? If you're gonna pick up a stray, you gotta take care of him properly. He'll make himself useful one day."

"I'm not so sure about that."

Inukashi laughed again.

"If he doesn't, just eat him. Or is he—" Inukashi's gaze travelled to Shion's hair. "He's got interesting hair. Has he got issues, or what?"

Nezumi turned up the corner of his mouth and answered shortly.

"As many issues as the dogs you have. Too many to count."

"Uh-huh. So the rumours were true. You really are keeping a young boy as a pet." Inukashi's face turned serious as he stared at Shion from head to toe. It was a bold and insolent gaze. The thin dog suddenly raised itself off the floor, and barked once. Two furry brown balls came tumbling out of the darkness. They were puppies, probably

a month or two old. Their noses and tails were tipped with white. The skinny dog lay down again, showing its belly. Its teats drooped pitifully. The puppies eagerly latched themselves onto them. Their round bottoms wagged from side to side.

“Wow, puppies!” Shion exclaimed. He gently petted their backs so not to get in the way of their feeding. “Wow, Nezumi, look. They’re so soft. Why don’t you try petting them too?”

“No thanks.”

“But look, they’re puppies. So you’re a mom, huh. It must be tough for you, raising all these kids.”

Inukashi furrowed his brow and retreated half a step away from Shion.

“What’s up with this guy? What’s he doing having a serious conversation with a dog? Is he unbalanced or something?”

Nezumi pointed to his temple.

“He’s a little vacant up here. It comes naturally to him.”

“Comes naturally, huh? Why are you taking care of this weirdo?”

“Like I said, he’s got issues. And he might not look it, but he’s pretty good with his hands. He can even pull off a simple surgery.”

“I don’t care what he can do, I wouldn’t have any of it. He’d never be anything more than a dead weight.”

“Couldn’t have said it better myself,” replied Nezumi. “So have you looked up what I asked you to?”

“Of course. A job’s a job. Let’s go upstairs.” Inukashi took his candle holder in his other hand and disappeared back into the darkness. There were more stairs. Like the ones before, they wound upwards in a gentle curve. These ones weren’t crumbled as badly. The rubble was cleared with a space just wide enough for a person to walk through.

“Oh—” Shion murmured in surprise as they emerged at the top of the stairs.

A narrow hallway ran straight before them. There was a person curled up at the edge of the hall. Beside him were a pair of dogs. They had long white fur, and they were nestled closely against the person as if to protect him. Shion squinted his eyes, and he could make out several more of these groups of people and dogs curled up together.

“What are these people doing?”

Inukashi answered over his shoulder.

“They’re my customers.”

“Customers?”

“This place used to be a hotel, and it still is now. Rumour says this place used to be quite grand, but now it’s just somewhere people can bunk for a bit of money if they have nowhere to stay for the night. We have beds, too. If you can cough up the cash, I can get them ready for ya.”

“What about those dogs?”

“I rent them out for heating. It can get pretty cold at night, but it’s not so bad if you curl up with a dog or two like them. You won’t freeze to death, at least.”

“So that’s where ‘dog-lender’ comes from.”

“Dogs are useful for other things too. They’ll collect information, guard your property, or carry your stuff. They’ll do anything. They’re probably much more useful than a natural airhead like you.”

Nezumi clucked his tongue.

“That’s my line.”

At the very end of the hall was a wooden door. Beyond it was a small room, with a low ceiling and no windows. A round table stood in the centre of it. Inukashi placed the candle holder down, and spread an old map over the surface of the table.

"This map that Nezumi got his hands on is from around twenty years ago. This is my hotel here, and LK-3000 should be somewhere around here."

"Latch Building isn't marked on this map," Nezumi added. "I asked Inukashi to look into that."

He ran a finger lightly over the map. It was a casual gesture, but one of understated elegance. It was a movement calculated and honed to perfection, fully aware of watching eyes.

"What?" Nezumi tilted his head at Shion's gaze.

"No— I just thought that sometimes you move really elegantly."

"Huh?"

"Sometimes your gestures are really captivating. I couldn't help but stare."

Inukashi looked up at them, his gaze alternating between Nezumi and Shion's face.

"How can you say something like that in front of his face?" he asked in disbelief. "Nezumi, this guy really *is* naturally oblivious. How do you put up with him?"

"I manage somehow."

"Shion, haven't you heard what this guy does for a job?"

"No."

Inukashi thrust his open palm toward Shion.

"If you pay up, I can tell you. Selling information is another one of my trades."

"I don't have any money."

"What? You don't? Nezumi, you're taking care of a penniless bum?"

Inukashi's eyes narrowed. "So he has weird hair, he's an airhead, shakes hands without a second thought, and has no money— Nezumi, where did you bring him from?"

“Where do you think?”

“I’m asking the question here.”

“If you pay me, I can tell you.”

“Don’t mess around,” Inukashi snapped. “You’re the one who should be paying up.”

Nezumi took out a small leather pouch from his pocket.

“There you go.”

The contents of the pouch fell on top of the map. It was a small, grey mouse.

“It’s a mico-robot. It has audio and video recognition and recording sensors, and it’s mounted with a solar-powered micro-battery. One charge will make it last for thirty-six hours. It can move around freely to gather information. You’ll find plenty of use for the places your dogs can’t get into. You were telling me you wanted one, right?”

Inukashi nodded wordlessly. He moved his head up and down in an exaggerated way, much like how a small child would nod.

“Are you really going to give this to me?” he asked.

“Yeah. If your information is worth it.”

Nezumi put the mouse back into the pouch again, and clenched it lightly. Inukashi’s tone of voice sped up.

“Fine. I’ll jump right to the conclusion. Latch Building doesn’t exist.”

“Is that all you’ve got?”

“Of course not. It doesn’t exist, but there’s something that goes by that name.”

“Latch Building?”

“Latch Bill, and it’s the name of a newspaper. A long time ago, there used to be a newspaper company by that name, right behind this hotel. It went bankrupt and got torn down to be made into a parking lot

for this place. It happened before this map was made, which is why it doesn't exist."

"So Latch Bill 3F means—"

"If it means the 3rd floor of that newspaper company, then—"

"Then?"

"I have no idea," Inukashi said abruptly. "There's no way for me to know what could have been on the 3rd floor of a newspaper that went out of business twenty-something years ago. You should meet up directly with the guy who has ties to that place."

"There's someone with ties to it?"

"Yeah. I got the location of one guy who had ties to Latch Bill. And said guy also has interesting connections to No. 6. Listen carefully—" Nezumi leaned forward. Shion swallowed.

* * *

No. 6 was shrouded in the red glow of the sunset. Nothing was more exquisite than the sunset of late autumn. The man let out a satisfied sigh.

What beauty this was, what a tranquil scene. The Forest Park only days ago had been showing a vivid contrast between turning leaves and those that were still green, but now most of the trees had lost their leaves. It was a peaceful kind of beauty, of nature that was quietly preparing for the approaching winter.

He had gathered here the pinnacles of modern science; he had nature under his management, and the ultimate utopian city was nearing its completion. People were fortunate to be able to be born, raised, and live to an old age here. They were the chosen ones.

There was no such thing as misfortune here. Even the occasional hurricane that came upon them was an abundant source of natural

irrigation that watered the agricultural and farming pastures that spread from East to Southern Blocks.

All it needed was a little more. A little more, and the land of the gods would finally be complete. A utopia, where only the chosen ones would reside. It only needed a little more.

"You really must love the view from here." A voice said behind him, with the hint of a laugh.

"Wouldn't you agree that it's excellent?"

The man that had laughed silently shook his head in an expression of refusal. He was wearing a white lab coat.

"I prefer the micro-universe. The world of bacteria, microbes, neurons, macrophages, viruses. When you get to something like viruses, you're at the nanometre scale. You could only see them through an electron microscope. They're very beautiful, you know. The really beautiful things are things you can't see with the naked eye. There's only so much that your eyes can show you as is."

"That's always been your mantra, hasn't it. You've been saying that for as long as I can remember."

"It's my unchanging mantra."

"And you also still drink strong coffee before and after supper."

"That's another unchanging habit of mine."

The men looked at each other and chuckled quietly. They had known each other for decades. They knew well what part of the other had changed, and what remained the same.

"So what now? I think it's about time." The man raised his custom-made coffee cup. The coffee in it remained steaming and fragrant as if it had just been poured, thanks to the adjustment mechanism built into the cup. The man robed in the lab coat licked his bottom lip. It was his habit when he was immersed in thought.

"You're talking about collecting more samples," he said.

“Live ones.”

“Yes, we’ve already collected a few dead sample bodies. But we can’t say they’re nearly enough, though. We want a few more.”

“If you want, I can find ways to go about it. How many do you need?”

“I’ll report to you later with how many we want for each condition based on sex, age, and history of illness.”

“That would be great. So how about the live ones? Do you want me to go into collection preparation?”

“No, I need more time.”

“Why?”

“The data from the collected samples is still incomplete. We’re still running analyses and uploading it to the database. I want to flesh that out first.”

“It’s taking unusually long for you. How rare.”

“If we were able to do it publicly, things would go much more smoothly. But doing this much under wraps is going to take double the time. I want you to keep that in mind. Besides, we should have entered the live samples stage only after the dead sample database was complete. That was an unexpected occurrence— we have to investigate as to why that happened in this stage. It’ll all take time...”

“I know,” the man conceded. “I’m not rushing you. Make sure that everything gets carried out carefully, thoroughly, and perfectly. This is all connected to No. 6’s future roots. Yes— and this is the final piece.”

“The final piece to make this place a Holy City in the actual sense, hmm.” The lab coat chuckled. “Cheers to the Great Leader.” He raised his coffee cup lightly.

“And cheers to the Great Brain behind it all.” The man lifted his cup as well. There was a moment of silence. The man in the lab coat spoke with a slightly lowered voice.

“But is it really good to go?”

“What?”

“Collection of the living sample. I heard a certain Rat is with him.”

The man placed his coffee cup down, and wiped his lips with his fingers.

“It’s just one rat. It should barely be an obstacle at all.”

“If you could get him alive as well— I’m interested in him.”

“You want to cut him open?”

“An autopsy, hmm. That would be rather nice. I would like to investigate every corner of his body. But before that— we need more samples.”

The man in the lab coat suddenly stood up, and began soundlessly pacing on the thick carpet. He strode impatiently, taking large steps with his hands behind his back. It was a bad habit of his that he had since he was young. Following the movements of the tall lab-coated man with his gaze, the man reclined deeply into his desk chair.

“Yes that’s the main issue,” the lab coat continued. “The total number of samples is severely lacking. We need more, Fennec.” Fennec was a nickname that had been given to the man when he was young. A desert fox. It had the smallest body and largest ears of its kind. Its ears, which could reach up to fifteen centimetres long, was not only well-suited for releasing body heat effectively, but possessed keen hearing ability that could detect even a grasshopper hopping in the sand. He had also heard that, contrary to its cute appearance, it had a vicious personality.

It was not a nickname that he liked very much. He had not used it, nor been called by it for quite some time now. He had almost forgotten about it. But he didn’t feel the same repulsion toward it as he did in his younger days. He even felt somewhat fond about it now.

Fennec. The desert fox. Not bad.

“We don’t have enough living samples either. I’d want at least two, no, three more on hand. But that could be difficult...”

The man in the lab coat continued muttering to himself, and paced increasingly quickly. He was completely oblivious to everything else around him. He had probably not even realized that he had called the man Fennec. He had been like that since he was young. His research and experiments, his speculation, his satisfaction. It was only ever about him. He had never shown any interest toward things external to him. He showed no attachments to power, money or women. He had no need for faith, philosophy or morals in his life. A brain of rare intelligence and a vacant soul...

— *Which is why he’s useful all the more.*

The man trained his gaze on the pacing figure clad in the lab coat, and smiled.

— *You would have no use for a soul. If you did, it would only be to declare your loyalty to me.*

The lab coat stopped pacing.

“Fennec, let’s make another living sample. I want a female this time. It might be difficult. Yes, at this stage it will be very difficult... but that’s why we should prepare one ahead of time.”

“Let’s do it.”

“There’s a great risk of failure, however—”

“Failure and sacrifice are all things we must go through in order to gain progress. Don’t worry, we’ll be able to overcome it to hold the final piece in our hands.”

“I guess you’re right,” the lab coat agreed.

“Let’s have supper then, shall we? This probably won’t pique your interest much, but I’ve had it all prepared, and the main course will be lamb. I’ve also a remarkable wine to go with.”

“And coffee after the meal?”

“Of course. But I beg you, at least take off that lab coat while we eat.” The man lightly clapped the lab coat on the shoulder. Then he gave a sidelong glance at the scene out his window. Beyond the pane of thick, spotless glass, the stars were beginning to twinkle.

* * *

“We’re here.”

Nezumi’s feet stopped. They were standing in front of a three-storey building. At least, it resembled more of a building than the ruins that constituted the hotel, but in the sense that it was also falling apart, they were none too different.

The arched entranceway and the red brick walls had probably once carried an air of pomp, but were now strangled by vines, crumbled in places, and radiating an aura of dilapidation. Nezumi jerked his chin upwards.

“Someone’s home.”

There was a light in the third-floor centre window. From its brightness, it was most likely an electric lamp. That meant there was electricity running in this building.

They pushed the wooden doors open, and entered inside. There were no signs of people on the first or second floors. The stairs, which were also wooden, creaked loudly with each step they took.

If Inukashi’s tip was a good one, a former reporter from the Latch Bill newspaper was supposed to be living here.

They climbed up to the third floor. There was light spilling out from a crack of the open door into the wooden hallway, which was carpeted with a thick layer of dust. In the pool of light, there were several empty glass bottles. It was easy to tell what these bottles used to hold. Shion

didn't have to pick one up to check, for the strong smell of alcohol filled the air around them. In a darkened corner of the hallway, there were towering piles of bundled papers, and empty cans littered about it. Only the door from which the light was spilling was neither dirty nor broken, though it was very old. Shion raised his hand to knock, but Nezumi held him back.

"What's wrong?"

"No, it's just— the air is strange."

"Air? What do you—"

Before Shion could finish his sentence, he heard a yell from inside the room. It belonged to a man. There was the sound of furniture being knocked over. A high-pitched voice screaming angrily. He could hear the sound of glass being smashed.

"Sounds serious. What now, Shion?"

"What do you mean, what now?"

"It looks like they're busy at the moment. Should we come back another day?"

"As if."

"Thought so."

There was a loud noise again. A man's deep voice yelled out for help. Shion tried to burst into the room, but Nezumi restrained him and opened the door.

The room was well-lit by a large lamp. It was the brightest light Shion had seen since coming to the West Block. The light was illuminating clearly every corner of the room. By the window there was a large desk, and against the wall was a rather unimpressive textile sofa. The floor was covered, again, with bundles of paper and books that were piled up or scattered haphazardly. But these were all things he had noticed when he had taken a good look around the room much later on. What Shion saw immediately over Nezumi's shoulder were two

people entangled with each other. It was a man and a woman. The man was wearing pants, but his upper body was naked. The woman was clad all in black. Her hair, cut straight across at the shoulders, was also black. She was straddling the man. The hem of her slitted skirt had flipped up to reveal her thigh. She had well-endowed, curvy body. She had a round face, round nose and round eyes. Her face was tense. The woman swung her right hand up.

“Help!” The man yelled. Shion realized that there was a knife in the woman’s hand. Nezumi *tsked* his tongue shortly.

“You good-for-nothing!” The woman shouted. Nezumi moved at the same time. Soundlessly and in a flash, he was holding the woman’s wrist mid-swing. Without a word, he twisted it.

The knife clattered to the floor. Shion hastily picked it up. He spotted a red knife pouch in the corner of his vision. He grabbed it reflexively, and sheathed the blade. He felt relieved.

“What the hell are you doing?” The woman screeched shrilly. She had fallen backwards on her bottom from being dragged by Nezumi.

“I don’t think you should be swinging around a toy like this, Miss. It’s dangerous,” Nezumi said softly.

“Leave me alone. What’s any of this got to do with you? This good-for-nothing, shitbag of a womanizer deserves to die.”

The woman dissolved into tears on the floor. Still holding the knife, Shion looked down at her hunched back. He didn’t know what to do. There was nothing in Shion’s manual that told him how to deal with this kind of situation. Nezumi knelt down, and gently stroked her back as it shook with her sobs. He lowered his voice into a quiet murmur.

“Don’t cry. No— you *should* cry. Cry to your heart’s content. You’ll feel better that way. Go on, cry—”

It was like a lullaby. His whisper was deep and soothing, and soaked into Shion's soul like the sound of the rain that seeped into the basement room. He could see the woman's agitation subside as its gentleness and tranquility washed over her. But there was no gentleness or tranquility in Nezumi's gaze. After taking a quick glance around the room, his gaze stopped at the middle-aged man who was gasping, half-naked on the floor. Then his eyes flicked up to Shion, who was stock-still, rooted to the spot. Shion took a step forward.

"Um— are you Rikiga-san? The one who used to work for the Latch Bill newspaper?"

The man raised himself unsteadily and began to put his arms through a shirt that had been draped over the sofa. Though not exactly obese, he was rather fleshy around the shoulders and waist. There was a white scar that ran diagonally across under his right shoulder blade.

"Uh— have we gotten the wrong person?" Shion asked uncertainly. "We've come here today because we heard we could meet a Rikiga-san here—"

"You've got the right one."

It was the woman who had answered. Her face was a sopping mess of tears, sweat and snot, but she was not crying anymore.

"This good-for-nothing liar goes by that name. Once upon a time he was a newspaper reporter, but now this shitty excuse for a man is reduced to making shitty porno magazines to pay for his liquor habit."

"And who's the one who had a hysteric fit when she got dumped by said excuse for a man, huh?" retorted the man who had been called Rikiga.

"What're you talking about?" the woman shot back. "You're the one who said you wanted to get married!"

"And I'm telling you, issues have come up, and I can't get married to you anymore."

“What issues?”

“Well— ah, um— you see...”

“If you’re gonna try to trick me, at least take the time to think up a proper lie. I’m not one to be messed with.”

Sparked to anger by her own words, the woman’s wrath threatened to boil over again. She suddenly lunged at Shion, breathing fast.

“Give me my knife back!”

“No—I can’t do that—” Shion resisted. “Stop, please. It’s dangerous.”

“I said give the damn thing back. What ‘issues’, huh? Let’s hear your excuse. I can’t believe I’m being shitted like this. I’m gonna kill you.”

“Stop, watch it—”

Nezumi stood up. With one step, he strode to Rikiga’s side and put a hand on his shoulder.

“Father, is she going to be our new mother from now on?”

The woman froze. Her mouth gaped open, and her eyelid twitched.

“Father?”

Nezumi nodded with an affectionate smile.

“Yes. We’re his sons.”

“You— you had kids? I’ve never heard anything about that before.”

The woman’s voice turned hoarse. Rikiga blinked.

“Father and Mother separated a long time ago,” Nezumi explained.

“But Mother passed away just last month, and so we came back to live with Father. We’ve already heard before that Father has someone he loves. But he said he would give up getting married so that we could live together as a family again, the three of us. Right, Shion-niisan³?”

“Huh?”

“We came all the way here searching for Father, right?”

³A suffix used to refer to an older brother.

“What? Oh— yes, we have. We’re his sons. Nice to meet you.”

Rikiga cleared his throat a few times.

“—That’s how it is. They’re my sons. I’ve had to take them into my care now... raise these two on my own. Living will become much more difficult. I couldn’t put you through that, honey. I love you, I love you so much. But these kids need their father... I couldn’t burden you by asking you to be their mother. I had no choice but to ask you to break up with me.”

“So that was what came up...”

“Well— pretty much.”

The woman ran a hand through her hair, and sighed. “So that’s how it is.”

“That’s how it is.”

The woman ran a hand through her hair again, and picked up her coat and purse, which were lying on the floor. She looked at Shion, and drew her chin back slightly.

“You have strange hair. Is it a wig?”

“Oh, um— stuff happened...”

“More issues? Like father like son, you guys must love your issues. Oh well, fine. If that’s what’s going on, I’ll break up with you. As if I would want a middle-aged man with kids anyway.”

The woman gave an energetic wave of her hand.

“Good-bye, then. It was fun while it lasted.”

The door closed. Shion let the knife in his hand drop to the floor. His palms were sweaty from nerves.

Rikiga lifted the chair and placed it upright on the floor, and began to gather the pieces of broken glass. There had probably been some kind of drink in it, for its contents had made a stain on the carpet that

emitted such an overpowering smell of alcohol that it made Shion feel ill.

“Good god, she certainly let herself go,” grumbled Rikiga. “It was fun while it lasted, huh? Putting on a cool face at the last minute. Geez.” Rikiga looked alternately at Shion and Nezumi, and grinned.

“You saved me from the gallows. First, let me give you my thanks.”

He had strong, broad shoulders and considerable height. The bridge of his nose was high, and it suited his moustache well. His face was neither handsome nor ugly. It was a face that was both energetic with optimism and worn with hardship; it was a face of cunning, and steely, resilient willpower.

“Your acting could have been better, though. Especially for a star of the show like you, Eve.”

Nezumi scooped the knife off the floor and smiled thinly.

“You know about me?”

“I’m your fan. I went to see your show last week.”

“That’s nice to hear, but I didn’t appear in any shows last week.”

“Really? Well, anyway, we wanted to do a special feature in our magazine about you. We asked your manager to get an interview with you, but he turned us down.”

“He probably would, for a magazine like this.” Nezumi’s fingers flipped casually through the pages. The cover was a photo of a naked woman. On the whole, she was rather blurry. All the other pages were somewhat similar. Naked women, half-naked men. Lewdness and provocation overflowed in the flimsily-bound pages of the magazine.

“It’s the go-to for young people,” Rikiga said. “Teaches them everything from birth control to picking up women.”

“You should do a feature about the right way to dump a woman next, old man.”

Nezumi tossed the magazine aside. Rikiga raised his hands in an exaggerated gesture.

“Ouch Eve, that was pretty harsh. I thought you’d be more of a pansy.”

“Nice to hear that coming from someone who was pinned on the floor by a woman just a minute ago.”

“I was drunk, alright? And she suddenly just jumped at me— but I never would’ve guessed that she had a knife on her. Scary things, those women.”

Shion took half a step forward.

“Eve . . . is that your real name, Nezumi?”

“No way. It’s just for work.”

“Your work . . . so you’re a stage actor.”

“Nothing half as classy as that. Maybe a couple steps above this magazine.”

“But— oh,” Shion murmured in realization. “So that’s why you speak and move so gracefully.”

A spotlight shines on a dark stage, illuminating a single actor as he floats up out of the darkness. Captivating the eyes, ears, and souls of all who watch, his voice rings out— at times, with a soaring, elegant air; at times, with a pained tremor like a wind that whistles low to the ground.

Nezumi snorted.

“What’re you imagining, Shion? We’re talking about a playhouse here, in the West Block. People who’ve got a little spare cash to spend come out to forget their worries for a little while. We haven’t got any embroidered drop curtains, decent costumes, or stage props. It’s mostly impromptu song or dance. That’s it.”

“But it still makes people forget their worries, right?”

“Huh?”

Shion was gazing unblinkingly at Nezumi. In these past few hours, he had experienced almost as much as— no— perhaps even more than what he had seen and heard his entire life. Of course, this was still only just a glimpse. But he had caught a glimpse of how harsh and brutal it was just to live a day, an hour, even a moment, in this world. If these people, in their brief moment of respite, chose to go to this place of their own free will, and that was where Nezumi was, then he thought it was amazing. It neither filled their bellies, nor quenched their thirst. But people still yearned for this crude stage and the tales told on it, and immersed in them, they forgot their melancholy. They clapped, wept, laughed, and bustled with noise. There was no way of telling when death might come sweeping down upon them. But in this moment, they could still live and enjoy life. They could live and enjoy life all the more because of it.

“I think it’s amazing, Nezumi.”

Nezumi sighed, caught himself hastily, and grimaced.

“Knock it off. It’s not as rosy as you make it out to be. You’ve probably never even seen a stage.”

“You’re right— In No. 6, students weren’t allowed to watch plays.”

“I would’ve thought so. Especially for top-rankers like you, Mr. Elite. Everything you watched or read would be strictly limited— though you probably never even realized it was being withheld from you.”

“No. 6?”

Rikiga stopped mid-gesture as he was bringing a cigarette to his lips. “Hey, wait a minute. Are you saying this wig-boy is from No. 6? You gotta be kidding me.”

“This is no joke, old man. And he isn’t wearing a wig.”

“Then is it some kind of new hat? Is that what’s popular in fashion these days?”

“No, it’s my real hair,” Shion answered. “Just— a lot of things have happened due to— uh, issues.”

“Oh?” Rikiga said. “There’s nothing I love more than issues. If you’ve really tumbled out of No. 6, you must have issues like no other. I want to hear your story. And the reason behind that hair.”

Nezumi hoisted himself up on the desk, and let his legs dangle.

“Does it smell, old man?”

“What?”

“Your nose twitched. Did you sniff out an interesting scoop, or what?”

Rikiga clapped a hand to his nose. Nezumi continued laughing softly.

“It’s the same nose wild dogs make when they smell food. It twitched, then your nostrils flared.”

Rikiga’s brow furrowed, and an expression of clear distaste spread over his features.

“I’ve mentioned this before, Eve. I think I’ve had misconceptions about you. I thought you’d be more gentle and refined. I would never have imagined such a rude and brash kid. I’m disappointed, frankly.”

“I thought you were my fan?”

“You can count me out from now on. Good god, I don’t know what you enjoy so much about taunting adults like this.”

“Karan,” Nezumi spoke quietly. Rikiga froze. “Do you know a woman that goes by that name?”

Rikiga’s body, beginning to show the signs of middle-aged weight gain, teetered dangerously. His throat contracted as he swallowed.

“You know Karan...? Are you acquaintances with her?”

“She’s my mother.”

Rikiga appeared not to understand Shion’s words immediately. He sucked in a deep breath.

“Mother?”

"I'm— oh, my name is Shion. I'm Karan's son."

"Son... Karan's son, huh... who's the father?"

"I couldn't say."

"You couldn't— don't you know who he is? Is he deceased?"

"No— I've heard from my mother that they separated shortly after I was born. It's just been the two of us all my life. I've never met my father."

Nezumi continued to laugh.

"Are you telling me there's a possibility he might be *your* son?"

"No— that can't be— wait a minute, er, what was your name again?"

"Shion."

"Shion— aster, huh. Karan did like that flower a lot. Uh— Shion, will you hold on for a minute? I'll get you a drink— ah, I mean, a non-alcoholic one, of course... what would you like? I have everything. Oh yes, here— let's move somewhere more comfortable where we can talk."

Rikiga knocked the wall behind the sofa, and pressed his right hand on it. The wall soundlessly slid to the side.

"Wow," Nezumi whistled. "Fingerprint recognition? You've got fancy gimmicks on this place. Guess it's not as shabby as it looks."

Beyond the wall appeared a rather extravagant room. The floor was lined with a luxurious carpet, and there were leather chairs, a leather sofa, and a table. There was a fire burning in the fireplace set into the wall.

"Come in, this way. I'll pour some coffee. Are you hungry? I have some excellent pie."

Shion had forgotten that he was starving. His empty stomach ached.

"What kind of pie?" Nezumi said. "I prefer meat."

"You can shut up." Rikiga waved his hand irritably at Nezumi.

“You’re horrible, treating us so differently like that.”

Rikiga ignored him and disappeared into a small adjacent room. The aroma of coffee soon wafted over to them.

“Coffee and pie, huh. I don’t believe it.” Shion had barely tasted any such savoury foods since escaping from No. 6. Nezumi let his gaze wander about the room.

“You’re right. They’re luxury items, for sure. And seeing how this room is outfitted... it looks like Inukashi’s information was spot-on after all.”

“If that’s the case...” Shion said pensively. “No, that can’t be...”

“What can’t be?”

“Mother once told me that my father was fast and loose with money and women, and was one step away from becoming an alcoholic, a hopeless—”

“Good-for-nothing?”

“Yeah. A hopeless good-for-nothing... but she said he was really gentle, honest and straightforward.”

“What’s that supposed to mean? Is your Mama still attached to him?”

“I have no idea... but it fits his image, right?”

Nezumi threw a glance at the entrance to the small room, and pulled a face.

“I dunno the part about gentle, honest and straightforward, but he sure is fast and loose with women, and halfway there to being an alcoholic. Now that you mention it, I guess you guys look kind of similar around the eyes. Well, we don’t have DNA testing here, so there would be no way to know for sure. —Shion, you don’t look too well.”

“Ah, no... I’m probably just hungry...”

“Don’t worry. Just the idea of that being *my* father would make me feel ill too. I’d probably break out into a fever.”

"You've got a fever? Are you alright?" Rikiga set a tray down on the table. On it was coffee, pie, and a glass of whisky. Shion's mouth watered.

"Karan liked pie, too," Rikiga said reflectively. "She also liked bread and cakes."

"She still loves them," Shion replied. "She bakes bread for a living now."

"Baking, huh... mm-hmm. I see."

An idea sparked in Shion's mind.

"Do you remember about the cherry cake?"

"Cherry cake? I'm not too sure... what, do you want to eat cherry cake?"

"No, it's just... my mother told me once that the day I was born, my father came home with three boxes, each with a whole cherry cake inside. And the two of them ate it together."

Rikiga lifted the glass of amber liquid and squinted.

"Is that so... one of Karan's fond memories, huh? But unfortunately I have no recollection of that. I've never bought cherry cake or eaten it with Karan. I was never even a resident of No. 6. Shion, I'm not your father."

Nezumi swallowed his mouthful of pie and nudged Shion's shoulder.

"So he says. What a relief, huh, Shion?"

"What's that supposed to mean, Eve?"

"It means exactly what it means."

Shion fished out Karan's memo.

Arnd LK-3000. latch Bl. 3F. Not sure. -K

“We relied on this memo to get us here.”

Rikiga stared intently at Karan’s scribbled writing. Shion spoke.

“Shortly after I... escaped from No. 6, my mother sent this to me. She must have thought you were still here. I’m just wondering how you—”

‘Know my mother’ was what Shion planned to say afterwards, but his words caught in his throat. A tear had spilled from Rikiga’s eye.

“Karan... she hadn’t forgotten about me... she remembered me... her writing... still the same as I remember it...”

His bowed head and broad shoulders were trembling slightly. Nezumi nudged Shion on the shoulder again.

“Egh, will you look at that. This old man is a teary drunk. At this age too— talk about embarrassing, hah.”

“Shut up. What’s wrong with getting a little teary? You’re always wailing and yelling on the stage.”

“That’s all acting. What, are you saying yours is an act too, old man?”

Rikiga glared at Nezumi with watery eyes, and raise himself heavily. He extracted a folder from the back of a sturdy bookshelf. He drew a single photo from it and placed it in front of Shion.

“This is Karan and I.”

An image of his mother was smiling back at him, young, beautiful and wearing a sleeveless one-piece dress. Beside her stood Rikiga, much thinner and well-proportioned than now, even with a hint of boyishness in his features.

“It was taken decades ago, not long after we met each other. Karan was still a student, and she was interested in the columns I wrote, and came to visit me. The third floor of the company building was my workplace, and when I’d just gotten back from an interview, she was sitting there. It was a rainy day, and thundering outside, but she came all the way out here to see me...”

Rikiga sniffled. Shion and Nezumi looked at each other. Nezumi gave a long, exaggerated sigh.

“You used to be a reporter, didn’t you, old man? Can you summarize it a little more efficiently? So basically what you’re saying is that you and Shion’s Mama first met on the third floor of the Latch Bill company building, am I right?”

“That’s right. We got along great... I enjoyed spending time with Karan. I think it must’ve been love. Back in those days, No. 6 wasn’t as closed off as it is now. People were more or less free to come and go. I’d just started my career as a journalist, and one of the things I was sniffing out was about No. 6.”

“Sniffing out? So you had some suspicions about that city, huh, old man? You must’ve had a decent nose back then. Too bad it’s useless now.”

Rikiga fixed Nezumi with a glare again, and contorted his face in an odd half-grimace.

“Eve, I wasn’t kidding when I said I was your fan. When I first went to see you, you were standing centre-stage and reciting a poem. Arthur Rimbaud, I think it was... I was captivated by your appearance, and your voice.”

Nezumi licked the grease from the pie off his fingers, and crossed his legs.

*But, in truth, I have wept too much! Dawns are heartbreaking
Every moon is atrocious and every sun bitter
Acrid love has swollen me with intoxicating torpor
O let my keel burst! O let me go into the sea!*

“—Shion, know what this is?”

“A stanza from ‘The Drunken Boat’, if I’m not mistaken.”

Nezumi chuckled. “Racing up that learning curve, aren’t you? I can treat you to a little more fan service if you want, old man. How about it?”

“No thanks. But let me say this, you were brilliant on that stage. I almost can’t believe that it was the same person as this insolent brat that’s in front of me. So do me a favour and stop talking.”

“Don’t be mad,” Nezumi drawled. He uncrossed his legs, and his face turned serious. Expression vanished from his voice. It became flat and heavy. It was a voice that was startlingly different from moments before.

“In the beginning, six cities were founded, including No. 6, as model cities for the future. They were models created in the search for a way humankind could live comfortably in a land that was reduced to rubble, riddled with abnormal weather patterns mostly due to the carbon dioxide from massive consumption of fossil fuels during the wars. That was what it was, at first. The plan was that each city would take part in the research and development of things like safe energy that could be mass-produced to replace fossil fuels and nuclear power, and scientific technology that ranged from the nanometre to cosmic scales, in a way that was appropriate for the conditions of each city. This was in hopes that some day, everyone on this earth would be free of any threat to their life— whether it be war, catastrophe, or plague— and this first step toward a world of threat-free life, the cornerstone of hope, was No. 6. In all respects, this was the objective at first. Wasn’t it, old man?”

Rikiga drained the rest of his glass of whisky in one gulp. He coughed lightly.

“So I guess classics weren’t the only thing you could recite off by heart, Eve. Your manager told me he didn’t know your real name, age, or where you were born. He said you were a wanderer that just appeared

out of nowhere. But I'm not buying it— you're not just any travelling entertainer. What's your real identity?"

"Nose around my business afterwards. So during the time this picture was taken, No. 6 was still seen as the hope for all humankind, right? But you had doubts. A fine nose you must've had to smell something fishy there."

"When I became a journalist, No. 6 was already in the process of change," Rikiga said. "Research organizations were gathering all sorts of skilled labour, and their departments flourished; but on the other hand, release of information and free speech were becoming more and more restricted. I thought, is this really going to become a utopian city? I had my doubts. You and your smart mouth are right. Back then, I had a nose that could sniff out something that I couldn't see. While I was scrambling around, the barriers spread further and grew more secure, and going to and fro from outside parts became much more difficult. Soon, you couldn't even enter or exit without a permit from the city. It happened in no time. Since I was a journalist, they made sure I could never set foot in that place again. They stamped out the freedom of the press, just like that. Of course, that meant I couldn't see Karan anymore either. To tell you the truth, I think that hit me harder than not being able to do my work."

A decade and some later ... you get what you're seeing now. The surroundings of No. 6 became places whose sole purpose was to service the one, central city. Agricultural lands, cattle pastures, recreational forest— and this is their garbage can. Destitution, dispute, disease, violence— the rubbish that No. 6 spits out all ends up here. You two probably don't know this, but this town used to be a small, but much more decent place than it is now. At least, not a place that's been classified and shelved away with an impersonal label like the West Block. But they've turned this place into a garbage can. What's

this *hope* they're speaking of now? Some Holy City this is— they're doing the name a disgrace. It's more like a devil that releases toxins everywhere it goes."

"I guess humans and cities are similar, then," Nezumi remarked. "In time they forget the ambitions they set out with, and corrupt themselves to no end."

Nezumi drained the rest of his coffee, and threw a glance at the man who had just finished talking.

"What's that supposed to mean? Are you saying that I've been corrupted?"

"Can you say that you aren't?"

Shion let his eyes flit to Nezumi's profile. He felt that Nezumi was provoking Rikiga. Rikiga responded to that provocation. No— maybe he had just been lead into the skilful trap.

"You're criticizing me about how I've become a drunk, huh? How I've been reduced to making magazines full of naked pictures, drinking as much booze as I could bathe in, and to top it off, nearly getting killed by a woman."

"You sound bitter, old man. But using pretty words instead isn't gonna help you survive here."

"Everyone knows that."

"What I'm curious about is how decked-out this room is. A warm room, and good food. You can't get those things easily. I can't see all your income for this coming from those porno mags. Which means— you've got ahold of someone's purse strings. Am I right?"

