

No. 6

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No.6

Part Three

A novel by
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Volume VII

The doors of the Correctional Facility, against all odds, have opened at last. Their destination — the topmost floor, where Safu is being kept captive! At the end of a fierce battle with the soldiers of No. 6, what meets Shion's and Nezumi's eyes?

*Finally, you are here.
I have been waiting for you.*

1

YOUR LAST EMBRACE

*O here
Will I set up my everlasting rest
And shake the yoke of inauspicious stars
From this world-wearied flesh. Eyes, look your last.
Arms, take your last embrace!*

ROMEO AND JULIET, ACT V SCENE III

A WHITE light stabbed at his eyes.

It was blinding.

The light was overpowering.

The place overflowed with light, and glittered.

It was unmistakable—it was the world of No. 6.

* * *

Yes, No. 6 had always been like this. Brimming with light; releasing it. *I've returned.* Shion clenched his hand into a tight fist. He was thumped on the back.

“Take a deep breath,” Nezumi said. “Breathe out and get rid of all your emotions. A split second of hesitation or excitement can cost you your life. Keep your head.”

“Got it. You too. Follow me, and don’t fall behind.” Suddenly, he felt the urge to laugh. It tickled in his chest.

“What?” Nezumi drew his chin back. “What’re you grinning about?”

“No... just thinking about how great it feels to say ‘follow me’ to you. Before, I was always the one to be told that.”

“—You know, Shion, you’re—” Nezumi closed his mouth mid-sentence, and shook his head.

The door opened fully. The light hit them head-on.

“Let’s go, Nezumi.” Shion unclenched his fist, and glided out into the white light.

* * *

He smiled? Nezumi shook his head, and chewed his lip. He felt suffocated, though only a little. *How can he smile at a time like this? And from the bottom of his heart, like he was really happy.* It wasn’t bravado. It wasn’t fake. In a moment they would be stepping into the Correctional Facility, and yet, Shion had smiled. He had been able to smile.

Just thinking about how great it feels to say ‘follow me’ to you.

What the hell? What are we, a couple of students making idle chatter and laughing on the way home from school? Why? Why is it that you seem not to feel nervous at all? Don’t you understand what kind of situation you’re in right now?

He could hurl as many insults as he liked. *But*, Nezumi muttered under his breath, *but it’s still amazing.* He couldn’t help it; his feeling of awe was stronger than his desire to insult the boy.

I can't smile like that. Give an innocent and carefree laugh—it's just not gonna happen with me. Right now we're about to step into a danger zone that might as well be a minefield. I can't spare the energy to laugh.

He wasn't afraid. He wasn't going to flinch. But he was tense. This stance prepared him for battle. He needed this shift in mind and body so that he could manoeuvre himself out of the way of an attacking enemy; so that he could turn around and sink his fangs into the enemy's throat. Shion had none of that. He didn't even have the fighting mentality.

Numerous times, Nezumi had felt frustrated at him. *Where did you leave your fangs and claws behind?* he would think. He had even slapped Shion's cheek out of sheer frustration.

He had thought that Shion was frail. He was far weaker, far more fragile than Nezumi. Like a newly-hatched chick, he was defenseless and powerless... he had not a single skill to survive in this harsh reality. But that didn't mean that Nezumi scorned or looked down upon Shion.

On the contrary, he had felt that he needed to protect him. If he didn't protect him with all the strength he had, Shion would not be able to survive. He would be crushed. Nezumi had earnestly believed so once.

And he had utterly misunderstood. *I made unfounded assumptions, and that was my foolish mistake.* He had realized it long before.

Shion was not weak at all. That was why he had been able to come this far. He had not been crushed; in fact, he was far from it: he had survived stoutly. He had come crawling up with his own strength. He had emerged from this brutal reality, stood on this ground, and even smiled.

Smiled, huh. That's right. You'll do things your way and I'll do it my way, and we'll overcome this.

He regulated his breathing.

It starts here, Shion.

He couldn't predict in the faintest what was going to happen, what was waiting for them.

An abyss?

Or a miracle?

A return alive, or no return at all?

He couldn't predict what lay a pace away.

What's going to happen...?

When we've run past the finish line, will you still be laughing? Will you be smiling as you are, unchanged from now?

"Let's go, Nezumi." Shion glided into the white light. He had to follow, so as not to fall behind. Nezumi nodded, and stepped out into the light after him.

Point X. It was marked as such on the floorplan. It was the door at location po1-z22. It was the only point where the underground blank was connected to ground-level.

When the door opened, it made a passage-way between the underground realm and the Correctional Facility. There was a difference in air pressure, perhaps, for there was a slight air flow.

Shion ran to the right. The floorplan that Fura had filled in for him rose in his mind as if he were actually seeing it in front of him.

"Fifteen paces to the right. We're safe until there. There are no sensors. Beyond that, we've got stairs."

"And there?"

"Laser beams: one on the second step, running 45 degrees; one on the stairwell, 15 centimetres above the floor, running parallel; one on the eleventh step running 60 degrees. As long as we don't touch those, the surveillance won't go off."

“Hm. Pretty lax.”

“Only up to here.” This was the basement floor of the Correctional Facility. Excluding Point X, there was no contact to outside areas, so naturally, there were no windows or doors. Facility workers, personnel, and visitors who had the appropriate identification chip and didn’t need to worry about the sensors came down by the stairs or elevator—the legitimate route. But other than that, the only way to get here was through the underground realm.

Adding to that fact, none of the departments here handled confidential material, and the risks of infiltration were infinitely close to zero. It was understandable for security to become lax.

No one had probably predicted that Point X, or location po1-z22 would ever open.

“Nezumi.”

“Hm?”

“How much time do you think we can buy?”

“One—no, at least two minutes.”

Two minutes? Can we buy that much? The change in Point X had probably already been registered by the security system. Could they even buy two minutes until the monitoring staff realized and took appropriate action?

“Inukashi’s working his magic,” Nezumi said. “It’s probably a bit of a hullabaloo up there.”

“Hullabaloo?”

“You’ll see in time. The joyous festivities are only beginning. Anyway, we’ve got two full minutes. It’s ours to use.”

“Two minutes, huh.”

“Feels like an eternity, doesn’t it.”

“Sure does,” Shion said drily.

Second step, 45 degrees; stairwell, 15 centimetres parallel; eleventh step, 60 degrees. They emerged at the top of the stairs. It took a bit of time, since they couldn't just dash up. Approximately 1 minute, 06 seconds left.

From this floor began the ground-level part of the Correctional Facility. There was an entrance hall, where the largest number of people came and went. Personnel came through a different gate than that of prisoners, and gathered on this floor. From here, they dispersed to their respective workplaces. Everyone was cross-checked minutely at the entrance, but once they were through, it seemed like inspection on the rest of the floor wasn't as thorough. The higher the floors, the more strict it became.

The top floor was where they were headed.

It was the deepest and furthest part of the Correctional Facility, encircled by many layers of security networks. They were not headed for the imprisonment facility, which protruded like a bump from the main tower.

It was the furthest part of the Correctional Facility. That was where Safu was.

Shion knew in his guts.

Safu was a certified elite. Such chosen ones were furnished with the best educational environment from a young age. Investing ample time, money, and labour into developing elites was a fundamental political policy of No. 6.

Shion couldn't imagine No. 6 taking an elite that they had raised so carefully to throw her into prison with the rest of the inmates. If she had been arrested in connection with him, then his mother Karan wouldn't have been safe, either.

But it had been Safu who had been taken, and not Karan.

Then it must mean that she was arrested not in connection with him, but on the conditions that she herself fulfilled. The fact that she was elite, perhaps, and without parents, or perhaps because she was female—

“Sample Collection Status—I remember there being a section like that in the Health and Hygiene Bureau’s data,” Fura had said. Sample. Mock-up. Specimen.

No. 6 was taking samples from within the city, and apparently in secret. Citizens were being extracted, unbeknownst, to become specimens. There was no way this wasn’t related to the rumour of agitation and abnormalities trickling out from inside the city.

Shion knew this too, in his guts.

If Safu was a sample who fulfilled their various requirements, then she was valuable. They would probably need a suitable facility in which to handle such a valuable sample.

That was why Safu had to be on the topmost floor, the Special section of the furthest part of the Facility. He wasn’t one-hundred percent sure, but it was very likely.

Shion felt a violent chill.

Not at No. 6, but at himself.

How would I treat a valuable sample? He felt a chill at how he was turning this over in his mind coolly. He felt goosebumps form at his own thoughts, which placed Safu in that position.

I need to be calm and rational. I need to be in this state of mind; it’s what I need most, especially in danger.

Don’t get distracted, don’t get fooled, don’t lose sight.

Nezumi had taught him.

Being calm meant repressing the furor of his feelings. The restless tides of his human emotions lurked constantly in his heart; and yet,

he had to suppress them inches from the surface. That was how it was. If he let himself lose feeling and emotion completely, all that would remain would be a heartless being.

But can I say that I'm not heartless? Maybe there's a part of me that's gone completely cold, and I'm just mistaking it for calmness.

He gritted his teeth.

Don't get distracted, don't get fooled, don't lose sight. And don't wander. This isn't the time to be getting lost.

There were hurried footsteps. Two sets. One was plodding and heavy, and the other was light.

"Why does it smell so horrible? I can't stand it." Two men clad in white coats came running down the stairs. Both of them had handkerchiefs held to their noses. One man was heavysset and in his forties; the other man was still young and scrawny.

Shion crouched in the shadow of the handrails. The men stopped right before his eyes, and took deep breaths.

"I feel faint. What in heavens is this smell?" the middle-aged man grumbled.

"Apparently the cleaning robots broke down. Instead of cleaning, they're strewing trash everywhere, so I hear," answered the younger man, wiping his brow. The middle-aged man was clearly not feeling well, for the colour had receded from his face.

"It's impossible to get any work done in this. I feel like my nose is going to fall off," complained the older man.

"Unbearable, isn't it? Do you suppose it's because of—you know, that?"

"That?"

"Today's the Holy Celebration. We're probably suffering some kind of heavenly punishment because we're working on a holiday."

"It can't be helped. When you work for a research organization, you can't always get your vacations by the calendar. But being rather unscientific, aren't you, saying things like 'heavenly punishment'?"

"I guess." The man paused. "But these days, I find it suddenly occurs to me that..."

"Occurs to you? What does?"

"... That maybe someday, the heavens are going to punish us. That if we keep going like this, we'll eventually pay the penalty."

"What? And who do you suppose would be able to exact punishment on us? Are you sure the smell hasn't short-circuited your brain?" the older man said sardonically. "—You listen to me: even if you happen to have unscientific thoughts, don't say them out loud. You'll earn the brand of an ineligible citizen. And you can forget about your reputation as a researcher."

The young man shrugged, and lapsed into silence.

Shion turned and signalled to Nezumi with his eyes. Nezumi acted at almost the same time. Nezumi twisted the arm of the man in front of him, and pressed a knife to his throat. Shion also burst out, and twisted the young man's arm behind him.

"Wh-What—"

"Don't move. Don't make a sound. Make a noise, and I'll kill you." Nezumi's voice was low, heavy, and cold. It was the voice of a murderer. It agitated fear inside the person, and sealed any attempt at a struggle. Shion was yet again faced with the truth that Nezumi was an incredibly talented actor.

"You too," he whispered in the young man's ear. It didn't go as well as Nezumi. But Nezumi's voice and his silver knife played its part well. The two of them showed no signs of struggling. They stood stock-still, like wooden poles. Only their bodies trembled slightly.

“The door on the right,” Shion said. “Hold the name tag on his chest up to the sensor.”

Nezumi nodded, and positioned the man in front of the door, with his arm still twisted behind his back. The sensor embedded into the top part of the door activated, and blinked on and off.

The door slid silently open.

“A change room,” Nezumi said.

“Yeah.”

“I see. A perfect hiding place for these gentlemen.” Even before finishing his sentence, Nezumi had spun around nimbly and had ground his fist firmly into the man’s stomach. Shion pushed the young man’s body forward. The man tripped over his own feet. The blade of Nezumi’s hand swung down upon his neck. It all happened in the blink of an eye.

The two men crumpled to the floor without uttering a single sound. They stripped the men of their coats, and shoved them inside the lockers. *Like highway bandits*, Shion thought fleetingly. He didn’t feel strange about it, nor did he feel guilt. One more upper hand, one more step forward. That was all he was setting out to do. He slid his arms through the sleeves of the white coat.

“How do I look?” Nezumi twirled in his white lab coat.

“You look good.”

“Thank you. They’re a fine set of stage costumes. A little on the big side, though. So? These name tags function as ID chips, then?”

“Yeah,” Shion answered. “The door opened, so I think we can be sure about that.” He figured even No. 6 wouldn’t embed each and every single Facility employee with a chip. Embedding them inside the body would make them incredibly difficult to retrieve. If they were to go through the trouble, they would chip people who didn’t need to get them retrieved: first, prisoners; then, those with access to the most

confidential information—those who could access the top floor by their own will.

He had guessed that other personnel would use an identification item which they could wear and take off easily, and could distinguish at a glance.

His guess was right.

With these chips, they would go as far as they could go.

Shion and Nezumi made eye contact. No emotions swam in those grey eyes. He felt somehow relieved. No matter what situation he was in, he would have these unwavering eyes by his side. They had been like a sturdy supporting pillar for Shion. All this time, they had supported him.

Shion closed the locker.

No, Shion. From here on out, you have to be the one to blaze the trail. Instead of the stern, you have to be the prow.

They exited out into the hallway. An odour permeated the place, which smelled a lot like rotting garbage.

“Hey, what’s going on? What’s this smell?”

“The whole building is full of it.”

“I feel faint. I think I’m going to throw up.”

People burst into the hallways, or came clambering down the stairs, holding their hands or handkerchiefs to their mouths. Some were deathly pale. Others had a sheen of sweat on their foreheads, and still others were close to tears.

Shion furrowed his brow, not at the stench, but at the commotion. It was indeed a bad odour, but was it something to make such a fuss about?

The smell that wafted over the marketplace in the West Block was nothing like this. It was a more concentrated, more vividly disgusting

stench. And everyone lived in it. They raged, harangued, drank, sometimes laughed, and cried in it. They lived every day there.

But this, this was merely—

“They haven’t any immunity, after all,” Nezumi muttered, as if to sense what was in Shion’s heart.

No immunity. Well, I guess that’s true.

Disinfection, odour removal, humidity control—artificially building a comfortable environment naturally meant the removal of everything unpleasant. No. 6 had received its name as the Ideal City, the Holy City, through purging and exterminating rubbish, refuse, bacteria, viruses, smells, odours, and noise—all of it.

No. 6 had a standard frame, and did not tolerate anything or anyone who crossed the boundaries of this frame. It concerned not only smells, noise, and bacteria; it purged humans as well. It ruthlessly cut them away. The majority of prisoners in this Correctional Facility were not criminals in the real sense; they were merely people who had exceeded the permissible bounds of the Holy City. They had not declared their loyalty to the city, or they had raised an objection. They had not complied. They had questioned its ways. There were probably a great number of people who had been imprisoned on a charge of these crimes. The rest were those who had committed crimes due to their poverty, or out of want of food. And underground, the residents of the West Block were groaning in pain.

Expel all undesirables without an exception.

This was the world of No. 6.

The result of the policy had shown itself in this small scene.

Any faint smell was enough for these sensitive people to react and panic. It was a sign that the physical tolerance levels of the citizens, like their city, were becoming dangerously low.

How fragile they were.

Had Nezumi perceived this fragility? It was a slight, almost unnoticeable crack. But even a crack small enough to be overlooked could be a trigger for collapse.

This frailty, this defect in its resistance, could be the wound that would seal No. 6's fate.

Had Nezumi seen through all of this, too?

Shion didn't know.

He realized he barely knew anything about Nezumi. He thought he had begun to see into his past, into how he had been raised, but—

He didn't know. He knew just as little as when they had first met.

Nezumi was almost like a deep forest.

No matter how far he waded in, he could never gaze out over its entirety. Here, clumps of flowers bloomed; here, a bowed branch bore fruits. Here, a spring gushed forth, and he could hear the gentle sound of its flow. He had definitely seen these various scenes, but they were mere parts of the deep, vast forest. Perhaps he would emerge from the dense trees to be faced with a sheer cliff. Perhaps there lurked man-eating beasts. Perhaps a scene totally unknown to him would stretch before his eyes. He didn't know.

No matter how far he waded in, Nezumi never revealed his entirety to him. The further he waded in, the more unfathomable it got.

I've wandered and gotten lost in an endless forest. I'm drifting, a tangle of throbbing pain and dreamy ecstasy.

* * *

There was a cotton handkerchief in Shion's coat pocket. He used it to cover his nose and mouth. It wasn't to shield against the smell; it was to hide his face. This way, the risk of being spotted would lessen. Nezumi also pressed a white handkerchief to his mouth.

They climbed the stairs. The odour gradually grew stronger. Still, the security alarms didn't go off.

A chime sounded, and his feet froze on the spot. A bead of sweat rolled down his temple.

"Commencing odour removal. Commencing air filtering. Operational level 8.5. The air quality of the building will return to normal in approximately two minutes, sixteen seconds."

The announcement was made by a mechanical voice imitating a female contralto. A chubby man beside Shion let out a great puff of air. Shion also breathed out quietly into his handkerchief.

"Good heavens, we're saved. It's torture, this smell."

"I don't think I can stand this for two whole minutes." Behind the man, an equally chubby woman had twisted her face into a scowl. Her skin was flawless, and her red pouting lips were strangely alluring. Shion and Nezumi tried silently to slip by.

"Oh—hey, you there!" The man called at them. Shion's heart skipped a beat.

Thump, thump. Thump, thump.

His pulse was racing painfully. Sweat erupted on his face.

Nezumi twisted his neck around, his handkerchief still clamped over his mouth.

"Yes?"

"Where are you going?"

"We're going... back to work."

"Third floor?"

"Yes—third floor." Nezumi coughed lightly.

"The stench is horrible up there," the man said. "You'd be better off going down. I'd suggest you avoid the area entirely for a while. I can't imagine you could get any work done in that."

“—We can’t really afford to leave. We’re doing a rush job right now...”

“Rush job? On the third floor?”

“Yes...”

“But the third floor is for resource compilation and management systems. What section of the third floor are you?”

“Hygiene Management,” Shion answered. He traced the floorplan in his head.

Third floor. He could guess judging by the layout of electric circuitry that the General floors ended at the third. Starting from the fourth Special floor, the circuitry spread into a fearfully complicated web. The fourth floor was connected to the Surveillance Wing of the prisoners. Mobile barriers were placed at equal intervals in the hallways, and the number of sensors were over three times that of the General floors.

The majority of Facility personnel could only access as far as the third floor. They had no need to go further. What sections were laid out on that third floor? The floorplan rose vividly in his mind. If he remembered correctly, the Hygiene Management department was nestled in a far corner of the third floor.

“The source of this smell still hasn’t been identified,” Shion said hesitantly. “We Hygiene Management employees are in a bit of a panic right now. We’re not getting any data of foreign objects coming in from outside, so there’s a possibility that something has gone wrong inside the building...”

“Oh, really? According to Management Systems, there was a maintenance problem with the cleaning robots, and they supposedly broke down and started strewing trash everywhere. That’s not it?”

“Ah, well, that’s...” He was at a loss for words. Nezumi answered in a low, hoarse voice.

“The smell seems too strong for just that. We’re doing an emergency investigation into whether there was something mixed in with the

garbage. We've had no previous cases, after all... we're fumbling, truth be told."

"Hm. I see. Were there always young'uns like you in that section, though?"

"We're not—that young," Shion stammered.

The man craned his neck to inspect him. "What happened to your hair? It's gone all white."

Shion couldn't find any words to say. He had forgotten about his hair—white, to the point of transparent. No doubt it was extremely noticeable. If he said he was born with it, people would probably be suspicious about never having seen him before.

What to do?

"I, well... I tried dyeing it..."

"Oh, how pretty," the woman smiled. "It's *very* pretty. So nice and shiny. What did you use to get it to look like that? Tell me all about it."

"Sara, stop flirting with him."

"Excuse me? *Flirting*? How rude. I don't know why you can't be a little more polite. Ugh, this *smell*. I'm sick of it, and I'm sick of you, too." The woman stalked off down the stairs.

"Wait—hey, Sara! What was that supposed to mean? Hey! Wait up, Sara. Wait!" The man wiped the sweat off his brow as he followed after the woman.

"A romantic spat if I ever saw one. That guy supposedly tries to pick up ladies in broad daylight. At work, no less." Nezumi shrugged. "Saved our asses, though."

If the man had questioned them any further, they would have been in trouble. Shion felt a coldness around his armpits.

“You’ve gotten pretty good at lying. But not quite polished enough on the finish.”

“Not as nearly as good as you. Looks like I’ll need a lot more training.”

“Good call.”

The third floor was white-walled and white-floored, and though it was neat, it was eerily blank.

“So this Management Systems room?” Nezumi said.

“Left-hand side. It’s a glass-panelled room. Nezumi, surveillance camera right above you. Don’t look up. Be careful. There’s also a 360-degree camera on the ceiling to your top-right after you enter the room.”

“Roger that.”

The odour removal and air-conditioning mechanics were well under-way, evidently, for the smell had dispersed considerably, and did not bother them much. The confusion was beginning to settle.

The glass doors slid automatically open, and a thin man with a jutting chin came out carrying a vacuum. He looked ill; there was a dead look in his eyes, and he was horribly pale.

“I’ve done it . . . I’ve actually done it,” they heard the man mutter as he passed them by. “I’ve done it . . . but . . . serves them right . . . serves them right . . .”

“Get out of here quickly,” Nezumi whispered to the man’s back. The man stopped in his tracks, and glanced furtively at Nezumi.

“Did you say something?”

“I told you to get out of here. Don’t dally.”

“You—”

“You’ve pulled it off admirably. A job well done.” His tone was that of a king congratulating a subject. The man blinked. His Adam’s apple slowly bobbed as he swallowed.

“Who . . . are you?”

“I’m grateful. Now make a good getaway.” Nezumi flashed the man a seductive smile, and slowly set foot inside the Management Systems room. He didn’t look anything like he was in a rush. He had the footsteps of an honest employee returning to his work.

The security alarm did not go off.

We’re still good. Shion clenched his hand into a fist. His palms were sweaty. *Things are going better than I thought. If they continue like this, maybe we’d be able to pull it off.*

No, don’t let your guard down. Even a slight moment of inattention could cost us our lives.

Following in Nezumi’s footsteps, Shion also entered the room neither hastily or cautiously, maintaining a perfectly ordinary step and speed. It was spacious inside, and the room was sectioned off with clear walls of reinforced plastic. The booth closest to where Shion and Nezumi had entered was empty. There was no one there. The booth next to that also showed no signs of anyone. They had probably fled, unable to bear the smell. But the smell had now been mostly removed; people would be returning soon.

“This must be the management division for ventilation. And—”

“The operating button for opening and closing Point X should be here, too.” Nezumi’s gaze focused on the right-hand edge of the control panel. A small, round button. It was a vivid, almost cheap-looking shade of green. It looked almost out of place amongst the other switches and touch panels. Shion stood in front of the control panel.

“Oh, yeah,” Shion said. “The surveillance and management of all entrances and openings take place beyond this wall, but the door to Point X is the only thing that doesn’t.”

“Is that strange?”

“No. It’s just as you said: that door is impenetrable. It will never open. No. 6 never considered the chance of someone coming in through that door. Of course, they never considered opening it from their side, either. So this button for them was actually meaningless. That was why it didn’t matter where they put it. There was no need to keep watch on it, anyway.”

As he spoke, Shion tapped a large screen in the centre of the control panel. Of course, he was concerned about his fingerprints being lifted, but the screen wouldn’t function if he didn’t touch it directly. Security measures would take effect, and it would lock itself.

“That’s right,” Nezumi answered. “It’s indulgence. Indulgence that comes from complacency. No. 6 thinks nothing in the world can threaten them. Makes you laugh, doesn’t it?”

Point X was created when Rou was placed in the underground settlement, though at the time, it had probably been mere caverns. The caverns themselves were to be his prison. Then, the Correctional Facility gradually grew closer to its current form: a new, even more secure imprisonment facility than the caves.

The underground caverns, Rou, and the other prisoners were forgotten. Either that, or they were written off as people who had never existed. Only the door remained.

The screen changed into a layout of the Correctional Facility’s ventilation system.

“Nezumi, look here.” There were stairs leading from the fourth to the fifth floor, and to the top floor as well.

Each step was 120 millimetres deep, and 240 millimetres high. It was quite a steep slope. The stairs were also barely wide enough for one adult to climb. It was more like a ladder than a set of stairs.

Nezumi peered in. “What’s this?”

“Stairs for construction and maintenance. Everything is usually computer-regulated, but once in while they would probably need some manual labour. The stairs were probably made with that in mind. They probably haven’t been used much, though.”

A soft exhale escaped Nezumi’s lips.

“I didn’t know there was something like this here. Did you know about these stairs all along?”

“No, I only guessed,” Shion said. “I noticed it when I first looked at the floorplan. It was an unusual blank space.”

“I didn’t notice.”

“It’s in the wall. There was a narrow space between the outer and inner walls. This particular part was wider than the rest.”

“So you saw something that I overlooked.”

“That’s right.”

Tsk. The sound of a frustrated click of the tongue.

“And is that spot gonna welcome us in like an amusement park? There aren’t any anti-trespassing devices?”

“I don’t know. This screen only shows ventilation-related systems. I can’t tell about anything else.”

“You said it was a blank. So there’s nothing written in there.”

“No.”

“Then how about a door? If there are stairs, there has to be a door that leads to them.”

“I don’t know about that, either. There’s nothing written here that might pertain to that.”

“Then we don’t have a next move.”

They did not have a next move. But they would have to move anyway. If they couldn’t use the central stairs or the elevator, this was the only route that would take them to the top floor.

Shion had stared at the floorplan long enough until he felt his head throb, memorizing the interior structure. This was the conclusion that he had drawn as a result.

Their chips would not take them any higher. They would have to set foot on these stairs, using any method they could. If only they could bound up the steps in one dash. The mother computer was on the top floor. They had to get there. They had to reach it, no matter what.

This was the only way.

In a way, the Correctional Facility was like a prototype of No. 6. All information, activities, functions, and monitoring networks led back to the mother computer. This meant that all the power was in the hands of the single person who could control the Mother freely.

A perfect hierarchy, in which the king was the absolute summit—that was what they were trying to create. It was an incredibly vast, yet foolish ambition.

Humans could control machines. They could develop and refine devices, and use them in any way they liked. But it was impossible for humans to dominate other humans. Even empires which had proudly stood for a thousand years, crumbled after that millennium. Humans could not dominate other humans. The system would always break down.

Shion had learned this outside No. 6. The ones inside—those reigning over No. 6—had evidently not. That was why they could continue to believe in this illusion that they would conquer all.

They were foolish. But foolishness created a vulnerable opening. If they could make contact with the mother computer, they would be able to find out Safu's location, and they would be able to halt the Correctional Facility's functions, if even momentarily.

With a centralized system like this one, where everything concentrated into this one single point, then all they had to do was attack that one

spot.

No. 6's fragility had also revealed itself here.

Shion's fingers flitted about. The screens changed one after another. The barriers on the fourth floor. They had to overcome those somehow. They had to break through the open space before the walls closed in on them and blocked their route off. And to do that—

The inside of his head settled into a cold stillness. Only his fingers kept moving, and finished one task, then another.

"Hey, there's something wrong here," yelled a man in the next booth. Several workers had already returned. "The activity lamp for Point X is on."

"Point X?"

"On location po1-z22. The door's been opened and closed. It's recorded here."

A tall, young man tilted his head in perplexity. "Po1... that's underground. Did we ever have a door there? Are you sure it's not a display error on the part of the computer? Maybe the smell was so bad, even the computer couldn't handle it. Haha."

"This isn't a joking matter," the other snapped. The man closed his mouth.

"Two minutes and forty seconds ago. That was just now. The door on Point X opened right in the middle of that commotion."

"Is there something wrong with it opening? Doors are supposed to open, aren't they?"

"It's not general entrance door. It's not an emergency exit, either. The staff don't use this door."

"Oh. Then, where's the door supposed to lead?"

"I don't know. I've never heard of it. But this means that a door that was never supposed to open has opened. This—"

Evidently the sound-proof setting was off, for the boys could hear the muffled voices of the two men conversing.

“Our time’s up.” Nezumi undid the buttons of his lab coat. Shion stood up as well.

Two minutes, forty seconds. It was much longer than they had anticipated. It looked like Fortune had not abandoned them just yet.

“Oh—hey! You there.” A grossly overweight mass of a man was standing in front of them, blocking their way. “What are you doing there? Who are you?”

Nezumi flung his coat at the man, which landed on the man’s head and draped over him. The man flailed his arms and staggered. Nezumi swept his feet out from under him. The man fell sideways with a resounding crash, and gave a muffled groan.

“Excuse me.” Nezumi stepped over the man, and exited into the hallway. Shion followed suit and hopped over the man’s body.

“What was that?”

“Somebody—an intruder! Somebody help!”

“What? Has the emergency bell gone off?”

An agitated buzz rose from behind them.

“Nezumi, run up the stairs.”

“Gotcha.”

If the sensors caught any intruders, the security shutters would fall automatically. Could they reach the fourth floor before all the shutters went down?

The lighting on the stairs turned red. The shutters of special alloy silently began to close.

They were fast.

“Shion, go in head-first.”

Nezumi and Shion dived into the narrow space.

2

IF ONE'S HUMAN SOUL

*If one's human soul should completely disappear,
one would probably be more likely to find happiness.
But even so, the human inside oneself feels horror towards it like nothing else.
O how so completely terrifying, grievous, and painful he thinks it!
For one to lose his memories as a human.*

NAKAJIMA ATSUSHI, SANGETSUKI

S_{HE} HAD awakened.

Safu had awakened, and understood everything.

She knew now what had happened to her.

What have you done... what have you done... what have you done?

“Goodness, Safu. What’s wrong? Look at the fluctuation in your emotions. How long do you plan on keeping up this agitation for? What a troublesome child. Your beauty is going to waste.” He chuckled. “Ah, no, that was just a joke. A flat joke. Don’t mind me. You are still beautiful, very beautiful. A huge success. Things are going exactly as planned so far. And of course, there will be no mistakes in the future, either.” He chuckled again.

The man continued to laugh from his spot beside Safu.

Devil.

So you were the Devil.

Why—why—why have you done this to me?

“You are not only beautiful. You are also resilient. You are my ideal, Safu, let me confess that. I cannot lie to you, after all. I... at first only collected you to use you as a specimen. I tried to treat you as I would any other sample. Oh, I hope you will forgive me. I don’t want you to reproach me like that. I didn’t know that you would be so beautiful and strong. Safu, you captivated me. I could repeat myself a million times. You are my ideal—you are what I’ve been looking for. That is why I will make you queen. No, I will make you into someone close to a goddess. A perfect existence. You and I, we will rule the world together. How does it sound? Exciting, isn’t it?”

Devil.

You are the Devil.

Don’t come near me. Don’t come near me.

Safu’s voice did not reach the man.

The man continued to talk fervently as if he were possessed. Colour tinged his cheeks, and he paced in circles, back bent slightly forward. He was like a fish in an aquarium. He went round and round, round and round, swimming in an enclosed space. Round and round. Round and round.

The man’s feet trod silently on the floor as he continued talking. Perhaps he was speaking more to himself than Safu.

“I finally have you in my hands. The ideal materials. Oh, Safu, I’m no believer in fatalism. I don’t believe in forces beyond the bounds of human power, or the heavens being in control of our lives. I have always laughed in scorn at it, calling it absurd. But—please don’t laugh, Safu. After meeting you, I, well... I feel like I could believe a little bit in this so-called fate. Perhaps it is true. Perhaps there is a God, and

He is trying to bestow me with an absolute power. If not, what could explain the fact that I met you like this? That is why I will make you a goddess. I have the power to do it. Oh, yes. Yesterday, I told you that you wouldn't need a name. Right, of course, of course. You should throw away your name from the past. I shall give you a name suitable for a goddess."

The man's feet and tongue showed no signs of stopping.

He kept walking. He kept talking.

"Yes, how about..." The man's feet stopped abruptly. A slow smile spread over his face. "How about... Elyurias?"

Elyurias?

The man resumed pacing. The blissful smile still hung over his face.

"A splendid name, isn't it? Indeed, a name fit for a queen. Perhaps it is all the more suitable for someone like you."

This man...

Safu's gaze locked onto him. For the first time, she got a good look.

His thin face looked gentle at first glance. His age—it was hard to tell. Depending on how the light hit him, he either looked very young, or considerably aged. The man had completely cut himself off from the external world and was wallowing in his inner realm, staring intently into the air and soliloquizing his feelings.

Self-intoxication.

This man was completely absorbed in himself. He believed that his abilities were equal to that of God. He believed he was entrusted with everything, that he would be forgiven for anything. That... that was why he could do this.