Nezumi smiled. It was a haughty, but elegant smile, like of one passing divine judgment.

"I heard high officials from No. 6 come here secretly ever so often."

Rikiga's mouth made a chewing motion.

“Old man, I heard you take orders from these men and bring them the kind of women they want, like the middleman in a deal. I guess your connections from your journalist days ended up being pretty useful. And the enormous payment you get from these guys pays for this luxurious lifestyle. You suck up to the guys who are pretty much at the core of the city that you just called the Devil, and leech off the good parts while you live off women who have no choice but to sell their bodies to avoid cold and starvation. You don’t call that corruption?”

All expression vanished from Rikiga’s face. It had no light or shadow, and looked strangely flat. The flames from the fireplace were lighting the right half of his face.

“... Where did you hear about that?”

“From a dog.”

“Dog?”

“A dog told me he heard you and some man whispering under the stairs. Afterwards, the man got in his car and drove right through the special gates of the Access Control Office, and got into No. 6 without any difficulty. The kind of people that can go between No. 6 and the West Block freely are limited. Only High Officials who have a special identification card with them can. Everyone else would get destroyed at the gates.”

Shion gulped. He felt like he was watching a stage play. He could read nothing from the man’s face, which was coloured crimson by the flames. Suddenly, its mouth twisted.

“How would you like to join, then?”

“Join?”

“No. 6 is a boring place. You’re not allowed to have a disorderly lifestyle. Beggars and prostitutes aren’t allowed to exist. Everyone’s listless. So they come here to stretch their wings. They come, laugh

at the women who sell themselves for whatever meagre cash that'll take them. The men reconfirm that they're a specially privileged class, and take joy in that again. After their short moment of fun, they go back to their boring home. Those kind of people are the ones that keep coming back."

"So business is booming, huh? That's good for you."

"Thankfully, yes. But their demands seem to have no end. They give me different orders, every time. First they want a dark-skinned girl, next they want a young girl with a tattoo all down her back. It gets stressful sometimes."

Shion had his head bowed. It pained him to listen to Rikiga talking. No. 6 was a beautiful city on its surface. Now he was hesitant whether to call that real beauty, but nevertheless, it was orderly. Its nature and buildings maintained a delicate balance, neither one over-asserting itself, and all its people were gentle and polite. Behind all of that was the truth that he was hearing now. His eyes met with Karan's in the photograph.

Mom, the place where we lived, the place where you still live now, was just a monster wearing a mask of beauty. Mom...

"And you're inviting me to join you in head-hunting for women?"

It was Nezumi's dry, brittle voice. Rikiga laughed. It was vulgar and insulting to the ears.

"Never. That would be a waste of good labour that could be put to better use. I've actually been thinking about it ever since I first saw you on that stage. You could rake in as much money as you want. It should be a piece of cake for you to sweet-talk those bored stiff into showering you with money. What do you think? It'll pay way more than that shabby hut of a playhouse."

"Are you telling me to take customers? Has the alcohol gotten to your brain, old man?"

Rikiga sneered. “Don’t try to play cool with me. God knows where you’ve come from and where you’ve been— a wandering actor like you has probably had experience with it anyway. It’s no use pretending you’re an innocent—”

“Shut up!”

It was Shion who had yelled. He whipped the coffee cup and its contents at Rikiga. He leapt over the table, grabbed him by the shirt, which was soaked through, and leaned in with all his weight. Rikiga gave a short cry as he fell to the floor.

“That’s enough!” Shion yelled angrily. “How dare you say something so degrading! Apologize— apologize to him!”

Shion straddled Rikiga and shook him roughly. The back of Rikiga’s head banged against the floor repeatedly. Still holding him by the collar, Shion closed his hands around Rikiga’s throat.

“Can’t— breathe—” Rikiga gasped. “Shion, please— I really can’t—I’ll apologize... so stop—”

“Shut up! You shameless— shame on you—”

A pair of hands slid under his armpits, and he was dragged backwards.

“Shion, that’s good enough. Any more, and the old man’s gonna pass out.”

Rikiga curled up and coughed.

“That was a surprise,” Nezumi murmured, still holding Shion from behind. He really sounded stunned. “I never imagined you’d resort to violence. I guess even *you* let the blood get to your head sometimes, huh. Enough to go attacking people like that.”

“... First time in my life...” said Shion, slightly out of breath.

“I can tell. Your heart is going a mile a minute.”

Shion turned and impatiently brushed Nezumi’s hand away.

“Why aren’t you angry?”

“Angry? If I let a joke like that get to me every time, I’d be going mad all year round. I’m used to it. It’s no big deal.”

“Idiot!”

“Idiot? Shion, what’re you getting all worked up for?”

“You’re an idiot. What he said wasn’t a joke. Don’t say you’ve gotten used to it. Don’t—”

His eyes burned. A tear spilled before he could screw his eyes shut.

“Shion— come on, don’t cry. Why would you...—I can’t believe you’re crying,” Nezumi said exasperatedly.

“He... insulted you.”

“Huh?”

“He insulted you. He said horrible things— lumped you in with the filthy officials of No. 6. But you say it’s no big deal. You weren’t even angry about it... and that made me feel even more helpless and angry— so angry... I don’t even know what to do anymore...”

Nezumi opened his mouth to say something, then closed it again. He yanked the tablecloth and thrust the end of it toward Shion.

“This is all I’ve got, but you can wipe your face on it.”

“Okay.”

“Shion, the one who got insulted was me, and not you. Don’t cry for other people. Don’t get into fights for other people. Fight and cry only for yourself.”

“I don’t understand what you’re saying.”

“I guess you wouldn’t— sometimes it’s like we speak different languages. Look, there’s snot coming out of your nose. Wipe it, come on.”

“Mm-hmm.”

“I always find it impossible to understand you. Even if we spent our whole lives together, I probably still wouldn’t understand you. You’re

right in front of me, but at the same time, it's like you're far away. That's probably why—"

Rikiga rose to his feet behind Shion.

"I'm sorry for interrupting your moment, but I want to let you know that that tablecloth is silk. I had a hard time coming across that thing, so I'd appreciate if you didn't wipe your nose on it."

He peered into Shion's face.

"Your angry face looked just like Karan's. I felt like I was being scolded by Karan herself. Though with her, I've never been yelled at that violently."

Then he turned to Nezumi, and lowered his head in apology.

"I'm sorry. I went too far. I deserved to be punched. Looks like my morals have rotted right through."

"They haven't rotted. They're just pickled in alcohol, that's all."

Nezumi gave Shion a light push on the back.

"I think we can call it a day. Let's go home."

"Sure. But I have to clean up first."

Nezumi laughed.

"You really are a well-behaved little boy, aren't you?"

"Make fun of me all you want, but I'm still going to clean up."

Shion bent to retrieve the coffee cup. Nezumi also reached for the folders and plates scattered on the floor. His body stiffened. His breath was caught in his throat, and he was frozen.

"Nezumi, what's wrong?"

"This—"

Nezumi's fingertips were trembling slightly as they held a single photograph. It had probably fallen out of one of the folders. Rikiga narrowed his eyes.

"What's the matter? Oh, that."

There were several men and women in the picture, with Karan at the centre.

“It’s a photo from the last time I entered No. 6. It’s a picture of Karan and her friends.”

“This man . . .”

Nezumi pointed at the tall man standing at Karan’s side.

“That guy, huh,” said Rikiga absentmindedly. “Who was he again? I think he said he was in an institution for biological research— looks like a bright fellow, doesn’t he? I can’t remember much about him, though. He didn’t really stand out. Eve, you know this guy?”

“I might.”

“How do you know him?”

Nezumi drew a breath, and answered quietly.

“He’s my godfather⁴.”

⁴Godparent (名付け親) in Japanese can mean both *guardian* or the one who has named the child. Nezumi is using it in both senses.

4

THE ANGEL OF THE NETHERWORLD

*I love him, love him. He's a millstone round my neck —
he'll take me to the bottom with him. But I love this millstone of mine —
I can't live without it.*

CHEKHOV, *THE CHERRY ORCHARD*, ACT III

THE GIRL came just as Karan was about to close the blinds of the store.

“Ma’am, are there any muffins left?” She was an adorable child with a round face, probably not yet ten.

“We’re all out of cheese, but if you like raisin muffins, we’ve got one of those left.”

“I’ll have it, please.”

“Alright, Lili. Just a second.” Karan picked the leftover muffin off the tray, and put it in a bag with two doughnuts.

“The doughnuts are a little something extra.”

“Thank you, Ma’am.” Lili dropped a few copper coins into Karan’s hand. She had probably held them tightly in her hand her whole way

here, for although no blood coursed through the coins, they held the warmth of a human body.

Lili peeked inside the bag, and her face glowed as she observed aloud that there were two whole doughnuts inside.

“You’re one of my regular customers after all, Lili. Next time, I’ll bake some extra cheese muffins for you.”

“Ma’am, you won’t quit running this store, will you?” Lili raised her face from the bag, and questioned Karan with a sombre expression.

“I would never. Why would you think so?”

“Mama said that you might close your store. But I’m glad you’re not.” A relieved grin spread across her round face. Karan squatted down and wrapped her arms around the girl’s small frame.

“Thank you for worrying about me, Lili.”

Her soft body, her warm presence— she was so small, yet she provided Karan with definite encouragement.

“Mama and Papa were both worried,” Lili said. “They were saying, ‘what if we can’t eat the bread or cakes from your bakery again?’. Because you know, the cake shop in front of the station is bad-tasting, and expensive, and mean,” she said huffily.

“Are they?”

“Yeah. Because the other day, there was a huge white cake on display, and it was like a toy castle. And me and Ei— oh, do you know who Ei is?”

“No, I don’t.”

“He’s my friend. He’s really good at blowing bubbles. So Ei and me were looking at it together, because it was so pretty.”

“So you two were looking into the shop window?”

“Yeah. And the old man in the store started yelling at us. He said, don’t touch the glass with your dirty hands. We were just looking.

We weren't even touching the glass," Lili said indignantly.

"That's awful."

"So Ei yelled at him back, and said 'you stupid stingy old man!' and so I yelled at him too, and said 'you stupid bald old man!'. And then we both ran away."

Karan found herself bursting into laughter. It had been a while since she had laughed out loud. She kissed Lili on the cheek.

"I can't make anything as big as a castle, but for your birthday, Lili, I'll bake a nice, all-white cake for you."

"Really?"

"Really. Make sure you share with Ei, too."

"Thank you, Ma'am," said Lili happily. "I like cherry cake."

Cherry cake— Shion had liked it too.

Lili waved her hand, and walked out of the store. Karan watched her retreating back until it melted into the dusk, then lowered the blinds. She sank into a chair.

After Shion had left her, she found it hard to bear when evening set in each day. Evening trapped her in the deep disappointment that another day had passed without Shion coming home. The feeling turned into heavy exhaustion that made it feel troublesome to lift a single finger.

"Shion..."

At times a murmur, at times unvoiced; at times as if in conversation, at times coming close to screaming— she wondered how many times she called her son's name each day.

When she heard that the Security Bureau had taken Shion into custody on charges of civil disturbance and murder, she thought she would go insane.

"Please be aware that you will likely never meet with the suspect again."

The night that she had been given the news by a Security Bureau official, Karan had a premonition that her son would die. She knew more certainly than anyone that Shion would never take part in a murder. But a mother's desperate feelings would never get across to the Bureau— she knew that well too. In No. 6, where the crime rate was almost zero percent, there was no judicial system. Merely being arrested and taken into custody by the Security Bureau confirmed the suspect's guilty status. Pleading guilty or not guilty was not allowed, nor was raising a formal objection.

He has already been impounded into the Correctional Facility. Soon, as a first-class VC he will be sentenced for life; or under special law, be sentenced to death penalty. The Security Bureau official's words were neither exaggerated nor twisted in any way— they were the bare truth. They had always been. The next time this uniform would appear at her door would be after the sentence had been handed down to her son. At this moment, Karan experienced for herself what despair physically felt like. All sounds disappeared from around her, and all colours faded. She couldn't smell or feel anything. Darkness was the only thing she could see before her. It was an inky-black darkness that would never see the light of dawn. Was this bottomlessness what people called despair—?

I've lost everything.

Suddenly, a certain man's face crossed her mind. *If I beg him for help, could something be done?* But the crack of light that had shone into her heart soon flickered and vanished. *No— there's no time.* She didn't even know where that man was right now. She had no time to search him out and beg for her son's life.

Suddenly overcome with nausea, Karan vomited all the contents of her stomach. She broke out into a sweat. She half-crawled to the storage room, and collapsed on Shion's bed. Most of Shion's belongings had

been confiscated as evidence by the Security Bureau. *I can just die too, in a corner of this storage room. I'll close my eyes, and follow after him. Rather than live this brutal life, I can choose the peace of death that'll come after short suffering. I'm not strong enough to go on living alone in this darkness.*

“Cheep-cheep!”

She thought she heard something squeak at her ear as she lay there. It was probably just her imagination. It might not be my imagination. *But it doesn't matter, I'm already...*

Something bit her earlobe. A dull pain raced through it. She lifted her upper body. A small mouse scurried away into a corner of the storage room.

—*What was a mouse doing here?*

She swallowed. She touched her earlobe. A little blood came off on her finger. Lost Town may be in the older parts of town, but it was still rare for animals, excluding pets, to be running around. Even more so for mice—

“Nezumi.” Her heart thumped loudly.

Nezumi. Hadn't Shion murmured that word more than once? While he was drinking cocoa; while he gazed at the trees swaying in the wind; while he looked up at the evening sky, he had murmured that word. Ever since that day, when they had been evicted from Chronos and moved to Lost Town because of that incident— it was the day that Shion had undergone an investigation and received a stern warning for guarding a VC, regarded as a violent criminal in No. 6. Concealing and aiding in the escape of a VC normally classified as a serious crime, but with regards to his young age of twelve and his emotional state, he had been let off with only the removal of his special privileges.

Karan, for some reason, didn't feel much of an attachment to Chronos, nor did she find her life in Lost Town harsh. Though others may have

reprimanded Shion's actions for lacking common sense, she was able to believe that there was something in Shion's feelings and beliefs that lead him to do what he did. Although the city gave him preferred treatment as a gifted child because of his level of intellect, perhaps she had begun to realize somewhere inside that her son would take emotion over knowledge, and take a future that he could grasp of his own free will over a future that was already promised to him. That was why she chose not to question him much about that incident. But she had asked him once about Nezumi.

"So what's this Nezumi? Who is he?"

"Huh?"

"It's someone's name, isn't it?" She had thought so because of the tender way her son said the word. Nostalgically, lovingly, at times strained—it even carried a tone of longing. He would definitely not use that tone of voice to call a regular mouse or rat.

"Did you get your heart broken by that person?"

"Never. What're you saying, Mom?"

"Well, it sounded like that."

"No, it's not like that. You've got it all wrong."

It was then that Shion would become unusually agitated, blush crimson, and do things like drop his spoon. Yes, she remembered it now. Nezumi...

She stood up. Her heartbeat returned to normal, and her body felt lighter. Hope—though she didn't know why—flickered inside her. She could breathe, and the willpower to move on revived within her again.

A small mouse was curled up next to a box of flour. It made eye contact with Karan, and swung its face around in a wide circle. It spat a capsule out of its mouth. Then it disappeared into the back of the storage room. There was a memo inside the capsule.

*Shion is safe, worry not. Escaped to West Block.
Be wary of Bureau surveillance.
Any replies to this mouse. Brown brings news of safety,
black brings news of change or abnormal occurrence. —Mezumi*

The light that flickered in her became a roaring flame. She pressed a hand firmly to her mouth. She felt if she didn't, she would cry out in joy.

He's alive. My child is alive. I'll be able to see him again.

Karan breathed in, and furtively looked about her.

If the memo was true, and Shion had escaped alive to the West Block, then this house was probably under heavy surveillance by the Bureau. Pinhole cameras. Audio tapping. Wireless signal tapping. She would not be able to act recklessly.

She moved further into the storage room. Beside a crate of jam, she scribbled on a piece of wrapping paper. The word 'West Block' brought to mind a hazy figure. *What was his name again?* He worked for the Latch Bill... he was a good person. She remembered that much. *Perhaps he would— but—*

She had an endless amount of things she wanted to tell Shion.

Shion, stay alive. No matter what you do, stay alive. Your mother is fine. As long as you're alive, I'll be fine. So please, don't die.

But there was no use in spilling her heart out now.

"Cheep cheep!"

The small mouse appeared at her feet. It twitched its whiskers as if to urge her on. She couldn't stay in one spot like this for long—especially because she didn't know where the surveillance cameras would be located. She scribbled hastily, rolled the paper up, and tossed

it on the floor. In an instant, the small mouse picked it up in its mouth and disappeared.

If I follow it, will it lead me to Shion?

It was a fleeting thought. She waved it away, and took a step forward.

I'll wait here, until my child comes back to me. I'll stay here, and I'll wait. It's an easy thing to do. He's alive, and he's in the West Block. If he's alive, I can wait. Hope hasn't been cut off from me. I haven't lost yet.

I haven't lost? Who am I fighting with, anyway?

Karan smiled slightly to herself, lifted her face, and strode out of the storage room.

It had been almost a month since then. Just once, a small mouse appeared. It was brown, which meant that Shion was still safe. She felt relieved, but at the same time, distressed. Next time, a black mouse might appear. There was nothing ensuring Shion's safety.

She wanted to see him again. Lately, she had been having frequent dreams. In them, Shion was still young, and she would become afraid if they weren't clasping hands with each other. *I won't let this hand go.* But no matter how strongly she thought so, the little boy's hand would always slip from hers as he began running ahead of her.

"Shion, wait."

Don't go there. It's dangerous over there, there's a horrible danger—

"Shion!"

She would awake to her own scream. These sort of mornings had been continuing for some time. She had often moaned with dizziness, shortness of breath and headaches. But she still continued to bake, and continued to open her store for people like Lili.

Even after news of Shion's arrest and imprisonment had been broadcasted, the attitudes of the people around her hadn't changed.

The factory worker who always stopped by on his way to work to buy raisin bread and a sandwich for lunch— the college student who came once a week to buy a walnut cake— the housewife who came every morning to buy a freshly-baked loaf of bread— all rejoiced that Karan was still continuing her business.

“Whenever I eat your cakes, Madam, it fills me with a happy feeling. I don’t know why, but it just makes me feel happy.”

“Not being able to eat your raisin bread’ll take all the fun outta my day. It’s one of the things I look forward to, so don’t ya take it away from me, Karan-san.”

“You’re a baker, aren’t you? It’s your job to bake, no matter what happens. We’re all waiting, you know. Every morning, we all wait for the aroma of baking bread to waft into the streets.”

These, and so many other countless words had supported her. Although they were still far from strong, the words of others made her soul hold ground as it threatened to collapse from the distress of not being able to confirm her son’s well-being.

She had borrowed their shoulders to stand, clench her teeth, and continue to bake bread and cakes.

But evenings were still unbearable. If the people that passed her storefront on their way home were youths, it was unbearable all the more. It made her want to weep her heart out.

She sank into a chair, and covered her face with her hands.

“Cheep-cheep!”

She lifted her face. Under the glass display case, a small mouse was twitching the tip of its nose. It was brown.

“You came.”

The mouse looked around, then spat a capsule out of its mouth. She instinctively knew what would be inside the transparent capsule case.

Mom, I'm sorry. Alive and well.

The writing was slightly slanted, and distinctive in style. It was none other than Shion's hand.

Mom. The words became his voice as it echoed in her ears. Right then, at this moment, her son was living. He was alive as he wrote these words to his mother. He had written on this tiny piece of paper, a message just several words long. But it was enough to make Karan cry. She couldn't stop the tears that streamed down her face. She traced the words over and over again with her fingers.

Shion was probably in a dire situation. He may well be suffering in uncertainty. But he was not in utter dejection. His cramped but energetic handwriting expressed that.

Mom, I'm alright. I'm not unhappy. I really haven't despaired.

Karan wiped her tears on her apron. She vowed them to be her last. The next time she would cry would be when she was holding Shion again in her arms. Until that day, she would weep no more. Despair no more. *I'll bake bread every day, sell it, manage my money, clean my shop, put out some flowers, and go on living. I'm going to do my job.*

"Starting tomorrow, I'll put out a few more kinds of muffins. I know, I'll make it a Kids' Special day."

Karan nodded at her own words, and reached into the glass case to take out a round savoury roll. The bread, which was sprinkled with powdered cheese, was still fragrant and tasty even after it had gotten cold. With its affordable price to boot, it was a popular choice at her bakery. This one was the last of the batch that she had baked today.

"Thank you. Thank you so much, Mr. Mouse." She broke off a piece and tossed it in front of the little mouse. The dark brown mouse stared warily at the bread for a little while, sniffed it, and began to nibble at it cautiously.

“Is Nezumi your master? Will you tell him that I’m very, very grateful? And please tell him to come by one day to have a bite to eat. I’ll treat him to as much bread as he can eat. And plenty of bread for you too, of course.”

There was knocking at the door. It wasn’t rough-sounding; on the contrary, it was quiet and almost hesitant. But Karan’s heart shrank in fear.

Oh no. There was the possibility that this house was now a part of the Bureau’s surveillance net. She had been so preoccupied with Shion’s note that she had completely forgotten.

Is it the Security Bureau? Have they come to collect this letter—?

There was no complete security system here like in Chronos. There was no security alarm or camera, nor an auto-lock with a built-in recognition sensor. There was only a door paned with thin glass, blinds that covered them, and an outdated manual lock. One powerful man would be able to force his way in easily.

Karan crumpled the note into a ball in her hand. If worse came to worst, she was prepared to swallow it whole. The knocking still continued. She stood up slowly. She clenched her hand into a tight fist.

“Excuse me.” It was a young woman’s voice. “Excuse me . . . is anyone home—?”

The voice trailed off feebly. For an instant, the face of the college student who liked walnut cakes rose into her mind. But it wasn’t her. Karan pressed the button to open the blinds.

Beyond the glass panes of the door stood a slender girl. She was wearing a thigh-length grey coat that seemed to melt into the dusk. Karan remembered the face that looked up and smiled at her.

“Why, it’s Safu.” Karan hastily opened the door. The girl stepped into the store along with the evening breeze, and commented on the tasty

aroma. Then she bowed her head.

“Madam, it’s been a long time.”

“It has. How many years has it been now? You’ve grown so beautiful. I was so surprised.”

“I did used to be mistaken for a boy a lot,” Safu smiled, dimples showing in both her cheeks. Her smile was still the same as before. Like Shion, she had placed in the top rank for her intelligence in the city’s Children’s Examinations. She had been studying with him as a classmate in the Gifted class until the age of twelve. Karan remembered hearing that Safu had lost her parents at a young age, and was living with her grandmother.

After Karan and Shion had been banished from Chronos, Safu was the one classmate that continued to treat Shion as she had before. She had also come to this store once. That time, her face had still harboured some of its girlish innocence.

But the Safu now, who had unwound her light pink scarf, had silky skin and a gentle mouth. She showed hints of the beautiful woman she would eventually grow into.

“But hadn’t you gone away on exchange to another city? I remember hearing something like that from Shion,” Karan said.

“I’ve come back. My grandmother passed away. I received word not long after I arrived there, so I packed up and came right back.”

“Your grandmother? Oh, dear...”

This girl has lost the last of her blood relatives.

“Safu... I don’t know what to say. My heart goes out to you.”

This girl had also experienced the same despair. She had experienced the loneliness of standing by herself in neverending darkness. And she was so young.

“Is there anything I can do? Safu, is there any way I can help?”

"There is." Safu stood in front of Karan, and looked her straight in the eyes. She was not wrought with grief. She wasn't anguished, or spent in exhaustion. She had a resilient and defiant gaze. The kind of eyes that one could only have in her girlhood.

"I came here because I have a favour to ask you, Madam."

"What is it?"

"Please tell me where Shion is."

Karan drew a breath, and gazed back into Safu's eyes.

"Please, tell me," Safu persisted. "He's alive, isn't he? He's not incarcerated in the Correctional Facility. He's alive— where is he?"

Her tone of voice was anxious for an answer. Karan clenched her fist harder around the small scrap of crumpled paper.

"Safu, you know about Shion, then?"

"I only know what's been broadcasted by the Bureau. Which means I don't know anything. They're all lies, aren't they?"

"Safu."

"What they said about Shion planning indiscriminate murder from twisted hatred— that's a huge lie. Shion wasn't twisted, and he didn't harbour any grudges toward anyone."

Karan tugged the girl by her hand and led her into the storage room.

"It looks like this room doesn't have any surveillance cameras or recording devices. Though I'm not sure how safe it is—"

Safu's eyes sparkled.

"If you're being spied on, that means Shion hasn't been captured, right? He's escaped somewhere, hasn't he? He's been able to escape safely, and he's still out there alive— Madam, you're sure of it, aren't you?"

"Why would you say that?"

"Because you're so calm about it... Just one look at you, and I could tell. You looked thin and worn, but you hadn't given up completely.

It wasn't the face of a mother who's lost her son."

"I'm blown away, Safu. You'd make an excellent detective."

"Madam, Shion's alive, isn't he? He's doing well, right?"

Karan continued to hold Safu's gaze with her lips firmly shut.

Was there a possibility that Safu had been requested by the Bureau to come here to seek Shion's whereabouts? Karan thought for a moment. The answer was no. If the Bureau really intended to, there was no need to use Safu. It would be easy enough to extract information from Karan herself using a confession serum.

Was the Bureau actually pursuing her son in earnest?

The thought suddenly crossed her mind. All this time she had been too swayed by emotional exhaustion and confusion to even think about it, but if the Bureau were to actually pursue him with all their might, a mere young boy like him would not be difficult to put under arrest. Even if Shion had thrown his ID card away, tracking satellites would be able to confirm his location. As long as he didn't remain eternally underground, it was nearly impossible to escape the highly-refined tracking satellites.

"Madam."

Safu's hand grasped Karan's arm.

"Shion's outside of No. 6, isn't he?"

"Yes."

"I knew it... but it's only natural, isn't it? Within the city, surveillance would be in effect everywhere. It would be impossible to hide..."

"Safu, what's the image resolution of tracking satellites nowadays?"

"The newest ones would be under fifty centimetres. I heard it's possible to zoom in now by sending commands from the ground. Which means, it's possible to get an image of a person on ground-level with clarity."

The shrewd girl had guessed Karan's next thought. Safu swallowed, and continued talking.

"If they input Shion's data into the system, the satellites would start tracking him automatically. If he's above ground, it would be impossible for him not to be found."

"Then I wonder if he's gone underground. Or—"

Or has his appearance changed greatly from the recorded data— was that even possible?

"Madam . . . I think as long as Shion is outside the city, he'll be safe."

"Safe?" Karan repeated Safu's words in question. She didn't understand what Safu meant.

"I can't say it very well. It's just a hunch I have . . . we've never learned to put things like feelings and hunches into words. But after spending time outside the city, I've come to feel something . . ."

Safu's words became awkward and stumbling. She was desperately searching for words that described not theory, but something that resided within herself.

"Ah . . . I feel like this city is really closed— like it's shut itself in. Like it's just withdrawn completely into itself, solved everything within itself . . . and it's not interested or intrigued by anything outside of it."

"And you're talking about this city, here."

"Yes. That's how I feel. So if Shion is outside the city, I figure the Bureau would leave him alone, no matter if he's the suspect of a serious crime. If he were to come back to the city, though, they would probably arrest him immediately."

"That would mean Shion would never be able to come back, right?"

"As long as the city itself doesn't undergo some kind of change— I feel like that's how it would continue to be."

"That's such a cruel thing to say, Safu."

Safu shook her head, and grasped Karan's arm again.

"Madam, where is Shion?"

"In the West Block. That's all I know."

"West Block— is that so?" A breath escaped Safu's lips. For an instant, her gaze wandered in the air. Then she bowed her head deeply toward Karan.

"Thank you. I'm glad I was able to see you, Madam."

This time, Karan was the one to grab Safu's arm.

"Wait," she said. "What are you going to do, now that you've heard Shion's whereabouts?"

"I'm going to see him."

* * *

Karan was at a loss for words. She couldn't let go of the arm she was grasping. The slender sixteen-year-old girl stood silently before her.

"Safu... what on earth are you saying? Do you know what kind of place the West Block is?"

"I don't. I've only heard that it's a terrifying place. But I'm still going."

"But— but— you said so yourself just now. It might be possible to exit the city, but getting back in..."

"It doesn't matter to me," Safu said determinedly. "Even if I could never come back here again, I wouldn't regret it. If Shion is in the West Block, that's where I'm going."

"Safu."

"I want to see him. I want to see Shion." Safu's eyes welled up with tears. She bit down on her lip.

She's a strong girl, Karan thought. At this young age, she's already learned how to stop her tears.

Karan reached out and embraced the girl to her bosom.

“Thank you, Safu.”

“Madam...”

“You know, I always thought I was alone. I thought I had to carry this burden all by myself... but you were right there with me. You had a place in your heart for Shion too— thank you.”

“I... I love him,” Safu said, her voice trembling. “From the bottom of my heart, I’ve always, always, loved only him.”

“Mmhhh,” Karan murmured in assent.

“I don’t want to lose him. I want to be by his side.”

“I know.” She stroked Safu’s back.

In the distant past, I’d said the same thing once. I’d met a man I cared about more than anyone else, and I never wanted to lose him. I wished I could be by his side forever.

But they had separated. The only thing he left in her hands was her newborn baby. ‘Shion’ was a name that the man had given to his son. It was his last and only gift to her.

“Women can go on living without a man, you know.”

It had come out as a whisper. Perhaps Safu had not heard, for she raised her face and blinked at her as if in question. As she blinked, a single tear spilled over and rolled down her smooth cheek.

“Safu, can I ask you to believe in him?”

“Huh?”

“Believe in him. He’ll come home one day. Somehow, I just know he will. He’s not as weak as he looks.”

“I know that, very well.”

“So please, wait for him,” Karan implored. “Take some time to see how the situation unfolds. I don’t think it would be good for us to act rashly.”

Safu's shoulders raised and dropped as she took a deep breath.

"Madam, can I ask you one more thing?"

"Sure."

"Who's by his side right now?"

It was an unexpected question. Someone who was with Shion— unseen, but by his side nonetheless. Who was it?

"Is it Nezumi, I wonder?"

"Nezumi?"

"Yes, Nezumi. That's the only person I can imagine."

"I wonder if he's a very important person to Shion?" Safu asked.

"I think so. Maybe even as much as you and I are to him."

Safu smiled, and announced that she was going to go home.

"Wait, Safu," Karan said urgently. "Promise me you won't do anything rash. You'll wait until he comes home, won't you? Right?"

The girl's smile didn't fade. But the light in her eyes was defiant, and harboured a clear intention.

"I don't like to wait."

"Safu..."

"I've always been like this. I can't just sit still and do nothing while I wait. This morning, I went to do all the paperwork to get my exchange cancelled. I'm free now. So I'm going to go. I'm going to get to where Shion is, no matter what it takes."

Karan shook her head. She felt like no matter what she said, it would be of no use now. But she had to stop Safu. She couldn't let her make the foolish choice to walk right into the spider's web.

"Safu, I may be Shion's mother, but I don't know every single thing about him. There are probably more things I *don't* know. But— but you see, I know that surely he wouldn't want you to put yourself in danger just to see him. If something happened to you because of that,

then he would suffer for his whole life. This much, I know for sure. So please . . .”

Safu raised her chin. She pursed her lips firmly.

“This has nothing to do with how Shion feels.”

“Huh?”

“I’m doing this because I want to. I’m being selfish, I know. But I can’t just sit and wait for Shion in this state. I want to see him so badly. That’s why I’m going. That’s all there is to it . . . I’m not a mother, Madam—I can’t be strong like you. I can’t keep waiting out of faith. I don’t want to regret anything. If— if by some chance, he ends up never coming back . . . I’m going to be the one to suffer for my whole life. I don’t want that. I don’t want to lose him.”

“But Safu . . .” Karan said the same words again softly, in her heart.

But Safu, you know, women can go on living without a man. It’ll be painful, and it might feel like your limb has been torn away, but you’ll still be able to live on carrying that wound. Even with that burden, one day you’ll be able to laugh again. That’s why— please, don’t put your life on the line for any man. Please, live for your own sake.

How could she respond to this girl’s stubborn and fiercely devoted feelings? How could she convince her? Karan awkwardly but desperately struggled to find the right words. But already, Safu was turning her body away from her.

“Madam, I’m glad I was able to see you. Good-bye.”

No, Safu— never say words of farewell like that.

“Next time, come by before noon,” Karan called out. She willed her words to reach the back of the figure clad in grey.

“Before noon?”

“Yes. I bake bread from early morning right up to before noon. Earlier in the morning, I bake mostly rolls and loaves, but closer to noon I

bake sweet breads and cakes. I'm going to bake three kinds of muffins. Do come and have a bite. I have delicious black tea to go with it, too."

There was a moment of silence between the two.

"I know," Karan continued, "Safu, if you're willing, would you be able to help me with this shop? I'll teach you how to bake bread. I've been very lonely all this time. If you would come and work here, I would be so happy."

She knew she was being foolish. But what else could I have said? How else could I distract her heart from Shion? How can I protect her from danger?

"Thank you, Madam. I love muffins. I'll look forward to the day I can taste them."

The girl once more said her words of farewell, and stepped out into the nighttime streets. Karan silently watched her back disappear. Her arms and legs felt heavy. One sigh after another escaped her lips.

Why were girlhood loves so fluttering, anxious, and blindly devoted? Girls at this age couldn't even wait patiently with faith. Their feelings were so turbulent, so passionate with longing, and so painful.

I'd completely forgotten how it was to feel like that.

Karan sighed again.

It was after she had locked up and was about to turn off the lights that Karan noticed the baby-pink scarf. The forgotten scarf. She could almost feel Safu's agitation.

Yes, Safu was still wavering in her decision. If she had even a little bit of uncertainty, she may be able to stop her from going. It might not be too late after all.

Karan clutched the scarf in both hands, and opened the door of her shop.

* * *

She was about to exit the alleyway into the main street when she realized she had forgotten her scarf. It was a piece that was hand-knitted by her grandmother.

Right now, hand-knitted scarves and sweaters had come back into fashion because many people found the woolly texture pleasing on the skin. But back when Safu had been small, no one wore scarves in No. 6. Most people wore undergarments made of special fibre under their clothes, and all parts that touched the skin were kept at a level temperature. People didn't need to wear scarves, nor even a thin sweater or gloves.

Safu's grandmother knitted as a hobby, and she was always knitting sweaters and scarves for her granddaughter. Safu was often laughed at by classmates for them. Even though they were in the same Elite curriculum, the kids would find any small difference and mock or put others down because of it. The hand-knitted scarves and sweaters she wore became a target of ridicule.

"Wow, is that an artifact from the last century?"

"I've only seen that in a museum before."

No one understood what consideration for others was, or anything about people's souls, or people's dignity. It was because they had never learned about it. Everyone thought they were the chosen ones. The chosen ones were permitted to do anything. People belonged to classes: the chosen ones, and those who were not. Apart from an enormous amount of theoretical knowledge, in the classrooms which were outfitted with state-of-the-art equipment, that was all they had learned.

But Shion was different. He knew to treat others with as much respect as he treated himself. He put himself neither above nor below others. He was an oddity. That was how Safu had felt about him.

This person is different from the others.

She didn't remember when anymore, but he had once complimented a black sweater that Safu was wearing. The sweater had had a reddish-pink trim across the chest and around the mouth of the sleeves.

"It looks really nice on you."

Safu had been checking the day's class schedule on the EL display on her desk. She hesitated a little at being spoken to so suddenly.

"That sweater looks really nice. I can tell just by looking at it that it's really warm."

"Th— thank you."

"No worries. But now I've learned something new."

"Huh?"

"Black and pink go pretty well together. I had no idea they did."

It wasn't anything like a proper conversation. It was abrupt, and one-sided. But at that moment, in Safu's soul, the gentle-faced boy had risen and left an imprint.

What a strange person...

He was a strange person. He was different from the rest. So one day, he'll probably go a different way from the rest of us too. He'll probably leave, throwing away without a second thought everything we've clung onto, everything that we've been taught to prize most importantly.

She had had the feeling before.

So when Shion had passed the selection examinations for the High Institute's Gifted Curriculum, only to lose his privilege shortly afterwards to move away to Lost Town, Safu wasn't surprised. Her premonition had just come true. There was nothing to be surprised about. But she wanted to know why. She wanted to know the meaning behind the eyes Shion made ever so often.

What are you looking at? Who are you looking for?