"Just a little bit more. Just a little more, and my project will be complete. You were the last piece. Thanks to you, I have all the parts I need. They're complete, that's no mistake. I just need time. I just need a little more time. How do you feel? I want you to be comfortable,

and for that, I would do anything. You are one of the most important things in my life right now, after all.”

Set me...

“What? Safu, did you say something?”

Set me free. Change me back to who I was. Let me see him.

Her emotions reared angrily. A wind roared in her heart, howling loudly. She wanted to scream from the bottom of her lungs. She wanted to cry.

I want to see you.

“Oh, what’s the matter? Your numbers are going up. I guess you’re having trouble adjusting to your new environment. Hmm, I thought the transition would be smoother. Oh, no, I don’t mean to blame you for it. I wouldn’t blame you for anything. You are my treasure. Will you sleep a little more? That should make things better. Hm? —It looks like Mother agrees with my judgment. She says she will prescribe you some stabilizers. Oh, yes. I have to tell you about Mother. You and Mother are directly connected, you know. Mother will always monitor you to adjust your conditions for utmost comfort, so that you will have the best environment possible. So that’s why, look, now she’s saying that you need rest—”

A bell sounded shrilly. The tapered ends of the man’s eyebrows shot up.

“What is it? An urgent call *now*? How uncouth— yes, it’s me. What’s the matter? Today is the Holy Celebration, are you not busy with your own—what? What’s that? What do you mean? In the city? This is happening in the city... no, that can’t be... right, send the video over to me. The samples, too. Everything you’ve collected... yes, I’m about to right now... what? Thirty bodies already? In the space of one day... so that’s what’s happened... I understand. That’s enough. I’ll go over there myself... yes, immediately. Immediately.”

All the blood had receded from the man's profile. His lips were bloodless, white, and parched. They trembled uncontrollably.

"It's a mistake. It must be a mistake. That... that couldn't have happened. It just isn't possible," the man practically spat, as he exited the room. He was agitated to the point of it being unnatural. All the ease and eloquence he had a minute ago were gone without a trace.

This is happening in the city, the man had said. Had something happened inside No. 6? Something that exceeded that man's predictions...?

No. 6, where I was born and raised. But there was always unrest squirming below the surface. It was such a comfortable and beautiful place, and yet it was always precarious... the lingering feeling that something was about to happen... at least, I thought so...

Safu could feel her rage gradually begin to quiet.

She was sleepy. So sleepy, she could melt. Had she been dosed with a sleeping drug? She was connected to the Mother—what did that mean? The Mother... *oh, I'm so sleepy.*

Her consciousness blurred. It became hard to think. And in these moments, there was always a figure which rose in her mind.

Shion.

She tried calling his name. Shion smiled, and gave a slight nod. It wasn't an illusion. He was so vivid, so concrete, as if he were standing right in front of her.

Hey, Shion. When was it again? I remember the sun was setting. The wind was a little nippy, right? It had snowed for the first time the day before, and the path was wet. We were walking side-by-side. Do you remember? You haven't forgotten, have you?

And I called your name, didn't I?

Shion.

* * *

She called his name again. And Shion, again, smiled at her.

“What’s wrong, Safu?”

“No... I just—”

“Just?”

“I just wanted to call your name. I was giving it some hard thought, and I actually realized that ‘Shion’ is a nice name. It’s a flower.”

“You had to give it a hard thought to notice it was nice?”

She had giggled. “So, what kind of flower is a ‘shion’?”

“Uh... a perennial flower that’s part of the *Asteraceae* family, if I remember correctly. The stem grows up to 1.5 metres high, and it blooms with light purple flower heads...”

“Shion, I don’t want to hear an explanation about the flower. I can get that kind of information easily.”

“Then what do you want to know?”

“Something that I can’t get easily.”

“Can’t get easily... hmm, that’s almost like a riddle. If you don’t want to hear about the aster flower, then... nope, I have no idea. What do you want to know, Safu?”

I want to know about you, Shion. I wanted to know you. Who named you that? Do you like it? When was it that I first called you by your name? And when was the first time you called me...?

Shion, I still don’t know anything about you.

I know your habits, the food you like, how you talk, your gentleness and strength... yes, I do know. I know it very, very well. But, Shion—

Who were you chasing? Who did you long to be beside? Who were you yearning for? Who stands at the other end of your outstretched fingers? Couldn’t it have been me? Did it have to be that person? I don’t know anything. So tell me. I wanted you to tell me, Shion.

Shion.

* * *

Safu.

She heard a voice. Sparks burst in the haze of her consciousness. Scarlet flowers opened their petals. A wind scattered the fog that hung over her eyes, and in the same way that the scenery would unfold before her, Safu's consciousness came back to her. The voice had called it back.

Safu.

Who is it? Who called me?

It wasn't Shion's voice. Nor was it her deceased grandmother, or her parents. It was a voice she had never heard before—no, sound? Melody? A breeze in the canopies, the gentle splash of water, the pounding of rain on the ground—it sounded similar. But it was different. It was a sound she was hearing for the first time.

Is it a song—? A beautiful, song-like...

Safu.

Who is it? Who's calling me?

It's me, Safu.

Who? Who are you?

I am Elyurias.

Elyurias...

* * *

"Shionn, stop squirming!" Inukashi clicked his tongue as he lowered the baby into a large pot full of warm water. The baby grinned. He flapped his arms and legs, squealing with glee. Warm water splashed everywhere, wetting the hem of Inukashi's shirt.

"Stop horsing around. Geez, you're really round, aren't ya?"

The baby's hands and feet, his belly, his whole body was plump and soft. Every finger, every hair was brimming with the energy of life.

Strange guy. He's different from any baby I know. Way different. So different, sometimes he just makes me stop and stare.

The kind of babies Inukashi knew always had Death curled up and ready to spring at their feet. Their life was wrenched from them before they even had a way of protecting themselves. Those were the kind of babies he knew. Malnutrition, plague, the frigid air; sleeping quarters not much better than a garbage dump. What was the fraction of babies in the West Block who lived to turn five? Fifty percent? No, maybe even thirty. Some kids were killed by their parents so that they would be one less mouth to feed. Inukashi knew swarms of them whose only purpose in life seemed to be to come into this world, only to die. For a short time, Inukashi had done infant burials as a job. But his "burials" literally only consisted of him digging a hole and burying the baby. It was no different than digging a grave for a dog. He thought babies who were sent off with the mourning of a father and the grief of a mother were still lucky. Oftentimes, Inukashi was the only one to see the baby off. No one ever left prayers, much less a single flower for the simple grave, a raised mound of dirt with a rock placed on top. In time, people forgot that it was a grave in the first place.

Babies usually died with their mouths slightly open. Sometimes, through their eyelids which had not quite closed, he could see a set of startlingly clear eyes staring vacantly back at him.

Of course. They couldn't even stand on their own feet. They'd have no way of becoming tainted. Of course they'd still be innocent.

His heart had never ached as he piled dirt onto the small corpses. He had never experienced sorrow, nor spilt any tears.

Good for you to have died early. You're a lucky one. You didn't have to suffer any more than this. These were the only words he's speak to

them.

Hey, little guy, how many months did you get to live for? Two? Three? You've lasted half a year? That should be enough, then. Don't even think about being reincarnated. You'll just end up with the same fate anyway. If you still want to that badly, then come back as a weed that grows on the edges of the path, or as a puppy. You'll be a hundred times happier. You listen, alright? Never, ever be born again as a human. That was another thing he'd say to them.

It was Inukashi's own way of sending the dead off.

Nezumi would sing. He would probably sing a sending-off song, for the soul that had expired while it was still innocent—though Inukashi didn't know if such a song existed, he knew Nezumi would sing it. *But you know what, Nezumi? Dead people don't need songs. Dying people might, but not the dead.*

The dead return to the land, and turn back into soil. Babies do, and so will you and I.

Inukashi shook his head vigorously when he realized he had been absent-mindedly thinking about Nezumi. He crossed his left middle and index fingers. It was his charm to ward off demons.

For Inukashi, Nezumi was something close to a demon. Even more detestable than Death.

You could avoid Death to a certain extent, as long as you didn't let your guard down. You could ward it off, you could trick it. *But what about him? He thinks nothing of driving people until their backs are against the wall. He gets you involved in danger. He doesn't give a damn about your convenience or your own matters. He'll make use of dog shit if it serves him a purpose. He's cunning, frightfully thorough, and can wrap you around his finger as easy as anything. Ugh, enough, enough. If Nezumi didn't have his power as a singer, I would never have associated with him. Never. Oh—damnit, I'm thinking about him again. I shouldn't*

even devote a second to thinking about that guy, or else I'll be sucked in by his evil. I should know this—what's wrong with my head?

“Come on, Shionn. You do the charm, too. Then the demon won't come getcha. You're beyond all hope if you end up like your Papa, completely under his spell. See, stick your fingers together like this.”

“Bah-booohh, boo-boo!” Shion raised a joyful cry from his bath. He was strange—a very strange baby, indeed. Not even a shadow of Death crept up on him.

In their room in the ruins of the hotel, the walls were crumbling, the windowpanes were shattered, and a cold draft always blew in. It was a place only marginally better than outside. Rikiga was able to provide them somewhat with milk, but it was nearly not enough. Inukashi made up for what he didn't have with dog's milk and vegetable broth. The baby was probably more fortunate than most in the West Block, but it didn't change the fact that he was still severely deprived.

But Shionn was always in high spirits, swinging his hands and feet, laughing, and babbling to Inukashi. His skin had a healthy glow, and he was plump, round, and full of energy. Inukashi could even swear that the baby had grown in these past two, three days.

Those eyes shined with life, his skin was smooth, and his voice was strong. It was almost like the infant was encased in a transparent shield that protected him from the many dangers and toxins of this world.

A strange baby.

“Hey, Inukashi,” a gravelly voice called out to him. A deep, muddy-sounding voice.

Geez. I'm not asking you to change your face, but can you at least get some class into your voice?

“What the *hell* are you doing? Stop it!” There was scramble of footsteps, and Shionn was snatched from Inukashi's arms. The pot wobbled, and warm water spilled out.

"What's your problem?" Inukashi whined.

"You must be kidding me. Stop this!" Rikiga hugged the naked baby to his body, retreating slowly. "Inukashi—this is going too far. This isn't what humans do."

"Huh?"

"Aren't you ashamed of yourself? Sure, you might be more dog than human. But that doesn't mean you don't have a shred of reason in you."

"Reason? That crap isn't gonna do any good for me, will it now? But I guess I might have a little more of that than you, old man."

Rikiga screwed his drunken flushed face into a scowl, and retreated another step.

What the hell is this old man doing?

"I thought you'd have more decency for a dog boy. Inukashi, I don't know how hungry you are to want to do this, but eating a baby? You must be a monster. Have you thrown away your human heart, too?"

"Huh? The hell are you talking about?"

"Don't play dumb with me. You—you were trying to boil Shionn and eat him."

Inukashi fixed Rikiga with a long stare. He didn't even blink. He could feel laughter welling up and prodding inside his chest.

"What's so funny? You inhuman bastard."

After Inukashi had bent over double and laughed for a good while, he wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.

"I laughed so much, I'm drooling. Ah, old man, you missed out. If you'd come even thirty minutes later, I would've treated you with some good soup taken from baby broth. As much as you could eat."

"L-Like I would ever eat something like that! I'd rather starve to death. Besides, what were you—"

“A bath.”

“Huh?”

“I was giving Shionn a bath.”

“In a pot?”

“Yeah. This is the pot I use to make food for my dogs. It’s the best size for giving a baby a bath. Of course, if you insist on delivering me a high-quality baby bathtub, old man, I’d be delighted to use that instead.”

“Uh... I, well...”

Inukashi shrugged exaggeratedly.

“But I gotta say, I’m flabbergasted to find out you care so much about Shionn, old man. I thought you were only nice to your money, your booze, and young women. What a surprise.”

“Of course I care,” Rikiga said indignantly. “I’m not like you. I still have a decent human soul. Don’t lump me in with you people.”

“You people? Am I part of that group, too?”

“You and Eve. Who else?”

Inukashi shrugged again. “Fine. If you’re so bent on it, then take him.”

“Huh?”

“Tuck that baby into your coat and take him home. I can just *imagine* the fine young man he’d grow up to be, raised by such a gentle old man like you. Just like airheaded Shion, who you love so much.”

Rikiga shook his head hastily.

“No can do. I can’t do it. Inukashi, I’m sorry. You’re not an inhumane bastard. I’m sorry for lumping you in with Eve, that wiley fox. I apologize. I’m sorry. There must’ve been something wrong with me. Hahaha—I see, yes, a bath. Babies love baths, right? Isn’t that nice,

Shionn, aren't you glad to have been picked up by such a nice person? You lucky guy."

Rikiga rubbed his cheek against Shionn's. Shionn burst into tears. He opened his mouth wide, and his stretched arms and legs went rigid. An old dog who had been sleeping underneath the table raised its head and narrowed its eyes suspiciously.

"Oh—hey, come on, don't cry. Stop flailing around! He'll drop you." The baby didn't stop crying. He wailed, stretching his hands towards Inukashi. Inukashi almost reflexively snatched the baby back into his own arms. He wrapped both arms firmly around the small body. The crying stopped instantly.

"Geez, he'll catch a cold like this. If he gets sick, it's your fault, old man. You'll be paying for his medicine bills. Must've been cold, huh, Shionn? I'll get you inside the bath again. Go on, warm up."

A plump arm reached out, and its fingers touched Inukashi's cheek.

"Mama."

Tears had left their streaked marks on his smooth cheeks.

"Mama."

Inukashi felt like his heart was being wrung. Something twisted deep inside his body. He almost stopped breathing at this huge, scalding, twisting emotion that had reared inside him.

"Mama."

Yeah, I know, Shionn. It was a joke. A lame, stupid joke. Forgive me. It's alright, I'm here. I won't give you away to a drunkard like him... no, I won't give you away to anyone. I promise. I swear.

* * *

Rikiga peered into the bundle in Inukashi's arms, and exhaled a breath that reeked of alcohol.

“Mama,” he echoed.

“What? You miss your Mama, old man?”

“My mother went six feet under a long time ago. She crawled into that grave when I was ten, and hasn’t tried to crawl back out since.”

“She must be really comfortable in there,” quipped Inukashi.

“And she probably wouldn’t want to see how much her son has gone downhill anyway. Maybe she’s choosing not to come out.”

“Who are you calling downhill? But anyway, about Shionn . . .”

“What about Shionn?”

“He called you Mama.”

“So he did.”

“Why ‘Mama’, huh?”

“Dunno.”

“Mama.”

“See, there it is again.”

Inukashi lowered Shionn back into the bathwater, and warmed him. Shionn found it very comfortable, apparently, for he gave a relaxed smile. Its radiance touched upon everything: beautiful things, refreshing things, exciting things.

I didn’t know babies were such precious beings.

“Why is it ‘Mama’, Inukashi?” Rikiga insisted.

“Everything is ‘Mama’ to babies, old man. Hard to believe, but even you were crying for you mama some decades ago. Did you stop crying once someone flashed you a gold coin back then too, huh?”

“You’re one to talk,” Rikiga shot back. “You’re just as attached to money as I am. Look at the pot calling the kettle black.”

“Hah, shut up.”

They’re such precious beings. I never knew.

All the babies Inukashi had buried without feeling—in the frozen ground; in the sun-beaten and parched soil; in the muddied earth of the rainy season—now, for the first time, Inukashi cast his thoughts to each and every one.

Maybe Shionn wasn't the only one. Was that baby a precious existence? Or that baby, or that other baby, too? If they were, then... they shouldn't have died like that. It doesn't make sense. It doesn't make sense that they have to die so skinny, with their skin so wrinkly you'd think it was some old woman. To draw their last breath with such innocent eyes, without any hatred for anyone, without even knowing how to hate. Like the one I buried at the root of a honeysuckle bush, or the one I dug a grave for in red soil, or the one I wrapped in rag before burying, or that one, or that one, or that one—they all should have been cherished more;. They shouldn't have been forced to die that way.

Shionn, don't you die. Live on. Live, and grow big. Learn to hate, learn to cherish.

“Muh-muhhh.”

Inukashi scooped the baby up, and briskly put his clothes back on him. A black female dog got up as if it had been waiting its turn. The mat it had been sprawled on had cotton stuffing poking out of its ripped seams. Inukashi had fished it out of the rubble in the marketplace. It was faded, worn thin in many places, and more like a rag than anything else. But upon closer examination, one could see an adorable pattern of baby chicks. Maybe a baby much like Shionn had been using it before. On the day of the Hunt, maybe he had been put to sleep on this very mat, and been immersed in a dream.

“He’s all yours,” Inukashi said to the dog. After Shionn had been laid down beside the dog, he immediately latched onto the dog’s teat. He suckled eagerly, making gurgling sounds in his throat.

“Rather furry nurse he’s got.”

“We’ve got as many furry girls as you’d want,” Inukashi said.

“Black fur, red fur, white fur, spotted fur. Care for a night with a lady of your choice?”

Rikiga ignored Inukashi’s sarcasm, and heaved a sigh.

“A human baby being raised on dog’s milk . . . that’s quite something. But is that alright? God forbid he should start barking next.”

“He just said ‘Mama’, didn’t he?”

Rikiga looked down at Shionn, and heaved another sigh.

“Old man.”

“What?”

“Have you made the preparations?”

Rikiga’s face slowly turned towards Inukashi. “Yeah.” He lifted his arm languidly, and pointed at the black bag on the table.

“Good. Let’s go, then.” Inukashi lifted the bag. It weighed down heavily in his hands. Rikiga knitted his brow and made a reluctant face.

“Inukashi . . . why don’t we call it quits?”

“Quit?”

“Let’s just forget about the whole thing.”

“Forget about it, and then what?”

“We crawl back into our holes and keep quiet. Don’t you think it’d be . . . better that way?”

“Of course.” It would be better, old man. I feel that way hundred times stronger than you. I want to forget all about it, and crawl back into my den.

It would be cold tonight, but not enough to freeze. If Inukashi had his dogs with him, he’d be able to ward off the cold. Just minutes ago, he’d filled his stomach with stale biscuits and a soup of vegetable rinds.

It was good. *That means right now, I'm more or less fulfilled. If I could just lie down with my dogs and fall into a deep, deep sleep...*

That'd be nice.

"Right?" Rikiga continued. "Why don't we do that? You have Shionn. You have to protect him. If something happens to you, who's going to take care of him? Think about it."

"The dogs are here. The dogs will raise him even without me. Just like my mum did."

"Yeah, but... Inukashi, let me be straight with you. I value my life as much as you do. I don't want to do anything dangerous. So," he said hesitantly, "let's back out of this. Forget it ever happened, hm?"

"And what happens to Nezumi and Shion? You gonna abandon them?"

"Those two are already dead. There's no way they'd be alive. They couldn't have lived if they've been rounded up by the Hunt, anyway. You know this as well as I do. That's why it's useless. We're about to put our lives on the line for something completely useless. Come on, let's just stop this. It's for the best."

"Old man."

Rikiga drew his chin when he saw Inukashi's gaze.

"—What?"

"That's enough yammering. It's almost time. Let's go."

"Inukashi!"

"I'm going. If you wanna quit, old man, you go do that. I don't care. The bag comes with me, though."

"Inukashi, why? Why are you so bent on fulfilling your duty to them? You always acted alone. So have I. I could understand for Shion, but to go this far for someone like Eve..."

"He's one of us."

"Huh?"

“They’re part of our group. I can’t abandon them.”

Rikiga’s dark eyes darted about. His mouth twisted into a scowl, like someone had force-fed him some bitter herb. He scratched furiously at the rash on his chin.

“I can’t even bring myself to laugh at your joke,” Rikiga said scathingly. “You’ve got no taste. Just listening to you makes me nauseous.”

“Well, gee, I mean, your stomach is probably already a mess from your binge-drinking. I’d advise you to give up the booze for your own sake, though it’s probably too late for you. Heheh, but I sounded pretty cool back there, didn’t I? You’d agree I was pretty suave, right?”

“Idiot. I can’t believe you could rattle off those embarrassing lines as if you actually meant it. Maybe you’ve got potential to be an actor like Eve. You must be kidding me,” he spat, “one fox is enough.”

Inukashi bared his teeth on purpose into a vulgar grin. Rikiga’s mouth twisted even more severely.

“The only members of your ‘group’ are your dogs,” he said. “You have as little trust for humans as the length of your pinky. Keep shooting off lies like that, and one day your tongue will rot.”

“Ooh, I wouldn’t want that,” Inukashi said sarcastically. “Fine, let’s be frank. You first.”

“Me—” Rikiga began. “Well, like I said, I want to back out. I’ve been saying this over and over.”

“That’s honestly how you feel?”

“I’m an honest man. I don’t lie.”

“I can’t even bring myself to laugh at your joke. Forget your tongue. Watch it before your wang rots and falls off, too. How much money did you spend to come up with what’s inside this bag, huh, old man? I’m sure you’ve gotten tons of gold from Nezumi, but at best, that gold’ll offset your expenses and you’ll be even... no, you’ll probably be down. If you scamper on back to your hole, you’ll be losing all

that extra money you spent for nothing. Could you stand that, really? Of course not. Are you the kind of humble man to just back down and submit to your loss? Hmm, even a pure and innocent kid like me finds that hard to believe.”

Inukashi whistled. A few dogs that had been laying low near the walls stood up. He whistled again, this time at a slightly lower pitch than before.

The dogs surrounded Rikiga. Without so much as a snarl, they formed a circle with Rikiga at the centre.

“Don’t assume they’re just normal dogs that are a bit on the big side,” Inukashi said. “These guys have been trained to be guard dogs since they were born. I trained them myself, you’ll see they’re not just any kind of dog. What would I call them... yeah, like elite troops trained exclusively for the offense. They’ll latch onto human throats—hell, even a tiger’s. It’s too bad we don’t have any tigers around here. We got tons of humans, though.”

Rikiga clutched his throat, and shrank back. A pronounced fear swam in his bloodshot eyes.

“Inukashi... cut that out, that’s a stupid joke.” He knew it was no joke. Rikiga’s voice cracked, and the fear in his eyes deepened.

Inukashi repressed his emotions, and continued speaking in a flat tone. A cold, inscrutable voice was much more fearsome than a rough and aggressive manner. He had learned that from Nezumi.

“Only Nezumi was able to escape from these guys. But barely. They managed to chomp down on his shoulder. Pretty deep. He didn’t make a sound, but I think it must’ve been painful.”

“That Eve, huh... what an accomplishment.”

“Hmph,” Inukashi sniffed scornfully. “If you’ve got better moves than Nezumi, old man, you’d be able to make it through. If not—”

“As if I would be able to scurry around like Eve does. Just climbing the stairs leaves me out of breath these days, and I know it’s nothing to brag about.” Rikiga sighed deeply, and let go of his throat. “Fine, Inukashi. I lose. This is your kingdom, after all. I could struggle all I want, but I wouldn’t be able to win.”

“Feel like coming clean now?”

Rikiga glanced furtively at Inukashi’s face as if to gauge his mood.

“Starting to resemble Eve more and more. Don’t let him poison you. Nothing good will come of it. Actually, you might be beyond all help already.”

“That was the most useful piece of advice I’ve ever gotten from you since we met, old man. Thanks. But you don’t need to worry. Once this business is over and done with, it’s good-bye to him for good.”

This was his honest intention.

Inukashi didn’t like to be around Nezumi. He couldn’t see through Nezumi at all, nor could he place a finger on him. But despite that, Nezumi had a strange magnetism about him. Inukashi found himself entangled in Nezumi’s web. Like Rikiga said, he was being poisoned by him.

Danger, danger. Gotta say good-bye.

“Good-bye? Are you leaving this place?” Rikiga asked.

“Never. This is my kingdom, I would never leave. I wouldn’t even hand this place over if No. 6’s army came crashing in. I’ll be saying good-bye, but I won’t be the one leaving. It’ll be Nezumi.”

“Eve?”

“Yup. The fraudster actor.” Inukashi licked his lips. They felt dry.

The dog that had been nursing Shionn gave a wide yawn.

“He’s a wanderer. He appeared in this place out of nowhere, and decided to stay. Eventually he’ll go wandering again. He’s like a whim-

sical cloud. He'll rain himself out for a bit, and then he'll disappear over the mountains."

"I see. So that's what you think of him."

"That's what I expect him to do."

I'll live on this land for the rest of my life. But he'll probably disappear.

It was a gut instinct. He had nothing to prove it. He had heard nothing from Nezumi himself. It was only something that he, Inukashi, personally felt. But he felt like he probably wasn't far from the mark.

Like the clouds travelling across the sky on the wind, like petals scattered on the surface of a river, he's going to vanish from our sight.

I can't wait.

"Well, enough about Nezumi. Enough about me, too. That leaves you, old man. So? Why did you try to lead me away from this plan? Why'd you go as far as to put on a lame act just to make me withdraw?"

Rikiga puckered his lips, like Shionn did often. The gesture on a plump baby was adorable, but on a middle-aged man flushed with booze, it was rather revolting. Inukashi averted his eyes.

"You've got it wrong," Rikiga insisted. "I was just scared for my life. You could say I got cold feet. I was sitting down with a few drinks, and the more I thought about it, the more afraid I became of what I was about to do. All I could think of was how much I didn't want to die, and I just couldn't stand it anymore... I don't know if it's because of the alcohol, but I feel like these days, once my head gets fixed on a thought, it just stops working. I just get stuck deeper and deeper in the rut. You know, Inukashi, maybe I haven't got much longer to live."

Rikiga slumped his shoulders dejectedly. His eyes turned pitiful, like a sodden puppy. Inukashi had felt pity for sodden puppies before, and taken them under his wing numerous times. But not humans. He

felt even less inclined when that human was carrying some emotional burden.

Inukashi snapped his fingers.

A larger black dog, which had been standing in front of Rikiga, crouched into an attack stance. It flashed its canines and gave an intimidating growl. Its gaze was fixed squarely on Rikiga's throat.

Rikiga gave a terrified whimper. "Hey, stop it."

"I don't have time for your hammy acting, old man. That's it. I've had enough. Just answer my question. Once you get your throat torn apart, you wouldn't be able to talk even if you wanted to."

"I-I'm talking right now, aren't I?"

"Old man, you said before—the day before the Hunt. When I said I wanted out from this plan, you were hell-bent on stopping me. But today, you're saying both of us should have nothing to do with it. Some 180-degree change, don't you think?"

"I'm inconsistent. Always been."

The black dog snapped its jaws, opening its mouth wide. Its sharp fangs showed, and saliva dripped onto the floor. You could almost hear its steady *pat-pat*.

Rikiga clicked his tongue. "Tsk. I've gotten old, to take threats from a dog-boy like you. Fine, I'll talk. That's what you want, right? Fine. Damnit, this pisses me off."

Rikiga produced a small bottle of whiskey from his jacket pocket, and drained it in one draught. He let loose a rude burp.

"Pray excuse my lack of manners, Your Majesty," he said sarcastically. "So, Inukashi—about the strange incidents that are occurring inside No. 6. Looks like they're real. Everything seems to just have erupted all at once. I didn't expect this turn of events. Couldn't even predict it."

"What's happening all at once?"

"Citizens dying right and left inside the walls."

"Holy City residents?"

"Yeah. Today was—what do you call it, the Holy Day, or some festival or other, that honours the founding of the city, right? People who gathered for the festivities just collapsed all over the place. And none of them survived. They died. Each and every one of them."

"Is that—an accident? Like a poisonous gas leak, or something—"

"That would result in a massive death concentrated in one place. But it looks like the commotion is happening all over the city."

"Then what—terrorists?"

"Terrorists? Have there *ever* been terrorist organizations in No. 6? That's the most thoroughly-monitored city-state I've ever seen. There's a city that exterminates undesirables right down to the last cockroach. It's impossible."

"Then why's it happening?"

"I don't know. I've only skimmed the news from No. 6. It pretty much said a random accident occurred in the middle of the ceremonies that resulted in civilian death. The ceremony was cancelled partway through."

"And where do you get 'dying left and right' from that? Are you sure you're not just being delusional, old man?"

Rikiga's lip curled into a smug grin. "I've had a long relationship with that city, you know. I've got my own intelligence network. But, well... not all of them are trustworthy, though. Anyway, if that city's media is saying 'a few deaths', then there has to be at least a few dozen. When they say the cause is unclear, it means they have no clue what it is. But this is No. 6. This city is home to some of the brightest scientific minds. What in the world is going on that they can't solve?" *What's going on?* The thought crossed his mind momentarily, but the answer was still shrouded in a fog. He couldn't even make heads or

tails out of it.

“You know the answer, old man?”

“Me? Obviously not. If I had that much power, I wouldn’t be sitting here being threatened by your dogs. But—think, Inukashi. That high-and-mighty city is running itself up the wall, unable to deal with the problems that are occurring inside it. Doesn’t it make you excited?”

“Well, yeah...” Inukashi said somewhat dubiously.

Rikiga’s grin widened. He looked genuinely happy. Inukashi knew his dogs usually made that face when they were given a pork rib.

“It’s the first time, isn’t it, Inukashi? No. 6 has never been this confused... this is the first time. Maybe it’ll turn out as Eve said. No. 6 won’t last much longer. It’ll crumble from the inside.”

“Yeah...”

“You know, I’ve never taken that fraud of an actor for his word. Neither have you.”

“No, I haven’t.”

“But this time around, he might not have been tricking us. That city might fall apart, just like Eve predicted. The signs were all there. They’re just getting stronger, building up to this. And if that’s true... then next, the big quake will come—”

Rikiga’s hands came together noisily as if to squash something invisible.

“—and flatten it.”

“Ahh, I see it now,” Inukashi said. “You believe Nezumi, old man. You believed the Holy City would fall. So would the Correctional Facility. It might become true, and not just end as a fairy tale. Which means the gold bullion that’s supposedly stored in the basement of the Facility is starting to sound a lot more real too, along with the chance of stealing that treasure. The possibility keeps climbing.”

Inukashi pointed a finger at the ceiling. Rikiga turned aside.

"But then you started feeling reluctant," Inukashi continued, "about sharing it with me. The more you thought about it, the more you didn't want to hand it over. So to get your full claim over the gold, you put on this hammy act. You're helpless, old man. Forget booze, all that greed has probably got to your brain and turned it to mush."

"Not much better yourself. You seemed eager about the gold bullion. You were licking your chops, you were."

"Yeah, I'm eager alright. It still makes me drool. But let me tell you, until now I've been on the fence. I was pretty suspicious about whether there was really gold in the basement of the Correctional Facility. But if you're going so far as to put on an act to snatch it all for yourself, then... heh heh, I think now I believe it a lot more. You got your information from a girl named Suru, right?"

"Yeah. No. 6 executives are her best customers. When a guy tells stories to his prostitute in bed, it's bound to be trustworthy."

"I see. So, No. 6 gets to be wiped out and we get rich at the same time. Sounds awesome. So great, in fact, I think flowers are going to sprout on the top of my head."

"If everything goes well."

"What? Don't rain on my parade here. I've had enough of your theatrics."

"That's not it." Rikiga walked over to the windowsill. The dogs silently made way for him.

"Inukashi..."

"What?" Inukashi snapped. "We gotta get going, or else—"

"Do you think it'll really be destroyed?" It was a dazed murmur. "Is No. 6 really going to disappear entirely?"

"Who knows." That was the only answer he had. Rikiga continued to mumble as he stared out the window. Inukashi's reply had probably not reached him.

“But . . . if that really happens . . . what’ll appear in its place?”

“Huh?”

“A world without No. 6 . . . once that *thing* disappears, what’ll happen? What’s going to appear out of it?”

Inukashi felt like someone had bumped him roughly on the shoulder. He sucked a breath in. He felt like he was breathing in tiny shards of glass. His chest pricked painfully.

A world without No. 6. The aftermath.

He had never thought of it.

He couldn’t even imagine it.

What would appear?

He tightened his grip around the handle of the bag.

“I don’t have a clue. I just know one thing is for sure.”

Rikiga turned around and blinked at him.

“Money is money. No. 6 could disappear tomorrow, or it could last for a thousand more years. It doesn’t matter. It doesn’t matter what appears. That gold is a hell of a lot of treasure, and that’s never gonna change.”

“I see.” Rikiga shook his head, grinning. “You’re a tough one. Hah. You might be an even tougher cookie than Eve. I should watch out for the dog instead of the fox, shouldn’t I?”

The ambiguity was now wiped clean from his tone, and Rikiga’s face turned back into the one of the alcoholic that Inukashi knew so well. This was the countenance of a greedy but cowardly man, indulging in both booze and women alike, living no dreams—just harsh reality. Inukashi somehow felt relieved.

“Let’s get going, old man.”

“Yeah,” Rikiga answered promptly this time, and started walking. Inukashi snapped his fingers, and a few dogs sprang up and bounded

ahead of Rikiga out of the room.

“Are you taking them, too?”

“Yeah. They’ll be much more useful than what’s inside this bag.”

Shionn began to fret. The female dog swung its head around and licked the tiny body gently with a warm, soft touch. Inukashi remembered it, too. The baby would probably soon fall fast asleep.