Don't let your eyes wander so far away. Look at me. I'm right in front of you.

They were such simple words, but she could never bring herself to say them. They were such strong feelings, but they showed no sign of getting across. Communications devices were progressing in quality day by day, and card-type mobile phones, wearable computers and electronic paper all existed and were used in the real world— but all of them were useless to her. They served no function to communicate her soul to the one that stood beside her. It riddled her with anxiety. She was frustrated at herself for not knowing any words of confession, and at Shion for not even trying to sense her feelings. But even so, she had bared her soul just before departing on exchange. She was embarrassed at herself for being so direct, but it was the only way she could say it.

I want you. I've always wanted you.

Simple and direct words. It was the best confession she could muster. But it had been brushed away all too easily.

I always thought of you as a friend.

What an Oscar-award-winning answer. It was so ridiculous she had wanted to dissolve into peals of laughter. So funny, it was almost painful.

You numbskull, idiot, grow up a little, won't you?

She criticized him in her mind. But she had still been able to tell him what she wanted to say. That was good enough. Her load was one millstone lighter. *In two years, when I get back from my exchange, I'll start over again. I'll look at him face-to-face again, when I'll be two years more mature.* Her soul would remain unchanged. She still ached for him with longing.

But Shion for the most part, had not even been looking at Safu. His soul had been captured by something else, and he had forgotten about

her. For the first time, she had seen this calm and serene boy of few words being ruffled right before her eyes.

Shion's emotions had lost their equilibrium, and he had been in agitation.

She had tried to follow Shion's gaze, through the station, through the crowd of people, but she had not been able to see anything. Whoever it was that she couldn't see had probably been the person Shion had been searching for. And right now, that person was probably by his side. Although she had no evidence, she was certain it was true. It was no use wondering who that person might be. He was an unknown persona.

Is it Nezumi, I wonder? That was what Karan had said.

A mouse?

There was. There had been a mouse. Before they had parted at the station, a small mouse had climbed up onto Shion's shoulder.

"Nezumi." She tried saying it out loud. Only the image of a lab rat came to mind. The wind blew. She felt cold around the neck. *Should I go back to get my scarf?* Right as she was about to change direction, a dark shadow appeared before her.

"Are you Safu-san¹?" She was called by her name. A faint chill ran down her spine. These uniforms— they were law enforcement officers of the Security Bureau.

Why were Bureau officials—?

"Safu-san, am I right?" One of the men repeated his question. It was a question he already knew the answer to.

"Yes."

"May I see your ID card?" After confirming the card that Safu showed them, the officials looked at each other and nodded. Their tone of voice

¹An honorific suffix, here similar to *Miss*.

was courteous, but were not friendly in any way. It was mechanical, with no human warmth. Her chill got worse.

“If you don’t mind, we’d like for you to come to the Security Bureau with us.”

“What?”

By the time she had raised a small cry, she had already been flanked by officials on both sides and taken by the arms.

“Please get in the car.”

“No, let me go!” She struggled. Their grip didn’t loosen.

“Stop it! What are you taking me for? Tell me why,” Safu demanded.

“Get the hell in there and you’ll find out soon.” Their words became rough. It looked like they intended to forcibly escort her. Safu let her body relax.

“Alright. Please, just don’t use violence on me.” She took a step forward.

“Ah—!”

She pretended to trip, and let her body fall forward. The men’s hands loosened. She rammed herself into the man to her right. He staggered back a few steps. Safu swung her bag around, and whipped it at the other man. She sped through the space between them.

She had to get away. If she got captured, she would never be able to see Shion again.

What it meant to be forcibly escorted by the Security Bureau— she knew by instinct, not logic. *I’ll never be able to see him again.*

She saw a shadow at the end of the alleyway. It was too far away to make out clearly, but she could see that it was holding something light-coloured in its hands.

Her baby-pink scarf.

“Madam.”

Her feet stopped.

Madam, no. Don't come this way.

She tried to whirl around, but she was grabbed by the shoulder. Her wrist was wrenched and twisted behind her back. A shooting pain. Her mouth was covered as she opened it to scream.

Stop.

The men didn't speak a single word anymore. Silently, they proceeded to capture Safu. A feeling of terror raced through her whole body.

I'm scared. No. Help me. She struggled to get free. She heard the sound of her coat ripping. A button tore off and rolled onto the street.

Help me. No—help—

She felt a shock in her neck. Her body went numb, and she couldn't move as she wanted to.

"No... help me..." She was fading out of consciousness. The night scene before her blurred.

Shion.

Before she could murmur the name, Safu was dragged into the darkness.

* * *

Karan saw the shadowy figures tangled in a struggle. She heard a small cry. She instantly recognized it as Safu's voice. She hesitated for a moment, then broke into a run. But her legs didn't move as she willed them to, and she tripped and fell, and struck her knee hard on the pavement.

By the time Karan had gotten back up, the men were dragging Safu's limp body into a car. It was like a silent shadow play performed on an empty street. But what was unfolding before her under the evenly-spaced street lamps was none other than reality. The men were not

acting in a fiction— they were carrying out their assigned mission, without a single word.

Security Bureau.

Her breath caught in her throat. Curled up on the pavement, she was unable to move. It was not pain, but fear, that prevented her feet from stepping forward.

One of the men glanced this way. Or at least she thought he did. Her body shrank in horror. Karan was curled up outside of where the light shone, so in this darkness it would be difficult to see her. But with night-vision goggles, the time of day was of no concern. They could see into the darkness as if it were midday. They could probably see Karan crystal-clear.

She was terrified.

But the men swiftly got into the car. The black station wagon silently glided forward, and disappeared from Karan's sight within seconds. Karan lifted herself up and clenched the scarf in her hands.

“Safu.”

She said her name out loud, and the real terror of it finally set in. Her hands shook. She staggered home, and locked the door. The faint smell of bread soothed her a little.

Safu had been taken away by the Security Bureau. It had almost been like a kidnapping.

Why? Why did she have to get captured? Is it because of Shion? If it is, then why is it Safu, and not me? Why on earth—

She didn't know. She didn't know anything.

Cheep.

A small mouse poked its head out from under the glass case. It was holding a morsel of cheese bread in its paws.

“Nezumi.”

Would Nezumi be able to help her? Would he bring her salvation?
Would he take the hand she extended out to him?

Toward the small animal with grape-coloured eyes, Karan extended
her palm.

5

HIDDEN DANGER

*The first day or so we all pointed to our countries.
The third or fourth day we were pointing to our continents.
By the fifth day, we were aware of only one Earth.*

SULTAN BIN SALMAN AL-SAUD, ASTRONAUT

AFTER SHION had finished reading the picture book, Kalan gave a sigh of satisfaction.

“That was a good story.”

Rico blew out of his flared nostrils sullenly. He fiddled with the newly-changed bandages on his neck and complained.

“Well, *I* didn’t think it was good. Stories about rabbits are boring.”

“Then what kind of story do you want to hear, Rico?” Shion asked.

“Ummmm—” Rico paused for a moment of thought. “Oh, a story about bread. And— and one about soup and fried sweet potatoes.”

“You must be hungry, Rico.”

Kalan turned to Shion and nodded.

“He’s hungry all the time. Rico gets more hungry than anyone else.”

“Just a minute, then. I think I’ve got some soup...” Was there any soup left for him? A bowlful of soup that could sate Rico’s empty stomach for a short while—

Kalan stood up.

“No, thank you. It’s okay. We have to go home now.” She took her little brother by the hand and made for the door. She stopped, turned, and spoke in a small voice. “Thank you for reading to us.”

“You’re very welcome.”

“Can we come again tomorrow?”

“Of course.”

“Okay.” A smile spread across Kalan’s face, and she half-dragged Rico out the door. Nezumi stretched in the shadow of a pile of books.

“Stupid as always, aren’t you.”

“Stupid? Me?”

“They say the biggest idiots are the ones who don’t realize they’re idiots. I think there was a proverb like that.” Nezumi stood up, and draped the superfibre cloth around his neck. “You tried to give a handout to the kids. You tried to give them leftover soup.”

“Is that a stupid thing to do?”

“Those kids came here to be read to. They didn’t come to beg. If you can ensure that Rico will never starve again, that would be fine and dandy. But if you give him leftover soup on a whim one day, what’re you gonna do the next time he starves? You wouldn’t be able to take care of him all the time. If you’re going to be irresponsible and abandon him halfway, it would be better not to give him anything at all in the first place. Kalan has a better idea of how things work. That girl is bright and dignified. She knew to refuse your half-hearted and reckless charity.”

Shion sank into a chair. Nezumi’s words always inflicted him with pain. It felt like his skin was being torn from his very body. He could almost

hear the sound of his flesh being ripped from him. His foolishness, his arrogance, his heedlessness. His outward vanity stripped from him, he was left naked: superficial and pretentious— his real self. Nezumi strode in front of him and continued to speak while he pulled on a pair of gloves.

“There’s a second example of your stupidity. Wanna hear it?”

“Sure. Tell me.”

“You made a promise for tomorrow.”

“Is there something wrong with that?”

“There’s no guarantee that there’s gonna be a tomorrow.”

Shion took a deep breath.

“So you’re saying that I can’t be sure that I’ll be alive tomorrow to read a book to those children?”

“Yeah. See, you’re starting to pick up on things more quickly. You’re on the Bureau’s Wanted list, and you went wandering around outside yesterday. I wouldn’t be surprised if the tracking satellites have got you already. Maybe the guys who have nothing better to do over at the Security Bureau’s Law Enforcement division are heading over here right now. If they are, then you can forget having a read-aloud tomorrow. At best you’d be in a solitary cell in the Correctional Facility; at worst, you won’t even be able to speak, because you’ll be dead.”

Shion was gazing at Nezumi’s leather-gloved hands. Even when he was speaking crudely, his movements were still graceful. Shion wanted to imitate him if he could.

“What?” Nezumi said. “You’re spaced out again.”

“Oh... uh, sorry.”

“You really have no sense of danger, do you? I think even a newborn fawn would be more cautious than you.”

“Nezumi.”

“I don’t want to hear it,” he said abruptly. “I’m going to work.”

“Do the city authorities really intend to capture me?”

Nezumi stopped.

“This place is adjacent to No. 6,” Shion continued. “If they really set out to catch me, it wouldn’t be hard for them at all . . . no, not even just me. You’re a VC on the run too, aren’t you? And unlike me, you go walking around outside all the time. No. 6’s tracking satellites are able to keep detailed surveillance on one location from their stationary orbit.”

“Uh-huh, so?”

“So I’m wondering why. The authorities aren’t serious about trying to catch us. They certainly haven’t gotten desperate about it, to say the least.”

Nezumi shrugged his shoulders.

“Shion, in both good and bad ways, the city you were born in isn’t interested in things outside of it. For them, everything’s complete within those walls of special alloy. The West Block is their garbage can. Here, they throw away their waste, their pus. If you’re pus to them, they probably think the West Block is an appropriate place for you. They’ve squeezed the pus out of their tiny wound, and thrown it away in the garbage. They’re not going to come back looking for it.”

“So I’d be safe as long as I stayed here.”

“Who knows? It probably won’t go that well, but there’s a chance you will be. —You said you wanted to go on living here, didn’t you? Maybe your dream will come true.”

“Until spring, at least.”

He had a moratorium until spring. Once spring came, and the wasps entered their activity period, what would happen in the interior of

the Holy City? Would the parasite wasps sweep the city with their dread? He had to do something before it got warmer, before spring arrived. He had to come up with a plan before they passed the winter through.

"The man-eating wasps have finally shown themselves," said Nezumi airily. "You should just sit back and watch. It'll be an interesting stage, to see what happens to No. 6. Our wasp will be the star of the stage. A tragedy like no other— or a comedy like no other. I wonder which one it'll be?"

"Mother is still inside that city. I can't stand by and be a spectator."

"What, you're planning on going home?"

"Once, before spring comes. I'm going to see if I can make a blood serum by then."

"Using your own blood?"

"Yeah. It would be impossible to make a perfect one, of course, but it's worth giving it a try."

"Hey, you might be a genius, but what can you do without any beakers or syringes? You sure can't get them here."

"I'm going to try asking Rikiga-san. He might be able to get his hands on at least the bare minimum of equipment I'll need."

"The man won't do anything unless it's going to put money in his pocket," Nezumi said flatly. "You might be the son of a girl he used to love, but try to get him to do free labour, and he'll turn away as fast as anything."

"You think so?" Shion said dubiously. "—But we'll still need a serum. Yeah, I'll tell him if it goes well, he could make some money off of it. I'll convince him someh—"

Nezumi's foot moved. Shion, chair and all, went flying across the floor. A pile of books collapsed. The mice darted away.

“What was that for?” He tried to get up. Before Shion could move, Nezumi’s knee was on his chest, and his hand was holding his shoulder down.

“Shion.” Looking down into Shion’s face from above as he lay on his back, Nezumi moved his fingers from Shion’s shoulder to his throat. Through the leather of his gloves, Shion could feel the sensation of five fingers at his neck. They tightened their grip slowly.

“Aren’t you gonna resist?”

“No. It wouldn’t be any use. You’d agree,” Shion said calmly.

“Giving up pretty easily, huh? Don’t you care about your life?”

“Of course I do.”

“Or are you thinking that I’d never kill you?”

“Yeah.”

Nezumi smiled. His grey eyes, his thin lips, and well-shaped nose formed a beautiful but cruel and pitiless smile.

“Don’t think too highly of yourself,” he said softly. A knife appeared in Nezumi’s hand as if by magic. “I remember doing something like this four years ago too. I was holding you down like this on your bed.”

“I remember too,” Shion said. “That time, I was the one that went lunging at you. You dodged it like it was nothing, and then the next moment, you were pinning me down and I couldn’t even move.”

That stormy night. He remembered the wind howling outside his window. He remembered the sensation of Nezumi’s skinny body, feverish and hot. It had been four years since then.

It’s been four years, and I still have neither skill nor the heart to push this body aside.

“That time, I was holding a spoon. And I said— do you remember? — that if this was a knife, you’d be dead.”

“Yeah.”

“Wanna give it a try?” His fingers moved away from Shion’s throat. In their place, the blade of a knife was pushed under his chin. It was cold. Shion felt a prick of pain.

“I won’t let you make a blood serum,” Nezumi whispered. “I didn’t save you so you could go around doing something like that. Keep your nose out of things you have no business in. Stay holed up here until the time comes.”

“’Til the time comes? When’s that gonna be?”

“When I strike No. 6 with its fatal blow, that’s when.”

“When you strike No. 6...”

“Yeah. I’m going to choke its last breath out of it.”

The weight lifted off Shion’s chest. Nezumi put away his knife, and wiped the cruel smile off his face. He pulled a glove off, and stroked Shion under the chin with his bare finger. A small red smudge came off on his fingertip.

“This is your blood. Don’t even think of doing something foolish like making a serum. Put it to better use.”

“Nezumi.” Shion grabbed his wrist. “Why do you loathe No. 6 so much?”

There was no answer.

“What happened between you and No. 6? Why do you have so much hatred for it?”

Nezumi exhaled shortly. The muscles of his wrist flexed.

“Shion, do you still not understand what kind of place No. 6 is? It sucks the nutrients from the places around it, and while they grow lean, it only become more engorged. It’s a hideous—”

“Parasite City.”

“Yeah. So you do know what I’m talking about. Humankind is becoming more and more intent on expelling parasitic organisms.

What I'm doing is the same thing. I'm going to exterminate and wipe No. 6 off the face of the earth. Once that place is gone, the people here won't have to live in a garbage can anymore."

"But what I want to hear is your personal reason," Shion persisted.

"I don't have one."

"You're lying. You're the one who told me only to fight for myself."

Nezumi fell silent, and shrugged his shoulders.

"Is it revenge?"

Silence. Nezumi didn't even bother to shake Shion's wrist off, and gazed at him as they stood face-to-face.

"Do you want revenge on No. 6? If you do— then what happened?"

"I don't need to tell you."

"I want to hear it." Shion clenched his fingers around Nezumi's wrist.

"I want to know, Nezumi."

Suddenly, Nezumi started laughing. It sounded like a laugh that was genuinely full of mirth.

"Geez, you're like a brat throwing a tantrum. Alright, Shion."

"Mm-hmm?"

"If I tell you, would you co-operate with me?"

"Huh?"

"Would you aid me as I stab a knife into the heart of the city you were born and raised in? Would you help me bring destruction— not salvation— unto that city? I don't need any blood serum. If parasite wasps do exist, then I'll use them. I want to wreak havoc on No. 6 from the inside. I want to watch as the people that have always lived in safety fall into a panic, flee in confusion, and lead themselves to destruction. That's the kind of thing I have in mind. Will you aid me, Shion?"

Shion shook his head from side to side. He dropped his gaze from the pair of grey eyes.

"I can't do that."

Shion's fingers were shaken off.

"You're always like that," Nezumi spat. "You babble on about how you want to know, but you're never prepared to handle it. To know means to be prepared to know. Once you find out the truth, there's no going back. You can't ever go back to being the way you were, blissful and unconcerned. Why can't you understand that? —Shion, let me ask another question."

Nezumi squatted, and hooked a finger under Shion's chin.

"Me, or No. 6 — which one do you choose?"

Shion's breath caught in his throat. He knew he would be faced with this decision one day. He had felt it coming.

Which would he choose? If he chose one, he would lose the other. He didn't want to go back to No. 6. In that sense, he had no attachments whatsoever left for that city. But with people, it was different. His mother, and Safu, who was off in another city now, and the residents of Lost Town were all within those walls. Within those walls were familiar scenery and fond memories.

If Nezumi harboured hatred toward the entirety of No. 6, its people, scenery, memories and all, then he couldn't sympathize with that hatred.

Nezumi's fingers withdrew from his chin.

"You love No. 6, and I hate it. That's why— one day, we're going to be enemies."

It was a murmur. A murmur that stabbed at his heart.

"I have a feeling that we will," Nezumi said quietly.

He had said something similar before. That time, too, Shion had said that he wanted to know. He had wanted to know how Nezumi grew up. I want to know about you, he had said. And now he was receiving the same answer as he did that time. *We're going to be enemies.* But that time, there had still been laughter in Nezumi's eyes, and his voice had been light with jest. But now, it was heavy. A darkness hung over the statement, and its weighty reality sank deeper into Shion. It was Nezumi's honest answer.

Some day, we'll be enemies.

Nezumi rose to his feet, and looked up at the clock on the wall.

"Crap, I'm late," he said to himself. "The manager's probably pissed off." He turned his back to Shion. His voice and his eyes were wiped clean of any shadow of murderous intent. His grey eyes were bright, and his tone of voice was casual.

"Nezumi."

"Yes, yes," Nezumi said unconcernedly. "Mama is going to work now. Little lamb, you are in charge of the house while I'm gone. A scary wolf is going to come by, but whatever you do, you aren't allowed to open the door. Okay?"

"Don't underestimate me," Shion said quietly.

Nezumi's expression hardened. He drew his chin back a little, and knitted his brow.

"What did you just say?"

"I said, don't underestimate me too much."

"Are you offended because I called you a little lamb? Then why don't I give you the role of the Little Red Riding Hood? Cute and innocent Red Riding Hood. Oblivious to doubts and caution, she ends up being eaten by the wolf. A perfect role for you."

I'm not going be provoked. You can condescend me all you like. But I have something I need to tell you.

"Sometimes there are things I can see that you can't."

"I don't understand what you're saying," Nezumi said bluntly. "Oh wait, that's supposed to be your usual line, right?"

"You put everything into dichotomies," Shion continued, ignoring Nezumi's comment. "You either love or you hate. You're either friends or enemies. Outside the wall, or inside the wall. And you always say you can only ever choose one of them."

"Of course. If I stood there at the fork in the road wasting time trying to decide what to do, I'd wither away. That's what cowards and traitors do. You can't run away forever. Some day you'll have to choose one over the other."

"Don't you think that there could be a third way?"

"Third way?"

"Yeah."

"Shion, what you're saying is incomprehensible," Nezumi said irritably.

"What 'third way'?"

"Instead of destroying No. 6, what if you made it disappear? Don't you ever think about that?"

Nezumi put a hand to his cheek, and took a deep breath. He was restraining himself from letting it show on his face, but Shion could tell he was agitated. Shion took a step forward.

"Tear the walls down. Get rid of them."

"You mean No. 6's barriers?"

"Yeah. Without its walls, No. 6 as a place will no longer exist. Everyone will be able to come and go freely. Take away the walls and gates. Then there will be nothing dividing No. 6 and the Blocks from each other, and—"

Nezumi burst out laughing. He bent over, holding his stomach. His hollow laughter echoed in the basement room. The mice huddled

together fearfully and curled up into balls, making them smaller yet.

“Is it that funny to you?” Shion said tensely.

“It’s hilarious. It’s so funny, it’s bringing me to tears. You’re not just a little airheaded, are you? Do you also have delusionary tendencies? What *third way*, huh? Those are just pretty words, an unrealistic fairy tale.”

“Nezumi, I was serious when I said—”

“I’ll have none of it.” There was not a remnant of a smile left in his face as Nezumi said those words. “We can’t have that place disappear so easily just yet. We have to let it keep being the way it is, let it dress itself up and eat a bellyful of good food, let it grow fat. I can just imagine how great it must feel to slice that belly open with one blow. I’m going to pull out all of its gorged innards and expose it to the light. I can’t wait. Yeah, spring is going to be great. I’m quite excited.”

Shion lifted his chin, and clenched both hands into fists at his sides.

“I don’t care if you laugh at me, I still think it can be done,” he said defiantly. “I want to believe that it’s possible.”

“You’re just looking for an escape route,” Nezumi shot back. “You’re looking for a way to avoid getting hurt. Say if you do get rid of the walls: you won’t get any kind of heaven. It’ll be hell. Tumult, disorder, fighting, looting— you don’t know how much these people have been oppressed until now. You don’t know how many people have been sacrificed so that city can be where it is. You don’t know, and that’s why you can spin fairy tales like that. Shion, it can’t be done. It’s not like mixing paint, you can’t mingle them together and make them one. Either one will have to destroy the other, that’s the only solution. That’s what fate has set out. Love and hatred, friends and enemies, those within and those outside the wall— and you and I. They can never be as one, and neither can we.”

“You don’t know until you try. For one thing...”

“For one thing?”

“—I know I wouldn’t become your enemy. Ever. No matter what happens, even if I’m killed, I would be on your side.”

“Just pretty words.”

“It’s my resolve.”

It was his will, and it was unwavering. In order to know, you had to try it first. He believed that human souls, when faced with a dilemma, would ultimately choose peace over war, songs and scriptures over weapons, and love over hatred. It wasn’t a fantasy. It was hope. *I still haven’t abandoned hope. I want to find a road that you can’t see, and point it out for you.*

Nezumi averted his gaze. He kicked the chair leg with the tip of his shoe.

“It pisses the hell out of me sometimes, when I’m with you. Your head’s full of naive and idealistic theories, and you talk as if you’re actually serious about them.”

“You wouldn’t listen if I wasn’t serious about it.”

“That’s enough,” said Nezumi curtly. “Just shut up.” He began working at setting upright the chair that he had kicked over, and lightly thumped the faded cushion seat. “An idealistic armchair theorist like you should just sit here all day long. Ignore the world outside, and mull over this and that all inside your head. Don’t talk to me anymore. Don’t make me any angrier than this.”

“Nezumi—” Shion began.

“I don’t want to hear it. Listening to you makes me sick. Sick and tired. Damn it, if I knew you were such a chatterbox, I would never have brought you here in the first place.”

“I’m not a chatterbox. I actually don’t like speaking to people much.”

“Then all the more reason for you to shut up.”

But I can't just shut up. I can't sit here, close myself off in my own world and sever myself from the world outside. I have to talk to you, listen to your story, and search for a way that we can go on living together.

I don't want to live like this anymore— plugging my ears, keeping my mouth shut, closing my eyes. Nezumi, you were the one that made me feel that way. Pry your hands away from your ears, you said, open your mouth, and will your eyes to see. Those were your words. And now you're telling me to shut up? You're telling me you don't want to hear it?

"Who's the coward now?" He muttered out loud without thinking. Nezumi's expression hardened.

"What did you say?"

Is this gonna end in a fight? The thought flitted in a corner of his mind. Then he decided he wouldn't mind if it did. Nezumi would probably easily wrestle him to the ground. Four years ago, and even now, this hadn't changed. Shion had no chance against him. But it wasn't about winning or losing.

He wanted to charge at Nezumi with his own body, his own flesh. He wouldn't mind if he were to be pushed to the ground, punched, or pinned so that he couldn't breathe. If even for a moment, he wanted to collide with Nezumi as equals.

But Nezumi averted his gaze again. He made for the door without even looking at Shion. But before Nezumi's hand closed around the doorknob, there came a muffled scratching sound from outside. Something was tearing at the door. A moment later, there was a bark. Nezumi and Shion looked at each other.

"Sounds like a dog."

Nezumi opened the door. A large, dark brown dog was sitting in the doorway, wagging its tail. It had a white parcel in its mouth.

"You're from Inukashi's—something happen to him?" Nezumi retrieved the package from the dog's mouth. It was a letter. Nezumi

read it, and the corners of his mouth relaxed.

“Shion, there’s a job request for you.”

Shion ran his eyes through the letter that was passed to him. It was nearly illegible. The paper itself was yellowed, old, and wet with dog saliva, and the handwriting meandered all over the place. But it thrilled Shion’s heart more than any other letter he had received.

hey shion, feel like working? Its a dog-washing job.
i need some help. If you wanna do it, follow this guy.
As long as hes with you, the Disposers wont do
anything funny. see ya
Oh PS: this guy said your made for dog-washing.

“What’s dog-washing?”

“It’s just how it reads. You wash dogs— the ones that Inukashi lends out for heating. They’re the big, quiet ones with long fur. There must be about twenty of them altogether. He gets customers sometimes that don’t pay because they complain the dogs are smelly or have fleas, so once a week on a sunny day he takes them out for a wash. So what are you gonna do?”

“I’ll go, of course,” Shion glowed. “He’s asking me if I want to come work. It’s my first job. I actually have a job now.”

“Will you stop gushing?” Nezumi said with a grimace. “Man, you really are easy to please, aren’t you?”

“Nezumi, should I take anything with me? Do you think I’ll need soap?”

“You probably won’t need anything. Just beware of men and women who might pull you into alleyways, I guess. If that dog is with you, I don’t think you need to worry. I’ll go with you partway.”

“Speaking of which, I do want to see your workplace one day. And see you on the stage.”

“Don’t get your hopes up.”

The dog barked.

“Thank you,” Shion told him. “Thanks to you, I’ve been able to get my hands on my first job. I’m all yours, take me there.”

The dog wagged its tail as Shion crouched down toward it, and licked him under the chin.

“You’re licking my wound for me? You’re a nice boy.”

“Dumbass, he only licked it because he smelled blood.”

“I don’t think so. He did it because he was concerned about me. But whatever the reason, he’s certainly nicer than you,” Shion said wryly.

“Don’t compare me with a mutt,” Nezumi said sullenly. He looked genuinely disgruntled. The way he stuck his lip out brought back a fleeting image of his face four years ago. It somehow made Shion want to laugh, and for some reason, made him feel nostalgic.

“What?” Nezumi said. “What’re you grinning about?”

“Nothing,” Shion said mildly. “Just noticing you’ve still got a childish part left in you. It made me kind of happy.”

“Huh?”

“Never mind. Alright, then,” he said briskly, “lead the way.” He petted the dog lightly on the back. Picking up the cue, the dog bounded up the stairs. Shion followed after it and exited the basement room.

The sun was bright in his eyes. *I see— a day like this would be perfect for washing dogs.* He tilted his face up to the sky and breathed in deeply.

* * *

It looked like Shion's figure was being sucked into the light. Whenever Nezumi crawled out of his dark hole, the light always stabbed at his eyes. He didn't like bright places. Places filled with light always turned easily into areas of danger. He knew this well from experience. He couldn't be like Shion and fully accept the light without hesitation. Friends and enemies. Outside the wall, and inside the wall. Love and hatred. Light and dark.

I told you, didn't I? They can never co-exist. I've told you so many times, and you still don't seem to get it.

He swallowed a sigh that was halfway up his throat. The lump sank deep down into his chest again.

As Nezumi was about to lock the door, a mouse came rubbing itself against his foot.

"You're back." He scooped it up in his hand. The mouse seemed exhausted. Its grape-coloured eyes were bleary.

"You've worked hard. Rest up." The mouse shook its head, and spat a capsule onto Nezumi's palm. There was a light blue piece of paper inside.

"A reply, huh." If it was, Shion would rejoice. Today must be a lucky day for letters.

Just for an instant, a blackness flitted across his heart. A black thing. It had no form—it was only dark. Uncertainty, a bad premonition. A dull pain throbbed in the back of his head.

His ability to smell impending danger or calamity was something he had had since birth. Thanks to this ability, he had been able to escape numerous times, in some instances by a mere hair. The contents of this capsule carried a bad smell. It smelled like the first step toward something that would chase him into destruction...

He opened the capsule. The paper was scribbled with what looked like Karan's handwriting.

*Safu was taken away by the Security Bureau.
Help. -K*

The pain got worse. Nezumi screwed his eyes shut, and leaned heavily against the door.

Safu— it was that girl. *Why was she— wasn't she an elite? Just like Shion... just like Shion... which means— she was taken in place of him? The second scapegoat? But he didn't know for what reason. Why do they need a sacrifice? Shion was framed as a murderer to cover up what the parasite wasp did. They should only need one perpetrator. So why— why did the authorities want another sacrifice? Why—*

Either way, if that girl is the second sacrifice, she hasn't been taken to the Security Bureau. She's headed for the Correctional Facility. A mouse takes half a day to get back from No. 6. There's no more time. She's probably been imprisoned in the Correctional Facility already.

Why were they eliminating so easily a Gifted Curriculum student that they had measured, carefully selected, and spent considerable funds and time to raise?

Why? Why— what was going on? What are they hiding? What's about to happen?

Nezumi slowly brought himself upright.

He didn't know. It was a mystery. But now was not the time to be solving puzzles. He had an important decision to make.

What to do with this?

If he showed this scribbled note to Shion, he would probably head right for the Correctional Facility, without even knowing what kind of place it was. He would go, with the single intention of rescuing Safu. A sheltered simpleton of a little boy like him would never be able to let a friend's death go unheeded. If he could prevent it, it was

reason enough for him to go diving head-first into a nest of venomous snakes. He would willingly embark to his own death.

Or do I crush it?

It was very easy to do. This girl, Safu, had nothing to do with Nezumi. She was a stranger. It wasn't any of his business what should happen to her. He could leave things be, and it wouldn't matter. Nothing would change.

But if Shion died, something within him would change greatly. He didn't want to see Shion die. He would probably suffer. Not Shion, but he— Nezumi— would suffer, from having to live and stand before Shion's corpse. He would be experiencing the same suffering again, of being broiled alive in hellfire.

You've gotta be kidding me. I've had enough of this already.

He didn't want to lose him. He didn't want to experience the remorse of having been the one that lived.

I don't want to lose him? I would suffer?

He was clicking his tongue in frustration.

So this was what he had come to. He almost felt like curling up on the ground.

He had rescued Shion from the hands of the Security Bureau to return the debt that he owed him. That was it. He never wished to be attached to him. Shion wasn't the only one— he had never wished to be attached or to share his heart with any other person. Feelings for others were even more dangerous than the light. He was not to share a connection with anyone. Whether it be with a man or a woman, he was only to develop relationships that could be severed easily.

Never open your heart to anyone. Don't believe in anyone but yourself.

The last words of the old woman. He was turning against them again.

I don't want to lose him. I would suffer.

Nezumi carefully folded Karan's memo again and stuffed it inside the capsule.

He was used to loss, he was used to suffering. Wasn't he? Even if Shion did die, perhaps he wouldn't moan in agony over his gaping loss. Even if he did, perhaps it would only be for a short while.

He would be able to use his bed and shower freely. He wouldn't have to worry about making enough soup. He wouldn't be pelted incessantly with questions, or be spoken to. He would be released from having to look up halfway through a book to lend an ear to the other's words, and to give an answer while trying to restrain his irritation.

He would go back to his normal life. That was it. He should just pass the memo, capsule and all, to Shion, and then turn his back on him.

On a whim, Nezumi opened his door again.

Before him was his room, filled with books and sparse furniture. The basement chamber, surrounded by thick walls, was a nest that suited a rat like him well.

The room looked barren and dark, and larger than usual. Its coldness, darkness and vacant space seeped into his bones.

That was what being attached to someone meant. He would no longer be able to live alone anymore. It was one of many artfully-set traps that lurked at every corner of his life. And to this one, he had fallen victim.

Have I still got a chance?

"Nezumi, what's wrong?" Shion called from the top of the stairs, the entrance that led to ground-level. "The dog's pulling at me. Hurry and come on up." His shadowy figure floated up against the glare of noon.

Have I still got a chance? Shion, will I still be able to live without you? After some amount of suffering, would I be able to detach myself from

the trap you've become?

Would I be able to sever you?

"Nezumi?" The voice from above dropped apprehensively.

"Nothing— I'm coming." He closed the door. He heard the dog bark. There was light. The rustle of a breeze.

Nezumi wrapped the superfibre cloth around his neck again, and ascended the stairs step by step. He kept ascending to the ground above.

Volume III

This is why humans are troublesome. The more you involve yourself with them, the tighter the shackles become. It becomes harder to live only for yourself. Nezumi receives a memo from Karan reporting that Safu has been taken away by the Security Bureau. Although he keeps it under wraps, Shion finds out the truth and resolves to save her. The chance of success is infinitely close to zero — and the story breaks into full sprint!

What lies beyond the wall...

1

THE BEAUTIFUL ONES...

*Away, and mock the time with fairest show:
False face must hide what the false heart doth know.*

MACBETH, ACT I SCENE VII

THE SKY was blue and bright. The sun's rays, approaching noon, were gentle and warm. It was a temperate afternoon that made the frigidness of a few days ago seem like a dream.

Shion lifted his face, and narrowed his eyes as he looked up at the azure sky.

He thought it was beautiful.

The sky was beautiful. The blinding whiteness of the crumbled ruin as it reflected the sunlight was beautiful. The odd bubble that floated up as if by magic from the soapsuds was beautiful. The sheen on the fur of a freshly-washed dog was beautiful.

All the little things that surrounded him were beautiful. A lone bubble floated up again and drifted on the gentle breeze.

"Hey, stop slacking off," Inukashi's voice called over to him. "There are still tons of dogs left. Space out every other minute like that, and

the sun's gonna set before you're even halfway through."

As if in agreement with Inukashi's reprimand, a large white dog covered in suds gave a low growl.

"Oops, sorry."

Shion stuck his hands back into the suds and washed the dog thoroughly with his fingertips. The dog evidently found it very pleasing, for its eyes were closed and its mouth lolled half-open. Today was only Shion's second time at his dog-washing job, but already he had learned that dogs had many different facial expressions. They also varied in personality and tendency: some were lazy, others diligent; some high-strung, others laid-back; they could be mild, impatient, rambunctious— all of this was new to him.

The white dog that he was washing now was a female that was quite old. It was gentle and intelligent, and reminded him of the wise old woman that often appeared in tales.

"Shion, you're spending way too much time on each dog. How long is it taking you to wash just one?" Inukashi, with his long hair tied at the back and soapsuds on his nose, pulled a face at him.

"You lend these dogs out to serve as blankets, don't you?" Shion answered. "They need to be cleaned properly, then."

"A quick wash is good enough. The customers are all like dirty strays anyway, the bastards."

In a building mostly reduced to rubble, there was a part that still somewhat retained a semblance of the hotel that it used to be. Inukashi lent space there as overnight accommodation for those who had nowhere to stay. He lent out dogs in preparation for the coming winter. Boarders spent the night buried amongst several dogs, and by doing so were able to avoid freezing to death. Shion had been hired to wash these dogs.

“Inukashi, I don’t think that’s a nice thing to say about your customers.”

“Huh? What’d you say?”

“It’s not good to call your customers bastards, or call them dirty.”

Inukashi rubbed his nose with the back of his hand, and gave a small sneeze.

“Are you my Mum or what, Shion?”

“No. I’ve been hired by you to wash your dogs.”

“Then that makes me the employer and you the employee. And your job is to shut up and do what you’re told.”

Inukashi yanked the white dog out of Shion’s hands, and began vigorously rinsing the dog by dumping water over it, which he had drawn from the stream.

At the back of the ruins, there ran a small, clear river. Not long after Shion had escaped from No. 6 to this West Block, he had nearly died from a parasite wasp that had planted itself in his body. Although he was unconscious most of the time from severe pain and high fever, he still remembered clearly the taste of the cold, delicious water that had slid down his throat numerous times.