See ya, Shionn. You wait here. Be a good boy and watch the house with the dogs while I’m gone.

I’ll come home. I’ll come home for you someday. Wait for me.

“Mama, mama, mama,” Shionn called, right before he was about to step out of the room. Inukashi closed his eyes, and slowly pulled the door shut.

3

THE ARMS OF REASON

*... but he who, provoked and nettled to the quick by an offence,
should fortify himself with the arms of reason against the furious appetite of revenge,
and after a great conflict, master his own passion,
would certainly do a great deal more.*

MONTAIGNE, ESSAYS, BOOK 2 CHAPTER XI

THE SHUTTERS closed.

Shion sprang up, and took in his surroundings. Teal walls and a teal hallway stretched out before him. The floor was made of a smooth, glossy material polished to a spotless sheen, and reminded him of the cleanliness of a hospital.

However, unlike a hospital, there were no windows or doors.

He felt like he had been shut into a durable box. No, it wasn't *like* a box—this *was* a box, a sealed box. There were three barriers between where he stood now and the prisoners' wing up ahead. Once all of them came down, the box would further seal itself into multiple compartments.

These were spaces designed to capture escaped prisoners, if not execute them on the spot.

The barriers, far from being just walls, were also designed to release high-voltage current. This beautiful colour, close to indigo dye, was the colour of the execution grounds.

The alarm went off.

The barriers began to roll down.

“Nezumi, run. We have to make it through.”

Nezumi kicked off the ground. They ducked past the first barrier. The second one was halfway down; the third one was already two-thirds of the way down.

“Why?”

Shion and Nezumi had reached the end of the hallway by the time the third barrier had closed completely.

“Why, Shion?” Nezumi asked. “Why are the barriers so slow? Getting through them is easy, at the speed they’re going.”

“It might be... easy... for you...” Shion gasped. His heart was straining in protest from running through the hallway in a single dash. He couldn’t breathe. It was far from easy for him—he was almost at his limit. If the barriers had fallen a second earlier, Shion would have been caught between the barrier and the floor, his back snapped in half.

“But this speed doesn’t make sense. Why is it?”

“That accident... it’s thanks to... the commotion about the smell...”

“What do you mean?”

“I copied and sent... the emergency signal that the third-floor computer recorded... to the fourth-floor monitoring system. Along with a deactivation signal, too. Right afterwards, the sensors would register

us... and then notify the system of an emergency again. Activation, deactivation, and reactivation..."

"I see. And that took up a bit of time. But I don't know how you could have done it in such a short while. The third and fourth floors operate on different systems, don't they?"

"... Yeah, well, I managed." Shion had not expected it to go this well. He had figured it was all or nothing and given it a try, but he himself was surprised that such a simple deception tactic would work against a leading, cutting-edge defence system.

It's almost like God's hand had a part in it.

God's hand?

Did someone send us help?

That's absurd, that would never happen. But...

Shion.

I heard a voice call my name. Only for a moment. This voice...

Safu?

No way, I'm hearing things.

Nezumi narrowed his eyes. The sharp glint in them condensed.

"And the door we're making for?"

"The wall up ahead, on the far right."

Nezumi ran a hand against the wall.

"Oh, here." It was almost indiscernible from the teal wall, but there was certainly a slight crack there. "There aren't any handles or sensors. How do you open it?"

Yes, there were no handles or sensors. And ever since the computer-operated maintenance system had been completed, this door had gone out of use and lost all meaning.

"There might be an old-fashioned lock on it," Shion suggested.

"My, my. How careless of them."

No one would be able to get this far without a legitimate ID chip. Even if they had, no one would take notice of this door. This was No. 6's judgment, and also its folly.

"—which means we might be able to open it pretty easily. Ah... it's just like you said. There's a keyhole here. Looks like it'll break easily."

"Can you do it, Nezumi?"

"Probably. I can't let you steal all the spotlight. But before that, I think we have to deal with those over there."

"Huh?" Shion tried to turn around, and was shoved in the shoulder instead. He staggered.

Ping.

A ray of light whizzed past Shion's eyes. It hit the wall, and left a small burn.

"Well, well. Look what you've done to the wall, and it's polished up so nicely, too. That would cost you a written apology, wouldn't it?" Nezumi hunched his shoulders in mock exasperation.

Three gunmen stood before them. They were clad in military gear—dirt-coloured combat uniforms and boots. Two barrels were pointed at Nezumi, and one at Shion.

"Don't move. Put your hands up." The man in the lead stepped forward, and took aim with his gun.

"Huh?" Nezumi said in mock surprise. "Oh, hey, will you wait a minute? You gonna shoot me right here? Aren't you getting a little ahead of yourself? I think I'd like to talk to my attorney first."

The man wordlessly wrapped his finger around the trigger.

"You sure about that? We're valuable samples."

The man stopped mid-movement. He had responded to the word "sample".

"Sample... you say?"

“Yeah. You guys are collecting samples, aren’t you? For the Almighty Mayor’s project?”

The men all shifted uneasily, and exchanged furtive glances. For a split second, there was a moment of vulnerability.

Tsukiyo sprang forth from inside Nezumi’s shirt, dashed along the length of the gun, leapt up, and bit down on the man’s nose.

“Whoa!” The man leaned back. Nezumi’s knife slashed through his wrist. Blood splattered everywhere, patterning the wall. Snatching the gun from the falling man, Nezumi took aim a second ahead of the men behind him, and pulled the trigger.

He shot one man through the shoulder, and the other through his hand; both men cried out in pain. Nezumi spun around on one foot as if doing a dance, and this time shot the laser gun at the wall. He swung a kick into it next. Tsukiyo scurried up his shoulder.

“It’s open.”

A space revealed itself, wide enough for an adult to get through if he crouched. It was pitch-black inside.

“Ugh... it hurts...”

“S-Somebody!”

“Help me... help...” The men were groaning. Shion could hear the sound of rapid footsteps. More soldiers, each with a gun in hand, were rushing onto the scene.

There was a curved handle on the inside of the door. Shion pulled it as hard as he could. The door closed with a screech and a bang. They were shut into complete darkness.

Just as he had predicted, there was a set of stairs in a steep slope, almost like a ladder. Shion shed his lab coat and tied one end to the door handle and the other end to the handrails of the stairs. It wasn’t much of a solution, but it would buy them some time.

Nezumi slung the gun over his shoulder and clambered lightly up the steps. Shion followed after him. The stairs continued up on their steep slope, straight into the darkness.

His breathing grew laboured. The sweat stung in his eyes. His feet threatened to trip him up. Shion pressed on desperately. A moment of lateness could cost him his life. It would endanger not only his own life, but Nezumi's as well. He wanted to avoid putting Nezumi into danger at all costs. He knew he was already a great burden to Nezumi, but he at least wanted to avoid putting him in harm's way.

Nezumi muttered something.

"What? I didn't hear."

"Nothing... Just noticing how you didn't make a fuss."

"Make a fuss?"

"About those soldiers. There was lots of blood flying back there. Usually you'd rattle off some grand spiel about how we shouldn't harm others."

"Oh..." *So that's what he meant.*

The screams resounded in his ears. They didn't belong to the soldiers. They were voices of the people whose lives had been wrenched from them unfairly in the basement of the Correctional Facility.

It hurts. I can't breathe. Help me.

O God, O God. Why do you make me suffer?

Please, just save my boy. He's only three.

Kill me. Please, release me from my pain...

Help, help, help, help, somebody.

What was a spray of blood on the teal floor compared to this brutality, this ruthlessness? The soldiers would receive care and medical attention from their comrades who were rushing onto the scene. But those people...

Those who had been sacrificed in the Hunt, those murdered people did not even have a way to alleviate the suffering of their dying moments. Their groans, their gasps, their cries, and their shrieks. It resounded in his ears.

“We have no choice,” he spoke to Nezumi’s back in the darkness. “It can’t be helped. We have to defeat the enemy. If you hadn’t taken them down, I would have been killed.”

Nezumi stopped. Shion could see a pair of grey eyes. His heart grew restless. *Even in this darkness, your eyes glow with elegance.*

“It can’t be helped... you really feel that way?”

“I do.”

“... I see.” Nezumi resumed walking. He walked swiftly. Shion could barely keep up.

“Shion.”

“Hm?”

“Back there, we were still able to go easy on them. From now on, we won’t have the chance to be as nice. You were right: we have to defeat the enemy, or else we’ll be killed ourselves.”

“Yeah.”

“If that happens...” Shion couldn’t hear the rest. He snapped his eyes open in the darkness.

“Nezumi, I can’t hear you. Say it a little louder.”

“No... never mind.” Nezumi breathed out softly in the dark.

I’m sighing.

He closed his mouth.

Never sigh in earnest.

They were the words of the old woman who had saved him from the flames that devoured the forest, the village, and their homes. She had raised him until the age of five.

Bite your lips to shreds before you let yourself sigh. Throw your head back at the pain. Never look down. Look forward. And most of all—

Never trust anyone. Never open your heart. Remember that. You must engrave these words into your memory in order to survive.

He had been taught over and over. It wasn't that he had forgotten. Each word, each letter was deeply carved into his heart—like a mantra, like a curse.

Sighing creates an opening, a vulnerability. If you want to stay alive, keep your mouth shut. Never let anyone see your weak spot. Let your heart warm to no one. Never trust anyone but yourself.

You, at least... you at least must survive... you, at least...

He gripped the handrail.

Forgive me, gran. I've gone against what you've told me. I've sighed many times for another. I believed him, and opened my heart to him. I placed the shackles around my own feet. But I couldn't have done otherwise. I couldn't cut him away.

"Nezumi," Shion was calling. He was out of breath. He had probably used up a considerable amount of energy. "What're you thinking about?"

"You wanna know what I'm thinking about now? Getting to the top of these stairs safely. Maybe a little wondering about what's waiting to welcome us at the top, I guess."

It was you, Shion.

I was thinking about you.

You said we had no choice. They're enemies, so we had no choice but to make them bleed. If we didn't kill them, we'd be killed ourselves. That's why we had to take them down.

That's what fighting is. We kill, or get killed: those are the only choices. And in a melee, there is no such thing as justice or morality. I know that.

It's been instilled into the marrow of my bones. But, Shion, you—are you just going to accept that? Are you able to? Are you letting yourself?

'You put everything into dichotomies. 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.'

'Don't you think that there could be a third way?'

I had scoffed at what you'd said. I scorned it as a naive fantasy. But you know what? I felt intimidated, too. I felt threatened by your naivety, but also your strength to be able to speak of fantasies as if they were plausible. When I heard those words, just for an instant—a short instant, mind you—I could really see a way. A white path rose up behind my eyelids.

The third way.

The way to seek cohabitation rather than retribution, perhaps?

A way that chooses acceptance over revenge?

Could such a thing exist, apart from in illusions? Could it exist in the hearts of people?

I've been thinking about it all this time. I didn't want to think about it, but your words always sat adamantly in the middle of my thoughts, reminding me constantly. 'Turn your thoughts to this third way,' they would tell me, 'don't refuse, don't look away; keep thinking about this path.'

I haven't found the answer yet. That's why I'm still thinking. I'm still fixated on your words, and pondering them.

But Shion, now this is what you're saying?

'We have no choice.'

If in the future, I end up killing someone—no, if you yourself were to harm someone—how about then? Would you still say so?

'We had no choice.'

* * *

They were at the top of the stairs. It was such a cramped space that they had barely any room to stand.

“Shion, there’s no exit.”

There was no handle or button to be found. Only a blank wall.

We’ve messed up.

His heart pounded. Cold sweat streamed down his back. If this was a dead end, then there was no escape for them. They could not fend off the pursuers coming from below.

“Up,” Shion yelled. “Push the ceiling up!”

Nezumi’s body sprang into motion on Shion’s orders.

Bang. The middle portion of the ceiling opened up like a trap door. Nezumi kicked off the ground, and launched himself up.

Just then, he heard a clamour below.

The door had been forced open.

“They’re up there! Aim for them!” The unique dry popping sound of firearms.

“Shion!” He extended his hand, and he could feel Shion latching onto it tightly. He pulled the other boy up.

“Agh!” Shion let out a small cry.

“Did they get you?”

“—’m alright. Just a graze.”

Once they shut the trap door, all noise was cut off, and only an eerie silence remained. Shion let out a long breath.

“Does it hurt?”

“No—no big deal.”

“First time, huh?”

“Hm?”

“It’s your first time getting fired at. And a sniper rifle, at that—a pretty old firearm. Sleek looks, deadly accuracy. That’s the kind of formidable lady you’re dealing with.”

“I see. Well, attractive as she is, I wouldn’t like to go on any future dates with her.” Shion laughed quietly as he bound his calf.

Perhaps he was straining himself. But it meant that he could still push himself further, and that the wound wasn’t so bad that he couldn’t move. Not that it mattered how bad his injury was, anyway: they had to keep moving. They could not stay in one place.

That was why he would not question Shion further. He would not concern himself with the boy. They only had to keep moving forward together.

“Shion, where’s this?”

“A part of the old air vents. I suppose they used these when this place was just built. But soon afterwards, they built new external reinforced walls. They added circulatory filtration devices, and these vents went out of use.”

“Which means they stopped needing them right when the Correctional Facility was turning into a stronghold. So the old vents must be—here.” Nezumi’s extended hand pointed to a rectangular tunnel.

“What’s down this way?” he asked.

“Probably a dead end. They’ve probably blocked it up partway.”

“I thought so. I figured it wouldn’t be as easy as worming our way right to the internal core through the vents.”

“Yeah. But we’ll have to go as far as we can.”

He was right. There was no way back. They had no choice but to go as far as they could go.

“Shion, I’ll boost you up. Go on ahead.”

“Kay.”

Shion dove into the hole more nimbly than Nezumi expected. He felt the slimy texture of blood as he supported Shion's leg. He clenched his hand into a fist.

"Hey, this thing opens." The upper body of a soldier peeked into view along with his voice. As soon as the soldier hoisted himself up, Nezumi kicked his chin so it snapped back, and swung his rifle butt down on the man's temple. He dragged the unconscious body up into the vent, aimed his gun through the opening, and began to fire. He heard bodies tumbling down the stairs. He closed the trapdoor, and rolled the soldier's body over it.

"He's got a nice beer gut. That should serve as a good weight."

Nezumi rifled through the man's pockets and almost whistled.

"Nezumi, what're you doing? Hurry up," Shion called.

"Don't rush me. We gotta get the most we can from them," he answered.

He entered the hole head-first. It was cramped. He had to lie flat on his belly in order to even move. Tsukiyo hopped out from the folds of his clothes and scurried down the tunnel.

"It's like a mouse hole in here," Shion reflected idly.

Still got his wits, he thought fleetingly. The boy was calmer than he expected. It wasn't an ignorant kind of calm; Shion understood his situation well enough. He felt the danger and tension of it, and yet also had room to be calm on top of it all.

But why?

"We couldn't have gotten through here if we were any fatter," Shion said thoughtfully.

"Well, I guess."

"Inukashi could get through just fine. Rikiga-san might have a bit of trouble."

“Rikiga? You mean the alcoholic geezer? He wouldn’t have been able to get this far in the first place. He would’ve tripped and fallen over when we had to dash down the hall.”

“So by now...”

“He would’ve been charred black. I feel ill just imagining what Roasted Old Man would look like.”

Cheep-cheep-cheep.

Tsukiyo answered in place of Shion. Shion stopped moving.

“Dead end?”

“Yeah.”

Dead end. I see. So this is it.

“It’s a dead end. But...” Shion’s palm slid along the wall. There was a soft *clunk* as a part of it fell away. Light seeped through.

“The grate. They must’ve blocked it from our side.”

“What do you see?”

Shion tilted his body sideways to make an opening. Nezumi looked out through the plastic bars.

It was a tidy and spacious room that looked like a laboratory. Straight across from them was a large glass window, where several male and female researchers were huddled together, peering through it and conversing animatedly. A man said something with a grandiose gesture, and a long-haired woman gave a toothy grin. They both had steaming mugs in hand. Apart from them were several other staff busy looking into their computer screens. There was also a stooped-looking man bustling about on foot.

“It looks like a comfortable room,” Nezumi commented. “Maybe they’d let me use their shower if I asked. Let’s pay them a visit.”

“What? We can’t get out through such a tiny opening.”

“If it’s too small, we just have to make it wider.”

“Huh?”

“Keep back, Shion. Just retreat as you are.”

“Nezumi, what’re you gonna do?”

“Just watch.”

“Is that . . . a miniature bomb?” Shion swallowed.

“Yup. A coin-shaped micro-bomb, more like. It even comes with a timer, and I can control how large the explosion’s gonna be. It was a good buy.”

“Where did you buy it? I didn’t even realize.”

“Are you being dense on purpose?” Nezumi said irritably. “Did we have *time* to do shopping since we got here? I nicked it from Beer Gut earlier. But anyway, who cares about that. Shion, get back. A little more. And take Tsukiyo.”

“About here?”

“Perfect. Hold your head with both hands. Once it explodes, we’re gonna jump right out. Be prepared.”

Bomb set.

Nezumi shrugged his superfibre cape off, and covered his head with it. He kept retreating until his foot touched Shion’s shoulder.

“Nezumi.”

“What?”

“Now it’s like you’re shielding me. I might end up safe, but you—”

“Idiot. Who the fuck cares about our positions at this point? Stop wasting your breath.”

How stupid can he get?

What an idiot. But it was just like Shion. No matter the situation, he never forgot about others. It was just like him, indeed.

Relief welled up from the bottom of his chest.

Voom.

An explosion. And then, wind. A blast of air rushed through the cramped tunnel. Tsukiyo let out a shrill squeal of terror.

“Shion! You safe?”

“Of course. Tsukiyo and I are both okay.”

“Good.”

There was no dust, perhaps because the wall was made of a special material. The bomb was considerably powerful, and despite the fact that he had set it to make the smallest explosion possible, it had blown apart a large part of the wall.

They jumped down. Screams rang out all around. Staff began to flee the room.

“Who are you?” A heavyset man drew a gun from his lab coat. Nezumi rushed at him and aimed a swift swipe at the base of his neck. The man fell forward onto his belly.

The security bells were ringing.

Keep running like this?

They couldn’t stay here for long. In a few dozen seconds, soldiers would be streaming into the room. They had no choice but to run.

But to where?

“Shion, what next? Give me orders. Hurry.”

There was no answer.

Shion, what’s wrong? Don’t tell me...

A cold sweat trickled down his spine.

He turned around to see Shion at the glass window, looking down through it as the staff members had been doing earlier. A dim light filtered through the highly-polished glass pane.

“What the hell are you doing? Move!”

Shion slowly turned his face towards Nezumi. He was completely ashen. His features were rigid, almost wooden. Nezumi had never seen Shion with such a face before.

What's wrong?

As soon as the thought passed, he realized that the hem of Shion's pants was soaked red. The gunshot wound had been deep. *He's fainting from blood loss.* That was his first thought.

"Shion, you alright?"

A pair of lips trembled lightly in the deathly pale face.

"Nezumi... this..." Shion trailed off, and swallowed with some difficulty. "What is this...?"

"Huh?"

There was no time to stop. He knew well enough, but the stricken expression on Shion's face drew him to stand by his side. His foot trampled something. It was a wooden photo frame. In the photo was a woman with a baby in her arms and a boy of about ten. It had probably been knocked off a staff member's desk. It was an outdated digital display. Both the woman and the boy were smiling somewhat sheepishly from the photo.

He lifted his gaze, and looked through the glass in front of him.

The space beyond was a storey lower, as if it were embedded in the ground. The ceiling was higher, accordingly. It was a room with white walls.

"Gh—"

He had recoiled without even thinking.

What—is this?

4

ARE YOU SAD?

"Are you sad?"

"Yes, I am."

"You're not really, are you?"

"No, I'm not."

HOSHI SHIN'ICHI, BOKKO-CHAN, SHORT SHORT 1001

TWO CONVEYER belts were running. Humans lay on them. Someone had put them there.

They were not alive. He could tell clearly even from where he stood behind the glass.

Bodies. Several dozen, maybe even a hundred, were being carried down. A half-moon shaped device of enormous size was operating beyond.

The bodies were sucked in one after another into two square openings. It seemed like the glass was of a special kind, for he could hear nothing of what was occurring on the other side.

Bodies slipped by continuously in this silent scene.

There were men. Women. Children and adults. Clothed and naked. Their statures, ages, and sexes ranged broadly.

“Why are their heads . . . all . . .” The words stuck in his throat. They became a lump that blocked his airway.

The top half of the head had been cut away from every corpse. A translucent plastic dome had been placed on top instead. Men and women, children and adults—all had been fitted with bowl-shaped plastic from the forehead up.

“—Samples,” Shion said, heaving a breath with his shoulders. “They’re samples.”

“What do you mean?”

“Brains . . . they needed human brains as samples.”

“—So these bodies have all had their brains removed?”

“Yeah— I think so. And I think they’ve all finished serving their purpose. So—”

“So?”

“They’re being disposed of.”

This time, Nezumi was the one to swallow hard.

The half-moon-shaped device at the other end of the belt: was that for disposing the corpses? Did it burn them instantly to ashes? Did it grind them up and then dry them into dust? Or did it use some special chemical to melt them right down to their bones?

The bodies were being sucked in.

People who had been alive just moments before—living, speaking, crying, loving one another—were being disposed of like trash.

How . . . how could . . . No. 6, how could you be so cruel? How could you have turned out to be so ruthless?

“They’re not humans.” Shion’s voice reached his ears. It was no whisper. It was crisp and clear. “This isn’t any human deed.” His fist

pounded the reinforced glass.

This isn't any human deed.

But the staff clad in white had been standing here conversing only moments earlier. They had been sipping a warm drink from their mugs. They had been engrossed in their work.

Are they all monsters?

Nezumi's eye caught the photograph at his feet.

The smiling woman, the smiling boy. The sleeping baby.

'Look, look over here. Smile, come on!'

'Daddy, I'll take a picture next.'

'Honey, make sure you get the baby, too.'

He could almost hear the family's conversation—so typical, yet so precious all the same.

Is the guy who had this propped up on his desk a monster, too?

He felt a presence. The enemy approaching.

Nezumi felt like someone had struck him on the cheek. He was wide awake. He yanked Shion by the arm, and burst out into the hallway.

We gotta run, Shion. We can't let ourselves die here.

His whole body reared its arms in order to survive. His thoughts, his senses, his fingertips, even each hair of his head acted solely for his survival.

We cannot die.

"Right!" Shion's calm orders sliced the air. "Thirty metres to the right."

Thirty to the right. There was no time to think about what was there. Strangely, the barriers were not coming down. But he also had no time to think about why.

Run. Wait, never mind.

Soldiers appeared before them.

“Squat down! Curl up!” Nezumi tossed the coin-shaped bomb across the floor, and fired at it. There was an ear-splitting explosion. Shattered glass sprayed everywhere.

“We’re going in!”

There was no way out if they let themselves be surrounded. In the face of a firing squad, they had no chance at all. They had no choice but to charge into the thick.

“Don’t leave my side.”

A broken sprinkler was spraying water left and right. Nezumi leapt into the knot of drenched soldiers.

He swung the blade of his hand against a soldier’s throat, and stabbed his knife into another as he spun around. As the soldier clutched his shoulder and fell forward, Nezumi extracted a military knife from the man’s waist belt and slashed the wrist of another enemy that was coming his way. A handgun fell and clattered loudly across the floor as blood and water mixed and flowed together.

None of the soldiers uttered a word. They remained silent and carried highly harmful military firearms in addition to the laser guns, which were still in the stages of development. They were silent, swift, and precise in their kill. They had probably been trained that way.

But when it comes to handling knives, I’m the better one.

In hand-to-hand combat, lower-tech firearms would be much more effective than high-tech weapons. Also, in certain situations, a knife would probably be much more useful than the most up-to-date gun. Especially if he could wield the knife as if it were one of his own limbs. After seeing three of their comrades defeated in the blink of an eye, the rest of the soldiers lost the fluidity of their movements. This was a retaliation they had not expected. Stiffness was a weak point, and Nezumi aimed squarely at it. He twisted the arm of the soldier in front of him, and pressed his knife to the man’s throat from behind.

“Don’t move.” He licked his lips, and commanded the rest of the soldiers.

“Throw away your guns, or consider this guy dead.”

The soldiers bolted back a step at once.

Will it go well? Could I make my escape, using this guy as a shield?

“Shion.”

“Yeah.”

“You alive?”

“Yeah. You moved so fast, I don’t think any of the guys had a chance to turn on me.”

“Perfect. Now use this guy as a shield, and—”

There was a burst of applause.

“Magnificent show. But that’s quite enough.”

The soldiers immediately parted, as if those words had been a signal. A man threaded his way in from between them. He stood before the two boys, and raised his right hand airily.

“Enough fun and games. VC103221 and Shion, was it?”

Shion let out a cry.

“You know him?” Nezumi asked. “Don’t tell me he’s your uncle or something.”

“He’s an Investigating Officer from the Security Bureau—called Rashi.”

“So you remembered me,” the man said. “An honour. Luck seems to bring us together quite frequently, doesn’t it? You’ve grown tougher since I saw you last. I would never have expected you to come infiltrating the Correctional Facility. I’m shocked, to tell you the truth. However, I am happy to see you again.”

“Why thank you,” Shion said guardedly. “I wasn’t expecting to see you here, either. I’m surprised, too.”

“Yes, yes, about that. To tell you the truth, my real profession is a military training instructor. Excuse me for not properly introducing myself last time.”

“Get his business card, Shion. It’ll come in handy when you’re job-hunting.”

Rashi twisted one side of his mouth into a smile.

“A way with words, as usual, boy. But your way with the knife is even better than your tongue. Admirable. I would never have expected you to take control of my subordinates so easily. Ah, simply brilliant. Worthy of praise. I would even consider recruiting you.”

“A tantalizing proposal, but I have to refuse,” Nezumi said. “What’s this military training you’re talking about, huh? Does target practice include shooting prisoners?”

Rashi chuckled. “We have that, too. Or we have training sessions where we exterminate foolish rats that have wandered in.”

Nezumi twisted the soldier’s arm with even greater force. “Throw away your guns and clear the way,” he said.

Rashi shook his head. “You two are brilliant. Not anyone can get as far as this. Brilliant, indeed. But unfortunately, you are also young.”

Rashi slowly raised his right hand. “Your plan is not well-thought out to the end.”

A gun barrel was pointed their way.

Huh?

“Stop!” The soldier twisted desperately. Nezumi let his arm go. A bullet pierced the soldier as he staggered forward. His wounded body crashed to the ground. Water poured on him from the ceiling. The soldier raised his face, and his gaze wandered as if he were searching for something. Then, he called.

“Mother.”

The voice reached Nezumi's ears.

To kill a subordinate so easily...

Then a savage pain tore through his shoulder and leg.

"Nezumi!"

Shion's arms caught him from behind. The water caught both their feet, and they toppled to the floor. Pain raced through his whole body.

"... ts..." Nezumi gritted his teeth. Sweat poured off his body, and his heart thudded rapidly.

"Come, come. Superfibre may be amazing, but it's useless if you don't wrap it properly. You can't hold a knife anymore, can you? Nor can you hop or dart around. Now you're finally quiet. I've had a splendid time, but the games are over, 103221."

Over? Does it all end here?

Rashi furrowed his brow, and sighed.

"I wasn't expecting to be met with so much trouble. A shame, really. A shame that I must to kill you, but—it cannot be helped. I won't draw it out longer than it has to be. I will respect your efforts in battle and I will let you go in peace. A bullet per person should do the job."

"Compassionate... aren't you?" Nezumi said.

"Do you have any last words?"

Is this really the end?

Suddenly, the sprinklers stopped. The barriers began to come down at once. A buzz of anxiety ran through the crowd of soldiers. Rashi's gaze also roved.

It was their chance. They would take advantage of this opening and steal that gun. A chance to return from the brink of death—but his body would not move.

"What's going on?"

"The barriers are just beginning to work."

“That’s absurd, why—”

“Run! We’ll be trapped!”

Once the barriers came down completely, a high-voltage current would run through the sealed space. No one would survive.

“Run! Get out of here!”

The soldiers broke into a run, with wounded comrades in their arms.

“Sir, the walls are coming down. Hurry!” A soldier stopped, turned around, and yelled. “Sir!”

The walls were coming down—coming straight down. Nezumi felt like his shoulder was on fire. He pressed a hand to his open wound, and smiled wanly.

“He’s calling you. Don’t you need to go?”

“After I get rid of you two.”

The barrel of his gun was pointed straight at Nezumi’s heart. Shion’s arm slid around his chest from behind, as if he were trying to protect him. Nezumi placed his hand on top. Shion’s arm was covered in dirt and blood.

I see. So I am going to die with you.

He leaned back onto Shion and let out a long breath. The tension left his body.

But he would not close his eyes.

He would behold the world before him with a steady gaze until his last moments.

Shion’s arm tightened around him.

I won’t close my eyes. Not until the last moment—

He heard a gunshot right beside him. It was a muffled sound, as if he were underwater. Red flowers bloomed on Rashi’s shirt. Petals flew all around.

What...?

Rashi staggered back a few steps before leaning heavily with his back against the wall. He slid to the ground. Crimson petals also fluttered from his lips.

Nezumi drew a breath, but could not release it.

Those aren't flower petals. —It's blood.

Blood had sprayed the wall. It was like someone had carelessly hurled red paint at it. Rashi bowed his head. A startling amount of blood poured out and dyed his lower body.

What—? What just happened?

“Sir!”

A scream. Then, the wall closed it off completely. For a moment, it was like a soundless void. A brief moment of quiet peace. He could breathe out now, and he could pull himself up.

“... Shion?” He twisted his head to look at the boy who was cradling him. “Shion—oh—”

He could breathe out, but no words would come. His heart was beating harder, more frantic and fast.

Shion's hand was wrapped around a gun. A small-calibre semi-automatic pistol. It was an official military-issue pistol that could shoot even through a bullet-proof vest. Just earlier, Nezumi himself had swiped it out of the soldier's hands and battered it to the ground.

The smoke from the gun wavered in the air. The sharp smell of gunpowder pricked his nostrils. Sweat stung his eyes. His mouth turned dry, and his tongue stiffened. He could hear the sound of it tearing as he forced it to move.

“Shion... what have you...”

Shion withdrew his arm from Nezumi, and stood up. He slowly made his way towards Rashi.

“Ngh...” Rashi groaned. He lifted his face, and his body trembled slightly.

“... You amateur...” A barely audible murmur trickled from his lips, along with a stream of blood. “At least... aim... for a fatal spot...”

“I have something to ask you,” Shion said, with gun still in hand. It was a low voice, stripped of all emotion. “Why didn’t you activate the barriers immediately?”

“... They wouldn’t move...”

“So they weren’t functioning.”

“... Yes...”

“Why not?”

“... I don’t know...”

“You and your people would have paused the barrier system temporarily before coming here, just in case. But this time, they started moving on their own... am I right so far?”

Rashi quaked as he looked up at Shion imploringly.

“... Please. Put me to rest.”

Tears spilled from his eyes.

“Answer me,” Shion said.

“... Yes... out of control... cause unknown...”

“Out of control. Cause unknown...” Shion repeated thoughtfully.

“I know... nothing... Shion, I beg you... hurry... put me to rest... save me...”

“Save you?” Shion’s shoulders twitched. “I heard those same words just earlier. In the basement of this building.”

It was then that Nezumi was finally able to stand. Blood streamed from his shoulder and leg, but he felt no pain.

He had to stand up. He had to grab Shion’s arm. He had to stop him.

Shion, what the hell are you trying to do?

His legs gave way. He tripped and landed on his knees. A soldier's corpse was lying right beside him. It was a young man. He had black, frizzy hair and was wearing a golden necklace. It was glittering. 'Mother'—it was almost like his last word was still plastered to his lips. "You people threw this man into the basement. He was a victim of the Hunt. He couldn't die, so he came begging to me. 'Help me,' he said. When this man was writhing in agony, what were you doing? Drinking coffee? Taking a bath? Giving a lecture?"

"... Please... put me... it hurts..."

"I couldn't save him."

"... Help me..."

"I couldn't save anyone."

Shion's right arm rose slowly.

"Shion, stop!"

A gunshot rang out.

Nezumi closed his eyes, and turned away. The smell of gunpowder grew stronger. Mixed with the stench of blood, the air grew thick and viscous. It was a stench he was used to—almost too used to—and yet, he still felt like throwing up. He couldn't bear it.

He didn't want to open his eyes.

If he did, he would have to face reality. He wanted to keep his eyes closed, and escape to a place that was not here.

I don't want to see it.

* * *

Whoosh.

He felt a breeze.

He smelled flowers. The faintly sweet smell of wildflowers.

Whoosh.

The breeze touched his cheek, and caressed his bangs.

Oh, it's that again. It's... that.

He opened his eyes.

The light stung.

A field stretched out before him.