When he had thanked Nezumi for giving him water and treating him, he had gotten a gruff answer that there was a decent spring nearby. Perhaps this stream originated from that spring.

“Inukashi, don’t do that. All the soap is getting into the river.” Shion hastily restrained Inukashi’s hands. Soapsuds bobbed on the stream as they drifted away from them.

“So what?”

“Everyone drinks from this stream, don’t they?”

“Well, yeah, of course. We don’t have any fancy facilities that give you sanitized and temperature-controlled water at the push of a button.

Everyone draws water directly from the river or spring.”

“Then you can’t get it dirty. It’s bad for the people downstream.”

Inukashi stared into Shion’s face for a brief moment.

“And why should I care about the people downstream?”

“Well, I mean...” Shion faltered. “If you know that the people downstream are going to be drinking from here, you wouldn’t want to make it dirty for them. That’s normal, right?”

“Normal? By whose standards are we talking about, Shion? This is the West Block. You wouldn’t be able to survive here if you went around putting everyone else first.”

“Yeah, but there’s no need to go out of the way to make it dirty,” Shion protested. “We can do what we did yesterday, and put water in steel drums and wash the dogs there.”

“Yesterday we only had small dogs. FYI, Shion, we were supposed to get through all the dogs yesterday. You taking your sweet time is costing us. You understand that, right?”

“Yeah.”

“Not only are you horribly slow, the dogs we’re washing today are all big. And that’s not it— wait for it— *there are shitloads of them*. Are you getting the picture? If we drew a bath each and every single time, it would take forever.”

Then Inukashi stopped, and shrugged slightly.

“But if you wanna draw water from the river on your own, I’m not gonna get in your way.”

“Fine. I’ll do it.”

“It’s heavy labour, man.”

“I know.”

“By the way, I’m only paying you to wash the dogs. Carrying the water is something you’re doing entirely on your own.”

"I don't mind."

"Well then, get cracking. I'm gonna have lunch."

The white dog shook itself vigorously, and water droplets flew in all directions. Shion grabbed the pail that Inukashi had tossed at him, and drew a pailful of water from the river.

"Shion," Inukashi said abruptly.

"Hm?"

"Why?"

"Why what?"

"Why shouldn't I badmouth my customers? Why do I have to bother about the people downstream?"

Shion looked up into Inukashi's tan face as he sat perched atop a pile of rubble.

"Because we're the same."

"Same?"

"They're the same humans as us. So—"

Inukashi suddenly threw his head back and laughed. His voice rang out and was sucked into the bright blue sky. Several dogs began barking in agitation.

"Same humans, huh? Ha ha, you nearly bowled me over. I've never heard those words before in my life. Shion, is that honestly what you think?"

"Yeah, is there a problem?" Shion said stoutly.

Inukashi leapt down from the rubble and drew up to him. He had a small frame, and only reached up to around Shion's shoulders in height. His thin arms and legs protruded from his black clothes, and his skin was the shade of tanned leather.

"So my filthy customers, and the brats that come here to draw water are the same humans as us?"

“Yeah.”

“Are you and I the same humans?”

“Yeah.”

Inukashi lifted his arm and extended it upwards to the noon sun above.

“Are the people of No. 6 the same humans as us?”

Shion nodded slowly, and answered.

“Yeah.”

Inukashi’s smooth, tan skin glowed in the sunlight, and his long bangs cast a shadow over his forehead and eyes. Under its veil, the same tan-brown eyes blinked a few times at him.

“Shion, you’re gonna die.”

“Huh?”

“Is your head up in the clouds or something? If you keep believing in that fantasy of yours, you’ll never survive here.”

“Nezumi tells me the same thing,” Shion said. “That I’ve got my head up in the clouds.”

“The clouds wouldn’t be high enough, actually. Your head must be in space, or something. I don’t know what space is supposed to be like, but it’s really high up, right? And sometimes you burn up, just like that, before you even get there.”

“I’ve never been to space, but yeah, I guess it is really high up.”

Inukashi climbed nimbly up the ruins, and sat down with the blue sky at his back. He dangled his legs over the edge, and spoke quietly as if to himself.

“I wonder why Nezumi even puts up with you. He hates people that are all talk, and unrealistic.”

“Inukashi, are you close with Nezumi?”

“Close? What do you mean by close?”

Shion heaved the pail up the path of withered grass and rubble, and dumped the water into the steel drum.

"It means you know a lot about each other."

"Oh, if that's the case, then no. I know less than the tip of that guy's tail, and I wouldn't want to know." As he spoke, Inukashi pointed at the light brown puppy that was tumbling about at Shion's feet. Its tail was tipped with white.

"I thought you were friends, but I guess I was wrong..."

"Friends!" Inukashi exclaimed incredulously. "There's another word I don't hear often. Friends. Hah, ridiculous. Nezumi only comes here when he wants information that me or my dogs have collected. I give him information, and he gives me money. That's it, that's everything."

Inukashi fell silent. His gaze wandered, collided with Shion's, and slid away.

"It's not just information and money that you guys trade," Shion said. A statement, not a question.

"Uh— well, once in a while, he— sings for me."

"Sings?"

"He has a good voice. So I... I get him to sing. Sometimes when my dogs die— it's alright when you wake up and they're already dead, but— sometimes, they're sick or hurt, and don't die as easily, and they... they suffer. It hurts them so much, they whimper all night long. That's when I get him to sing. I don't know what the song's called. But it— I don't know how to describe it— I dunno, what would it be?" Inukashi murmured to himself.

"What does it sound like?"

"Huh?"

"Nezumi's song. Nezumi's voice. If you were to compare it to something, what would it be?"

Inukashi tilted his head to the side, and pondered in silence. Shion also silently continued carrying pailfuls of water. He made several trips between the river and the steel drum, and when more than half of it had been filled, Inukashi opened his mouth again.

“The wind, maybe . . . ?” he said hesitantly. “A wind that comes blowing from far away . . . yeah, his song steals away souls that are struggling because they can’t die. Just like how the wind scatters flower petals, his song cuts the soul away from the body. Any dog, no matter how much he’s suffering, closes his eyes and becomes quiet. You think he’s just settled down, but he’s actually not breathing. They all die quietly, like all their suffering was just a dream or something.” He paused. “It was like that with my Mum, too.”

“Your mother’s passed away?”

“Yeah. She got killed by a couple of brats that live downstream, the ones you said I shouldn’t make the water dirty for. She got rocks thrown at her, and was clubbed to death with an oak stick. But my Mum was at fault for that, too. She tried to steal their only supper. She snuck into their hut, and got caught holding their dried meat in her mouth. When she finally got away and managed to come back, both her front legs and ribs were broken, and she was bleeding from her mouth. There was nothing we could do.”

Having finished filling the drum with water, Shion wiped the sweat off his brow. He couldn’t understand Inukashi’s words.

“Inukashi, by front legs . . . you mean your mother’s, right?”

“Yeah. She’s a dog.”

“A dog?”

Shion could feel his jaw drop. Inukashi looked at him and gave a laugh. His voice was high and rang out clearly into the air.

“I was dumped here when I was still a baby,” he explained. “The old man that picked me up was a weirdo who lived here with his dogs, and

he raised me together with them. My Mum gave me milk. She licked me, and curled up with me to sleep. When it got cold, she huddled close to me and my siblings— her puppies— and kept us warm. She always used to say, you poor thing, you have no fur— but at least you're cool in the summer, and you don't get fleas. She'd tell me that over and over again, and lick me until I was clean."

"She must have been a great mother," Shion said softly. "Gentle and caring."

Inukashi blinked several times.

"You really think so, Shion?"

"I do. She cherished you. Since you didn't have fur, she protected you and made sure you didn't freeze."

"Yeah. Mum was always really nice. I still remember how her tongue felt. It was warm, and wet... funny, I can never seem to forget about it."

"It's a gift of memory."

"Huh?"

"It's a gift of memory from mother to son. Memories that your mother's left behind for you."

Inukashi stopped dangling his legs, and drew his chin back.

"I've never thought of it like that..." he said pensively. "A gift of memory, huh..."

Shion knelt at the river's edge and sipped a mouthful of water.

It was cold. It soaked through his entire body, and it was delicious.

Ah yes, it's this water.

It was the water that had quenched his exhausted body like an elixir after his battle with the parasite wasp. Not only his body— it was from the moment the water had slid down his throat and he had found

it delicious, that Shion's entire being was revived again. He believed it so.

This water was connected to what it meant to be alive. This coldness, this deliciousness. It was connected to the voice that called to him, telling him, *don't die, live, come crawling back up again.*

That was why he would remember it forever. There was no way he could forget it. Deep within Shion, this water and that voice had set its roots down, and would continue to thrive, never to wither. And at times, it would float to the surface of his conscious, and each time, it would whisper to him.

Don't die. Live. Come crawling back up again.

It was a gift of memory, indeed.

"I'll bring ya some lunch." Inukashi stood atop the rubble, and spoke in a tone that sounded more like a command. "You better be finished with that black one by the time I get back. I won't let you have it until you're finished."

"Wow, I even get lunch? That's nice of you."

"I don't just serve this to anyone, you know. It's a full-course meal. And by full I mean two: bread and dried fruit."

"That's more than enough."

Running a brush through the black dog's fur, Shion grinned at Inukashi. Months had passed since escaping to the West Block, and chronic hunger gnawed at Shion persistently. At times he wished he could eat his fill of dishes with plenty of meat, fish, and eggs, and he yearned for the bread and cakes that his mother Karan baked. But in contrast, things that he had never even acknowledged as food before— soup made with bits and ends of vegetables, and bread that was beginning to mould— made his mouth water, and satiated his appetite.

Being able to eat is enough.

Here, everyone was starving. They starved, froze, and passed away. Shion knew in his own way how precious the single slice of bread was that Inukashi was about to give him.

He looked up to the sky. The sun was bright. This light was also shining down on No. 6. His former workplace at the Forest Park, the high-end residential area of Chronos, Lost Town, where his mother lived, and here, West Block, were bathed in the same light. But things were so different. Too different.

Divided by a wall of special alloy, prosperity and poverty stood in opposition to each other. Life and death. Light and dark. At the same hour that an extravagant party was being hosted in the interior of No. 6, while people smacked their lips at the numerous elaborate and delectable dishes, in a corner of the West Block, an elderly person clad in rags would starve to death. While the boys and girls of No. 6 would crawl into their beds in their air-conditioned rooms, the children in the barracks of the West Block would huddle close to each other to avoid freezing to death.

It was the truth that Shion had seen with his eyes. There were far too few things which were like the sunlight, equally and amply distributed among all.

“Get working, then,” Inukashi spat, and disappeared in the shadows of the ruin.

* * *

All that remained of the entranceway, which had probably once been flanked by thick, wooden doors, were pairs of rusted hinges. Every time the wind blew in, their screeching noise assaulted the ears. Inukashi passed through that entrance to climb the stairs to the second floor. Some sort of architectural consideration had left this particular part

of the building, which used to be a hotel, withstanding against the elements. Durable though it was, plaster still peeled from the walls, and the hallways and ceilings were webbed with countless cracks.

Buildings too possessed a life. From the moment they were abandoned, buildings began to decay. They began to die. This hotel, which had become a ruin, continued crumbling and decaying still. It marched steadily toward destruction, neither loathing the heartlessness of its human owners, nor lamenting its fate.

Inukashi occasionally wondered what he would do once this building had completely collapsed into rubble.

The old man that had picked him up, given him dog's milk, and taught him speech and the written word was no longer here. He had wandered outside one snowy day, never to return again.

Snow? Was it snowing? Maybe it was thundering that day. Or it might have been a morning with chapped winds... either way, the old man disappeared. He vanished, without even leaving any words of farewell.

He wasn't lonely, because he had his dogs. From that day until now, he had lived here with them. He knew no other home. He also knew of no other human company. Nezumi was probably the same. He may have been to more places than Inukashi, but he probably lived alone, not knowing anyone else, nor ever having the need to know. Inukashi had assumed so, for no particular reason. He had no grounds for his argument, but he figured he wasn't entirely wrong. Inukashi had a sharp sense of smell. Nezumi always only carried the smell of loneliness. When that scent blurred, and Inukashi had begun to notice a mingled scent of another, Shion had appeared before him.

He was a weirdo. He was very strange. His hair was snowy-white, and he had a red scar. Though Inukashi wasn't sure, he'd heard that the raised scar covered Shion's whole body like a coiled snake. But in terms of appearance, there were tons more people who were weirder

than him. His appearance wasn't the only thing—Shion was also weird on the inside. He said not to dirty the water for the brats downstream. *He said the people inside the Holy City and people like us were the same. And he talked about the gift of memory. Not as any kind of joke or sarcasm, but in all seriousness.*

He was weird. Very weird. Why is Nezumi hanging around a weirdo like him?

Inukashi walked down the hall, and opened the door at the very end of it.

“Nezumi.”

Nezumi was sitting in a chair with his feet up on the table.

“Can't you even knock before entering the room?” Inukashi said irritably. “Someone didn't learn proper manners from Mama. Geez.” He then swung a blow as hard as he could toward the pair of long legs resting on the table. Nezumi sniffed lightly in derision, and took his legs off.

“I called out before coming in. That dog gave me permission to enter.” A dog with black patches on its fur was lying in a corner of the room. It cocked its head to the side, and gave a wide yawn.

“If you're here to pick up Shion, you're early. If he keeps going at this pace, he probably won't be done 'til evening.”

“Pick up? Never.”

“But he scuffled with the Disposers, din' he? Isn't it dangerous to let him walk by himself? I'll send him with a dog on the way home, either way.”

“That's good enough.”

“But the Disposers don't give up easily. That guy stands out, and if he gets caught, who knows what they might do to him.”

Nezumi's grey eyes sparkled, and a slight smile played on his lips.

“Does it matter to us what the Disposers do to Shion? What’s up, Inukashi? You’re being awfully nice. Not like you at all.”

Inukashi glared at Nezumi silently.

The small playhouse was one of the few entertainment facilities in the West Block. And as one who stood upon its stage, Nezumi made his audience pay— or rather, made them want to pay— out of what little money they had for a show that provided them no physical nourishment. It was Nezumi’s beautiful countenance and deep, clear voice that made them want to. His voice laid trapped and dying souls to rest, gently detaching them from the body. His appearance made it impossible to discern whether he was male or female, human or demon, God or the Devil. His audience, in a brief slice of the evening, could forget the day’s hardships and the next day’s sorrows, and let themselves be immersed and intoxicated by his voice.

Once the outside the shabby doors of the playhouse, reality waited for them— no money in their pockets; children crying for food at home— but despite that, the people’s faces were always filled with drunken contentment as they scattered hither and thither into the darkness.

It’s all an illusion. He’s just a big fraud.

Every time he met with Nezumi, Inukashi mentally spat these words from the pit of his stomach. Nezumi was like the beautiful mistress who manipulated men and milked them of all that they were worth. Inukashi had been through that experience once, too.

Mum was suffering so much, I didn’t know what else to do but to call him. I asked him to let my Mum’s soul go peacefully. That was still good. His song was impressive, and my Mum was released from suffering. But what he did before that— the sheer amount of money he demanded while my Mum lay there suffering— it was enough money for me to live a whole month without working. With other dogs, I would’ve given up. I would slit their throat, or smash their skull with my own hands, and let them

die a quick and easy death. But I couldn't do that to my Mum. I could never do that to her with my own hands. He knew that, and that's why he demanded that sum. After burying Mum in her grave, me and the dogs had to work for three days without any food. He's a fraud. He captures people's souls, clamps down on them, and shows them a fleeting dream. It might be vivid, but it's still fake. Dreams are dreams. You can't live on them.

Inukashi unlocked the cabinet and retrieved the bread and a bag of dried fruits.

"If you're not here to pick Shion up, what're you here for?"

"Can you treat me to some lunch? I'm starving."

"*You jest,*" Inukashi said in a mocking voice. "I don't have anything fitting for a star actor like you. But if you pay me one silver coin, I can give you bread, fruits, and water."

"One silver coin for mouldy bread, rock-hard dried fruits and water from the stream? That's stretching it, Inukashi."

"Way cheaper than how much it costs for your singing."

Nezumi chuckled softly.

"You still holding a grudge about that?"

"Damn right, I am."

"I sang for your dogs so many times after that. It might as well have been charity, for the amount I took as payment."

"That's what pisses me off even more. You took advantage of me. I got gypped out of all the money I had that time. I was this close to starving to death."

"Well, if that happens again, feel free to call me," Nezumi said amiably. "I'll sing you a song about food, and see you off."

"Just teeming with compassion, aren't you?" Inukashi retorted. He hunched his shoulders, and stood directly in front of Nezumi. He

posed his question once more.

“What do you want?”

Nezumi, still deeply seated in the chair, tossed a single coin onto the table. Inukashi’s eyes widened.

“Gold...” he whispered.

“It’s real. See for yourself.”

Inukashi pinched the shiny coin between his fingertips, and gazed at it.

“You’re right— it’s real. Yeah. It’s the real thing.”

“I want you to do a job for me,” Nezumi said in an expressionless voice.

“Job? A job that’s worth a whole gold coin?”

“That’s down payment. After the job is done, I’ll give you another gold coin.”

“Big spender, aren’t you? But I won’t take it.” Inukashi flung the coin out onto the table.

“You’re going to refuse a job worth two gold coins without even hearing about it?”

“I’m refusing it *because* it’s a job worth two gold coins. I can just smell the stench.”

“Stench?”

“The smell of danger. My nose is warning me— it’s saying, don’t go there, or else you’ll get killed. I don’t care how much money you’re gonna pile on. If I die, it’s all over. Either way, any job that involves a Rat and is worth two gold coins is like sticking my hand into a nest of poisonous snakes. I don’t wanna die just yet.”

“That’s why you get the money without dying— isn’t that what doing a job is all about? Avoiding danger isn’t gonna turn you a profit.”

"It depends on the level of danger. *All* your jobs are dangerous and tricky. This is two whole gold coins we're talking about here. If anyone else came to me with that deal, I'd have taken it in a split second. Damn it," Inukashi grumbled. "I feel ripped off already."

Nezumi stood up, and pocketed the gold coins.

"That's too bad. I guess it can't be helped."

"No hard feelings. Things are just too risky with you. To be honest, I don't even wanna have much to do with you."

"Then it's mutual," Nezumi said airily. "Fine. Let's not meddle with each other anymore. I'll never come to you with a job again. As for you, no matter how much you suffer, be sure you don't come to me about it."

Inukashi hastily grabbed Nezumi's arm as he turned his back. He had lunged so suddenly that he almost tripped over himself.

"W-Wait a minute, Nezumi. What do you mean, no matter how much I suffer?"

"I just told you. If you end up like your mother someday and you're suffering because you can't die, it won't have anything to do with me. You can call me, but I won't come."

"What're you going on about...?" Inukashi said shakily. "Me, going through a painful death? That would never happen... Besides, I'm younger than you, aren't I? I think so, at least."

Nezumi lazily brushed Inukashi's hand off.

"Inukashi, age doesn't matter in this place. You know that, don't you? Death can never be predicted. It just comes. And how many people here are lucky enough to die painlessly, huh? The majority suffer, suffer, and die writhing. Tomorrow, someone might stab a knife into your stomach. You might crack your skull open on a falling piece of debris. You might get bacteria into a wound, have it fester, and rot alive. You might come down with a serious illness. Can you guarantee

that none of that is going to happen to you? Huh, Inukashi? Can you say with certainty that you, above all people, will die without suffering?”

The pair of grey eyes bore into him. They had the lustre of fine cloth, and glowed dimly like the clouds when they shrouded the sun. His voice reverberated deep in his ears.

Inukashi sucked a breath in, and took a step backwards.

It was a trick. An illusion. *He's trying to suck me in.*

“Suffer all you may because you can't die. I won't get involved. Fine with you, right?”

Inukashi sank into a chair.

He knew death. He had seen it countless times. Not one of them could be called decent. That was why— that was why he wanted to stay alive. He felt like as long as he survived, he would be able to experience a more-or-less better death. Although much too insignificant to call it hope, Inukashi admitted feeling a sort of longing for peaceful death.

Damnit.

He gritted his teeth. Nezumi's lips curled thinly into a smile.

This is a threat. I can easily turn Nezumi down now. But after that, if I were to get into the same fix as Mum did— my bones broken, my insides crushed, blood spurting from my mouth— and I had to die that way... If there was nothing to ease my pain, numb it even just a little— if I had no choice but to moan and plead for someone to kill me, quickly, please, until death came to claim me— Just thinking about it sent a chill down his spine. He broke into a sweat.

“Sit down,” Inukashi uttered weakly. “I'll listen to what you have to say, first.”

Nezumi's gloved hand extended toward him and caressed his cheek.

“Good boy.”

“Fuck you.”

Inukashi glared at the face that still smiled wanly at him. “Lemme tell you something, Nezumi. Don’t think this shebang is gonna work every time.”

“Shebang? I only want you to do a job for me. A rude way to treat a customer, don’t you think, Inukashi?”

“Is this your idea of a decent customer? Taking advantage of someone’s weakness, threatening him, and then forcing a dangerous job on him? I think even fleas are a little nicer to the dogs they infest, compared to you.”

“Wouldn’t you say,” Nezumi said, “that the fault lies with that person for having a weakness that can be taken advantage of in the first place? In these parts, exposing your weakness can cost you your life. Not news to you, I hope?”

Nezumi once more gently stroked Inukashi’s cheek as he fell silent, and murmured sympathetically.

“You’re afraid of death. More than anything, you’re afraid of the suffering that leads up to it. You’d do anything to be spared from it. I know that, and I’m able to ease that pain for you, am I not? I don’t want to blackmail and wring things out of you. I’m taking the proper steps, paying you money in exchange for a job.”

“That’s enough!” Inukashi slammed the table with his fist. Two puppies that were playing under the table shot out from under it and fled.

“You fraud, you sophist, you third-rate actor! I hope you choke on rat poison and die.” Out of breath, Inukashi inhaled raggedly.

“Are you finished?” Nezumi said momentarily. His calm and unruffled tone further stirred Inukashi’s wrath. But it was no use getting irritated. Nezumi was right. He was at fault for exposing his weakness and leaving himself vulnerable. These were the rules of this land.

Inukashi sighed, and adjusted himself in his seat.

“Let’s hear what you have to say. I don’t have much time. Keep it short and sweet.”

Nezumi lowered himself into a seat as well. He was no longer smiling.

“I want information.”

“I figured as much,” Inukashi said simply. “Even *you* wouldn’t be foolish enough to come to me looking for groceries. So? Information about what?”

“The Correctional Facility.”

Inukashi almost fell over.

“Correctional Facility!” he exclaimed. “You mean the one the Security Bureau presides over?”

“Is there some other Correctional Facility that no one knows about?” Nezumi said sarcastically.

Inukashi ignored him.

“So you want information... what kind of information?”

“Any kind, no matter how unimportant.” Nezumi fished a white mouse out of his pocket. It was about the size of an adult thumb. Inukashi’s eyes narrowed.

“Is that a robot? It’s smaller than the one you gave me last time.”

Pulling off his gloves, Nezumi gently pressed the mouse’s head. Its back split open, and a yellow shimmer of light flickered momentarily before an image floated up into it.

“What’s this?”

“A hologram. The mechanism embedded in this mouse uses light to reproduce objects.”

“I know what a hologram is,” Inukashi said irritably. “It’s my first time actually seeing one, though,” he said as an afterthought. “But I’m asking about what’s displayed there. What is this? A blueprint?”

"It's a floor plan of the Correctional Facility's inner structure, but it's pretty outdated. The structure itself might not have changed, but their administrative system has probably been improved."

Inukashi scowled at him in a way that said, 'you must be kidding me'.
 "No can do. I don't care what kind of information you want, I won't be able to get it for you."

"Why?"

"Why? Don't ask me stupid questions. Do you know what kind of place that is? Of course you wouldn't," he said flatly, "I don't know either. No one knows, because there hasn't been a single person who came out of that place alive. —Not even dead bodies can make it out of there. Once they pass through the Special Gates, they disappear. They vanish off the face of the earth. That's the kind of place it is, right? That's what the rumours say."

Inukashi gulped, and shuddered. Nezumi echoed his words back to him expressionlessly.

"Rumours?"

"Rumours say—" Inukashi began hesitantly, "there's a huge incinerator in the basement, and all the prisoners get thrown in there. They get burned like garbage. And the ashes that come out of there are scattered on the farm fields of the South Block, instead of going to waste disposal. They say it's good for the soil. —Here, in this place."

Inukashi pointed at the bottom-most floor, presumably the basement, on the diagram that floated above the table, and shuddered again. It was a blank white space, and there was nothing written in it. This curiously empty space gave him an eerie feeling.

"There's no incinerator there," Nezumi muttered.

"What makes you so sure?" Inukashi said accusingly. "Have you seen it? How can you say that without even—"

Inukashi clipped his words halfway through and found himself staring at Nezumi.

“You know—?”

There was no answer.

“You know what it’s like inside the Correctional Facility? When—” Inukashi’s hand thrust into the light, and clenched into a fist. The image jittered and warped.

“When did you record this?” he demanded. “This is internal data.”

“Inukashi, I’m not paying you gold to answer *your* questions. I want whatever you can manage — find any latest information about the interior of the Correctional Facility, and add it to this data. Specifically, if I were to be picky, I’d want accurate information about the operations and security systems.”

“You stupid or something? Operations system? Only people in the highest classes have access to that, it’s top secret. Tough luck if I can even get my hands on it.”

“That’s why I’m not being picky. Gather whatever you can manage. Any information that has to do with the Correctional Facility, and I want it ASAP. I’ll leave you with this.”

Nezumi turned off the switch, and tossed the small projector mouse to Inukashi. Inukashi wrinkled his nose at it as if it were a rotting corpse.

“Should I use the mini-mouse I got from you last time?” he asked.

“No, that won’t work. The Correctional Facility is full of security sensors. Any robot, no matter how small, is gonna get blown up if it’s caught scurrying around without proper recognition.”

“Then use real mice,” Inukashi continued. “They’ll be able to get in much easier than dogs. A small living organism isn’t a problem for the sensor, is it?”

“Not so fast. Forget mice, even flies or cockroaches would be exterminated automatically. Lasers burn them up so that there’s nothing of them left. They don’t let a single fly intrude into that place. And that’s how it is.”

“Then what am I supposed to do?” Inukashi said in frustration. “How am I supposed to sneak in and gather information from some place that’s all computer-managed?”

“You don’t have to sneak in. You’re right — pretty much all of the Facility’s interior is managed to the tee. But there are still lots of areas that involve people, too. And information usually leaks through the mouths of people. If there’s anything computers can’t control, it’s a man’s tongue.”

Inukashi hunched his shoulders exaggeratedly. He was beginning to make out, though vaguely, what Nezumi was trying to get at. He didn’t want to see any more clearly if he could help it.

“Of course,” he agreed promptly. “You need people operating the computers and humanoid robots. The guards would have to be human, and officials from the Bureau would be coming in and out of there. And we can’t forget the prisoners, they’re human too, right? But apart from them, the only people that can come and go from the Correctional Facility are people inside No. 6. You need an IC card to get through the Special Gates. It’s impossible to create a fake No. 6 IC card. Which means no one from the West Block can get near that building unless they’re prisoners. Not that anyone would wanna get near it, anyway. So —” He was talking rather fast. “Well — if we jump to the conclusion, pretty much it’s impossible for us to interact with people inside the Correctional Facility because they’re residents of No. 6, and that makes it an impossible case, right? You should know better than anyone. Those guys live in a completely different world from us. It’s just *different*.”

“Inukashi.”

“What?”

“You’re talkative today.”

Inukashi dropped his gaze. He knew that lowering his eyes signalled defeat, but he had no energy to glare back at the pair of grey ones that stared at him. He knew already who would win and who would lose. Nezumi stood up and drew close to Inukashi, who was staring at the floor. He whispered in a voice raspy and low, but sensual — a woman’s voice.

“That’s how you always are. When you’ve got something to hide, you suddenly become more eloquent. And then I realize the truth that lies in your heart — that underneath that tongue of yours, flapping like a leaf in the wind, a furtive secret is curled up.”

His fingertips stroked Inukashi’s chin, slid up his jawline, and lightly pinched his earlobe. Inukashi shivered. The brief moment of ecstasy was followed quickly by a small, sharp pain. His earlobe had been yanked.

“Ow!” he said indignantly. “The hell was that for?”

“Don’t underestimate me, Inukashi.”

“What’re you talking about? I wasn’t—”

“Stop playing dumb. I know what you’re using your dogs for. That’s why I came here.”

Inukashi tsked loudly, and roughly shoved Nezumi’s hand away. Nezumi chuckled amusedly.

“You use your dogs to smuggle, don’t you? You’ve been transporting leftover food and garbage from the Correctional Facility into the West Block. For years now.”

“I am,” Inukashi answered defiantly. “So what? Transporting goods is also part of my trade. A rat like you has no business telling me what

to do.”

“The Correctional Facility has full waste disposal functions,” Nezumi continued. “They can dispose of everything inside that building. You just said that not even corpses can make it out of there. You’re right. They even dispose of dead bodies inside that place. Which means there shouldn’t even be a speck of dust escaping from there, much less leftover food. From that same Correctional Facility, you somehow manage to get periodical loads of leftover food, and sell it to the food stalls in the West Block. Makes good money, doesn’t it? Maybe even more than your hotel-running business?”

“Is it not to your liking that I’m operating in the black market?” Inukashi said scathingly. “You must be kidding me. Since when did you become a Bureau lackey, huh, Nezumi?”

“Machines don’t trade with black-market merchants. Once they are programmed with a set of rules, they’ll never break them. If anyone’s going to break the rules, it’s the humans. There’s someone in the interior of the Correctional Facility that’s selling you leftover food, isn’t there? No, not just food. He’s probably passing prisoner rations and other belongings your way too. Anyway, the fact is, you have a contact inside the Correctional Facility. Sniff out a lead from him. Lure the information out of him.”

Inukashi shook his head. The young man in front of him was trying to get him involved in more danger than he had expected. Inukashi broke out into a cold sweat.

“It’s impossible—” he muttered. “The guys I deal with are the lowest of the low. They pretty much do the cleaning and waste disposal right alongside the robots. There’s no way they would have any sort of useful information.”

“That’s exactly why you wanna ask them. The guys on the top tier are strictly overseen by the authorities. They can’t risk the danger of

letting any secrets slip. But management is lax with people in lower positions. And if their job is to clean the place, they've probably been everywhere inside the Facility. Who knows, they might have more information than you think. Your job is to sniff it out. Your nose is as good as a dog's, isn't it?"

Inukashi heaved a sigh, and vainly attempted at a last act of retaliation. "I need money. To get any information from them, I'd need money. Two gold coins isn't gonna cut it."

Nezumi nodded, and passed a small leather pouch to Inukashi. In it, there were a considerable number of gold coins.

"I only have this much right now." Nezumi suddenly squatted down and peered into Inukashi's eyes.

"Inukashi, work with me. I'm begging you."

Begging? Nezumi, are you begging me?

"If you take the job, I promise I'll always rush to your side if you're overcome with unbearable pain one day. No matter where you are, I'll deliver a song to your soul. I promise."

"Who's gonna count on a promise between a dog and a rat?"

No one could guarantee it. But yet — Nezumi *would* keep his promise. Almost instinctively, the feeling apprehended Inukashi's soul.

No matter where or how I died, if it was accompanied with suffering, he would always appear and put my soul to rest. He could be hard to understand as hell, but he would never break a promise.

Inukashi believed strongly in his own instincts. He extended his hand, and closed it around the leather pouch.

"I'll take the job."

"I owe you one." Nezumi breathed out shortly, and wound the superfibre cape around his shoulders. Then, he put a finger to his lips.

"I shouldn't need to tell you, but none of this—"

"I know. I won't let anyone get wind of the job. It's the cardinal rule for my work. I'll gather the information as quickly as I can, and contact you before anyone else can find out."

"I'm counting on you."

"Nezumi, I wanna ask you something."

"What?"

"What are you doing this for?"

Silence. It was impossible to read a single expression from Nezumi's face. Inukashi licked his bottom lip, and continued.

"With this much money, you could live the easy life for a pretty good while. I knew you were a star actor and making quite a bit of money, but even for that, this is a lot. Putting this much money forward, and threatening me—"

"I'm not threatening you. I only came to you with a job."

"Hmph—whatever. Then, going as far as to *request a job from me* — what makes you want to poke your nose into the Correctional Facility so badly? What's your reason?"

Nezumi didn't answer. He only made a slight half-smile. It was an artificial one, made for the stage.

"You don't need to know to do the job, do you, Inukashi?"

"Well, obviously," Inukashi said testily. "But diving into this kind of risky job without even knowing why is kinda harsh, man."

"Finding out why isn't gonna change how risky it is."

Tsk. This guy and his fondness of twisting arguments around — I'm no match for him when it comes to verbal arguments.

"Fine," he said finally. "That's enough from you. Get outta here already." Inukashi flapped his hand to shoo Nezumi away. He caught a whiff of soap. The image of a face crossed his mind. It was the face of

someone who was washing the dogs, covered in suds. The nonchalant question tumbled out of his mouth.

“Nezumi, this has nothing to do with Shion, does it?”

For a brief moment, the grey eyes wavered. Inukashi’s eyes didn’t miss their slight hesitation. The tip of his nose twitched. He could smell something.

“Shion?” Nezumi raised his shoulders slightly. “Where does Shion come into this? This has nothing to do with him.”

“Just now, you told me not to divulge information about this job to anyone else. Do you mean that I can’t tell Shion either?”

“Of course. There’s no need to involve people that have nothing to do with this.”

“Dear, dear, aren’t you the gentle one?” Inukashi mocked. “Who knows how many dangerous jobs you’ve shoved into my hands, but when it comes to Shion, *oh no, I can’t get him involved*. Hah, I see. I guess even you warm up to people if you’ve lived with them long enough. Is that white-headed weirdo of a little boy that precious to you?”

Nezumi vanished from before his eyes. Before he could even utter a cry, Inukashi’s body was being pushed up against the wall, and a set of fingers were digging into his throat.

“That’s enough smart-mouthing from you,” Nezumi hissed. “Any more, and I’ll make sure you can never speak again.”

“Let’s see you try,” Inukashi said boldly. “These guys won’t let you off for it.”

Several dogs which were sprawled on the floor got to their feet, snarling menacingly as they surrounded Nezumi. Just as one of them bared its teeth, a small grey shadow darted out of a corner of the room.

A strangled yelp.

The large dog that had bared its teeth raised its voice in pain. A small mouse was latched onto its neck. The dog writhed, violently shaking its head from side to side, but soon collapsed forepaws-first. Its four limbs convulsed. The other dogs retreated fearfully. Inukashi shoved Nezumi aside, and cried out in the same strangled way his dog did.

“My dog, my dog!” He lifted the dog’s body in his arms. A cold voice showered over his head.

“If you don’t want to end up like him, settle your other dogs down.”

“Nezumi, you fucking—”

Cheep-cheep.

The soft cry of a mouse. Inukashi lifted his face, and his breath caught in his throat. He looked about the room, and he was rooted to the spot. From the top of the cabinets, from underneath the table, from the shadow of the door, from various places in the room, countless small grey mice were staring silently at him. All their eyes were red, and glowed from deep within.

“Down,” Inukashi commanded hoarsely. The dogs did as they were told. They returned to their spots, and lay low on their stomachs.

“He’s not dead,” Nezumi said. “He’s just paralysed a little bit. Give him twenty, thirty minutes and he’ll be fine. He’s breathing properly, right?”

It was just as Nezumi had said. The dog’s breathing was laboured, but consistent. It was struggling to get to its feet, but it looked like it had no strength to. It gave a pitiful whimper.

“You’ll pay for doing this to my dog.” Just as Inukashi clenched his fist, the door flew open with a bang. Shion came bursting in.

“Inukashi!” Shion stood frozen, still holding the doorknob. His gaze slid from Inukashi, who was hugging his dog, to Nezumi.

“Nezumi, what are you doing here?”

“What are *you* doing here? You shouldn’t be abandoning your workplace like that.”

“Well, I heard a dog howling, and I thought I heard Inukashi’s voice too — I thought something had happened — Inukashi, what’s wrong with that dog?”

“He’s just paralysed,” Nezumi answered for him. A brown mouse poked its head out from Nezumi’s shoulder. It jumped down on the floor, and scurried up Shion’s body.

“Hamlet, did you come along too?” Shion said to it.

“Hamlet? What’re you talking about?”

“It’s his name. Because he likes to be read *Hamlet* out loud.”

Nezumi’s face contorted.

“Don’t go naming my mice without permission.”

“Well, you wouldn’t name them yourself,” said Shion, unfazed. “—He seems to like it a lot. Right, Hamlet?”

The mouse nodded its head up and down.

“Ridiculous,” Nezumi spat. “So if this guy’s Hamlet, what’s the other one? Othello? Macbeth?”

“Cravat.”

“Cravat? Was there a name like that in Shakespeare?”

“It’s the name of a fried pastry. The colour of his fur looks just like one. It means ‘tie’, because of the shape. The dough has powdered almonds in it, and you twist it into a tie-shape to fry—”

“I get it, that’s enough,” Nezumi interrupted. “You go dream of filling your belly with those cravats, or whatever, when you go to sleep tonight. I’m going home. Talking with you gives me a headache.”

“Are you sure it doesn’t have something to do with your nerves? You’re always irritated. Maybe you’re tired.”

“Whose fault is it that I’m irritated all the time? Besides, you—”

Feeling Inukashi's bewildered gaze on him, Nezumi shut his mouth. He re-wrapped his superfibre cloth, and strode out of the room without another word. Hamlet nudged Shion on the cheek and chirruped once before bounding after its master.

The grey mice that had been all over the room had mysteriously disappeared. Inukashi let a long breath escape his lips, and sank to the floor. The dog gave a low growl in his arms. Shion bent down on one knee and began inspecting the dog thoroughly.

"He looks like he's been paralysed with some sort of drug... but his heart's beating normally, and he's not vomiting. He should be fine."

"Really? He won't die?"

"He'll be fine. He's only mildly paralysed. We should give him clean water to drink. I'll go get some." Shion filled the pail that he had been using to carry water from the river, and brought it to the dog. The dog gulped the water down eagerly.

"See, it looks like the numbness is almost all gone. But this dog — how did he get paralysed?"

"Nezumi did it."

"Nezumi? To the dog? No way."

"Yes way," Inukashi said angrily. "He did it. That bastard paralysed my dog. He wouldn't hesitate to do something like that. He's ruthless, cunning, and cruel. I'd watch out if I were you. If you let his pretty face fool you into thinking he's going to be gentle and kind like your Mum, you're in for a nasty surprise."

"I don't think he's my mother, but I do think he's kind."

Inukashi made circles with his index finger in front of Shion's face.

"Idiot. That's what I'm talking about when I say he's fooled you. You're too naive to notice how heartless he is."

"Nezumi isn't heartless. He's saved my life more than once. If it weren't for him, I wouldn't have been able to survive."

“Nezumi, help a stranger? Without anything in return?”

“For nothing in return. On the contrary,” Shion said reflectively, “I think he’s brought a nuisance upon himself. It might sound weird coming from me, but I think I’m being quite a bit of a burden on him. After all, I don’t know anything about how to live here.”

Inukashi pursed his lips. He let his gaze hover over Shion’s profile as he washed the dog’s wound with water.

A nuisance? He was quite right. In these parts, someone who was as naive and gullible as he was, and was kind to everyone, was none other than a nuisance. And a nuisance often became the shackles that binded the hands and feet.

But Nezumi was living with this weirdo of a nuisance, looking for nothing in return. He wasn’t chasing Shion out of his nest — on the contrary, he was sheltering him there.

Why?

“Hey, Shion.”

“Hm?”

“Do you two always talk like that to each other?”

“Huh? Well — yeah, I guess. Why?”

“Because Nezumi’s usually not like that. He doesn’t let his emotions show.”

Shion cocked his head to the side quizzically, as if to say, ‘really?’. The dog licked the back of his hand. It was its way of expressing gratitude for treating the wound.

Inukashi wiggled his nose and grinned. He was onto a scent.

Shion and that job concerning the Correctional Facility were somehow connected. For this kid, Nezumi was willingly stepping into dangerous territory.

Inukashi had no proof. He wasn't sure of any clear reason for why Nezumi was doing this. But he had grasped Nezumi's weakness now, and that was certain. *My nose doesn't lie.*

Nezumi, so this oblivious weirdo is your weakness, your Achilles' heel, huh? Heh, then things should be interesting. You said so. Let anyone find out your weakness, and it could cost you your life. You're damn right. And I've got your lifeline in my hands right now. I'll make sure you get rewarded handsomely for what you did to me. You can count on that.

"I might be wrong, but..." Shion's voice reached his ears. He was petting the dog, which had gotten to its feet and was wagging its tail energetically, apparently fully recovered from paralysis.

"Huh? Did you say something?"

"This dog — is he related to you, by any chance?"

"Oh —" Inukashi paused. "Yeah, he is. He's the last one that my Mum gave birth to. She had him, and got beaten to death shortly afterwards." There was a lapse before he said, "How'd you know?"

"I just had a feeling," Shion said. "He has really intelligent and compassionate eyes. It kind of reminded me of what you said about your mother, so I wondered if I was right."

Shion's hand stroked the dog's neck. The dog's eyes drooped half-closed, and a quiet sigh escaped from its mouth. From its peaceful expression it was hard to imagine that the same dog had bared its teeth at Nezumi earlier.

"Shion, you didn't laugh."

"Huh? About what?"

"About my Mum. Usually when I talk to people about my Mum being a dog, they laugh, or make fun of me, or treat me like a freak... but you — you said my Mum was kind and loving. You're the only one who's listened to me without laughing or making fun of my Mum, apart from—"

Inukashi clipped his words, and swallowed hard. He had just noticed this fact. Simultaneously, he was overcome with a wave of agitation that threatened to suffocate him.

Shion, still on one knee, looked up at him with a concerned expression. Inukashi licked his dry lips, and slowly formed the rest of his words as if tracing the thread of his memory.

“You’re the only one — apart from Nezumi.”

2

TRANQUIL SCENES

*I am the one without hope, the word without echoes,
he who lost everything and he who had everything.
Last hawser, in you creaks my last longing.
In my barren land you are the final rose.*

NERUDA, TWENTY LOVE POEMS AND A SONG OF DESPAIR

IN NO. 6, those under forty years of age consisted the majority of the age demographic. It was a young city. Because of this, the odd elderly person she passed on the street stood out all the more sorely.

I'd do anything to avoid growing old.

She was sick of seeing obese, white-haired women; knobbly, wrinkly old men and the like.

The woman worked as a nurse in the Municipal Central Hospital, which was directly managed by the Health and Hygiene Bureau. She was currently in charge of the elderly wing. Despite the fact that she loathed them, she had to deal with the elderly every day.

Why do they bother even staying alive?

The woman swept a hand through her long, chestnut-brown hair which she prided herself upon. She couldn't bear the thought of this

hair turning white, and having wrinkles and spots appear on her face. *I'd rather die before I end up looking like that.*

She was serious. No. 6 had top-notch terminal care. Some said that no other city could compare.

Once the elderly reached a certain age and received a notification from the city, they were entitled to live in a place called the Twilight Cottage, regardless of their social class, sex, or personal history.

The Twilight Cottage was an ideal facility that the city had built so that the elderly could spend the rest of their lives in abundance and comfort. People said it was like heaven for them: medical facilities for palliative care were a given; all things that threatened to hurt them, whether it be pain, suffering, or distress, were removed. It was a facility under direct control of the city, and from the woman's workplace at the Central Hospital, a few elderly people would be escorted to Twilight Cottage each week. It was not disclosed what age or what criteria determined when people were sent to the Cottage. Though not many, there were still some elderly who died from illness or unfortunate accident even before obtaining the right to live in the Twilight Cottage. That was why the elderly unanimously rejoiced upon receiving news of residency.

It was the same with the woman whose application for residency had passed yesterday. She was ill with a disease that had been declared incurable even by No. 6's stellar medical technology.

"I'm so glad. Now I can spend the rest of my few years in peace. I give my gratitude to God and the city for their compassion."

The woman, who had said she was a strong believer in God, had clasped her hands at her breast, and had murmured words of prayer before leaving the hospital wing.

The Twilight Cottage. The woman didn't know where it was located. The city had also not disclosed its address. But the woman had no

interest whatsoever in the Twilight Cottage.

The woman hated elderly people. Her disgust was a side of the same coin of fear that she felt toward growing old herself. The woman was young and beautiful. She wanted to stay young and beautiful forever. Through her work, she had heard rumours that the city was focusing more than ever its medical research on understanding the mechanism of life. She had also heard that amongst that, the city was investing considerable funds in molecular research having to do with ageing.

If a drug to suppress ageing were to be developed — if she could stay like this, and never grow old — how splendid it would be. She wanted them to succeed soon, as soon as possible.

She was almost at the station. Her parents were waiting at home, in a little house in a town two stations away. A man and woman just entering their senior years, they were both harpy, neurotic, and pretentious. They still complained that their daughter had not been ranked highest by the city in any field. She didn't want to grow old like that.

The woman stepped into view of the reflective shop window. *I'm on my way home from work, so I guess it can't be helped that I look a little tired. But, still beautiful. My hair, my skin — still youthful, still beautiful.*

She would do some shopping before going home. In the shop window, she could see the lavish dresses, tasteful shoes, and practical pantsuits that lined the store. In this city, she could attain whatever she desired. Of course, they were limited to things within her financial range.

Excluding the small part of the population that wallowed piteously in Lost Town, city residents had no problem obtaining everything they needed, as long as they weren't after the most premium-class things. They could obtain clothes, food, and residence without difficulty.

It wasn't nearly as good as it was for Chronos residents, but it was much better than the people of Lost Town. She lived a relatively

comfortable life.

The woman was satisfied with her position. She wanted to enjoy more of her youth, her beauty, comfort, and the life that lay ahead of her.

Her feet stopped. A pair of shoes displayed in the window had caught her eye. They were light-pink pumps. Winter had just begun, but the spring collection was already being put out. The pink pumps glowed: there they were, earlier than any other store; faster than anyone else; ahead, ahead; forward, forward, they invited her.

The Holy Celebration was next week. It was a day that marked the founding of the city. Parties and celebratory events would be held all over town. The woman, too, was planning to attend two parties.

I'll buy these shoes. And I'll buy a light-peach dress to match. It'll look splendid on me, I just know it.

Just as a satisfied smile spread over her face, she was struck with a sudden dizziness. After her brief bout, the base of her neck grew hot.

What's wrong with me? — I feel tired — My body feels heavy.

Her legs felt weak. She felt nauseous.

I have to rest somewhere...

She entered an alleyway between two shops. There was supposed to be a clinic run by the Central Hospital through this alley.

I just have to get there...

Her neck was burning. She felt like there was something wriggling underneath her skin. She felt the unfamiliar and disturbing sensation of her body being wrung dry.

What—?

She staggered, and collapsed. Her purse flew open, and its contents scattered. The woman extended her hand to pick her things up, and screamed when she realized what she saw.

Spots — black spots, like senile plaque, and several of them, were appearing. Her skin rapidly lost moisture and began to crack.

This can't be—what—what's happening—?

The woman snatched her mirror, and peered into it. She shrieked again. But her voice was hoarse, and what came out was barely a whisper.

My face— my face—

Her face, which had been so beautiful moments before, was changing rapidly before her eyes. Wrinkles creased her skin, spots marred it, and her hair began falling out.

Something wriggled at the base of her neck. There was something living inside her body. The woman, seized by fear, realized that her body was being taken over by something else.

No, help me— Mom—Dad— save me—

The faces of her mother and father appeared before her eyes.

Mom, Dad...

Her fingers, extended in plea, grasped thin air. Unconsciousness overcame her.

* * *

Karan sat on the bench, and heaved a sigh, one of many she had heaved today. She knew sighing was useless. She could cry out, she could throw herself on the ground, but reality would not budge. It would not change. Then, at least, she would remain defiant. She would square her shoulders, hold her head high, and be unashamed.

That was what she thought, but shortly afterwards, a sigh would escape her lips.

I can't do anything. I'm powerless...

Karan tried opening both hands palm-up in her lap. The gentle rays of the winter sun shone down on her white palms. She felt another sigh about to come.

Karan had closed her small bakery in a corner of Lost Town today, and spent half of the day walking around. She had embarked to visit Safu, in her and her grandmother's house in the luxury neighbourhood of Chronos.

If residents were acknowledged by the city as being of highest rank in one of various fields, they were permitted to live in Chronos, regardless of sex, upbringing, or family structure. The city provided housing, as well as an ideal environment suited for the growth and development of each skill.

When her son Shion had been ranked top-level for intelligence in his Two-Year-Olds' Examinations, Karan had also been given a residence in Chronos. Comfortable living arrangements, and a lifetime of insurance — as an elite, thanks to her son, who would probably eventually work his way up to the upper echelons of No. 6, Karan was in a position that many envied and desired.

A position that many envied and desired — it was a life of comfort, free of the need to worry of tomorrow's sorrows; free whatsoever of hunger or violence; a life where indoor environment, security, hygiene, and physical conditions were all monitored.

Karan slowly clenched her hand. Her fingers, which were smooth and soft when she had lived in Chronos, had become rough and worn from her work in Lost Town, and her skin sometimes cracked and bled.

But until I lost Shion, I was happier than when I was at Chronos. Much happier.

Karan had never adjusted well to a life where every minute aspect was managed and checked upon, and had begun to feel a sort of terror

that her nerves were unravelling. That was why, when Shion had committed a taboo and engaged in the unbelievable act of sheltering an escaped convict, she had felt — more than surprise, more than despair — a sense of release, even. She even found herself enjoying it. Of course, she knew in her rational mind that it meant all of their special privileges would be revoked, as well as the right to live in Chronos, and that the path to Shion's future would be closed forever. But she had still enjoyed it.

She wanted to praise rather than reprimand the actions of her son, which were so foolish for one with such a level of intelligence. Shion had thrown away his life in Chronos so easily. Rather than his stable and insured life, he had chosen the road to protect one who had fled into his room one stormy night. It was a blunder, if anything. But he had not been wrong in committing it.

It meant that Shion had also not seen much meaning in life at Chronos. To him, it was something he could throw easily away. He had only discarded what was meaningless to him. And that was not wrong at all.

“Mom, I'm sorry.”

On their first night moving into Lost Town, twelve-year-old Shion had hung his head as he apologized to his mother.

“Sorry for what?”

“Because... Mom, you... you have to go out and work now.”

Shion's crime had been assisting in hiding and aiding the escape of a violent criminal, called a VC in No. 6. With regards to his age, he had been let off only with exile from Chronos. But in turn, he was forbidden to live anywhere other than the city's lowest-class residential area of Lost Town. Mother and son had slid from the crest of the mountaintop to valley-bottom in a mere night. First things first, they had to think of a means of living for the future.

"I'm sorry."

His drawn chin, which still carried a semblance of boyishness, trembled. Karan wrapped her arm around her son's shoulders in a firm embrace.

"What a stupid thing to say," she said softly. "You shouldn't be apologizing for something like that."

"But—"

"Shion, are you Mommy, or am I? I think you've got your roles mixed up," she scolded in mock sternness. "I'm a lot tougher than you might think. I bet you didn't know that, did you?"

"No."

"Then that's something you can look forward to. You'll see how tough your mommy can be, real soon. It'll blow you away."

In her arms, Shion gave a quiet laugh.

How many years had it been since she had last embraced her son like this? That day, in the dark, damp room that had once been storage for building materials, what Karan had felt was neither despair nor woe. It was the joy of her child's warmth in her arms, and the sense of fulfilment only motherhood could bring.

"What kind of person was he?"

"Huh?"

"The person you took under your wing. I was just wondering what he was like. I'm curious to know — but you wouldn't tell me, right?"

Shion's body shrank away from her as if he had been stung. His pout and his flushed cheeks struck her as so humorous that Karan couldn't help but smile.

"G'night," Shion mumbled, and with the expression still on his face, hastily trotted out of the room. Even after the rickety door had closed with a loud noise, Karan was still smiling.

She wondered what kind of boy he had been. What kind of boy had made Shion leave Chronos behind? What about this boy was Shion drawn to, and dazzled by?

She wanted to know, but Shion would probably never put it into words. Children learned to hide their feelings, or encountered something that made them, and that was how they grew up. Maybe she would never be able to draw her son close again like this, without hesitation.

Just as how a fully-fledged bird spreads its young wings to leave its nest, Karan knew that she would have to part with Shion someday. She was prepared. If she could see her son off as he took flight, she figured it would be a joyous thing as a mother. So starting tomorrow, she would pour herself into work.

True to her vow, for four years at Lost Town, Karan worked tirelessly. She started with baking bread and selling it out on the street; eventually, she outfitted a corner of their abode into a bakery, and increased the variety of her goods. Her affordable and tasty breads and cakes enjoyed popularity in Lost Town, where there were few such luxuries. The business grew, and supported their household of two.

Small children showed up to buy muffins, out of breath and with coins clasped tightly in their little fists. An elderly labourer came to buy a cake to give as a gift to his grandchildren. There were customers that came first thing in the morning to buy fresh loaves of bread.

Karan was satisfied with her life in Lost Town. It was not bravado; nor was she trying to fool herself. She hadn't a thread of attachment left for Chronos. She was working, and reaping its rewards. It was a life that they had built up with their own hands, with their feet firmly planted on the ground. She desired nothing more.

Karan was, in her own way, happy — until that day had come.

One day, Shion had simply disappeared. He had left in the morning for his workplace at the Forest Park Administration Office, never to

return home. This was far from the kind of parting she had steeled herself to face as a mother. This was no natural way to part — it was so irregular, so sudden, so cruel. She realized how naive and dreamy she had been in thinking that she would see her son off as he took flight from the parental nest.

He had been put under arrest as a suspect of a violent crime, and been incarcerated in the Correctional Facility.

When she had received word from the Security Bureau, Karan experienced the full extent of the ugliness of despair. Despair meant being spun into the folds of deepest darkness. The darkness slithered its way into her body, and numbed her hands and feet. How irresistible death had seemed then.

But there was someone who had given her hope to live. Nezumi. He had contacted her to let her know that Shion was alive and in the West Block. He had delivered Shion's short letter to her. How beautiful was the small light that had glittered in the midst of her dark despair.

Mom, I'm sorry. Alive and well.

The hasty scribble of just a few words had become a streak of light that tore through the darkness, and became the voice that whispered life into her ear.

Karan opened her store, and continued to bake bread. Until Shion came home, she would grit her teeth and wait. She would keep waiting. Nezumi had brought her the strength to do it. At times, she was still overwhelmed with anxiety and the urge to scream, but Karan's daily life was gradually regaining its stability. It was around this time that Safu had appeared at her door.

Safu, like Shion, had also been acknowledged as highest-ranking in intelligence. She was a girl whose large, black eyes stood out defined

on her face; and she had an honest gaze. Safu, with few words but a strong will, had spoke of her love for Shion, and had proclaimed that she was going to the West Block to see him.

“It doesn’t matter to me. Even if I could never come back here again, I wouldn’t regret it. If Shion is in the West Block, that’s where I’m going.”

“I want to see him. I want to see Shion.”

“I... I love him. From the bottom of my heart, I’ve always, always, loved only him.”

The sixteen-year-old girl had formed these words, fighting back her tears; and for their simplicity and awkwardness, they had touched Karan’s heart all the more. But moved as though she was, she could not let Safu go to the West Block. As Shion’s mother, and as grown adult, she had to stop her.

Safu left her store, and Karan had followed shortly afterwards. What she witnessed was the kidnapping of Safu by Security Bureau officials. It had already been three days since then.

“Safu...” At her wit’s end, Karan let another sigh escape her lips. She had not the faintest idea what she was to do next. She had passed a memo to the small messenger mouse. That was all she had done.

Would Nezumi save the girl as he did with Shion? If she was already imprisoned in the Correctional Facility, it seemed almost impossible to save her. If Shion found out, and set out to the Correctional Facility to save Safu, perhaps this time he would really be killed. *Maybe I’ve done something rash*— There was no way Nezumi would take such a risk to save a complete stranger. Her feelings shredded into little ribbons, and made her fingers tremble.

Karan had spent these past three days hardly sleeping or eating. She was physically and mentally exhausted, and yet was unable to stay still, and had come all the way here, close to where Safu used to live.

The luxury neighbourhood of Chronos.

Abundant greenery, and a tranquil environment. A fully-functioning security system. Various facilities, for medical care, entertainment, and shopping were provided in full, and residents could use them freely with only their ID card. Even within the Holy City of No. 6, Chronos was of a different class still, a residence beyond anyone's wildest dreams.

Although Karan had been a resident here only a few years ago, this time she was prevented from even entering the streets. As soon as she had stepped onto the cobblestone path that led into Chronos, the gates had closed.

We are very sorry. Due to concerns for safety, the area past this point is accessible to Chronos residents only. Thank you for your understanding. Further, anyone who passes the gates without a Entrance Permit for Special Residential Districts issued by the authorities is subject to removal from the premises and punishable by municipal law Article 203 Clause 42. I repeat — Due to concerns for safety...

A gentle female voice flowed forth. The surveillance camera attached to the chalk-white gates silently captured Karan as she stood with her feet rooted to the ground. If she remained unmoving here, the soft voice would turn into a shrill alarm, and Security Bureau officials would burst onto the scene. Karan had no choice but to turn her back on the gate, bite her lip, and go back the way she had come.

And now, in a corner of the Forest Park, she was sitting on a bench under a large tree that had lost all of its leaves. She sat, staring absently down at her hands.

“Shion... Safu...”

Why am I so powerless? I've been living for decades, I'm a parent, I'm an adult, and I can't even help two young people who are in the middle of a crisis. I've been alive for so long, and yet—

Karan lifted her face. An emotion quite different from dread or anxiety flitted across a corner of her heart. In the years that No. 6 shaped itself and began maturing as an independent city, Karan lived in its interior as a resident.

Six cities were founded in this world, building upon the numerous blunders that humankind had caused. It was a place free of war or hunger, and people could live here in peace and freedom. Here, the people could live from birth to death in safety, bliss, and tranquility. That was how it was supposed to be. She had never thought deeply about it. Everyone thought that as long as they stayed in No. 6, they would be promised a fulfilling life.

They thought — they had thought — they had been taught into thinking.

She clenched her fingers, and bit her lip harder.

This is all a lie. Everything— it's all just an appearance.

She whispered without putting it into words. Though it was on the verge of winter, she was starting to perspire.

They were divided into countless classes by their ID chips so that they weren't even free to travel inside the city. Her son had been taken forcibly into custody, and she was not permitted even to make a formal objection. She couldn't even confirm the safety of another resident who had been seized by the authorities. Where was freedom? Where was peace, safety, and a life of fulfilment? It was nowhere.

If that's true, then what have we been doing all this time? Why have we created a city like this? What have we done — where have we gone wrong?

"Excuse me—"

Karan was jolted abruptly back to reality by a voice.

"I'm sorry. Did I surprise you?" An elderly lady wearing a small, light-blue hat was smiling at her. It was a face she didn't know.

“Ah—oh no, it’s nothing,” Karan said hurriedly. “I’m sorry, I was just lost a little in thought... is there something—?”

“Would you mind if I sat down beside you?”

“Not at all— please.”

The woman, still smiling, lowered herself into her seat beside Karan.

“What splendid weather it is, don’t you think? So nice.”

“Yes, it is.” The weather was the last thing on her mind. For the past few days, she had felt nothing in the colour of the sky, the sound of the wind, or the sight of the trees.

“You must have thought me a rather rude old crone for suddenly speaking to you like that, I suppose?” the woman said mildly.

“No no, of course not. I was just a little surprised. I was thinking about something, and I hadn’t noticed that you were standing there.”

The madam pushed her round spectacles up her nose, and her face turned serious.

“You see, that’s exactly why I decided to speak to you.”

“I’m sorry?”

The woman was wearing a silver ring. Her fingers extended to clasp around Karan’s hand.

“Please, I don’t want you to be offended. I know very well that I’m being meddlesome.” She hesitated. “But you had such a forlorn look on your face, I just couldn’t go without doing something.”

Oh, Karan said softly, her hands still clasped in the woman’s.

“And that was why you took the time to speak to me?”

“Oh yes. There you were, on such a fine day, on such a splendid afternoon, looking as troubled as ever. You were sitting alone, limp on the bench, with your head bowed. There was no way I couldn’t go without saying something.”

The elderly woman tightened her fingers around Karan's hands, and wrapped them tenderly in her own hands.

"Why is a lady so young and beautiful as you, sitting with such a face? Has something happened?"

The pair of eyes behind the spectacles were soothing and gentle. Above their heads, the branches of a beech tree were swaying.

"Thank you for your concern. I've just been going through a bit of trouble..."

"Yes, I understand," the woman said sympathetically. "There was a time in my life, too, when I was burdened terribly with troubles." Her aged but dignified countenance clouded slightly. Karan's heart leapt for an instant.

Were there other people brooding like her? Were other people suffering like her? Had other people realized the city's contradictions as well?

"It was devastating, even though it happened decades ago. —I lost my son to an illness."

"My, an illness," murmured Karan.

"Yes, and he was only three. When he died, I still remember crying uncontrollably when I saw how small his coffin was. You would understand, wouldn't you, the feelings of a mother who's lost her son?"

Karan tried to nod, and drew her chin back just in time. Shion was still alive. *I haven't lost my son yet.*

"I can't quite say that I do understand—" she said slowly, "but you must have suffered so."

"Indeed, I did. Words couldn't describe what I went through. Many times, I thought how much better it would be if I were dead. But now, I'm glad I'm alive. I couldn't be happier, living in such a brilliant city, surrounded by my children and grandchildren."

The woman smiled, and cast her gaze around her.

“I would’ve wanted my son to experience growing up here. No— if medical care at No. 6 had been what it is now, I’m sure he wouldn’t have had to die.”

Karan softly drew her hand back. The elderly madam’s gaze wandered into the sky as she continued talking. Her lips were still turned up in a vague smile.

“I really do think this place is a utopia. You know, I say this to my grandchildren very often. I say, you must be grateful for being born here. They just look puzzled, of course — but that’s when I tell them about the West Block.”

“The West Block?” Karan’s heart quickened again, for an entirely different reason this time.

“Yes, the West Block. Do you know what sort of place it is?”

Karan leaned forward. She wanted to know. The West Block was where Shion was, and she wanted to know the details, what sort of place it was.

“I haven’t the faintest idea. Please tell me.”

The lady furrowed her brow, and shook her head.

“I don’t know much about it, myself. But my nephew works at the Access Control Office, and I hear stories from him sometimes. It’s a horrible place, I hear.”

Karan restrained her impatient heart, and murmured in assent. She wanted to encourage the madam to continue her story.

“The hygiene there is absolutely atrocious, and I hear the children have to drink contaminated water.”

“Contaminated...”

“Yes, isn’t it just horrid? I feel such pity for them, my heart aches. Compared to that, the children in this city couldn’t be happier. Wouldn’t you agree?”

“What? I mean— yes, but . . .”

“That’s why over there, they’re plagued with contagious diseases all the time, ones we could never imagine within No. 6. Crime is a daily occurrence, and safety is almost nonexistent. The residents of that Block are all uneducated, savage, and most will even kill a man without batting an eye if it means money for them. Just recently, I heard a group of violent men tried to force their way into the Control Office. Of course, since their security system was perfect, they were arrested before they even set foot inside. It’s frightening, really.”

The lady wrapped her arms around herself and shivered.

“My nephew told me the place is like a hell, the basest, worst possible environment. It must be ever so different from here. We must rejoice too, that we’re residents of No. 6 — not just our children. As for myself, I’m not afraid to tell my grandchildren how fortunate they are as No. 6 residents, compared to the West Block.”

The West Block. The basest, worst possible environment.

Karan closed her eyes. Shion’s handwriting floated up in her mind. It was a mere scribble, and only one line long. It was a slightly slanted, distinctive hand.

Mom, I'm sorry. Alive and well.

The letters were brimming with energy. It was writing that radiated youthful vigour for life. He was alive in the West Block. Ever so strongly, even now, he was continuing to live on.

“Is something the matter?”

She opened her eyes at the elderly lady’s words.

“Are you feeling ill? Shall I contact the Health and Hygiene Bureau?”

Karan slowly shook her head.

“I don’t think so.”

“Pardon me?”

“I don’t think the West Block is the basest, nor the worst.”

“Why, what—”

“And I don’t think—”

I don’t think this city is a utopia, either.

Just as she was about to say those words, there was a sound, a flurry of beating wings, and a black object came flying at her from above.

The elderly woman gave a small cry.

“Heavens, a crow!”

A crow with glossy black wings had alighted on the ground at Karan’s feet.

“How disturbing,” the woman said uneasily. “Were there ever any crows in the Forest Park?” She furrowed her brow.

“This is a natural environment after all. There are crows, though probably not many of them,” Karan replied. The crow took flight again. She thought it would fly away, but instead, it flapped its wings busily and alighted again, onto a man’s shoulder.

It was Karan who gave a cry of surprise this time. She had not noticed at all that there was somebody standing this close by. During her conversation with the elderly woman, there had been other passerby: an elderly man with his dog; a girl stooping to pick up a coloured leaf; a group of what looked to be students — but no one with a crow on their shoulder. When had he gotten so close? How long had he been there? It was a little unnerving.

The man was tall and wiry, and clad in a light-brown jacket, with trousers of the same colour. He had a full head of hair, but with streaks of grey that stood out. His moustache was also flecked with grey. Apart from the fact that he had a crow perched on his shoulder, he seemed like an ordinary middle-aged man. And he was a complete stranger.

But the man extended both his hands toward Karan with a smile on his face. He even called her name as he spoke.

"Karan, I missed you."

"Huh?"

Before she could give a decent answer, the man grabbed Karan by the arm, and drew her toward him. Karan's small stature nestled easily into the man's long arms as they encircled her. He was holding her so tight, she couldn't breathe.

"Forgive me," he pleaded. "It's all my fault. I'll never do anything that'll make you feel bad again. I promise. You'll be the only one I love for the rest of my life."

"Sorry, what—?" Karan stammered in alarm. "What are you doing?"

"I didn't realize how much I loved you until you were gone. Please, I'm begging you. Say you'll start over with me again, Karan."

Why, he's gone mad.

Her first thought was that he was out of his mind. But if someone was insane, they wouldn't be able to roam on city premises. Just as the thought crossed her mind, she noticed the man's heartbeat. They were so close to each other that she could feel his heart beating on her own chest. It was beating with a steady rhythm. The man was neither insane, nor nervous with excitement. He was very much coolly and calmly rattling off these clichéd lines.

"I don't believe this. I've had enough!" Karan thrust her arms in front of her, and pushed the man away. "I've had enough of your sweet-talking. I'm leaving you. I never want to see you again."

"Karan, I love you. I'm really, seriously, in love with you." The crow on the man's shoulder cawed shrilly, as if to mock them. The man cleared his throat awkwardly, and bowed his head to the elderly lady, who was staring at them with her mouth gaping open.

"I'm very sorry for having to show you such an ugly scene."

“Oh— ah, you don’t need to—” the woman said falteringly. “So, er, you two are—?”

“We’re lovers,” the man answered. “I was a fool, and I caused her a lot of pain. I just wanted to apologize to her, and start over again.”

“I see. Well, that’s...”

“We’ve got some important things to discuss, so if you’ll excuse us—”

The man grabbed Karan’s arm, and she was half-dragged away from the scene. The crow cawed loudly again. They took a back route behind the Park Office — Shion’s former workplace — and exited through the back of the park, the man uttering not a single word the whole way. Karan also remained silent as she was pulled along by the arm.

There was a white car parked at the curb. It was a rather old model, seldom seen on city streets anymore. The man opened the door, and spoke quite without any hesitation.

“Get in.”

“No, thank you.”

“Get in,” the man repeated. “I have something I want to talk to you about.” With a great swoosh of its wings, the crow swooped noisily from the man’s shoulder to the back seat of the car. Then, it looked at Karan and jerked its head, as if to invite her to follow.

“He looks like a smart bird,” Karan observed.

“He’s a little too smart for his own good.” The man’s long-suffering tone was telling of how much trouble the bird must have caused him. The crow opened its beak widely and made a cackling sound. It sounded like it was laughing. Karan, found herself laughing a little, too. Only after she finished laughing did she realize how she had gone these past few days without laughing, or even smiling at all.

Karan continued holding the crow’s gaze as she slid into the passenger seat. The electric-gasoline hybrid car glided forward soundlessly.

When they merged onto the highway, the man pressed the switch on auto-drive and took his hands off the steering wheel.

“Did you know? A new bylaw is being put into place, and we won’t be able to use gasoline starting as early as next year. Which means I won’t be able to drive this car anymore either.”

“I’ve heard that fossil fuels have nearly been depleted, except for coal,” said Karan. “I guess we wouldn’t have any other choice but to switch to another energy source.”

“Who did you hear that from?”

“Who—? Well, it’s been announced in the city’s energy policy—”

“Exactly. An announcement by the authorities. The mayor’s speech on his administrative policy, word-for-word.” The man twitched his moustache in a cynical smile. “No one questions it. Everyone accepts what the city announces as it is, and agrees to it without a thought. God, everyone in this damn city is so obedient and naive. Doubting their superiors is the last thing on their minds. They probably can’t even imagine doing that, or want to. Having suspicions takes energy. It’s easier just to sit back and say, yes yes, I agree, to everything.”

Karan threw a sidelong glance at the man’s face.

Then are you saying that you have suspicions? Instead of nodding obediently, are you saying you’re stopping to question it?

She resisted the urge to ask him. It wasn’t wise to say such reckless things to someone she barely knew. She had to be cautious, like a cowering herbivore.

Karan drew herself up, and tried to change the direction of the conversation.

“May I ask you a question?”

“Fire away.”

“Who are you, and how do you know my name? What made you go so far as to stage that half-baked act to pull me out here?”

“Half-baked is a little harsh, no?” said the man wryly. “I thought I pulled it off quite well. You played along nicely, too. That’s Best Actress Award material.”

“Why, thank you,” Karan said pleasantly. “The role of romantic heroine isn’t one I get to play often at this age.”

“Well, I don’t see why not. You’re young and beautiful enough, quite, quite. You could play any heroine you wanted, Karan.”

“Where did you learn my name?”

“From my niece.”

“Niece?”

“Says she’s a fan of yours,” said the man. “Or I should probably say, a fan of your muffins.”

A small, round face floated up in Karan’s mind — the girl who always came to the store with coins clenched in her fist.

“Ma’am, you won’t close this bakery, would you?” — The girl who had shown sincere concern for Karan. She, along with the words and gazes of encouragement from others, had supported her in her dark days after Shion had been taken into custody by the Security Bureau.

“Lili.”

“That’s the one,” the man affirmed. “Lovable Lili. She’s my younger sister’s daughter. Says she likes your cheese muffins a hundred times more than ol’ Uncle here. She told me last time I saw her.”

“Oh, dear.”

“I was ticked off, so I was going to put in my own two-cents about these muffins of yours, and took a bite out of one to taste...” The man’s mouth made a chewing motion. He poked the tip of his tongue out, and licked his lips.

“They were good, weren’t they?”

"They were. I hate to admit it, but they were delicious. Guess it can't be helped that Lili would like them more than some old uncle who only pops by once in a while."

"Well," said Karan, "at least now I know that you're Lili's uncle, and that you learned my name from that adorable niece of yours."

"Thanks for understanding. Did you think I was someone suspicious, by any chance?"

"I still do. What was that act back there? Did you want to pull me away from that respectable madam that badly?"

"You bet. She was dangerous."

"Dangerous?"

The car turned slowly. It was going into Lost Town. It seemed safe to believe that this man intended to take her home.

The old car went back along the same path she had taken this morning, deep in thought. She had taken a day off from the bakery today. Was Lili disappointed?

"You were a hair away from voicing your dissatisfaction toward the city. Am I right?"

I don't think this city is a utopia.

Indeed, she had been about to voice those words. But she had been interrupted at that very moment by the sound of the crow's beating wings.

"That was dangerous?"

"There's a possibility it might've been. What would you have done if that lady decided you were trouble?"

"Trouble? What do you mean?"

"What I'm saying is, she would've gone to the authorities and told them that the women sitting on the park bench has a dissatisfaction with the city."

“You mean she would secretly turn me in?”

“Finding it hard to believe?”

“Of course,” Karan blurted. “That’s nonsense. That madam was concerned about me. She spoke to me out of kindness.”

“Exactly, because you looked so depressed. In this utopia, in No. 6, everyone has to be happy. Even seriously ill or injured people have almost all of their pain removed by leading-edge medical technology. People who are troubled, or who contemplate, or who lose themselves in thought — those kinds of people don’t exist. They aren’t *allowed* to exist.”