A field of tender grass. The wind was still somewhat sharp and cold, but the rays of the sun were strong. Small white flowers bloomed everywhere, swaying in the breeze, and glowing in the sunlight. There were misty mountain peaks in the distance. Were those lakes on the mountain-skirts, white pools reflecting the light of the sun? Lakes and marshes both large and small dotted the land. The sky was an indigo blue. It was such a deep azure, it looked like it could colour everything else with its pale shade. But the flowers still bloomed white on the ground, and the grasses were a gentle green.

In the sky he saw blue, on the land green, and he saw the forest.

There was a forest beyond the meadow. He could hear the rustling of the trees. White-backed leaves were fluttering. Birds soared up, and swooped down again. A fluff ball drifted past Nezumi's line of vision. He wanted to chase it.

Can I chase it?

Nezumi had lifted his face to look up. Looking up at... whom?

"Come here."

There was a gentle voice, and he felt his body being tenderly lifted up.

Oh, it's that again.

It steals my consciousness, and bears my soul away.

He felt like a little child. He was being carried gently. Like a small, small child.

Last time, it was summer.

He had smelled the hot air rising from the grass.

Was it springtime now? The scenery was more subdued. The wind, the light, the smells, the colours were all soft and gentle, encircling Nezumi in an embrace.

“I will teach you a song.”

He shook his head. “I can do it . . . I can sing.”

“You can sing? That song?”

“Yeah.” Nezumi straightened his posture, and drew himself up.

*The wind steals the soul away, humans thief the heart
O earth, wind, and rain; O heavens, O light
Keep everything here
Keep everything here, and
Live in this place
O soul, my heart, O love, my feelings true
Return home here
And stay*

The wind stopped. *It's listening to the song*, Nezumi thought. The wind subsided, and the balls of fluff began to fall slowly to the ground.

“I see. So you can sing.”

His hair was caressed. He was gently rubbed on the back.

“Sing some more. Let me hear a little more of your song.”

*The wind steals the soul away, humans thief the heart
But here I will stay
to keep singing
Please
Deliver my song
Please
Accept my song*

His eyelids drooped. All the strength left his body.

“... I’m sleepy.”

“Then go to sleep.”

Could I close my eyes like this, and drift off into a slumber?

“Go to sleep. I will take you there.”

“... Where are you going?”

“To the forest.”

“To the forest?”

“Go to sleep. Think of nothing, and let yourself rest.”

Is it really alright for me to go to sleep like this?

His body rocked back and forth. He was comfortable. So comfortable...

“I’m going back!” he heard himself yell.

He had to go back. He could not let himself drift off asleep. He had to return to reality, where Shion was. It didn’t matter what awaited him there; he couldn’t let himself flee on his own.

Shion.

I need to return to you.

* * *

He felt a cough coming up. The smoke and the stench of blood filtered deep into his body. A fit of coughs overtook him. He wiped his mouth, and stood up.

He could see Shion with his back to him. The boy stood with both arms dangling at his sides. The pistol was still in his right hand.

“I can’t save anyone,” Shion said in a muffled voice. He was repeating it.

I can’t save anyone.

“—Shion,” Nezumi tried calling the boy’s name.

Shion, do you hear my voice?

“Nezumi.”

Shion’s eyes focused on Nezumi. Joy ignited within them. A smile spread widely across his face. A sigh of relief spilled from his lips. The pistol slid from his hand.

“Thank goodness you’re safe. But—you’re bleeding a lot. Are you alright? We have to bind that wound, at least.”

Shion took off his sweater and started ripping the sleeve.

“This is all I have, but it might serve as a bandage. Give me your shoulder, and I’ll bind it.”

It was the usual Shion. His usual tone, his usual gaze. He was naive and foolish, ignorant, idealistic, unbelievably honest, and warm.

Nezumi’s heart ached. He felt burning at the back of his eyes.

“Shion.”

“What? Does it hurt?”

“You protected me.”

“Huh?”

“Don’t forget that. You... protected me.”

“Me?”

Shion closed his mouth, and blinked at him repeatedly. His gaze slid to and focused on the pistol lying on the floor. Then, it moved to the man slumped lifeless against the wall. He had been shot between the eyes.

Quite something, Nezumi thought fleetingly.

The bullet had pierced the man squarely in the middle of his forehead. Despite the fact that it was at point-blank range, shooting a target without a sight was not an easy feat for an amateur.

Shion's breathing quickened. He brought his palms up to his face. He stared at them intently as if there were some cryptic letters carved into them. His palms, his arms, his whole body trembled.

"Nezumi—what have I done?"

"You protected me. You saved me with your life—"

"No!" Shion's scream resounded in the confined space. "You're wrong! You're wrong! You're wrong!"

"I'm not wrong!" Nezumi shot back. "I would've been killed if it weren't for you. He wouldn't have been sitting there bleeding. It would've been me."

He pointed at Rashi.

"I would've looked like that."

He grabbed Shion's arms. He shook the boy with all his might. Shion's head jerked back and forth. He was like a marionette dangling on broken strings.

"Listen. Listen to what I say. You protected me, do you understand? You saved me. Shion."

Listen, Shion. Grasp my words. Believe them.

"If I were you, I would have done the same. I would definitely have done it. This is a battlefield. If we don't kill, we get killed. What you did was justified."

Nezumi chewed his lip. The words crumbled and rotted as soon as they slipped out of his mouth. This isn't what I really want to say.

Then, what did he want to say? What do I really want to tell Shion right now?

"Nezumi..." Shion murmured hoarsely. "I... killed him."

He got up, and picked the handgun off the floor.

"I don't know how. But without any hesitation at all, I was able to just... kill another human being."

Their eyes met.

What do I have to tell him?

“Is that forgivable? Is that something... that’s allowed to be forgiven?”

The mere 5.4-mm diameter of the barrel seemed so large to his eyes.

“You said once that No. 6 and I were very similar. I said you were wrong. But... maybe you were right. I am like that city. It doesn’t matter why I did it. I coldly, ruthlessly, wrenched a man’s life from him. Nezumi—”

Total length: 155 mm. Weight: 460 g. Shots equipped: 8. Rifling: 4 grooves, clockwise.

How many shots are left?

“Can I be forgiven...?”

Shion closed his eyes.

Shion? What are you doing?

“Stop—!”

Nezumi had raised a cry. Not with his voice, but with his whole body. He lunged at the boy, and punched him as hard as he could. As Shion crumpled to the ground, Nezumi straddled him.

“Stop fucking around!”

He grabbed the boy by his collar, and struck him across the cheek.

“You must — be fucking — kidding me !”

He could feel his palm hitting flesh again and again.

“You bastard, who do you think you are? We’ve come this far, and now you think you can run away? Put yourself out of your misery? Fucking bullshit!”

Shion whimpered softly.

“You traitor,” Nezumi snarled. “Are you saying that you can’t be forgiven for killing someone else, but you can be forgiven for killing yourself? You know that if you go on and commit suicide, you’ll be

murdering two people. *Why don't you get it?"* His last words came out like a pained plea.

Tsukiyo leapt up onto his shoulder and screeched loudly and insistently. He looked like he was trying to get between them.

Shion didn't resist at all. He looked like he wasn't even breathing. His eyes were open, but they were sightless. The edge of his mouth was cut and bleeding, and dried blood was caked on his lips.

He's totalled — wounded all over.

Would it have been better if they had not come? Nezumi knew more than enough that once they infiltrated the Correctional Facility, it would be a battlefield. He knew, and he had still dragged Shion in. The rescue of the girl, Safu, was only an excuse for Nezumi. He wanted Shion's power. He wanted the boy's power to perfectly memorize the innards of the Facility, and to give precise orders. He wanted to borrow—no, take advantage of— Shion's power to destroy the Correctional Facility, and put a crack in No. 6's core. Shion was a good weapon to serve this purpose, and this was a happenstance more lucky than anything Nezumi could ask for.

Yeah, I used Shion.

But if the results of it had been this — *this* — then, it was better if they had not come. *We should never have set foot in here.*

He had, of course, been prepared for a brutal struggle. He had recognized that they were waging a reckless war with less than a one-percent chance of winning, and yet he had had the resolve that they would emerge as victors; he had both the eager heart and the restraint of reason, and he had been so certain that he had it all.

And that it was we — not No. 6 — who controlled the state of things.

There was no battle without preparation. There was no victory without solid certainty.

There should have been nothing wrong with what he thought. He was certain he had not gone astray.

Nezumi gritted his teeth. He felt like he would almost succumb and kneel to the reality that stood before him. *I never imagined that it would turn out like this.*

We shouldn't have come. We were not supposed to come here. I shouldn't have dragged Shion into my battle.

It had finally dawned on him. But it was too late.

"Shion." *I'm the one who should be asking whether I'll be forgiven. I should be the one begging for forgiveness, not you.*

"Shoulder it," he whispered. The words tore through his gritted teeth and spilled from his lips. Shion's eyes moved slowly. They narrowed slightly, as if attempting to focus on Nezumi.

"Shoulder it— shoulder it, and live on." They were words for himself, not Shion.

Bear your sin, and live.

Shion, I'm sorry. I made you bear the burden, one so big it's making your spine creak. Would I be forgiven one day? Would you forgive me for what I did to you?

Shion let out a long breath.

An arm reached out, and a set of fingertips touched Nezumi's cheek.

"It's my first time... seeing you cry."

"Huh?"

Cry? Who?

"It's alright, Nezumi... don't cry. I get it. I'll do as you say. So just don't cry, please."

"Idiot," Nezumi said hoarsely. *Really, how idiotic can you get? Still caring for others in a situation like this. What's 'alright'? Nothing's*

alright. Besides, I'm not crying. I'm not like you, I don't just let my tears fall wherever and whenever I want, without hesitation—

He had reached his limit. He couldn't hold it in any longer. A wave of tears overcame him, and they streamed from his eyes. The droplets were startlingly hot. They rolled down his cheeks, dripped from the point of his chin, and landed on top of Shion.

Damnit, why are these tears—damnit.

He let his body sink on top of Shion's as his sobs spilled out.

Damnit. Bastard. Bastard.

"Shion."

"Mm..."

"I don't know how to stop my tears."

"Mm-hmm," Shion murmured.

"I really... don't know. If this keeps going it's gonna be... bad."

"Yeah?" Shion said softly.

"It *would* be. Think about it: if Inukashi saw me like this... he'd make a fool out of me for the rest of my life."

"—That's for sure." A hand slid around his back, and patted him.

"Nezumi, let's go."

Yes. They would have to go. This wasn't the finish line yet. They had to move forward. But, how? Was there a way to escape this sealed space?

"Oh!" Nezumi scrambled up. A startled Tsukiyo dove into Shion's shirt. "Why is that?"

"Why is what?"

"Why isn't anything happening? Weren't they supposed to run an electric current as soon as the barriers were down?"

"That's right." Shion also got up. He winced in pain, likely from some wound. But his face soon smoothed into a faint smile.

“It’s been almost five minutes since the walls came down completely. That’s kind of a late observation for you, isn’t it?”

“The hell is that supposed to mean?” Nezumi replied indignantly. Then, he closed his mouth. He glanced at Shion’s face, which was smeared with blood.

“Are you saying you knew, then? You knew beforehand that nothing would happen?”

Shion shook his head.

“I didn’t know. There was no way I would have known. It’s just that—”

“Just that, what? We’ve come this far. Don’t play hard-to-get.”

“Right. Well, you might laugh, but I feel like we’re being... invited in by someone.”

“Invited in?”

Shion licked his lips, and continued in his Shion-like, awkward manner.

“Actually, the barriers should have activated the moment we burst into the hallway. But they didn’t move. They only started moving when we were surrounded by the soldiers. Even though at that time, they would have been temporarily paused. That doesn’t make sense. That’s why they were so flustered.”

“Wait a minute, I dunno what you’re getting at. So are you saying that the computer monitoring the security system was buggy? That it conveniently stopped working for us? —Well, I dunno whether I’d call being trapped in here convenient. But we were saved. We were rescued by a coincidental computer malfunction— is that the deal?”

A No. 6 computer malfunctioning? No, there was no way something like that would happen.

Shion shook his head again.

“It’s not a coincidence. It was by will.”

“Will? You’re saying the computer had a will of its own?”

A third refusal.

“No. It could be operated a certain way based on one’s will, but the machine itself wouldn’t have one.”

“Shion, explain it to me so that I can understand. What’re you talking about? What do you mean by being ‘invited in’?”

“I don’t know,” Shion said slowly. “I can’t put it into words very well. But that’s the only way I can explain it. Someone is calling us—”

“And that someone operated the computer and rescued us of their own will. That’s what you figure?”

“Yeah.”

“And who’s that someone? That girlfriend of yours?”

“Safu—could it be her? But...” Shion dragged his feet to the wall. There was a part that was a different colour than the rest. It was a shade lighter.

“That’s the elevator, right?”

“Yeah. The only path that leads to the top floor.”

Thirty metres to the right. Shion had meant to tell him to run in this direction. There were no buttons to be found on the wall that would operate it. There wasn’t even a single projecting part. It probably activated by a sensor responding to a special ID chip.

“How do we get into this thing?”

Shion had turned his face back to stare at something. Nezumi followed his gaze, and landed on Rashi’s body.

“He might have a special chip embedded in his body,” Nezumi said hastily. He put into words what he figured had been on Shion’s mind. He didn’t want to let Shion utter any words related to that body. Shion glanced away, and held his palm up to the sky.

“No— that won’t do. This system will activate only if it senses life. The chip is useless unless it’s inside a living, breathing human body. A corpse won’t do.”

I see. Nezumi muttered silently, and cast his eyes down.

The madness that had driven Shion to nearly shatter his own skull had already been wiped clean.

It has to sense life. A corpse won't do.

How could he say those words so casually after such an intense emotional disturbance?

Nezumi shifted his eyes to his feet. Maybe I haven’t just made him shoulder it. *Maybe I've also hauled it out—hauled out what was dormant in him until now.*

Shion, what's lurking inside you? What do you really look like, Shion, the you that I don't know?

A chill ran down his spine. The wounds on his shoulder and thigh throbbed as if in answer. Until now, he had completely forgotten about his gunshot wounds.

“Is there any other way?” he asked, short and to the point.

“I think someone will come fetch us,” came the equally short answer.

“Fetch us?”

He heard a faint mechanical noise. The elevator was coming down. The door slid open almost soundlessly.

Two shadowy figures stood before them.

Nezumi tensed for a moment, then realized quickly that it was a reflection of themselves. The entire wall in front of them was a huge mirror.

“Nezumi—you’re getting on, right?”

“You kidding me? Of course. I’m not stupid or rude enough to turn down such a welcoming.”

“Yeah. I figured.”

He took one wide step into the elevator. *Throb.* His wounds stirred again. He would probably not be able to push himself much further, considering the amount of blood he had lost. And, as Rashi had pointed out, he could no longer use a knife with this hand.

No use mulling it over, though.

He could not predict what lay ahead of them after the elevator stopped. He couldn't foresee the future, so there was only one choice—to face the here and now.

He let his gaze wander. There was nothing of note apart from the mirror. The walls were smooth with not a speck of dirt to be seen. There were no buttons, switches, or touch screens. It was a sterile, bright, inorganic space.

The door was closing.

Right in front of them, he could see Rashi with his legs thrown out and his head tilted to the side. He could see the soles of the soldier's boots, the soldier who had called his mother in his last moments.

Shion's fingers moved to chest-level.

Are they going to clasp together in prayer? Nezumi thought.

But Shion's fingers only clenched into a hard fist.

That was it. The door closed.

5

A TREACHEROUS JOY

*A deep, inexpressible joy filled her heart,
a treacherous joy that she sought to hide at any cost,
one of those things of which one is ashamed,
although cherishing it in one's soul...*

MAUPASSANT, A LIFE

IS DADDY home yet?” Lili sighed. “Did Mommy get to see Daddy? Did she get to say ‘welcome back’ to him? It’s getting so dark. I wonder what happened? Yuna’s daddy and Ei’s daddy are already home. They always come home on the same bus. You know, sometimes me and Yuna and Ei go and meet them there.”

“I see. And Daddy’s very happy, isn’t he?”

“Yeah. Really. He picks me up, and kisses me on the cheek. But it’s kind of embarrassing. I don’t need to get a kiss from Daddy to be happy. I’m not a little girl, you know. But Daddy still thinks I’m a little girl. That’s why he kisses me in front of all those people. It’s kind of a problem.”

Karan smiled at Lili’s endearing attempt at sounding like an adult. Lili sighed again. She cupped her chin in her hands, and let out a

long huff. It was an adult woman's gesture—was she imitating her mother, perhaps? Usually, Karan would burst out laughing and tease Lili, calling her a right young little lady, but today she couldn't quite bring herself to. Her heart felt heavy, as if Lili had transmitted her melancholy to her. Smiling was the best she could do.