“That’s not—” Karan protested. “I mean, there are always people on the bench who seem to be lost in thought.”

The man shook his head, and tapped a corner of the small monitor on the dashboard that was displaying road information. Small digits expressing the time popped up on the screen.

“Do you remember how long you were sitting on that bench for?”

Karan gazed at the numbers, and shook her head. She had forgotten completely about the time. She had sat on that bench, contemplating, wrestling with her thoughts, and unable to find an answer. She had lost the will to stand up and keep walking.

“Your time limit is thirty minutes,” the man muttered.

“Huh?”

“Citizens are allowed to space out for thirty minutes, at the most. If they’re thinking deeply or losing themselves in thought for longer than that, the flags come up and someone’ll jump in to check.”

“So you’re saying — that madam approached me to investigate, because I was brooding for such a long time?”

“I couldn’t say,” the man answered. “All I know is that there was a possibility. Maybe she was just a little old woman who thought

she was being kind and generous — the kind that won't mind doing something nice, as long as it's not too much trouble for them."

"What a horrible way to put it."

"It's the truth. This city is teeming with those kind of self-proclaimed good Samaritans. There are so many of them, it gets pretty hard to distinguish the ones that are actually good. Still, if that madam was one of those, it wouldn't be a problem. But what if she was a snitch? That would've been a close call for you, wouldn't it?"

Karan didn't answer him. She didn't want to be suspicious of the elderly madam. She wanted to believe that the woman had been a kind soul who had spoken to her, a stranger, out of genuine concern. She had had such gentle eyes, smiling behind her spectacles—

Karan drew a sharp breath.

"Those glasses..."

"You've finally noticed? They were a little big and clunky for a sophisticated madam like her, don't you think? Maybe they were built in with a microphone and recording device."

Karan closed her eyes, and let out a long breath.

Thirty minutes was her time limit. She was not allowed any more.

To contemplate deeply; to wrestle with one's thoughts; to immerse oneself in the realm of one's mind; and from there, to find one's own answer — it was all prohibited.

The same question welled up inside her breast again.

What have we been doing all this time? Why have we created a city like this? Where have we gone wrong?

She swallowed her sigh. She felt exhausted, and felt as if the mental will to retaliate, and the strength to become angry, had all withered within her.

"I've probably been tracked by the authorities all this time," she said quietly. "They must have been keeping me under surveillance, and not only because I was lost in thought. I *am* the mother of a convicted murderer, after all."

"There'll be none of that," the man said sharply. "No putting yourself down." His tone was that of a father scolding his daughter. "Do you really think your son is a criminal, like the authorities have told you?" Karan lifted her gaze off the floor, and shook her head. She had not believed for an instant that her son had murdered someone.

"This is also something I heard from Lili," continued the man. "She says your son — name's Shion, right? — says he's really nice. When she'd break her toys, he'd always fix them for her. Says she likes him a lot more than Uncle here, though not as much as your muffins. She was wondering if he had a girlfriend."

"*Was* she? Oh, dear," Karan said, with a hint of a smile in her voice.

"Cheeky, huh? Acting older than her age. But for all it's worth, she can't seem to realize how attractive her own uncle can be. Don't know how my sister raised her, for her to turn out like that."

"And if I ask Lili, would I be able to find out what name this attractive uncle of hers goes by, and what he does?"

The man laughed at Karan's words, and tapped the panel lightly again.

"God knows what might happen if you asked Lili. She'd probably tell you that Uncle Yoming is a weird man who wanders by the house once in a while, eats 'til he's full, and scoots out of the place."

"Yoming. That's your name."

"Yeah. And this is my job."

The panel filled with images of bread, cakes and other light fare, followed by caloric content and nutritional information, price, and name of the stores that served them.

"I run an electronic newsfeed for all sorts of entertainment in the areas, all of them except Chronos. Which isn't much, I mean, apart from dining and seasonal events, which is mostly what I do. Since the city oversees all the plays, concerts and print publishing, there's not much we can write about other than food and drink. The Food Bureau's out of the question, no way I could get inside that place — so it's just stuff like where to eat good cakes, or good places to have lunch, or things like that. I do the best I can. It's actually quite popular. I mean, after all, in Lost Town, there's not much to do for fun other than eat or drink, so everyone's eager for information."

"Then by any chance, are you—"

"Right on," the man said energetically. "I want to run a feature on your bakery's breads and cakes, with a spotlight on the muffins. Will you let me interview you?"

"Are you sure you want to write about my shop?" Karan said worriedly. "Won't the authorities turn their eye on you too?"

"I don't care if the authorities turn their eye on me, or want to trip me up, what-have-you. I can't let those delicious muffins go without any publicity." He paused. "Though Lili probably wouldn't be too happy if a crowd of customers came and cleaned out your muffins. *Uncle, you never do anything right*, she'd probably say."

"Never," smiled Karan. "—But my bakery's been on the news before, with my son's incident, and all. People from Lost Town might still come — but what about people from other areas?"

Yoming shrugged his shoulders, and erased the image on the touch-panel screen.

"Karan, the people of this city aren't very good at remembering things." His voice was hoarse, and hard to catch.

"They forget everything at the blink of an eye. No matter how serious an incident. Gone. What's more, they don't even see the possibility

that there might be something underneath the surface. Remembering, doubting, contemplating. It's hard for them to do. But they don't even have to do it — the day still goes on, and peacefully, too. It's a terrifying place, this."

Yoming's words sounded so much like an open criticism of the present condition that Karan found herself straightening in her seat. If this conversation reached outside ears, that would be more terrifying than anything. As if perceiving Karan's agitation, Yoming relaxed his face in a smile and waved his hand nonchalantly.

"Don't worry. This car is equipped with an anti-tapping device. But who knows, maybe all the new cars rolling out next year will have tapping devices built right into them."

"Yoming, why are you so critical of the city? How can you be so certain that this is a frightening place?"

After a brief silence, Yoming tapped the touch-screen three times.

The image of a young, delicate-faced woman appeared. A baby was sleeping in her arms, bundled in a white blanket. The woman's smile was filled with the bliss of motherhood. Her chestnut hair, cropped in a short bob, framed her alert and energetic face, and her gentle smile was memorable.

"My wife. That's our son in her arms. This picture is from a long time ago."

"Did something happen to your—?"

"Same as with your son, she left the house one day and never came back. The only thing that's different from your case is that she disappeared along with our son, and that she was filed away as a missing person."

Karan's breath caught in her throat. Yoming's calm and levelled way of speaking made the fact even more shocking.

It's the same as Shion— there's someone who's been through the same thing—

“She was a school teacher,” Yoming said quietly. “She taught art and music to kids like Lili. Said no other job could suit her better. She always told the kids to cherish what they felt in their hearts. Whether it be for drawing a picture, or writing a song, she said the most important thing was to look straight at your feeling and emotions, and express them truthfully.”

“That’s beautiful,” Karan breathed. “I don’t think I’ve heard such touching words in a long time.”

“Yeah. She was an admirable woman, touched a lot of people. She had firm beliefs, and taught her children based on those. But she started getting more and more stern warnings and directions from the Education Bureau... they told her to teach the kids strictly by the book. The book that they’d published, of course. Naturally, she resisted— and she got fired from her workplace. She got her license revoked too, because they deemed her as unfit for teaching. I think during that time, there were quite a few teachers like her who were removed from their jobs. You didn’t know, did you?”

“I had no idea— I can’t even remember...”

“No need to be ashamed. It’s natural you shouldn’t know,” Yoming said grimly. “It didn’t make the news. The authorities were already starting to manipulate information by that time. There you had the seeds of a system that would eventually prevent anything inconvenient from being publicized as tangible information.”

The car was already entering Lost Town. This district was always the least-maintained and the last to be updated in its facilities, and was an area of haphazard mish-mash. Amidst its restless buzz, Karan found herself sighing a breath of relief.

“She was planning to build a school for children, with other exiled teachers — she was trying to teach in a place where the authorities would have less influence. She’d left for a meeting to discuss plans for

the school that day — and she never came back.”

Yoming clenched his fist, and pounded the steering wheel. The crow cried plaintively in the back seat.

“I’ll never forget,” he said through clenched teeth. “No matter what happens, I’ll never forget. I’ll keep it alive in my memory. It was cloudy that morning, and it looked like it would rain any minute. I’d gone to the dentist because my toothache was getting unbearable. I was off work that day, so I should have been the one babysitting our son at home. But she took him with her so I wouldn’t have to. She put him on a stroller with a blue hood, and she was wearing a beige jacket. There were small embroidered flowers on the chest. We promised that if my toothache settled down in the afternoon, and it didn’t rain, we’d go out to the Forest Park to take a walk. At the door, we kissed and said goodbye. I kissed my son on the cheek, too. He laughed, and kicked his feet. He was wearing tiny little white socks. There were flowery patterns sewn on them too. They were purple violets. I still remember. I still haven’t forgotten a single thing. I could never forget.”

“Yoming...”

The car stopped.

You have arrived at your destination, announced the car navigator. They were in front of Karan’s bakery.

“I’m sorry, I got a little worked up,” Yoming said. “Rude of me, since we’ve only just met.”

“No—” Karan said softly. “Thank you for bringing me home.”

She paused uncertainly. She questioned herself whether it would be alright to tell him about Safu. She was unable to decide whether she could completely trust the man in front of her.

“Ma’am!”

Someone rammed full-speed into Karan's waist as she got out of the car.

"My, Lili."

"Ma'am, why did you take a day off today? Are you sick?"

Yoming called over from inside the car.

"Lili, she's fine. Madam here just had some errands to run. She'll bake muffins for you tomorrow, I'm sure."

Lili blinked, and her mouth gaped open.

"Hey, is that you, Uncle Yoming? Did you come to eat dinner again? Why do you always come when we're having chicken and mushrooms?"

"See, this is what I get. Horrible, isn't it?" Yoming smiled wryly, and leaned forward to peer into Karan's face. "If you can, open your bakery again tomorrow. And keep on at it. You've got a job to do, Karan."

"Of course."

"Never despair. You can't give up, no matter what. It's only when you despair and decide that there's nothing you can do, that you really lose. It might seem easier to just give up—"

Karan placed a hand on top of Lili's head, and shook her head firmly.

"No, I won't give up. I have my responsibilities."

"Responsibilities?"

"Yes. I'm a grown adult, and I've been living alongside this city for a long time. I've done my best to live respectably, but if the result of that is what this city has become — then we've made a huge mistake somewhere along the way. I'm not sure where we've made it — but I know I've got to take responsibility for it. We can't let children like Lili suffer because of a crime that's not their own, right?"

“Shh—!” Yoming lifted a warning finger. A young woman on a bicycle sped past the car. “I understand how you feel, but don’t say those kind of things out loud here. You don’t know who might be listening.”

Lili giggled, and pulled at Karan’s skirt.

“Uncle Yo’s always being cautious. He’s a scaredy-cat, even though he’s a grown-up.”

“When you grow up, Lili, you’ll start to understand what the really scary things are.”

“Well, I think Mommy is the scariest when she’s angry,” Lili said matter-of-factly. “She’s really scary, you know. Daddy says he’s scared of Mommy the most, too.”

“Ah, that’s right, of course,” Yoming replied gravely. “I agree, your Mommy can be very scary.”

Karan burst out laughing. Lili’s mother would often scold her children in a booming voice that was hard to imagine coming from her slender frame.

“Lili, Yoming, and Mr. Crow, too — if you have time to spare, how would you like to stop by for a bit? I wouldn’t be able to serve you muffins, but I could whip up some pancakes.”

“Really? Yay!” Lili clasped Karan’s hand tightly. Her hands were soft. Karan’s heart swelled with an outpouring of love.

I can’t let this little girl go through what Shion and Safu did. And I must save those two, somehow. Yes — we have a responsibility to fulfill.

Her eyes met with Yoming’s. They stared back at her, the colour of crow’s feathers. Karan nodded, and unlocked the door.

“Lili, come in. You too, Yoming. I still have things to speak to you about.”

Just then, a small black spot flitted across her vision. She heard the buzz of wings.

“What’s wrong?” Yoming followed Karan’s gaze and glanced around as he got out of the car.

“There was an insect — I thought I saw a bee flying around.”

“Bee? It might be warm still, but I don’t think they should be active anymore.”

“I guess you’re right.”

It was winter. There was no way bees would be flying around. Even if there were, it was probably a single insect that had wandered out into the air, drawn by the sunlight and warmth. But she could not shake the foreboding feeling in her heart.

“Ma’am?”

Lili stared up at her from below as she stood still in the doorway.

“Oh, sorry about that. Come on in.”

My nerves are just on-edge. I must be tired. Karan reassured herself, and opened the door. She stepped inside, and shook her head violently, as if brushing away the buzzing sound that had lodged itself in her ears.

3

LAND'S END

*Humans were born from the eye of Ra.
Ra was the creator of heaven, earth, and all things.
Since he was the Sun, and also the ruler of the gods,
it was decided that he would become the first King on earth.*

THE BEGINNING OF HEAVEN AND EARTH, EGYPTIAN MYTH

IT WAS blurry. Everything was veiled in a haze, and vague.

But I have to wake up...

Safu struggled to open her eyes. She bit her lip as hard as she could. There was a slight pain. She could feel her sensations returning.

Safu realized that she was bound to a stretcher. A white door opened, and she was carted inside. In her blurry vision, she could not make out what was there. She felt her body gliding sideways.

“Ah, are we awake?” It was a man’s voice. “No need to be, though. Let’s give you an anaesthetic, shall we? Then you can sleep again in peace.”

“Where... am I...?”

“Care to take a guess?”

What's wrong with me? What happened—? I visited Shion's house, and then—

There was a man in a Security Bureau uniform.

'Are you Safu-san?'

The shock in her neck. The numbness that had spread through her body.

Safu almost shrieked in terror. Her lips parted, but no sound came out. Her voice was stuck at the back of her throat.

"Correc... tional... Facility..."

High-pitched laughter rang out. The man was laughing.

"Do you fancy the Correctional Facility? It seems you've taken a liking to it. I know, once this surgery is over, you can live in your own special suite until you die. I'll have it all arranged."

Surgery?

"Surg..."

"Yes. You're lying on a surgical table." The man's voice was still filled with mirth. A white glare filled her vision. Safu took it to be the light of a surgical lamp. She was pierced with horror — stronger than the horror that had seized her when she had been apprehended by the Security Bureau.

A tear spilled from her eye.

"There's nothing to cry about. There will be no pain, or discomfort. Good night, now."

Shion. Shion. Shion.

He'll save me. He'll rescue me, and get me out of here — Shion.

* * *

“Shion.”

His name was called. Shion stopped his feet. His guard, a large dog, gave a low growl.

“Rikiga-san.”

Rikiga was exiting a shabby restaurant through its rickety glass door. Shabby as it was, it was one of the more decent establishments in the West Block's bazaar. Most establishments of these sort were clusters of barrels and crates placed outside to sit on, and the dishes were all of an unidentifiable origin. The stench of strong spirits and some mysterious stew wafted out from these stands out into the street, and Shion often found himself pinching his nose. But even so, starving children and old beggars milled about the shops, some wandering in hopes of receiving food, others staring fixedly at the adults bringing their food to their mouths. A shop owner raised his voice angrily, splashing water outside his storefront, and chased the people away as if they were stray dogs or cats.

And in front of these starving people, those who had been able to get their hands on the day's sustenance sank their teeth into their food, dripped grease over their mouths, and licked their fingers.

To have money, and to have power.

To have food meant to fulfil these conditions.

Shion had learned this from these few days here. But he still could not get used to it. He couldn't bear to look at the scene before him. He couldn't help but avert his gaze, and look at the ground.

“If it makes you feel better, then give them a handout. But only if you can fill the belly of every single person there,” Nezumi had said. For Shion at the present, it was an impossible task.

“What can you do with your half-hearted sympathy? You might be able to save a handful of kids from starvation, for a short time. But that just means you're creating two new types of people— those who are

starving, and those who aren't. Let me tell you something interesting, Shion. It's more excruciating for people who've filled their belly once to starve, than for people who have never been full at all. Nothing is more harsh than starvation after satiation. These kids here have never eaten until they're full. They don't know what it's like to be satisfied. That's why they can put up with it. Understand? There's nothing you can do here, absolutely nothing."

Nezumi had spat those words, and strode out of the room. But before that, he had stopped abruptly before the door, and turned around. A brown dog was sprawled off to the side.

"So Inukashi's lent this dog to you as your bodyguard, huh? And I hear your wages were a little more flush than usual. Looks like you've become his favourite."

"He says he'll let me continue working for him. He asked me to clean the guest rooms and take care of the dogs."

"And you took the job?"

"Of course," Shion replied enthusiastically. "I was so happy, I thanked him over and over again."

Nezumi sneered.

"Will you look at that. Mr. No. 6 Elite is rejoicing over a housecleaning and dogkeeping job. It should be interesting to see how much lower you're going to stoop."

"I don't think I'm stooping," Shion said promptly. "You'd agree, wouldn't you? You don't think this is stooping at all."

Nezumi's shapely face contorted slightly. He hunched his shoulders.

"Oh yeah, Shion. You got paid by Inukashi today, didn't you? Go out and buy some dried meat and bread."

"At the market?"

"You don't know any other place to buy food, do you?" Nezumi said sarcastically.

“Well—yeah, but...”

“Dried meat and bread. Inspect it carefully when they give it to you. Space out like you usually do, and you’ll be stuck with a mouldy brick of a loaf. And haggle. Haggle like no tomorrow. I’m off.”

The door closed, and his footsteps faded into the distance.

He would have to buy dried meat and bread in front of those children. Nezumi had told him to.

Dried meat, and bread.

Shion’s stomach growled insistently. His mouth watered. He had had only the slice of bread and fruits that Inukashi had given him at noon. He was terribly hungry. He had not eaten any meat, nor soft bread, for days.

His stomach growled, his mouth watered.

He wanted to eat. He wanted to sate his empty stomach.

Shion sighed, and pulled his hat further down over his head.

What can you do with your half-hearted sympathy?

He recalled Nezumi’s words again and again.

You’re right. I can’t do anything. I’m just pretending to pity those kids to boost my self-respect. The truth is that I’m about to buy meat and bread, right in front of those children, to satisfy my own hunger. That’s my true form — that’s the kind of person I am. Nezumi, is that what you meant?

There were a few coins in his pocket. It was his day’s payment that he had received from Inukashi.

“Part of that is a thank-you for treating my brother. I can’t always pay you this much.” Inukashi had said this rather curtly, but Shion was grateful for his kindness. It may have been quite a large amount for a day’s worth of work. But even so, it was enough to cover only a few strips of dried meat and two or three loaves of mouldy bread. There was almost no food left in their room, otherwise buried in books. He

wouldn't be able to live off Nezumi's goodwill forever. He had to secure a means of providing for himself, however little it was.

Shion pushed the door open, and stepped outside. The dog slowly got to its feet, and trailed after him. When Shion set foot into the market street, it drew up to Shion's side and kept pace with him closely. He was trained well. It was apparent that Inukashi had quite a hand with his dogs. Shion smiled sheepishly as he caught himself, yet again, being surprised or impressed like with so many other things since coming to the West Block.

It was already dusk. Darkness was setting in, and the cooing and bellowing of voices echoed even more loudly in the air. Under ripped tents, and in front of barracks, people sold and bought things, ate, and drank. As soon as the warmth of the afternoon slipped beneath the horizon, the ground beneath them grew colder by the minute. Business was probably booming at Inukashi's hotel. For those who had nowhere warm to sleep, it was going to be an unpleasant night. Bare-breasted women called out from the darkness of the alleyways, and old women clad in rags huddled on the ground in the same darkness. Children trotted about, nimbly threading through the crowd, and being yelled at occasionally. And still people bought and sold, ate, and drank.

Don't know what waits for me tomorrow.

But at least I've lived through today.

So I'll eat. So I'll drink. Here, it's everything we've got.

All the things I've said, can't enjoy 'em once I'm dead

So I'm alive an' enjoyin' 'em today.

That's everything. Here, it's everything. My everything.

Someone was singing off-key. Shion paused, and tilted an ear to the voice. He hugged the parcel of dried meat and bread that he had just

bought close to his chest. This clamour that seemed to rush at him and overwhelm him — this clamour, this jumble of noises that seemed to burst out of the ground itself —

It was all connected to those who had a strong attachment to life, and the energy that they radiated. Here, everyone clung fast to life. They greedily latched onto survival. Because nothing insured a tomorrow for them, these people lived with even more desperation. This energy, this clamour. It was something that didn't exist, wasn't allowed to exist, in No. 6.

What feelings did Nezumi have as he walked through these streets?

“Brother.”

A feeble voice called out to him. He turned to see a thin child robed in faded cloth. He had long, matted hair, and a dirty face. Shion couldn't tell whether it was a boy or a girl.

“Spare some bread for me,” the child pleaded weakly, in a voice that was barely a whisper. “I haven't eaten for three days. Please, just a morsel.”

The child's countenance reminded him of a little girl he got along with back in Lost Town. Her name was Lili.

“A morsel...”

A pair of tiny hands stretched toward him. Almost without a thought, Shion was putting his hand into his parcel. As soon as he pulled out a round roll, an impact slammed into his back. He had been shoved. He staggered. As Shion lost his balance, a pair of small hands snatched the parcel from Shion's arms. At the same time, he was shoved violently in the back once more, and he fell to his knees.

“Run!”

The child shouted energetically, almost unrecognizable from the whisper moments before. Several children yelled after him as they stormed

past Shion. The dog leapt forward swiftly and silently. He attacked the child who had stolen the parcel. Screams rose from the group.

Still hugging the package of dried meat and bread in both hands, the child crumpled to the ground. A few strips of meat and a piece of bread fell out and scattered on the ground. The dog pinned the child down with its legs, and bared its teeth.

“Stop it! Heel!” Shion had shouted without thinking. The dog obeyed, closed its mouth, and looked up at Shion reproachfully. The child didn’t miss his chance. He sprang up, and broke into a sprint with the package in his arms. He moved with the swiftness and agility of a wild animal. In moments, his small back had disappeared into the throng. The other children had also melted into the crowd, out of sight.

“Amazing...”

Shion couldn’t help but murmur at their cunning ways. Admittedly, he was impressed. He soon realized that this was no time to be impressed, and stooped to gather what was left of his meat and bread. What would Nezumi say, after seeing it reduced to almost one-third of its original amount? Would he say nothing, and shrug his shoulders? Would he sneer?

Shion shrugged off his coat and wrapped the bread and meat with it. He would share this with Nezumi for dinner tonight. Those children would probably do the same. They would share it amongst themselves, and each have a tiny morsel of food for dinner. Naive, and meaningless sympathy. He knew Nezumi would criticize him scathingly, but Shion was still a little relieved.

At least tonight, those children would have food. Right now, he had no power to free them from starvation. He couldn’t do anything. But if his meat and bread would stave off their empty stomachs even for a short time— wasn’t that at least a little meaningful? It was acceptable enough to give up because he was powerless to do anything. It was

acceptable, but it was arrogant. *Wouldn't you think so, Nezumi?*

"Oy, you there, fella."

From a stall selling roasted kebabs, the female shopkeeper called over to him in her raspy voice. "Will ya stop standin' in front o' my store all dazed-like? Being a nuisance, you is. Disruptin' business!"

"Oh, I'm sorry," Shion bowed his head hastily in apology, but the shop mistress was already busy dealing with other customers to notice him. Here, no one looked out for other strangers. They simply weren't interested. Whether there be robbery on the street, or a beggar dying, or a fight breaking out, no one cared. It all blended into the scenery of daily occurrences.

"Well, let's go home, then," Shion called over to the dog, and noticed its jaws snapping as it was chewing something.

"Hey, wait a minute, don't tell me you're—"

The dog gulped the meat in its mouth, and looked up at him with a flash of a grin.

"When did you manage to pick that meat up? A lot quicker than me, huh."

The dog lolled its pink tongue, licked its chops, and began trotting briskly ahead of him. Shion was amused, though he wasn't sure why. He had been following the dog for some time when he was stopped by Rikiga. Outwardly, Rikiga's job was publishing lewd adult magazines. But behind the scenes, he acted as a middleman for prostitutes, and that was his livelihood. Among his patrons there were said to be higher officials of No. 6 as well. In the words of Nezumi, it was from these kinds of people that Rikiga cunningly weaselled great amounts money.

But he was also the man that Shion's mother Karan told him to go to for help. According to Rikiga, a long time ago before No. 6 and the West Block was been divided with a wall of special alloy, he had met

and fallen in love with Karan. But it was only he who had fallen in love, and Karan had merely shown agreement toward the articles that Rikiga had written as a journalist at that time.

“He’s the prime example of a corrupted man.” These were also Nezu-mi’s words, but Shion found he liked the somewhat aloof and fearless aura of the man who had once loved his mother. This man wasn’t completely corrupted. He still had journalism in his bones. That was what Shion felt.

Rikiga’s face was beet-red from drunkenness, and even his eyes were bloodshot. It looked like he had been drinking quite a bit.

“Rikiga-san, it’s bad for your health if you don’t lay off the alcohol a little.”

“You’re so kind, Shion. I feel like Karan’s the one reprimanding me. She was just saying to me the other day, *‘Please, Rikiga, mind your health.’*”

“The other day? My mother?”

“In my dream. Ever since seeing you, Karan’s started appearing in my dreams. And every single time I see her, she scolds me. Don’t drink, don’t be reckless, don’t lose sight of what your job should really be—” A flush that was not from alcohol rose in Rikiga’s cheeks. He turned his face away as if to avoid Shion’s gaze.

“Well, a dream’s just a dream. Karan’s moved on, gotten herself an admirable son like you. I’m sure she’s changed from when she was younger — in appearance, and heart too.”

“She’s aged,” Shion conceded. “And she’s gotten a little plump. —But if she were to see you again, Rikiga-san, I’m sure she’d say the same thing she said to you in your dream. That’s the kind of person she is.” Rikiga opened his mouth to say something, and then pursed his lips. “All that about Karan— it’s— it’s alright. To tell you the truth, it’s a bit painful remembering...” he trailed off before abruptly changing

the subject. "So are you alone today?"

"I'm with the dog."

"The one that's glaring at me suspiciously right now? You wouldn't wanna bite me, mutt. Just so you know, my meat is soaked in booze, and it's running in my veins. Sink your teeth into this, and you'll go belly-up from alcohol poisoning."

The dog glanced up at the drunken man, twitched its nose disdainfully, and scowled. Shion looked down and chuckled to himself.

"What's his problem?" Rikiga grumbled at the dog. "So, no one else with you today apart from the dog?"

"Are you talking about Nezumi?"

"Yeah. That sarcastic smart-aleck of an actor. Geez, I don't think I've met anyone as foul-mouthed as he is."

"But you were his fan, right?"

"I just didn't know his true identity, that's all. I mean, Eve is quite enthralling onstage. I never would have guessed that he'd be such an impolite asshole. The kid goes around saying whatever he wants, whenever he wants. Hard to imagine how a beautiful face like that can be so brash and brutal. Unbelievable, I tell ya."

"Nezumi only speaks the truth."

No matter how harsh or ruthless his words were, they never carried any lies. That was why they became blades and spears that pierced Shion's chest, and left a pain that he could not forget. It was a pain that he would never have known if he had not met Nezumi. Every time the countless pangs stirred restlessly deep in his chest, Shion felt something in himself changing little by little. A part crumbled away, while another part rebuilt itself; and yet another part would be born anew. Each word from Nezumi, and the pain that accompanied it led Shion to change, and kept urging him forward. Shion could vividly feel himself being changed and shaped by the force of another.

"You know, Shion. If it gets too unbearable, you can stay over with me," Rikiga said as they walked side-by-side. His breath hit Shion's cheek, and reeked of alcohol.

"Unbearable? What do you mean?"

"No, I understand," Rikiga said abruptly. "You don't have to hide it. I can't imagine how it *wouldn't* be unbearable living with Eve. I'm guessing your living conditions are less-than-standard. Are you getting enough to eat? Now, I think this highly unlikely, but if in some nasty turn of events, you get influenced by Eve and your personality gets as twisted as his— hm," he grunted to himself. "Indeed. There's no way I can let that happen to Karan's son. Come live at my place. I'll give you enough to eat, and give you a warm bed to sleep in."

"No, that's alright. I'm fine."

"But Karan sent word to come to me for help, right?"

"Yes, but I don't want to be a burden on you, Rikiga-san," Shion insisted. "I'm fine. I've managed until now, and I'll keep managing. And I actually enjoy being around Nezumi."

"There's no way you'd enjoy being around an ass like him. You don't have to put on a brave face. You're having a hard time, aren't you? Look, you're not even wearing a sweater. You poor kid."

"Oh, no, I'm just using my sweater to wrap my meat and bread—"

But Rikiga wasn't listening to Shion's answer. He was glancing at his surroundings, and nodding fervently to himself.

"I know a good store. Let's go there." He yanked Shion by the arm, and walked into a shop that was lined with an enormous quantity of clothes. It looked like a used-clothing shop, and there were garments even hanging from the ceiling. The clothes ranged from well-worn to almost new.

"G'day." A woman almost as large as the shopkeeper from the kebab stand materialized out of the shadows of a mountain of clothes. As

soon as she noticed that Rikiga was her customer, she pasted a bright business smile onto her face.

“Whah, Mr. Rikiga. Nice to see you again,” she drawled. “If you’re looking for a dress to give to someone, we’ve got some very good ones, we do. One of these would leave her pleased as punch, yessir.”

“No, I’m not looking for women’s clothes today,” replied Rikiga. “Can you find something warm that would look nice on this boy here?”

The woman’s eyes narrowed, and her gaze raked Shion from head to toe.

“Whah, what an *adorable* gentleman we have heah,” she said appreciatively. “And mah, what bee-yootiful hair. Is it fashionable with young people these days?”

Shion pulled his wool hat further down over his eyes. His glossy white hair stood out, even in the dim darkness of the shop. When the parasite wasp had hatched inside him, as the price for his survival or some sort of side-effect, Shion’s hair had been drained of its colour in a single night, and a red scar had appeared on his skin, snaking its way up from his leg to his neck. He could hide his scar with clothing, but with his hair, it wasn’t so easy. His snowy hair and youthful face were an unusual combination, and drew stares wherever he went. In the West Block, it wasn’t particularly out-of-place for young people to be balding or have greying hair from malnutrition. There were many children that had salt-and-pepper hair which would otherwise be more common to those entering their senior years. But those like Shion, whose every strand of hair was pure white and shiny, was a rarity.

“It’s more transparent than white, I’d say. I think it looks way prettier than before, to tell you the truth.” Even Nezumi had said so, while touching his hair with his fingertips.

“Is he your boy? Highly unlikely, Ah’d say,” the women remarked, her artificial smile still plastered to her face as she gazed at Shion. He

felt like he was being sized up. It was a little uncomfortable.

“Rikiga-san, um, I really don’t need any winter clothes, can we just—”

“Nonsense,” Rikiga interrupted. “Winters here are harsh. You’ve got barely enough flesh on those bones to get you through. You need some good, warm clothes to keep the cold out. Well?” he said impatiently to the shopkeeper. “Are you going to put out some clothes or not? If you’re not, I’ll take my business elsewhere.”

Under Rikiga’s glare, the woman sprang hastily into motion.

“Whah, of course Ah will. We’ve actually just gotten a shipment in. Just a momen’ now.” The woman heaved an armload of clothes from behind a dirty curtain.

“There y’ go. Choose any one you like. They’re all *excellent* qualitatay.”

Shion had his doubts about whether they were of *excellent qualitatay* or not, but there was certainly a variety of garments. There were overcoats, half-coats, sweaters, heavy shawls, and sports jackets of every size, material, and colour, all heaped high.

“Guess you just have to look in the right place,” Shion muttered to himself. Here was a wealth of clothing, where just down the road there were people clad in rags, shivering in the cold. Even in a severely impoverished place like the West Block, there was still a stark divide between the poor and privileged.

“Shion, you don’t need to be modest. Pick anything that catches your eye.”

“But Rikiga-san, there’s no reason for you to be so good to me—”

“Don’t worry about it. You’re Karan’s son— and to me, that sort of feels like you’re my son too. Think of it as a kind of treat from your dad.”

Shion blinked, and gazed into Rikiga’s flushed face. It looked like his drinking had done away with some of his inhibitions; what he was saying now was probably close to how he truly felt. Perhaps Rikiga

had lived alone all this time in the West Block, with no family. And now, he was trying to re-enact the sort of family life he never had, with the son of a woman he had once loved. Freedom and loneliness. He had the cunning it took to succeed in the underground business with No. 6 officials as his patrons; but he had the frailty of one who had wearied of living too long in solitude.

Humans were complex. They housed in themselves both resilience and frailty; ying and yang; light and shadow; sacred and sinful. Here was the true form of a human that Shion would never have been able to map from the vast sea of knowledge he had acquired in No. 6.

What he knew of the human body — of roughly 32,000 genes; approximately 100,000 different kinds of proteins; 300 million base sequences of DNA; its neurons; collagen fibres; macrophages; the layered structure of muscles; the volume of blood in circulation — he didn't think any of it a waste. He didn't think so at all. But *understanding* a human being was an entirely different dimension. It was impossible to grasp any of the complexity or true form of a living being from systematic knowledge or information that could be converted to numbers.

It was something that Shion had learned from his days of living with Nezumi on this land.

"Well, in that case, I guess I'll choose freely."

"That's more like it," Rikiga said jovially. "Which one do you want? Find anything you like?"

Shion pulled out a dark, heavy coat.

"I'll take this one. It looks warm."

"Are you sure you want something that dull? Alright, then pick a flashy sweater. You're young, you'd look better in bright colours."

"No, really—" Shion protested, "I don't need so much."

"Nonsense. The coat by itself isn't going to keep you warm enough."

“Ah’d say so too mahself, sir,” the woman chimed in. “Our sweaters are *very* warm, see. Whah don’t you trah some on?”

The woman confidently yanked a sweater out of the pile. The mountain of clothes collapsed, and spilled in an avalanche over the floor.

“Oh, mah. *Well*. Ah *do* apologize—”

Rikiga clicked his tongue in annoyance.

“*What* are you doing?” he said irritably. “Now we can’t even choose from this mess. Ridiculous, huh, Shion.” He paused. “Shion — what’s wrong?”

Although Rikiga had spoken right beside him, his words did not reach Shion’s ears. His gaze was glued to what had appeared underneath the scattered garments. All sound and colour disappeared from around him, and only that thing rose up into his vision.

It was a grey half-coat.

The soft colour, with a hint of blue; its premium quality obvious to the touch; the large buttons on the cuffs of the sleeves — he had seen them before.

“This is—” His hand trembled as he grasped the coat. There was a rip in the shoulder that had been sewn up crudely with black thread. There was also a button missing, which looked like it had been torn off. His hands shook violently. He wanted them to stop, but they would not.

“That one capture your fancy? Ah, but this is ladies’ coat, see. The very best qualitaty, of course — but maht be just a *little* snug on you, sir. Ah don’t think it would fit. The last coat, the black one, that would look much—”

“Where did you—”

“Ah beg your pardon?”

“I’m asking you where you got this from!” He was yelling. He had no

intention of intimidating the woman, but she raised her eyebrows in surprise, and took a step backwards.

"This coat— where— where did you get it?"

"Shion!"

Rikiga clamped a hand on Shion's shoulder from behind. "What's wrong? What are you getting all worked up for? What's wrong with the coat?"

Shion swallowed hard, and clenched the coat in his hands.

"This belongs to Safu."

"Safu? Who's that?"

"My friend. My... very precious..."

"Friend? You mean, from when you were still inside the city?"

"Yes."

"Are you sure it's not a mistake? There must be dozens of coats that look like this."

Shion gritted his teeth in hopes of stopping the trembling in his fingers, and shook his head from side to side.

It was no mistake. This was Safu's coat. It had been a gift from her only blood relative, her grandmother, and even for a boy like Shion, he could tell that it was an elegant and becoming piece that complimented Safu's well-defined face.

"Your Grandma must really know you well, Safu. She always chooses things that look the best on you," he had said.

"Yeah, I guess so. I mean, she's raised me all my life, after all. Hey, Shion— if you were to give me a coat, what kind would you give me?"

"What? I'm sorry, but my wages are never gonna be able to get you a coat as nice as that one."

"I'm just saying, 'what if'? I want to know what you would choose."

"Hmm, tough question."

“Well, think hard. Solving difficult questions is your thing, isn’t it?”

Last year, they had walked down a winter path holding this kind of conversation. The rays of the winter sun had streamed through the bare branches and shone down on Safu, making her coat glow dimly. That was the first time he had thought his childhood friend looked beautiful. The wintry sun, the warm smile, the grey coat. It was Safu’s. He was sure of it.

Why— what was this doing here? Why, why, why...

“Why?” Shion pressed urgently. “Where, and how did you get this coat? Tell me, please. Now.”

“Shion, calm down.” Rikiga stepped out in front of Shion, and blocked the woman’s way. “So, what route did you ship this in through? Did it find its way here from No. 6, or—”

The woman’s face had long been wiped clean of its plastic smile. Instead, it was filled with bold and disdainful suspicion.

“Whah, I *never*. Here Ah am, bein’ polite for *you*, Mr. Rikiga, and what do Ah get in return? Is it any of your business where Ah get mah things? Or what is it— plannin’ to find all the faults you can with mah goods, and get them for cheap, Ah suppose? This is no joking matter, no, this *is* not. Ah’m not laughing one bit.”

“What the hell would I be doing wanting to make you laugh?” Rikiga snapped. “I can assure you the chances of that is slimmer than a hair on my head. Why aren’t you talking? What are you being so cautious for? It’s that risky, is it, wherever you’re getting these shipped from?”

The woman opened her wide mouth and let forth a stream of indignant complaints.

“Tha’s *quite* enough. Ah’ll have you know Ah run a *decent* business ’round these parts. If you’ve got somethin’ to complain about, you can show yourself the door. Git out, Ah say. Go home!”

Before she could finish, Rikiga had twisted her arm behind her back, and pinned her down on the counter.

“What the hell are you doin’? You dirty littl’ bastard!”

“If you don’t want your arm broken, you better spit it out,” Rikiga said darkly. “How did you get this coat?”

“Ah got it from the waste disposal plant in No. 6. Picked it up ’cause it was floatin’ in the sewage. Thas’ all, mercy, Jesus!” She winced in pain.

“There was sewage coming out of that place? I don’t think I’ve heard anything about that.”

“Thas’ whah Ah’m sayin’, it was a long time ago — does it matter, really? They threw ’t away ’cause it was garbage, Ah’m free to do whatever Ah want with it. It’s nobody’s business, ’specially not yours.”

“You’re lying!” Shion yelled. “That’s a lie! This coat was important to Safu. She would never throw it away!”

“What’s the noise about?” A door at the back of the store opened, and a man walked in. He was a giant — at least two metres tall in height. It looked like he weighed at least a hundred kilograms. His head was completely bald, and his face was strangely twisted. Despite the season, he was only clad in a short-sleeved T-shirt. Tattoos of a scorpion and skull decorated his thick arms.

“You’re back, and just in tahm. Will you kick these two out of here?” The woman smiled contemptuously while still being pinned by Rikiga. “Ah’ll have you know that mah husband’s got mighty strong muscles in them arms. Could sure break a neck or two ’fore breakfast. Ah’d git outta here if Ah were you, ’fore you end up dead.”

Rikiga let go of the woman, and shrugged his shoulders casually.

“Well?” said the woman impatiently. “What’re you dawdling for? Beat ’em ’til they can barely stand, go on.”

The man remained silent. Then, without uttering a single word, he bowed his head low.

“Long time no see, Conk,” Rikiga said momentarily. “Didn’t know you settled down. So you’re the hubby of a clothes-dealer now, huh?”
 “Got married a month ago,” the man mumbled.

“Well, well. Congratulations. Will you be kind and ask your beautiful wife where she got this coat? She’s got a lot of spunk, this madam of yours. Having a hard time getting the truth out of her.”

The man whom Rikiga called Conk stared intently at the coat in Shion’s hands, and turned to the woman.

“Tell Rikiga-san the truth.”

“Whah, whas’ gotten in to you all of a sudden? What do you have to listen to them for?”

“Rikiga-san was good to me a long time ago. Hurry up. Say it.”

Under Conk’s threatening gaze, the woman’s face twisted into a scowl. Still scowling, she turned her face away huffily.

“Ah jus’ bought it off some middleman. Ah dunno where *he* maht’ve gotten it.”

Rikiga clicked his tongue.

“Liar. There’s no way you wouldn’t know where your merchandise came from.”

“Ah don’t know what Ah don’t know,” the woman said stubbornly.
 “No way Ah would.”

Rikiga posed another question while restraining Conk, who had taken a step forward with a clenched fist.

“Then tell me who that middleman is,” he said. “I’ll be able to figure out the rest.”

The woman didn’t answer. Rikiga extracted a few bills from his breast pocket, placed them in the woman’s hand, and closed her fingers

around them.

"You were talking to yourself, and you let the middleman's name slip. We just happened to overhear. We'll keep it that way. I won't cause you trouble."

The woman glanced at the bills in her hand, and with her face still turned aside, mumbled an answer.

"It's the dogkeeper. That weird squirt who uses his dogs to do business."

The dog curled up at Shion's feet pricked its ears. Rikiga gave a low growl.

"Inukashi, huh. Then it must've come from the Correctional Facility."

"Correctional Facility?" Shion echoed in disbelief.

"Yeah," said Rikiga. "I heard the kid passes prisoner's belongings along to the underground market."

Shion's heart stopped. Or at least, it felt like it did. He couldn't breathe. There was a dull ringing in his ears.

Correctional Facility, prisoners, Correctional Facility, prisoners, Correctional Facility...

"Then Safu... she's inside the Correctional Facility?"

"Most likely," Rikiga answered heavily. "And she probably hasn't been invited cordially as a guest, either. She's probably been taken into custody— treated as a prisoner, no doubt."

Shion burst out of the store with the grey coat in his arms.

He had to see Inukashi immediately. He had to learn the truth from him.

"Shion!"

Behind him, Rikiga's yell scattered on the wind and dispersed fruitlessly into the air.

* * *

The man was walking strangely, and he had been doing so for some time. He stumbled on unsteady feet as if he were drunk.

Twelve-year-old Juse tilted his head in bewilderment as he dismounted from his bicycle. Off to the left, he could see the apartment building where he and his family lived. He was in a corner of a park, one of many that dotted the residential area. Although it wasn't as large as the Forest Park, it was nevertheless a peaceful alcove abundant in greenery. Juse pushed his bicycle along — a crossroad bike he had gotten for this twelfth birthday from his father — and followed the man with his gaze. He couldn't help but be concerned; he couldn't just leave the man there. His mother was always lamenting this habit of his. 'Don't get involved in other people's business,' she would say. 'You seem to want to stick your nose into everything, Juse. I wonder if you've gotten it from your grandfather.' But if he *had* gotten it from his grandfather, for Juse it would have been the best thing he could ask for. He always thought so in his heart.

Juse loved his grandfather. When Juse was still young, his grandfather, who had once been a sailor, would always sit Juse on his lap and tell him stories. He spoke of the sea, which Juse had never seen before; of great white whales that were as big as mountains; lands that were suspended year-round in snow and ice; flocks of tens of thousands of butterflies that streamed across the sky in one large flowing mass; giants that lived above the clouds; mysterious creatures that lived deep beneath the sea; faeries; magic; ancient wars of the gods — his mother hated it, but there was a time in Juse's life when he became completely engrossed in the stories that his grandfather would tell him.

He grew up, and not long after he began attending an institution selected by the Education Bureau, he received a formal reprimand

from the instructor that he had delusional tendencies. He was told that this was a concern for his future. His mother broke down in tears, and his father reeled from the blow. Juse was streamed into the Special Program and received special instruction for a full year. It was mandated to him, and he was not given a choice. All the old books he had borrowed from the shelves of his grandfather were disposed of. And a few months later, his grandfather disappeared altogether. He had been taken to the Twilight Cottage. Juse always heard from people how it was the greatest happiness any elderly person could ask for, but he himself cried in bed for many nights from the loneliness of never being able to see his grandfather again. And on nights where he cried himself to sleep, he always dreamt of the stories his grandfather used to tell him.

A year later, Juse had stopped talking about great white whales, or faeries with transparent wings. The adults sighed breaths of relief. But in the depths of the boy's soul, the stories remained secretly alive, and breathed within him. He would never be able to wash them away. Perhaps that was why he found himself still concerned about other people, even now. He couldn't help but wonder, *what does this person do? What's he feeling right now?* But he had also acquired the sense not to say it out loud.

"Oh—!" Juse cried out softly. The man had collapsed at the foot of a beech tree. The man groaned in pain. Juse left his crossroad bike and trotted to the man's side. He thought he saw something black fly away from the man, who was lying face down. Juse didn't have the time to check. The man's body had begun convulsing, but soon lay still.

"Um— sir—"

Juse called out to him hesitantly. He peered into the man's face. The next moment, Juse was screaming.

4

A LIE OF TRUTH, A TRUTH OF FICTION

The King's ears are donkey's ears.

Great furry donkey's ears.

Moving, twitching donkey's ears.

KING MIDAS' DONKEY EARS, GREEK MYTH

N_{EZUMI} WALKED slowly along the night path. Here, night and darkness were synonymous with each other. After all natural light had faded, what was left was a world of darkness. Everything became painted black.

Sometimes, a barrack would let a thin strip of light seep out of one of its cracks, while barely keeping the wind and rain out. But the lights were often extinguished not long after, and a frigid chill would reign over the night, piercing through the darkness, the silence, and people's clothes to reach their warm bodies underneath.

Even the white puffs of breath that escaped his lips faded into the darkness. He turned his face up to the heavens. Countless stars were winking in the clear night sky.

Tomorrow morning would probably be even colder than usual. And outside, more people would freeze to death. A cruel fate to meet under a starry sky. Even with a star-filled sky, no one called these winter nights beautiful — not on this land.

Nezumi stopped his feet, and gazed at the glittering city in the distance. The city of light loomed in the darkness — the Holy City of No. 6. The entire city glowed golden, and reminded him of the myth of King Midas, who turned everything he touched into gold.

In the freezing darkness, Nezumi smiled wanly.

King Midas would acquire the golden touch, but in exchange for it he would no longer be able to bring meat nor bread to his lips, and would even turn his beloved daughter into a golden statue. He would then finally realize his greed and his folly, and beg the gods for forgiveness.

No. 6, what will you do? You, the city that looks down on us in our darkness, and glitters in all its deception and artifice, will you too grovel on the ground one day and beg for forgiveness? But there will be no gods to grant you mercy. Clad in that golden robe of yours, you'll crumble, burn to ashes, and perish. I'll live until the moment the curtains fall on your finale. I'll keep living, and see the end with my own eyes.

Nezumi re-wrapped his superfibre cloth around himself, and began to walk. A little mouse, one that Shion had named Hamlet, poked its head out of the folds and chirruped softly.

Yes, he was going to live. Just as he had all the way up until now, he was going to keep living, even if he had to crawl the earth on all fours. He would shroud himself from any danger, sharpen his fangs, polish his claws, and keep living until the moment that he would sink his teeth into the other's throat, and tear it apart.

He would survive, keep living. He would.

Nezumi put a hand to the back pocket of his pants. Inside it was Karan's memo.

*Safu was taken away by the Security Bureau.
Help. -K*

He had not shown Shion yet. What was he to do with it? Nezumi was suspended in his decision. He stood at a crossroads, unable to throw the memo away, nor to pass it to Shion and turn his back on him, saying it was none of his own business.

To be indecisive, to waver, and to be agitated — he knew how dangerous these were to him, almost painfully aware. Right or left; up or down; fight or flight; abandon or protect — the split second it took to make the decision was the difference between life and death. He had never once made the wrong choice. That was how he had survived up until now.

This memo is dangerous. Then, all he had to do was throw it away. Along with the indecision that would no doubt endanger his life, it was for the best to entomb it all in darkness.

He knew the correct answer. But why wasn't he complying with it? Why was he taking the trouble, even paying a large sum of money, to have information collected about the Correctional Facility? *What the hell am I doing?*

His feet stopped.

Nezumi stood still, and trained his eyes onto the darkness. He was on a slope sparsely populated with trees, a couple dozen metres away from his underground abode.

"Who's there?" he spoke quietly. There was a dry rustling above him, perhaps from a gust of wind that whistled through the bare branches. But even more discreetly, there was a movement in the dark, the faint sound of a step on the leaves.

"A little slow to notice, aren't ya?" There was a short bark of a laugh. "Not like you, not like you at all. What were you daydreaming about?"

“Inukashi.”

Inukashi’s black hair and tan skin were convenient for blending into the darkness. But it was careless of him not to have noticed his presence until he had come this close. He was not himself today.

“Good thing it was only me. Who knows how many lives you’d need if you were that dazed around anyone else, Eve.” Inukashi called Nezumi by his stage name, and gave another short laugh.

“Things aren’t much safer with you around,” Nezumi retorted. “Especially if you’re gonna be waiting at night to ambush me on the road.” He took half a step backwards. “What do you want, Inukashi? I find it hardly likely you’ve been able to get the information this quickly.” Inukashi’s tone of voice changed, and all sarcasm vanished from his speech.

“We’ve got an emergency.”

“Emergency?”

“Just now — well, more like awhile ago — Shion came to see me.”

“Did he?” A jolt of unease raced through him, almost painfully.

“And not about his dog-washing job, either. He shoved a grey coat in my face, and asked me if I got it from the Correctional Facility.”

“Grey coat, huh... women’s?”

“Yeah. It was ripped at the shoulder, but it was a fine piece of clothing. It came from a used-clothes dealer I sold stuff to. Stuff I got smuggled out of the Correctional Facility.”

It must belong to that girl— Safu. Nezumi turned aside, and drew a breath.

“So?”

“So?” Inukashi echoed incredulously. “You tell me. What’s the script for this act, huh, Nezumi? Shion says this coat belongs to his friend. Which means his little friend is being kept prisoner in the Correctional

Facility. And earlier today, you gave me money to gather information about the Correctional Facility. Don't tell me those aren't related — even a dog wouldn't fall for that lie. Are you planning to help Shion's little friend out, is that what you're doing?"

Nezumi had no way to answer. He could neither affirm nor reject what Inukashi had said.

"Of course not," Inukashi answered for him. "There's no way someone like *you* would throw his life away to help a complete stranger."

"What makes you think I'm gonna die in the process?"

On the other end of the darkness, Inukashi sucked in a deep breath.

"Are you half-asleep? This is the Correctional Facility we're talking about. By some lucky fluke, you might be able to sneak in. But there's no way you'd make it out alive. Nezumi, don't get any funny ideas."

"Goodness gracious, are you *worried* about me? I'm shocked."

"I could care less about you," Inukashi snapped. "Whether one rat dies or not isn't gonna make a difference. But what're you gonna do about Shion, huh? Now he knows where his little friend's been taken. Being the oblivious little boy he is, he probably thinks the Correctional Facility is just some cushy Centre for Discipline, or whatever. He probably figures all he has to do is hand in a Visitation Form to see his little friend. If you don't stop him, the kid's gonna go. He's gonna go and — he's gonna get himself killed."

Inukashi fell silent, the darkness of the night seemed to deepen. Even the wind was still — the tree branches ceased to make even a faint rustle.

"Is this what you've waited all this time to tell me?" Nezumi said presently. "I ache to imagine what pains I must have put you through." Nezumi stepped forward, and grabbed Inukashi by the shoulder before he could slip away. As long as he had bearings on the other's presence, he could more than easily predict all of his movements.

"It doesn't matter what Shion plans to do," Nezumi said quietly. "He's not one of us, and it's none of our business."

"Then why the hell are you sniffing around behind his back?" Inukashi replied accusingly. "Why do you need to gather information about the Correctional Facility in secret?"

Nezumi stiffened his fingers and dug them harder into Inukashi's thin, bony shoulder. Inukashi cried out in pain. Nezumi bent to bring his lips near the other's ear.

"Don't stick your nose in things you have no business in," he whispered. "You do the job you've been paid to do, and nothing else."

He let his hand go. Inukashi's small body swayed unsteadily.

"I only told Shion where the coat came from," he said. "I haven't told him anything about what you've come to me for."

"Of course you haven't."

"Nezumi, Shion's gonna go alone," Inukashi said levelly. He feebly shook the arm that was now numb all the way to his fingertips. "He thinks you don't know anything about it. And he's gonna go alone, without telling anyone. He's not gonna get you involved. You know that, right?"

"What makes you so sure? Are you Shion's Papa or something?"

"I don't have to be his Papa to know. You should know even better than me what kind of person he is. That's why you're scuttling around in secret, aren't you?"

"Shut up!" Nezumi had raised his voice in a snarl. His emotions whipped about turbulently; his breathing came out irregular. Inukashi showed almost no reaction.

"If he's so precious to you that you don't wanna lose him," Inukashi said steadily, "protect him to the very end. And do whatever it takes to protect him, you idiot, no matter how humiliating it is. You think

you can save face, huh? Keep it all hidden, and take care of it all on your own? Stop fooling yourself.”

“Inukashi!”

Inukashi sprang back a split second before Nezumi took a step forward. Crouched on one knee, Inukashi laughed softly.

“You lose, Nezumi.”

“What?”

“You’ve gotten yourself something you need to protect — you lose. Those are the rules in these parts. Better get to know them.”

Nezumi kicked off the ground, and rounded in on Inukashi from the front. He snared the other boy as he tried to get away, and pushed him to the ground.

“What’d you say about losing?” he said fiercely. “That’s enough bullshit from you.”

“I’m not bullshitting. Nezumi, if this was you a while ago, you wouldn’t have let yourself be provoked so easily. You wouldn’t be walking around at night lost in thought, either.”

Let go, Inukashi said in an eerily calm voice. He got up, and heaved a sigh.

“Still don’t realize, Nezumi?”

“Huh?”

A sharp whistle tore through the air. While he whistled, Inukashi took several steps backwards.

In the darkness from all directions, countless small red dots of flame glinted as they emerged. It didn’t take Nezumi long to realize that they were dogs’ eyes. Before he knew it, he was surrounded by a pack of them. Not one of them raised so much as a growl as they formed a ring and advanced on him.

“Those ones are trained guard-dogs. You’re not gonna get the same deal you did in the afternoon.” Inukashi’s voice was further away now. “You stepped right into that ring without even realizing it. Definitely not a mistake you’d normally make, Nezumi. But there’s your weakness. Forget Shion — look at you, you can’t even protect yourself.”

After a moment of silence, a short command sliced the air.

“Get him!”

The dogs sprang up. Dozens of lithe and deadly bodies flew over Nezumi’s head and came down upon him from above as he sat crouched on the ground. He sprang to his feet, and aimed a kick straight upwards. A yelp.

One dog broke the silence with its voice, and crumpled to the ground. Before Nezumi could catch his breath, another one kicked off the ground. It sank its teeth into Nezumi’s arm, which he had wrapped with his superfibre cloth just in time. Nezumi swung his entire arm around and battered the dog to the ground. He rose, and regained his posture with a tree at his back.

“Inukashi, if you’re gonna keep up this stupid game, I’m not gonna go easy on you either.” Nezumi drew his knife from its leather sheath. He caught his breath, and counted the little red flames.

Four more.

“So you don’t care if your precious dogs get their throats slit, huh?” he called out.

Inukashi’s voice answered from the same spot as before.

“Let’s see you try. That was just a warm-up. They’re not gonna be all polite this time and come at you one by one. This time, they’re coming all at once.”

Even before Inukashi had finished his sentence, Nezumi was lunging in the direction of his voice. At the same time, a searing pain tore

across his shoulder.

“Out of the way!” He rammed the butt of the knife between the dog’s eyes. Along with the sound of tearing fabric, the black dog went rolling across the ground behind him.

“Inukashi!” Nezumi yanked Inukashi by his long hair, and dragged him down. He pinned him to the ground, and pressed the knife to his tan throat.

“Back your dogs down, or else—”

Inukashi laughed shortly.

“Or else what? You gonna kill me?”

“If you wish it so,” Nezumi said coolly.

“You think you can kill me, when you haven’t even managed to kill a single dog?”

This time, it was Nezumi who gave a soft laugh.

“But I don’t have a spare knife today.”

“What?”

“Dog’s blood dulls the blade. I saved it and kept it clean for you.”

Inukashi’s body twitched.

“Hey, cut that out, you jerk,” he said nervously. “You try and kill me — my dogs’ll jump you all at once. They’ll tear you to pieces.”

“Oh, I don’t know about that. You’re their boss, right? I’ve heard before that dogs lose their will to fight if their boss gets defeated.”

“Th—That’s not true— hey, really, cut it out. It’s dangerous.”

“Back your dogs down.”

“Fine.” Inukashi snapped his fingers. The dogs spun on their heels at once, and disappeared into the darkness.

“I see. You’ve trained them well.”

“Thanks for the compliment,” Inukashi said sullenly. “Funny how it doesn’t seem to make me feel any better. So are you gonna get your

heavy ass off me or not? A love scene with you isn't exactly something I've been itching to do lately."

"Don't worry," Nezumi said pleasantly, "it's the last thing I'd want to be doing either. I wouldn't even do it if I got paid to on-stage."

After he had freed Inukashi and put away his knife, Nezumi posed his question anew.

"What was all that for?"

Inukashi clucked his tongue while he brushed the leaves off his clothes.

"I took it upon myself to give you a private lesson."

"What?"

"The fact is, you're not as strong as you think. I just thought I'd teach you that. You've got skill, though. Not many people can get that far against me and my dogs."

"Why, thanks for the compliment. Funny how it's not making me feel better."

"But you're not any superhuman or monster," Inukashi continued.

"You're just a human. And a man can only do so much by himself."

There was a dull pain in Nezumi's shoulder. Blood flowed in streams down his arm.

A fleeting thought crossed Nezumi's mind. This was the same spot where he had gotten the bullet wound which Shion had treated four years ago.

"Nezumi!"

He could hear Shion's voice calling him. The light of a lamp bobbed nearer.

"Looks like the little lad has come to fetch you himself," Inukashi snickered quietly. "Well, let me excuse myself then—" Then, somewhat rushed, he added, "Nezumi, there's something weird going on inside No. 6."

“Weird?”

“I don’t know the details. I’ve heard that there’s some weird disease going around, but I don’t know for sure. I’m gonna look into it. And I’m going to be getting information about the inside of the Correctional Facility soon. It looks like things are starting to get busy for them too. It’s gonna get pretty interesting, I can smell it — my dog’s nose is telling me. So—”

“So?”

“So count me in — I’m gonna help you out.”

Inukashi’s hand reached out, and clapped Nezumi firmly on the shoulder. A vicious pain shot through him. Nezumi groaned, and fell to his knees with a hand pressed to his shoulder.

“See ya. I’ll be in touch soon.” Inukashi melted into the inky darkness faster than his dogs had disappeared. As he faded, Shion’s footsteps approached nearer.

“Nezumi, did something happen?”

Shion held the lamp up to Nezumi as he got to his feet. His eyes widened in alarm.

“What happened to you? You’re bleeding!”

“I got attacked by a dog.”

“A dog? Why?”

“It was just some mongrel. I guess it thought I was a cute little bunny rabbit. What are *you* doing here?”

Hamlet poked its head out from Shion’s sweater pocket.

“He came to get me,” Shion said. “I thought something might’ve happened to you.”

“So you came to help. With one lamp.”

“Yeah.” Shion brought the lamp closer to Nezumi’s wound, and furrowed his brow.

“We have to get this treated. Let’s go home. Can you walk?”

“Of course.”

Shion’s slipped a hand under Nezumi’s armpit, as if to support him. Nezumi brushed him away, and began to walk ahead. His shoulder throbbed painfully. But he wasn’t about to cling onto the hand that was extended to him. If he learned to lean on someone, he would never be able to walk on his own again. The helping hand was always fickle, and disappeared just as suddenly as it was offered. That was how things were.

Once they returned to their underground room, Shion sprang into action, briskly taking the appropriate steps. He checked the wound, cleaned, and disinfected it.

“You gonna sew it up again?”

“The wound isn’t that bad this time, unfortunately,” Shion said, in a rare rueful grin as he closed the emergency kit. “Freaked out a bit, didn’t you, Nezumi? Thought you’d go through the same thing as four years ago?”

“‘A bit’ is an overstatement. With you, I feel like I’d end up with stitches for a bug bite.”

“How rude,” Shion smiled. “I still think the treatment I gave you four years ago was the appropriate thing to do.”

Four years ago, on that stormy night — yes, on the night he had first met Shion — No. 6 had been in the midst of a hurricane. He still remembered, ever so vividly, the window flung open as if to invite him in; twelve-year-old Shion as he poked his face out; ‘You’re hurt, aren’t you? I’ll treat your wound’ — words that he had never expected; the satisfied smile that had spread over Shion’s face the moment he had completed the suture; the sweetness of the cocoa; the delicious taste of the cherry cake; the comfort of the bed; the sound of quiet, slumbering breaths right beside him as he awoke the next morning —

he couldn't forget any of it, no matter how hard he tried. Even when he tried to discard it, he could never quite bring himself to.

Each and every miraculous occurrence of that night still remained with him as tangible sensations, never fading in the least over the four years until now.

Did people call them memories? A mental record? Or did they call it fate?

It was easy enough to laugh at people, calling them indulgent and weak, when they accepted others unconditionally and tried to save them. Indeed, as a result of taking Nezumi in, Shion had lost almost all of his privileges and fortune.

How much easier things would have been if he was able to dismiss Shion with a condescending laugh, this naive boy, this petri-dish elite who had grown up oblivious to society. But it was too bitter to laugh at and be done with. It was too vivid to forget. And to throw away, it was much too heavy.

"Shion."

"Hm?"

"Do you really think so?"

Shion's hands stopped in the middle of winding a bandage.

"Four years ago. Do you really think it was the appropriate thing to do?"

"Well, we were in pretty limited surroundings," Shion said slowly.

"Back then, though, that would have been the most I could do. Now, maybe I would be able to sew it up a bit better." The long fingers of his deft-looking hands moved as nimbly as they looked, winding the bandage tightly and neatly.

"Not just about my injury. About the whole night."

After he had knotted the ends of the bandage with care, Shion studied Nezumi's eyes.

“Your life turned 180 degrees that night. Can you still say, even now, that what you did wasn’t a mistake?”

“Yeah.” His answer was so prompt, Nezumi was caught off-guard.

“You don’t regret it?”

“No.”

“Not even a bit?”

“No.”

“Why?”

“Nezumi, I don’t really understand what you’re trying to ask. But I’ve done a little thinking myself since moving to Lost Town. I wondered, if I were to go back in time, and return to that night four years ago — if I were to return to before I met you, what would I do?”

Shion smiled sheepishly, and pushed the emergency kit to the back of the shelf.

“I thought about it, over and over again. And every time, there was only one answer. No matter how many times I’d return to that night, I’d do the same thing again. I’d open the window, and wait for you.”

“Even if you knew that your own ruin would be waiting beyond it?”

“But there wasn’t any ruin,” Shion replied softly. “I don’t think my being here like this has ruined me at all. Right, Cravat?”

The small brown mouse nodded from its perch atop a stack of books.

“That one’s Hamlet, isn’t it?”

“Hamlet’s sleeping on the bed.”

“Oh. Right. — Geez, you had to go giving them stupid names, now it’s more confusing than before.”

“The poor guys deserve names, it’s the least you can do. Both of them are smart and courageous. Like Hamlet today, when he let me know that you were in danger.”

“Well, he went to the wrong person. Even if you showed up, you wouldn’t be much help. It was alright this time because I’d already chased the dogs away, but if I hadn’t, you’d probably be the one sitting there with a gaping wound.”

“Yeah, well — I guess you’re right about that one.”

Nezumi stood up, and grabbed Shion by the arm.

“Never do something like that again, you hear me? Whatever happens, don’t flatter yourself and think you can be any help to me.”

Shion stared back at him with unblinking eyes. Nezumi lifted his chin, and clenched his jaw.

“You’re powerless, you remember that. You don’t have the skill or the mentality it takes to fight. You’re like a chick that’s fallen out of its nest. You’d just chirp-chirp-chirp until you’re eaten by a fox. So do yourself a favour, and don’t go walking into danger’s path. Don’t do it, ever. Use your head. Put your so-called gifted brain into motion, full-throttle, and use your judgment to assess the situation. Geez, I don’t know what the hell you were thinking, running out into the darkness without even carrying a weapon.”

“I wasn’t.”

“What?”

“I wasn’t thinking at all, of the situation, or of danger. I was already running before I could stop to think.”

“That’s why I’m saying, Shion, next time, don’t ever do something as foolish or reckless.”

“Then what should I do?”

“Don’t do anything. There’s nothing you could do anyway. Pull a blanket over your head or something, and stay quiet.”

Shion dropped his gaze, and shook his head.

"I can't do that," he said quietly. "I can't stay there and sit still when I know you're in trouble. I would've burst outside either way."

"You'd just be a hindrance."

"That's harsh," Shion said softly.

"It's the truth."

"Nezumi — you're right," he relented. "I'm useless. I don't know how to fight, and I would never be able to bring myself to hurt anyone."

"Yeah, and as a soldier, that would put you in the lowest rank. No — actually, you'd be a write-off. So don't even think about fighting. You don't have the mental leverage to be worrying about other people. You can't even protect yourself. So don't do anything. I'm begging you, just don't go near any dangerous places."

What the hell am I saying?

Nezumi clenched his jaw again.

What was he saying? What was he doing, getting serious about this? Was he that bent on stopping Shion?

Shion's gonna go alone.

Inukashi's low voice echoed in his ears.

Yes, Shion would probably go alone. *He'd set out to a place with less than one in a million chances of returning alive, and he'd go alone, without begging for my help, without even telling me. He would go silently, not knowing anything about fighting, not knowing the pain of shedding blood or the chilling horrors of murderous intent. The useless, big-headed, oblivious idiot.*

"But it's not about reasoning," Shion said quietly, puncturing the silence.

"Huh? Did you say something?"

"It's not about reasoning, Nezumi. I know very well in my head that even if I were to show up, I wouldn't be of any help to you — I

wouldn't be able to save you. I know."

"Good for you. The grey matter in your head is about the only thing you can boast about, anyway. And if your head knows, then take its advice."

"No."

Shion pursed his lips firmly, his expression defiant. It was the face of one whose willpower ran strong and deep. It was Nezumi's first time seeing Shion with a face like this.

"It's not about reasoning!" Shion said heatedly. "Back there, when Hamlet came to call me, I was scared. I thought something had happened to you. I thought you were going to die. Are you telling me I should've just stopped and calculated in my head? Figured that it wouldn't do any good if I went anyway, and just sat still? I could never do that. How could I? How could I be cool and calm and think about whether I have or don't have the strength, whether I can or can't help you? How could anyone? Idiot!"

It was his second time being called an idiot by Shion. Both times, Nezumi wasn't able to predict Shion's explosion of anger. The first time, Nezumi had told Shion, 'Don't cry for other people. Don't get into fights for other people. Fight and cry only for yourself.' Shion had said that he didn't understand. It was true, he hadn't understood. For this time, again, Shion had burst out into the darkness for a stranger. Casting aside the reason which warned him of the risks, he had gone running into the darkness. It was dangerous. Very dangerous. Nezumi had been prepared for Shion to become shackles that bound his ankles. But there was also the opposite. There was a possibility that he himself would become the fetters that bound Shion's wrists.

This is why—

Nezumi averted his gaze from the boy in front of him.

This is why humans are troublesome. The more you involve yourself with

them, the tighter the shackles become. They hinder free movement. It becomes harder to live only for yourself. Maybe we should never have met. Maybe one day, Shion, you'd come to think so.

Shion's shoulders rose and fell as he took a deep breath. He stuck his lip out in a disgruntled manner.

"Nezumi, why aren't you saying anything?"

"No reason."

"Go on and laugh if you want to. You probably just think it's all gibberish from someone who doesn't know a thing about the world, right? Fine. Laugh to your heart's content. Go on, laugh."

"Wait a minute, Shion," Nezumi said hastily, "it's not like I'm mocking you. I just, well... I'm just saying it's dangerous to jump into danger like that, without thinking about—"

"I know that!" Shion said hotly. "But I couldn't help it, alright, I was worried sick. Or am I not even allowed to worry about you? Don't I even have the right to be worried?"

"The right? Shion, you're not making sense."

"You're the one making me talk like this!"

Shion's fist pounded the bookcase. A mound of books collapsed. Cravat gave an alarmed screech, and skittered into the folds of Nezumi's clothes.

Shion blinked, and his cheeks flushed. He bent to pick up the books, and mumbled an apology in a subdued voice.

"I'm sorry, I just — I didn't mean to yell."

"I don't mind," Nezumi said lightly. "I must say it was quite alluring to see you all worked up like that. Something I'd like to be treated to again once in a while."

"It seems like I'm always worked up when I'm with you," Shion sighed. "I'm surprised at how emotional I can get sometimes."

"You've always been an emotional person. You always choose feeling over reason, and you're not ashamed to be truthful to your emotions. Four years ago, it was the same. Even when you were a candidate for the elite echelons of No. 6, you still obeyed your emotions and took me in."

"Yeah... obeyed my emotions..." he said pensively. "I guess you're right."

Shion stacked the books neatly, and exhaled.

"But you know, Nezumi, I really don't regret it. I'm still glad that I didn't turn my back on my feelings that night."

"I know."

"Huh?"

"I know you don't regret a single bit of what you did. I just asked on a whim. I guess I was probably bored, or something."

He brought a hand to his shoulder. The bandages, which were old and worn, and would have lost all elasticity by now, wrapped themselves tightly around his shoulder and arm joint, and showed no signs of loosening.

"I wouldn't have been able to dress my wound this well," Nezumi said reflectively. "You might not be able to fight, but you can probably treat people. Everyone has something. And probably—"

"Probably?"

"No, never mind. Say, I'm hungry, aren't you?"

Shion gazed at Nezumi, and gave a gentle smile.

"There's bread and meat on the table. Some stuff happened, and there's only a little bit left, but it should be enough for dinner."

"What about you?"

"I'm going to sleep. Your wound is probably gonna keep you up tonight, so you can have the bed to yourself. I'll sleep on the floor."

“How kind of you.”

“Nezumi.”

“Hm?”

“If I hadn’t met you, I probably would never have realized what kind of person I was, huh?”

“Why’re you bringing this up now?”

Shion drew nearer to Nezumi as he sat in his chair, and looked him straight in the eye.

“I would have grown up into a mild, rational, obedient adult, without even knowing there were so many emotions inside of me. I would never have known what it was like to cry, or get angry, or feel resistance toward something. I met you, and I realized how much abundance I had. And I’m proud that I know now.”

Shion clipped his words, and hesitantly lowered his eyes.

“I’m glad I met you.”

It came out as a whisper that he could barely catch. Shion bent down, his eyes still lowered. His lips brushed lightly against Nezumi’s.

A book fell somewhere with a soft *whump*.

As Shion lifted his face again, Nezumi spoke.

“Not a thank-you kiss, is it?”

“It’s a good-night kiss.”

“Good-night, huh.”

“I’m going to be shearing the dogs tomorrow,” Shion said. “There are a whole lot of them with long fur. Inukashi just leaves them, so their fur gets all tangled and they’re starting to get skin inflammation.”

“I just got bitten by a dog, alright? I don’t care if they have short fur or long fur, I don’t even want to hear about dogs right now.”

Shion laughed out loud, and gave a casual wave of his hand.

“Good night, then.”

“Yeah. Sweet dreams.”

“You too.”

Shion disappeared into the shadows of the books. Cravat crawled out from Nezumi’s clothes and scampered after him, perhaps intending to sleep with him too.

“Good-night kiss, huh.”

Nezumi traced his lips with his fingers, and slumped back in his chair.

“Some liar you are.”

His gnawing hunger, exhaustion, and throbbing pain ebbed away. In its place, something welled up from deep within. Sadness, loneliness — it wasn’t quite either. What was it? A hot bead rolled down his cheek. It took him a while to understand that they were tears. He had long forgotten what it was like to cry.

It tasted salty, like over-salted soup.

Nezumi propped his knees up and put his head down on them. Slowly, he swallowed the tears that seeped into his mouth.

5

IN FALSITY'S COMPANY

*In days of old, the Buddha
was but a mortal;
in the end, we ourselves
will be buddhas too.
How grievous that distinctions
must separate those
who are alike in sharing
the Buddha-nature!*

TALES OF HEIKE: GIU

SHION SLOWLY raised himself off the floor.

Only a few dying embers remained in the heater, and the room was freezing cold. Cravat, who had been curled up against Shion's body, raised his head and chirruped softly.

"Shh—" Shion drew his blanket around the little mouse. "Here, you sleep in this. Just *please* don't make any noise, okay?"

Shion had gotten so used to this room that he could find his way even in the dark. He padded stealthily to the door. He unlatched it, and

before opening it, he turned back again. He listened carefully. There was not a noise.

It looked like the pain from Nezumi's wound hadn't kept him from sleeping. *I guess a wound that small wouldn't be enough to keep him awake.* There were so many things he still needed to tell Nezumi. The joy of meeting him, the gratitude for everything he had done for him, and the profound respect he had for him — Shion had not been able to get any of these adequately across.

I'm glad I met you.

That was all I was able to say.

Shion inhaled the air of the room deeply, just once, before quietly opening the door.

* * *

The lamp flashed, signalling a call from a direct extension to City Hall. The man lifted his face from the research documents he had been perusing, and lightly clucked his tongue in irritation. The document, which had been printed decades ago on paper, was very intriguing, and he wished to read a little further. But the lamp was flashing red, signalling an emergency situation. The man clucked his tongue again, and put the documents away in a folder.

When he pressed the switch, the familiar face of a man appeared on-screen. He was a man who used to be called Fennec.

Fennec — the desert fox. Who was it that had first started calling him that?

“What’s the matter, Fennec?”

“We have an emergency. Two samples have been brought into the Central Hospital.”

“Something the matter with that?”

"Both of them aren't registered as representative samples in the data."

"What?"

"They're different from the samples you've requested from us. Things are happening on their own, outside of our control."

"Perhaps it's too early to conclude that they're samples. Couldn't something else be the cause?"

Fennec shook his head. The screen promptly changed to another image. An audio clip read out the two bodies' personal information. Name, age, address, occupation, history of illness, physical measurements, citizenship number...

A man and a woman. Two bodies. Both their faces were contorted in suffering, and were aged and shrivelled. If it weren't for their facial expressions, their cause of death would easily have passed as old age. But the documented age of one of them was in the twenties, the other in his late thirties.

"You're right, *they* must have done it," the man muttered. The screen flickered again, and Fennec's scowl was displayed largely. The man exhaled quietly.

"... What could this all mean?"

"I think *I* would like to know that!" Fennec raised his voice, and his ears twitched indignantly. Ah, yes. This was a habit of his. Since he was young, he had always had the habit of twitching his ears when his emotions were agitated. That was why he was called Fennec. A fennec fox was a small fox with the longest ears of its kind, reaching up to fifteen centimetres.

"But how could something unexpected like this happen?" Fennec continued. "I don't believe it. What's going on?"

"Something must have gone wrong somewhere," the man answered.

"But it's insignificant. It's nothing you should be worried about."

Fennec's throat contracted as he swallowed at the man's words.

“Are you sure?”

“Of course.”

“You have the highest responsibility in this project, you know.”

“Not officially,” the man added. “Well, but then again, nothing about this project has been publicized officially.”

“But if this succeeds, then No. 6’s City Project will finally be perfect and complete. Right?”

“Yes.”

“Then even minor slip-ups can’t be permitted.”

“I know. I’ll launch an investigation immediately looking into the cause. I want you to send the bodies over to the Special Autopsies Room, Section V.”

“I’ve already got it underway.”

“Then I’ll get to work straightaway.”

“Please do. I’ll be waiting for the report.”

“Roger.”

“Oh, yes,” Fennec added. “Once this mess has quieted down somewhat, I’m planning another clean-up.”

“Clean-up? That’s something I haven’t heard in a long time. Say, it’s almost the Holy Celebration, isn’t it?”

“Yes, the same reverent day is coming again. If you need any for your experiments, I can arrange for as many as you need. What say you?”

“I am most humbled by the kind considerations of His Excellency.”

“None of that embellished formality, if you will.”

“But you’ll eventually become the absolute ruler of this land,” the man said. “The one and only King. I’d have to start calling you Your Highness.”

“And what would you have me call you?”

"I'll stay as I am. If I'm still provided with the same top-notch research facilities and environment as I am now, then I have nothing more to ask."

"Sparse in your wants as always, I see. Then I trust you'll have the work done."

The screen silently went blank. The man let his gaze flit over the documents he had only partially read. Unfortunately, it looked like he would not be able to read through the rest of it today.

They were documents concerning a species of ants called *Eciton burchelli*, which inhabited Central and South America. These ants, which formed colonies numbering up to 500,000, did not live in one static place, but instead repeated cycles of temporary encampment and migration until their life was spent. There was only one queen ant that reigned over the colony of 500,000. But the queen's sole purpose in the colony was to lay eggs, and she was not necessarily in control of its members. Warrior ants and worker ants, large and small, all moved accordingly to their instinct, and as a result, the colony functioned seamlessly as if they were governed by a great common intellect.

Ants, and bees too, had created the ideal social system.

There was no way that humans could not do what insects already did. Each would obediently fill his role. Without thinking, without being interrupted by suspicions, they would take to their task. Brains were unnecessary. Souls were of no use.

A colony of 500,000, and a single one to reign over all.

You say I'm sparse in my wants, do you? You're right, Fennec, I desire nothing. I have no need for desire. I never have to suffer from being dominated by my desires, like you do.

The man smiled discreetly, and pushed the button for the elevator leading directly to the Special Autopsies Room.

* * *

A frost had fallen. The frozen grass underneath his shoes made crunching sounds as he trod over them. When the sun rose, the frost would sparkle white, and the barren expanse would be enveloped in light for a fleeting instant. But it was too early — the sun had yet to rise for a while longer. Shion stopped in his tracks, and lifted his face to the northern sky. He wanted to reach the Correctional Facility before dawn. He had no idea what he would do once he arrived. But he had to go. It was all he could think about. Why had Safu been impounded in the Correctional Facility, when she was supposed to be abroad? Was it in connection with him? If it was, then would Karan's safety also be compromised? Uncertainty and fretful misgivings coursed through his body, blocked his airway, and pressed against his heart. He didn't want to lose anyone, neither his mother, Safu, nor Nezumi. He would do anything to protect them. But he was frustrated at himself for not being able to come up with how he would do so.

Even now, as he was walking, Safu was probably alone and frightened. He had to do something. He had to save her and get her out. But what was he to do? How could he—

Cheep-cheep.

A soft cry. His feet stopped. His eyes, which had gotten used to the darkness, trained on a small rodent poking its face out from the grass. "Cravat?"

He scooped up the tiny mouse in his hands.

"Did you follow me out here? Go home, you shouldn't be—" He realized as soon as he had said it out loud, that this mouse was not Cravat. It wasn't Hamlet, either. It wasn't even alive. This mouse carried no sign of the warmth that living animals did.

"This is— a robot—?"

"He's the navigator." There was a voice behind him. He didn't have to turn around to know who the voice belonged to. Shion took a few measured breaths, and slowly turned his body around.

Nezumi was also approaching him slowly. He plucked the miniscule robot from Shion's hands, and tossed it into a pouch.

"It's a simple navigator robot with three-dimensional mapping functions. It was warning you because you were going in the wrong direction."

"The wrong direction—"

"Weren't you going to Inukashi's place? You were gonna give those long-haired dogs a trim because their skin was getting inflamed, weren't you? Leaving awfully early, huh? How diligent of you. But this isn't the way."

Shion inhaled the frigid air of dawn yet to come.

"This has nothing to do with you," he said bitingly. "It's none of your business what I do, or where I go. I'm sick and tired of you trying to act like my guardian. I'm not a helpless baby. Just leave me alone. You know what," he said, "it's enough. If you still think of four years ago as a debt, then let me tell you now, it's paid back. You've given more than enough already. From now on, I'm going to be free. I'm going to do as I please, without being strapped down by you. That's my decision, so don't get in my way."

He ran out of breath, and lapsed into silence. It was too dark to see the expression on Nezumi's face. His shadowy figure shifted slightly, and he could hear a soft applause.

"That's quite some recitation for an amateur. Maybe you do have a talent for acting after all. Certainly better than yesterday's kiss, at least."

"Nezumi, what—"

He thought he saw Nezumi's right hand swing upwards, and then a hard blow struck his cheek. Shion staggered, and fell backwards. The taste of blood spread inside his mouth.

"—what was—!"

"Get yourself up if you have the time to be asking questions. The next one's coming."

The tip of Nezumi's boot swung straight toward him. Shion instinctively rolled to the side.

"Don't just stop there. Keep moving, keep the flow."

A kick landed firmly in Shion's ribs. His breath caught in his throat. He blindly grasped at a handful of pebbles that littered the grassy patch.

"Don't close your eyes. Don't look away from your opponent's attacks. Move!"

Shion twisted around to whip the pebbles at Nezumi, and at the same time, kicked off the ground and tried to ram into him with his shoulder. His feet were swept from under him, and he was slammed to the ground. This time, he could not get up again. He could see the stars. The stars that scattered across the sky yet untouched by dawn twinkled almost frightfully bright.

He was grabbed by the arm, and pulled up off the ground.

"Shion, this is punishment."

"Punishment for what?"

"You lied to me."

"Well—"

"You'll admit that, won't you?"

"Yeah... I guess."

"Your second crime. You belittled me."

"I never did that."

"Lying to someone means you're belittling him. Did you think I would fall for your lame excuse? If that's not an insult to me, I don't know what the hell is."

"It was my best attempt," Shion protested feebly.

"Well, you'd make a horrible politician or writer, seeing how you can't even conceive a realistic lie."

"Was it that bad?"

"Atrocious. But this is what pisses me off the most, Shion—"

"Yeah?"

"That you must've figured I was some brat who couldn't tell one kind of kiss from the other. What good-night kiss, huh? Bullshit."

Nezumi knelt in front of Shion, and gripped his collar tightly.

"You hear me? Never give me a farewell kiss again. Ever."

"I'm sorry."

"And never lie to me again."

"I won't."

"Swear it."

"I swear."

The hand released him. Nezumi settled into a sitting position, and looked up at the heavens.

"I've heard there are strange things happening inside No. 6."

"Strange?"

"I don't know the details, but Inukashi is gathering information for me. If we do it well, maybe we can use old man Rikiga and get some information through his customers, too. And it looks like stuff is going on in the Correctional Facility as well. There's commotion happening both inside and outside of No. 6 at the same time. A little weird, don't you think?"

"Correctional Facility? Nezumi, are you saying—"

“Your important friend, or whatever — you called her your best friend, right? — I’ve known about her for a while.”

He handed Karan’s memo to Shion. Shion’s fingers began to tremble after he had read the note.

“Your Mama is safe for now. I’m not so sure about your bestie. But don’t panic. Right now, we have to gather all the information we can and set down a plan. Inukashi says he’ll help. This is all preparation so that we can infiltrate the Correctional Facility as soon as possible. Understand? We’re not going in there to get killed. We’re going in there to save her. Be calm.”

Shion nodded.

“So I’ve finally dragged you into the mess, too.”

“It’s not your fault. Inukashi says he smells something, and frankly, I have my own suspicions too. Why would they need to imprison a precious member of their elite? There’s a chance that it might have to do with the wasp incidents.”

“The parasite wasps, huh... but they’re not active this time of year.”

“That’s why something must’ve happened, something unexpected. And if it has, then it might be worth risking the danger. Whatever the case, whenever Inukashi gets into contact with me is when we make our next move. Until then, we have to gather our own information and start making preparations.”

Nezumi stood up, and spoke in a beautiful voice that rang out crystalline.

“Cheer up. Things will work out. We’ll make them work out.”

“Thanks. You’ve saved me again.”

“Things are just getting started.”

Shion stood up as well, and called the name of the boy who stood beside him.

“Nezumi.”

“Hm?”

“Mind if I—”

“Huh? What?”

As Nezumi turned to peer inquisitively at him, Shion slapped him across the face as hard as he could. Nezumi, of course, didn't so much as stagger — but he was certainly startled. After drawing a breath, he yelled,

“—the hell was that for?”

“It's punishment.”

“Punishment?”

“You hid things from me. You didn't even mention a word to me about this memo.”

“What would telling you do, anyway? I couldn't have you wandering off by yourself like you did tonight. I did you a favour and looked out for you. Or what, are you saying I don't have the right to be worried about — wait, I've heard this line somewhere before.”

“Worrying about me and hiding things from me are two completely different issues. It's not like I want to be sheltered by you. I don't want to coast along living the easy life, always being protected by you. I want—”

Shion softly clenched his fingers around his palm, on which he could still feel the sensation of Nezumi's cheek.

“I want to be equals with you.”

Nezumi hunched his shoulders, and lifted his right hand in a pledge.

“I admit my mistake. I won't do it again.”

“Do you swear it?”

“I swear herewith upon my battered cheek.”

In the distance, a cock was crowing. Even in this darkness, it could sense the coming of dawn, and heralded it loudly and shrilly. In moments, the eastern skies would lighten, and the light of the sun would wipe the darkness away. The first day of their battle was about to begin.

* * *

Safu was trying to wake up. She could feel her consciousness gradually beginning to return. But her physical sensations were still murky.

Where am I?

What am I doing here?

Am I dreaming?

I have to remember.

Remember what?

My very precious person.

Precious person.

“Safu.”

She could hear a voice very close by, a man’s voice.

No.

It’s not this voice.

The voice I’m waiting for

isn’t this voice.

“How are you feeling? I daresay you must be feeling a little different from what you’re used to? But you’ll get used to it in no time. I hope you like this special suite. It’s the best you could ask for, and it’s especially for you, Safu.”

I don’t like this voice.

Don’t call my name.

Don’t call my name

with that voice.

“Safu, you are quite beautiful. Even more than I imagined. Beautiful, indeed. I’m very satisfied.”

I don’t like this voice, and

I don’t like this smell.

It smells like — blood.

The smell of blood.

“I’m rather busy today. I’ll come again, Safu. You should relax and rest a little as well.”

The footsteps faded away, and so did the stench of blood. She was relieved.

But why

Why is everything so

hazy?

But I

From the margins of her consciousness, which was not completely recovered yet, a flash of a figure emerged vividly.

Those eyes, those nails, that mouth, the faraway gaze, the energetic smile, or that clouded expression, the long fingers — and oh, she could hear his voice.

“I always thought of you as a friend.”

He was always such a child. He had never even realized her feelings for him. But there he was, desperately searching and yearning for someone else. She had loved that childish, but intent soul of his. She had loved him like she could love no other. Even now—

She was fading out of consciousness. The darkness gently draped over her.

I’ll never see you again...

Shion.

* * *

Shion spent the majority of the day taking care of the dogs. There had been no sign of Inukashi in the morning, so Shion had had to prepare food for and groom ten some-odd dogs all by himself. He had barely any time to rest, but he didn't feel the labour to be onerous. On the contrary, he was actually grateful for it. Immersed in his work, he could forget his agitation, even for a short while.

Don't rush, and wait patiently. Act calmly.

Nezumi's words were certainly persuasive, and he had no choice but to nod his head, but still he couldn't help his agitation. He could not remain calm.

Even while I'm going about this now, Safu is...

Every time the thought crossed his mind, his emotions would be thrown into disarray, he would panic, and he would bite his lip until it bled.

A dog whined forlornly. It was one from a litter of puppies that had been born at the start of fall. Shion realized he had been staring off into space in the middle of making their meal.

"Oh, sorry."

He hastily scooped the stewed leftovers into their food bowls. The puppies fiercely wagged their identical tails as they dipped their faces into the food. In the kind of circumstances where even humans starved to death, Inukashi managed to provide for his dogs with enough so that they did not starve.

The leftover food was shipped into the ruins in the middle of the night, and was sorted into food for humans, which would be shipped to the market, and the rest, which was used for dog feed. Shion finally knew where it came from now. Inukashi was probably tracing this route. Nezumi, too, had disappeared in an early part of the morning.

What could he do?

The more he thought about it, the more he came face-to-face with his own powerlessness. It agitated him. He could not stay calm. And he would bite his lip again, and try to endure.

There was a warm sensation on the back of his hand. He looked down to see a puppy intently licking his hand. Cravat poked his head out from the breast-pocket of his sweater, and ducked back inside again. He wanted to show Safu this puppy, and this little mouse. He wanted to let her touch them, and let her feel the warmth of their little tongues and bodies.

Safu was dear to him. She was precious to him. But it was different from the amorous sense — it was more serene, more deeply connected. He loved her like family, like a close friend. Whatever kind of love it was made no change to the fact that he cared about her.

He closed his eyes. He called her name.

Safu.

* * *

“You want me to co-operate with you?” Rikiga made a clearly distasteful expression.

“Yeah,” Nezumi answered. “I want you to glean information from your customers.” Nezumi seated himself snugly into the chair, and put his feet up on the table.

“Information? You mean about the Holy City?”

“Yeah.”

“What’s in it for me?”

“Enormous riches.”

Rikiga stood up, and strode over to Nezumi. They were in a room of the building Rikiga used as his workplace. It was a room littered with

magazines and empty bottles, and it reeked of alcohol. Looking down at Nezumi, Rikiga twisted his mouth in a scowl.

"Some long legs you've got, huh. Showing off?"

"What an honour to be complimented by you. These are the money-makers, I gotta keep them in shape."

Rikiga's hand rapped sharply on the pair of legs flung out onto the table.

"Get your feet off my table. It's obvious what kind of upbringing *you've* had," he said scornfully. "Don't even know your basic manners, do you?"

"I use my manners with people who deserve them."

"Not to mention your filthy language," Rikiga continued. "And this favour you're asking for, is this some kind of act? Are you practicing for some new part you've got?"

"It's a real issue."

"A real issue, huh. Enormous riches, you say? Ridiculous."

Nezumi glanced at Rikiga's face, and flashed a faint smile.

"What's wrong?" he said. "This is about making a fortune — you love this kind of stuff. Not feeling up for it?"

"What makes you think I'm gonna believe what some third-rate, fraud of an actor tells me?"

"Then who would you listen to? Shion?"

Rikiga's gaze wavered.

"Shion? Does Shion have something to do with this?"

"He has a lot to do with it."

"Did you get him involved, Eve?"

"No. Shion sowed the seeds, they're just growing in my yard."

"What do you mean?"

"If you agree to help me, I'll tell you."

“Spit it out.”

“First, I want you to show me your customers’ stats. When’s the next time a high official from No. 6 is gonna come to have a good time? I want to know his name, and position.”

Rikiga exhaled shortly, and folded his arms.

“Eve, how old are you?”

“Younger than you, old man.”

“You must be young enough to be my son. I’ve been meaning to say this for a while, but a brat like you has no right to look down on adults like this. You’re bound to serve the consequences.”

With his eye still trained on Nezumi, Rikiga called out, “Conk,” in a loud voice. The door to the next room opened, and a large man walked in.

“He’s my new bodyguard,” Rikiga said. “Just got him hired. He used to be a wrestler, and people used to bet on the matches. He’s nearly killed several people with his bare hands. On the ring, and off the ring too.”

The man silently gazed down at Nezumi. He was so large, he made the dirty room seem a size smaller just by walking in.

“Conk, I want you to give this little prince here a proper welcome. You don’t have to kill him. Just enough so that he’d never be able to make another smart comeback again.”

“Huh?” Conk stuttered. “Uh—”

“Don’t ‘uh’ me, I’m telling you to teach this kid what a punch from a real adult is like,” Rikiga said irritably.

Conk licked his lips, and took a step forward. And another step. Nezumi stood up. Rikiga smiled contemptuously.

“This is the punishment you deserve, Eve. The full extent of it.”

Conk’s feet stopped.

“Eve — is it really you, Eve?”

Nezumi smiled, and proffered his hand in a delicate gesture. His sensual smile made even Rikiga blink.

“So your name is Conk? Pleased to meet you, Conk. Thank you for always coming to see me on stage. I would never have dreamt that I’d be able to meet you here. I’m so happy.”

“Oh — Eve, me too.”

Conk blushed crimson, and gently clasped the hand that was offered to him.

“I’ve always been a fan of yours —

I’ve seen almost all of your performances—”

“I know. You stood out, so I always knew whenever you came to my shows. You’d even send me gifts sometimes. I’ve always wanted to thank you directly.”

“Really? You — you could really tell when — when I—”

“Of course. And last time, you even cried. I was watching you from on-stage, too, you know.”

“Watching? You were watching me?”

“Watching you.”

“Eve — I don’t know how to say — I —”

“You’re overwhelmed?”

“Yeah, overwhelmed. With happiness. I’ve never been so happy. I feel like I’m floating on air.”

“Thank you, Conk,” Nezumi said pleasantly. “And I hate to disturb you, but I’d like to have a nice, long talk with Rikiga-san. Would you be so kind and pour me a cup of coffee?”

“Of course. Anything to eat?”

“That would be nice. Do you have meat pie, by any chance?”

“Yeah. I’ll bring it rightaway.”

Conk disappeared into the next room with amazing swiftness for his stature. Rikiga shook his head.

"Coffee and pie, huh? That stuff is all mine, you know," Rikiga grumbled.

"Don't complain, or he'd probably punch you. You said so yourself. Ex-wrestler. Nearly killed several people. Right?"

"I can see why his wife kicked him out of the house," Rikiga said bitterly. "He's completely useless when you need him the most."

"He's a good guy. Probably makes excellent coffee."

Rikiga clucked his tongue three times.

"That's quite something, Eve. Not only can you handle a knife, can you also use sex appeal to your advantage too?"

"Both make good weapons."

"Then use that weapon you've got."

Nezumi lowered himself into a chair and crossed his legs.

"Eve, you're no rat," Rikiga continued. "You're a cunning white demon fox, great at manipulating people. Now, I don't know how many tails¹ you've got, but I've got a man who likes that kind of thing. He's an elite, works at the Central Administration Bureau. He's my best customer."

"Does that mean you're co-operating with me?" Nezumi's face was sombre. Rikiga's face was also grave.

"I've also heard that there's been commotion recently inside No. 6."

"News reaches you quick, huh. I'm impressed."

"Don't try to flatter me with things you don't mean. Staying on top of the news is what keeps my business running. But really," he said bemusedly. "This is the first time I've heard about anything out-of-line coming from that place. And that's how many decades since the Holy

¹The number of tails a demon has signifies how powerful it is.

City came to be? It's probably about time things started fraying at the seams. And if that's the case, then I want to know more. I'm still concerned about these things, Eve. And if Shion's involved — then I don't want to turn a blind eye."

"Is he precious to you?"

"He reminds me of Karan. And unlike you, he's truthful and kind. He's a good kid. Karan raised him well. She probably showered him with love."

"What's wrong, old man?"

"What?"

"Why so solemn? You sick or something?"

"Leave me alone," Rikiga snapped. "When I'm with Shion, I just feel at peace. I'm not sure why — but anyway, I'll show you my customers' data files. Once that's done, let's hear your story. I'm not sure if it'll amount to 'enormous riches', but it might be of some interest to me."

"That's what you're really after, isn't it?"

"Say what you will."

The aroma of coffee wafted over to him.

Nezumi thought about Shion.

Showered with love — he probably very well had been. His recklessness, his liberality, his straightforwardness, his wide acceptance, were probably all tokens of the ample amount of love he had been given. Shion had probably never experienced what it was like to grovel for love. That was fortunate of him. But love could sometimes be reversed into its opposite. Love could attract hatred, and bear the banner for destruction.

Hopefully, the love that had raised Shion, the love that resided within Shion, would not become the chains that bound him, nor the hand that led him to death—

Nezumi deeply inhaled the fragrant smell, barely managing to prevent a sigh from escaping his lips.

Inukashi trudged along the path, cocking his head ever so often in perplexity.

He didn't know how to sort through the information he had gathered. It was like sorting through ore, separating the gems from the rocks. From the reams of information, he had to select those that mattered, build the parts into a structure, and draw a conclusion. He wasn't very good at these processes.

Oh well. They'll figure the rest out. My job is just to dump all the ore out in front of them. But I can't help thinking—

He stopped his feet on a whim, and craned his neck. In the distance, he could see the fortress walls of No. 6. The special alloy reflected the light of winter. Inukashi had never thought about that land deeply. It was just an entirely different world, glittering in the distance. That was it. His only concern had been to survive the day's deprivation, and managing not to starve. He had never linked his ordeal with the shining Holy City. But Nezumi was different. He was constantly occupied with No. 6 itself.

Why did he insist on concerning himself? What bound him to it?

Love and hatred were no different in that they were both entrapments. There was a gust of wind. It was chilly. Sometime tomorrow, the weather would probably change.

Inukashi curled up, and gave a small sneeze.

He'd been taken ahold of, he knew it. He'd been taken ahold of firmly by Nezumi's persistent intentions, and Shion's resolution.

No, that's not it. Half of it is me sticking my own foot in.

It wasn't because he had been threatened by Nezumi, or because he felt pity for Shion. He had stepped in on his own will.

But why?

He questioned himself, but did not receive an answer.

Why? Why have I—

He craned his neck again to survey the Holy City.

Over there, the Holy City of No. 6 glitters, and over here is where we spend our daily lives. The amount of leftovers that No. 6 spits out in a single day is enough to easily satisfy the hunger of all the people here. Just leftovers. Half-eaten food, for god's sakes.

Gluttony and starvation, extravagance and poverty, rejoicing of life and fear of death, arrogance and debasement—

Would he be able to change it?

Inukashi walked briskly in the wind. His hair rippled and streamed out behind him.

Would he be able to change the reality he had resigned himself to, the days he had struggled to survive, his life which had long been stripped of any dignity as a human being?

Ridiculous. It's just a fairy tale. Besides, what can we do now that— But Nezumi had, and so had Shion. Nezumi and Shion believed. They believed that they would be able to change things with their own power.

Inukashi couldn't bring himself to laugh at them for it. The thought, the possibility, had crossed his mind.

This is bad.

One misstep, and he probably wouldn't live to see spring.

This is bad. This is very bad.

But he was lighthearted. He felt so buoyant he felt like breaking out into song.

As he whistled a light tune, the wind hitting his body, Inukashi found himself breaking into a run.

* * *

Shion finished neatly combing the last dog, and sank down on the spot. He had to admit that he was exhausted. The whole day today he had devoted to taking care of the dogs. He felt like he'd become a dog himself. It was already dusk.

The puppies nudged at him playfully.

"Alright, alright. Come along, then, all your fleas should be gone now." He had just scooped one of them up when Cravat gave a squeak from his pocket. Shion lifted his face.

Nezumi was standing right in front of him. He had not realized it. He had felt no presence at all. But of course, by this time, it was no surprise to him either.

Shion put the puppy down, and stood up without a word. Nezumi, also silent, jerked his chin. He began walking straight toward the ruins.

"Nezumi — you got word from Inukashi?"

"The two of them are waiting for us."

"Two?"

They climbed the crumbling stairs, and opened the door at the end of the hall. On top of the small, round table, a candle was burning. Inukashi and Rikiga were seated.

"They've graciously offered their help. Let's be thankful, Shion."

"Graciously?" Inukashi scoffed, and gave an exaggerated sigh. "I don't think you call getting threatened, bribed, or tricked into doing something is 'gracious', Nezumi."

Shion took a step forward, and bowed his head deeply. He had no words to say. He felt like no words would be able to express how grateful he felt.

"Thank you — all of you." This typical statement was all he could say.

“Shion, no need to be serious about it,” Nezumi quipped. “They’ve all got ulterior motives. They’re only here because they were attracted to the sweet scent of personal profit.”

“Eve, one of these days, that cheeky tongue of yours is gonna rot and fall off. That much I’m sure of.” Rikiga had a bottle of whisky in his right hand, one that he had evidently brought along with him. He took a swig, and swallowed it slowly.

Nezumi indicated with his gaze for Shion to sit, and then lowered himself into a chair as well. Inukashi was the one who stood up.

“Can I start, Nezumi?”

“Yeah. Go ahead.”

Shion made a tight fist in his lap. *I’ve gotten all these people involved. I’m the one that did it. I can’t let myself forget that.*

A hand suddenly reached over to him. It was Nezumi’s. It gently pried Shion’s fist open, finger by finger, gently, as if toying with it.

“We’re just getting started. Tense up like that, and you won’t last.”

With his gaze fixed on the fluttering flame of the candle, Nezumi spoke as if to himself. There was probably a draft coming in from somewhere, for the flame kept flickering. It was already completely dark outside. A long day was coming to a close. No, things were just starting. They were starting right here.

“This week, the number of prisoners escorted into the Correctional Facility was three. Among them...” Inukashi trailed off while staring at the candle, then resumed. The darkness edged in on them. The flame flickered. “Among them, there were no women. There were no escorts from within the city. All three of them were men from the West Block.”

Nezumi questioned him in a low voice.

“Are you sure about that?”

"Yeah. I heard it directly from the guy who's in charge of preparing the prisoner's clothes. There were three of them recorded in the Prisoner Registration data. They tried to break into the Access Control Office to steal money. They were either hungry enough to do it, or they were funny in the head. Either way, there were no women."

"That can't be!" Shion sprang up from his seat.

There was no way that could be. But at the same time, his heart softened just for an instant. What if Safu was actually safe? *Maybe that coat was just my mistake, and it didn't belong to Safu. Maybe—*

"If that's true, then things are gonna be complicated." Nezumi furrowed his brow. His voice was cold, like the draft that made the flame flicker.

"Complicated?"

"It means that she's probably not a legitimate prisoner. I know it's weird to call a prisoner legitimate, but if she's not registered as one in the Correctional Facility, then— Shion, it means she doesn't even exist as a prisoner. She's been erased."

"Erased..."

"The moment your friend got captured by the Security Bureau, all of her data as a citizen would have been erased. In normal circumstances, it would've just been forwarded to the Correctional Facility's main computer, and been filed as prisoner data. Then, once inside the Facility, all her personal information would be re-collected and added to, along with photos from all sides, height, weight, fingerprint, vocal signature, iris, and her finger vein. Only after these procedures do prisoners really become prisoners. It wouldn't matter so much for thieves from the West Block, but if their subject is a former citizen of No. 6, then they would definitely be thorough about these things. But this time, it wasn't done at all. Why? So as not to leave any trace that your friend ever existed."

“Hey, Nezumi.” Rikiga noisily placed his bottle on the table. “Can’t you go about things a bit more delicately? All this talk about erasing and leaving traces... it’s almost like you’re saying the girl... uh, Safu, was it? You make it sound like this Safu girl has already been murdered.”

“I think you’re more lacking in delicacy than me, old man.”

Shion swallowed hard while he listened to the two speak. He didn’t feel well. He felt like he was in a nasty bout of drunkenness. But now wasn’t the time to slump over the table and go to sleep.

Safu...

“Safu was an outstanding human resource,” Shion said evenly. “The city has spent a lot of money and time on her raising her from childhood. They’ve been raising her to have a future career in the upper echelons of the city. Why would they erase her? It would be a huge loss to the city, too, if they did.”

His own voice sounded like a stranger’s to his ears. It was a hoarse and irritating voice.

“Yeah, that’s the problem,” Nezumi agreed. “Why were they so willing to wipe out an elite they’ve kept domesticated with all this time and money? It’s not likely she’s gone and done something idiotic, like you did when you were twelve.”

Inukashi’s nose twitched.

“What idiotic thing? Does it have something to do with why Shion got kicked out of No. 6?”

“It does. But that’s not relevant right now. Shion.”

“Yeah...”

“What’s your friend’s family structure?”

“Safu didn’t have any parents. I think the only relative she had was her grandmother. She said she’d been raised by her.”

"Just her grandmother, huh. Which means if Grandma dies, then Bestie is left without relatives."

"Yeah..."

Shion lifted his face, and his gaze met with a pair of grey eyes. He could finally understand what Nezumi was trying to get at.

"Even if Safu disappears, there would be no relatives to make a big deal about it. And not only that—"

"What else?"

"Safu was supposed to be living in another city for two years on exchange. Even if she went missing from No. 6, no one would find it strange."

"That probably about sums it up, then. She's an elite, has no relatives, and wouldn't raise suspicions if she went missing for a long time. Your best friend filled those requirements. That's why she was apprehended and imprisoned in the Correctional Facility. Not as a prisoner, but—"

"Not as a prisoner— then what for?"

"I don't know." Nezumi shook his head. Inukashi leaned forward.

"Hey, does that have something to do with the rumours? The one about the weird disease going around inside No. 6."

"Do you have the details on that?"

"No," Inukashi said promptly. "It's not that easy to get information about what's going on inside that city, you know. This might be more of a job for Mr. Alcoholic."

Rikiga drained the rest of the contents of his bottle, and glared at Inukashi with bloodshot eyes.

"I don't think Doggy-boy has any right to call me an alcoholic. As for inside information about the city, I can't get it rightaway. Earliest would be the day after tomorrow. But I'm warning you, Eve, just because you have all the information you need, it doesn't mean things

are going to go well. How do you plan on infiltrating the Correctional Facility?”

There was no answer. Rikiga hunched his shoulders.

“What’re you gonna do? Attack the Access Control Office like those three lunatics, and get arrested on purpose?”

“Can’t do that,” Nezumi said brusquely. “All my personal information is recorded on their main computer.”

“Oh? So it was true that you’d once been in the Correctional Facility. Ah, so there is a way to get out of that place alive, huh. What a surprise. Give me an autograph, will you, I’ll hang it on my wall. Of course, with your real name.”

Nezumi ignored Rikiga’s joke. The flame flickered violently. The wind had probably gotten stronger.

“Inukashi — how about the security system?”

“I couldn’t get anything too specific. I’ve got the main points down. And there seems to be a new facility that’s been built underground.”

“New facility? For what?”

“I dunno. Even the custodians aren’t allowed to go in there. Supposedly there’s an elevator that leads directly to the top floor, but it also has an elaborate physical recognition system that only a fraction of people can log into.”

“Top-secret and confidential, huh... and this facility is located in the Correctional Facility, and not the Moondrop. I see.”

Nezumi lapsed into his thoughts. Shion fixed his gaze on Nezumi’s profile.

“Nezumi.”

“What?”

“Getting arrested would be the easiest and most surefire way, right?”

"In a sense. But once you get inside like that, there'd be no room for free movement at all."

"Is it impossible to rescue Safu? Isn't there even a single percent of possibility that we can save her?"

Nezumi gazed at Shion with a mixture of cold indifference and pity.

"You're in the same boat as me," he said. "They've got all your personal information on file. Say we get arrested and they scan through your data. It wouldn't even take them a second to match you up with the first-class criminal on the run. If fortunes work in your favour, you'd be sent to a solitary cell. If they don't, you'd be executed on the spot."

Rikiga erupted into a fit of coughs. Inukashi drew his chair back with a large screech.

"First-class criminal on the run? This dense boy here? Wait a minute, Nezumi. I haven't heard a word of this."

"Because I haven't told you."

Ignoring Inukashi and Rikiga's rapt gaze, Shion persisted with Nezumi. There had to be something. Somewhere, there had to be a possibility. Even if it was slimmer than one percent, thinner than a spider's thread, he had to grasp it and draw it toward him. Despair was not permissible.

"If we get arrested as prisoners, does everyone get searched immediately? Isn't there any way to avoid the data-matching in the time between getting imprisoned until we get Safu out?"

"No," Nezumi answered. "As soon as we get arrested, they'd pull up all our personal information, and scan it through their files. They won't let a single mole go unnoticed. And then we'd get implanted with a V-Chip. Prisoners are bound and placed under surveillance for the whole time. We won't even get a second of free movement."

"No exceptions?"

"No exceptions. Not a single—"

Nezumi abruptly swallowed his words. His face froze.

“Nezumi?”

At his sudden silence, Shion, Inukashi, and Rikiga held their breaths and unconsciously trained their ears. A voice spilled out into the silence.

“There is.”

“Huh?”

“There’s just one exception.”

Shion widened his eyes, and stared intently at Nezumi’s candlelit profile. Nezumi’s lips moved.

“The Hunt.” His voice was raspy, and very low.

Inukashi’s body tensed in his chair. Rikiga dropped his gaze from Nezumi, and gripped his liquor bottle.

“Hunt? What’s that?” Shion looked around at the other three faces. There was no answer from any of them. The darkness in the room thickened. Inukashi sighed.

Nighttime was approaching.

No. 6, glittering golden, would reign over the night. In a corner of the West Block, in a room carved out amongst the ruins, at the very bottom of the deep of the night, the four of them silently sat surrounding a flickering flame.

There was the sound of the wind. It moaned as if it called to someone, as if in yearning. And the night enveloped it all.

The wind whistled. The flame flickered, and went out as if it had spent the last of its energy. Nezumi’s whisper echoed in the darkness. It was no longer hoarse.

“The Hunt — that’s the only exception.”

This book was formatted by fans of the story. The text was set in 10½ point URW Garamond No. 8. Headings, epigraphs and poems were set in Alegreya Sans. Handwritten memos were set in Joe Hand 2 (Karan), Sunday & Monday (Nezumi), Biro Script (Shion), Gabo 4 (Inukashi), and Lipsum (Sasori).

Typesetting was done using L^AT_EX; the source code can be found at github.com/ekuiter/no6-translations. Do feel free to report any typesetting mistakes. This book was built on November 30, 2019.