"Ma'am."

"Yes, dear?"

"Daddy'll come home, right?"

"Of course."

Karan stopped in the middle of wiping a tray, and glanced at Lili. Lili's favourite cheese muffin lay half-eaten on her little plate.

"Getsuyaku-san—your father—is probably very busy at work. I bet he missed his usual bus. I'm sure he'll come home on the next one."

Karan gave a little sigh as well after finishing her sentence. These words wouldn't even serve to make Lili feel better. Lili didn't want to hear these banal words of encouragement.

She felt frustrated and ashamed that she could not even relieve a little girl's woes.

Lili's eyes, always so lively and full of joy, were now clouded over.

Her father, who usually came home every day at the same time on the minute, had not come home. She was worried sick.

Karan couldn't bring herself to laugh it off as an exaggerated concern. Lili had sensed something wrong with Getsuyaku, and it was paining her heart. Renka—Lili's mother and Getsuyaku's wife—had even gone to the bus stop to pick him up despite her difficulty moving around. There must have been something about Getsuyaku that caused his wife and daughter to feel uncertain and unsettled. It was not only Getsuyaku, either.

This uncertainty—an intangible uncertainty—had by now covered all of this city of No. 6.

One could call it a looming threat.

Several dozen citizens had already suffered at the hands of death—been sacrificed. Karan wasn't sure if "sacrifice" was the appropriate term, but she thought the eeriness and terror that the word invoked matched perfectly well with the city's atmosphere; of that, she was most certain. Karan herself was troubled, apart from her thoughts about Shion, with an uncertainty that dug into her heart.

Is this really happening?

People are dying left and right.

Without warning, they would collapse and cease to breathe. Karan had yet to see it for herself, but she had heard that the victims all lost their hair and teeth, were covered in wrinkles, and died looking a hundred years older. She had heard that even the most vibrant young man or beautiful girl ended up in this grisly form. Without exception.

Why? What's the cause?

A new virus? Poison gas? A plague?

Speculation was rampant, and yet, not one person could give a definite cause. No one could spot a common trait among all of the victims. Their ages, body types, environments, workplaces and development histories ranged widely, and barely overlapped.

Apart from the fact that they were exclusively No. 6 citizens.

One collapsed in the square in front of City Hall; one in the street; one in his own kitchen. In all cases, the victims were alone. There were no concentrated outbreaks of casualties in one spot. They all occurred in pinpoint locations. Many were safe who had seen the victims die right beside them. Any acquaintance in mid-conversation, any friend walking beside you, any stranger walking past you, could become a casualty. Shrieks and wailing voices burst into the air everywhere.

No one could predict who the next casualty was, or when and where it would occur. That was fear itself. An insurmountable fear.

My sister collapsed just now. She wasn't even thirty. Now she's transformed into an elderly woman.

My neighbour just died. We were just having a normal conversation. 'What's gonna happen now?' 'This is scary, isn't it?', just stuff like that. Then she suddenly started to double up in pain—

What's going on here?

This is a concern for everyone now.

Maybe tomorrow I'll be next... no, maybe even in a minute...

I might be the next sacrifice.

What the hell is the mayor doing? Why doesn't he try to deal with this?

Isn't he going to help us citizens?

Fear became discontent toward the politicians who twiddled their thumbs in the face of the situation. Discontent became criticism, which turned into a simmering rage.

The mayor, through various media organizations, called for calm amongst the citizens, and advised them to take careful action. But even as the mayor's image flashed across the display, another casualty fell right in front of it, another among the dozens today. He would convulse again and again, then age rapidly. It was impossible to remain calm.

Give us medicine.

Tend to the wounded.

Give us the truth.

The cries of the citizens echoed loudly in every corner of the streets. And on top of this situation, Lili's father had not arrived home. Her mother had gone out, and not returned.

The girl's tiny chest was probably full to bursting with uncertainty. Perhaps she was desperately trying to keep herself from crying.

Karan understood well the suffering and pain of being concerned but unable to do anything about a family member. She had experienced the frustration of only being able to wait. It was a pain that had soaked deep into her bones.

"Lili." She stroked the girl's soft hair. "Have the rest of your muffin."

"Ma'am..."

"You love your father, right, Lili?"

Lili looked up at Karan, and gave a huge nod.

"Yup. I looove him. I love Daddy lots and lots. I love Mommy, and the baby in Mommy's stomach, too."

"Yes, and your father loves you too, very very much, right? He kisses you on the cheek, and he says 'I love you, Lili' while he does, right?"

"Yeah. Daddy always says 'I love you' to me."

"Then everything will be fine. Your father will come straight home to you, Lili. You know, in the end, people come home to the people they love most."

Lili blinked. "Is that true, ma'am?"

"Yes. It's true. True as can be."

Lili's mouth relaxed. A smile spread across her face. She picked her muffin up, and took a bite.

"It's delicious."

"There are still more left. Three, to be exact. One for your mother, your father, and for you, Lili. You can take them home, if you like."

"Thank you, ma'am."

After finishing her muffin, Lili put her hands together and gave a loud thanks for her meal.

"Ma'am."

"Yes, dear?"

"I love you, too."

“My, Lili, that’s wonderful. Thank you.”

“And Shion too... but not as much as Daddy, or Mommy, or you, ma’am.”

“Hm?”

“Shion will come home too, right?”

“Lili...”

“People come home to people they love the best, right? So Shion has to come home to your place, ma’am. Right? He’ll come home, right?”

Lili seated herself deep in her chair, and dangled her feet over the edge.

“When I got hurt once, Shion made it all better.”

“Oh? He did?”

“Yeah. I was playing tag with Ei, and I fell down. I fell, and then Ei came and fell down on top of me, like — crash! — and it really hurt. Ei’s kind of fat. But she’s really fast at running, you know. And she’s good at drawing pictures. I like drawing pictures, too. We draw pictures together a lot.”

“You’re good friends, then?”

“Yeah. Really good friends. But we fight sometimes, too. Sometimes we have fights that are so big, I think we’re never gonna play again for the rest of our lives.”

“But if you can fight and make up again, that means you’re truly good friends. So you fell down, right, Lili? And Shion made it better?”

“Yeah. My leg was bleeding really bad. And it hurt a lot. I cried lots, and Ei was crying, too. But then Shion passed by, and he picked me up and took me to a tap and washed off the blood, and... oh, and then he put some medicine on it. He said, ‘it’s stopped bleeding, so you can stop crying now.’ And then he patted my head. He wiped Ei’s face for her, too.”

“And... when was this?”

Lili stopped swinging her feet, tilted her head a little, and looked at Karan.

“Lemme see, ummm . . . a little before Shion went away. When he was still going to work at the park. You know, ma’am, Shion is really nice. Mommy said so, too. She said he’s really kind, and handsome, and such a great person. She said, ‘When Shion comes home, you should ask if you could be his bride’.”

“Oh, Lili, you as Shion’s bride? That’s some happy news.”

“But it’s just that, well, Ei . . .”

“What about Ei?”

“Umm, she says she’s in ‘love at first sight’ for Shion. I asked her, ‘What’s love at first sight mean?’ and Ei said, ‘It means you get married, of course’. But if Ei and Shion get married, then I can’t be his bride. Mommy said I can’t lose to Ei, but it’s really hard.”

“Oh, my.” Karan laughed out loud. For even just a moment, she was able to forget the uncertainty and melancholy forming a malignant lump in her heart.

As far as Karan could remember, Lili had not mentioned Shion’s name at all since the day he had vanished from Karan’s sight. Lili had probably sensed that reflecting on memories of Shion would cause suffering for Karan. Or perhaps she had been warned by Renka.

‘Lili, from now on, I don’t want you to talk about Shion in front of Karan.’

‘Why not?’

‘Because she’ll be sad.’

‘Mommy, did Shion do something really bad? Is that why he got caught and taken away? Everyone says so.’

‘What do you think?’

'Me? I think... Shion wouldn't do anything bad. He's so nice. He would never do anything like that. Ever.'

'And you're right. See, you do know. I'm impressed with you, Lili. Whatever happened must have been some kind of mistake. Shion is such a wonderful boy. You wouldn't find anyone nicer. He's kind, handsome, and just such a great person. I know, Lili, when Shion comes back, why don't you ask if you can be his bride? Don't lose against Ei.'

Perhaps mother and daughter had had that kind of conversation, and grinned at each other.

Karan had been surrounded by caring people all along.

Through days of frantic frustration and anguish, she had always thought she was fighting alone. But it was not so. People around her, people right by her side, had been quietly expressing their concern all along.

All this time I was being supported by such a little girl. And—

Reunion will come.

And by Nezumi's letter.

There were many pillars. The hearts of others held her aloft.

"Lili, thank you." Karan gently embraced the young girl.

The emergency buzzer went off.

A part of the wall turned into a screen, and the face of a young woman appeared. She was a newscaster directly affiliated with the Information Bureau.

"This is an urgent broadcast. As of this moment, the authorities have announced a state of emergency. Citizens are advised to return home immediately. All subsequent outings of any kind by citizens will

hereby be prohibited. There are no exceptions. If you do not comply, you will be arrested and taken into custody. I repeat. We are entering a state of emergency. Citizens are advised to . . .”

The newscaster had been reading rapidly through her papers, her eyes cast down, when suddenly she snapped them open wide. She stood up, and clawed at her throat.

“Help me! No!!” Her shriek rang out.

Karan reflexively put her arms around Lili.

“Ma’am, what’s happening to her?”

“No! Don’t look!”

The caster’s flaxen hair turned white before their eyes. Dark spots appeared on her cheeks, and spread rapidly.

“Help . . . me . . .” Her fingers curled as if trying to grasp something in the air, and she collapsed behind the desk.

The broadcast cut off abruptly after that.

A state of emergency—it was nothing so tame.

This was an abnormality. A situation far beyond the bounds of common understanding. It was twisting and rearing before them.

She felt faint.

No, it’s not me. No. 6—this city—is the one that’s creaking from the stress. It’s shrieking, just like that newscaster.

Confusion. Disaster. Danger. Suffering. And, fear. Plagues that should have never existed within No. 6 were sprouting furiously.

She heard laughter.

Somewhere far, somewhere far in the distance, she could hear laughter.

Who? Who’s laughing? Whose voice is it?

Brittle, dead leaves fluttered past her window.

One, two, three . . .

A wind was blowing. A strong southern wind was blowing against her. It usually unravelled the rigid cold of winter, and brought with it the premonition of spring. The southern wind which usually made her heart feel so lively was carrying that voice to her ears.

“Ma’am, I’m scared.” Lili clung to her. “Someone’s laughing in the sky.”

“Lili, you can . . . hear it too?”

“I don’t know. I don’t know, but I’m scared.”

Lili began to cry. “I’m scared!” she sobbed.

“It’s alright,” Karan soothed. “It’s alright, Lili. I’ll protect you. So don’t be afraid.”

You supported me all this time. You cared for me, you were concerned for me. So this time, it’s my turn to support you. I won’t let people snatch you away, so easily like they did Shion and Safu. I’ll protect you, you just watch.

Karan bit her lip, embraced Lili still more tightly, and turned to face the wind that blew outside her window.

I will protect you to the end.

* * *

How could this be happening?

The man was confused. The cause was beyond his grasp. This was the first time something like this had occurred.

“Why have you let this happen?” he yelled, Fennec, the mayor of No. 6. “Why have *they* begun to act on their own? I thought you said you were able to control them perfectly.”

What noise, the other man thought. *What a noisy lout*. He had always thought of the other man as a cowardly, yapping dog who knew how to do nothing else. The years evidently had not changed his character.

“Soon, it will awaken. Then, everything will settle down.”

“Really? You *are* telling the truth?”

“Really, Fennec. These are only small precursors to the main event. Miniscule disturbances.”

“Miniscule disturbances—this, you say? The city is in a panic, for goodness’ sake.”

“Then, announce a state of emergency.”

“I’ve announced it,” the mayor said shortly. “But if we have any more deaths, the Security Bureau alone won’t be enough to suppress the chaos among the citizens.”

“Mobilize the army.”

The mayor froze.

“The army?”

“Yes. Even if there is a possibility of a riot, there would be no problem with the army there. No cause for concern at all.”

“You’re telling me to point weapons at my own citizens? These citizens of No. 6?”

“That’s what an army is there for. To neutralize anything that rebels against No. 6, whether it be from the inside or the outside.”

“But—”

“Fennec,” the man interrupted. “You are the one to make the decision. You are the King, after all. It’s not something I can intrude into. But do not forget. You are the sole person who dominates everything on this land. Rebelling against you is the same as betraying No. 6.”

The mayor remained silent for a while, and then gave a resolute nod.

“You’re right, in fact. Every word.”

“It may have been out of place for me to say this—”

“No, I don’t mind. I forgive you.”

Forgive? Forgive me? The man sneered inwardly.

“I will order the army to mobilize into battle formation and await further instructions.”

“That would be best. It is a grand opportunity to show your foolish people the extent of your power.”

The mayor swept out of the room, his gait stormy. He seemed to be in a temper.

The man sneered inwardly again, and closed his eyes.

Soon, it will awaken. And when it does—

* * *

Getsuyaku shut off the water flow.

Today, he was going to finish up work early so he could go home.

At the end of every shift, he took a shower and drank a cold glass of water. It seemed almost too mundane to call it his high point of the day, but he nevertheless couldn't deny that taking a shower put him into a good mood.

Well, that's all the work that needs to be done today. I can go home now.

A smile tugged at his lips every time the thought crossed his mind. He could see the smiles of his wife and daughter right before his eyes. His daughter was not of his blood; his wife had brought her from a previous relationship. There were times when he felt troubled at whether they could still become father and daughter, even though they weren't related. Now, he found it funny that he had even bothered to worry. Blood relations didn't matter. It had nothing to do with how one felt love. He cared for his daughter so strongly, he could most certainly say so.

Small and lovable Lili.

Every time he kissed her on the cheek, she would smile sheepishly. In a year, she might even be rejecting him with a cool “Daddy, don't.”

But her gradual blossoming into adulthood made her endearing all the more. *If I could, I wish she would let me kiss her forever—but that's probably not going to happen. But what about today? I wonder if she's come to pick me up at the bus stop. If she has, I would be so happy. Lili would come dashing up as soon as I get off the bus. She'd say, 'Welcome home, Daddy,' and she'd give me a hug. I would pick her up, and give her a kiss on the cheek.*

It was his moment of complete bliss.

And he could experience this because Lili, his daughter, was there for him. His second daughter, too, was almost on her way. He had been told at the hospital sometime before that the baby was going to be a girl. *My second daughter, and Lili's little sister. One more member in the family.*

Getsuyaku changed out of his clothes, and smoothed his hair with a hasty hand.

He had only to think about his wife and daughter. He would not allow his thoughts to wander and dwell on what he did today, or anything of that sort.

Nothing happened today. I didn't do anything. I don't know anything. And that's exactly how it's going to be.

Tomorrow, Inukashi would give him the rest of his payment. He knew Inukashi wasn't lying. He was wily, thorough, and miserly, but he kept his promises. In that sense, Inukashi was someone he could trust. If he hadn't been such a person, there was no way Getsuyaku would have co-operated in smuggling, even if it was just garbage or leftover food.

The payment this time around, however, was off the charts compared to the usual.

Getsuyaku counted on his fingers, curling each one, starting from his thumb.

Gold... three gold coins. It's quite a payment. Add that to the previous one, and that makes six gold coins. This is enough money to let me live like I'm on vacation for a good while. Of course, that's not what I'm going to spend it on. I'm going to keep it for Lili, and for the baby that's on its way. Renka would be happy for me. But—last time I handed her the gold, she looked more worried than happy. She went pale, and asked me, 'Where on earth did you get all this money?'. I managed to scrape together an excuse, but that was a close call. I made Renka worry more than she should. This time, I have to make it good. I have to come up with an excuse that'll satisfy her. Maybe something about special compensation. I hope I can pull off the lie.

Six gold coins. A payment off the charts.

After curling all his fingers in, he slowly raised his pinky.

I want to buy Lili some spring clothes. And Renka, too. Renka is so beautiful, but since we don't have the means to be fashionable, she always dresses frugally, and it makes her look older. She would look so stunning in a brightly-coloured dress, in pink, or blue. And Karan-san. She takes care of Lili all the time. And she's so good to her... I have to give her something to thank her. Hmm, what should I get?

His dreary mood began to clear. He felt excited. He could see himself shopping with Lili, taking her by the hand. He could see Lili turn around to grin at him. Renka was also smiling.

Oh, I couldn't be happier.

He felt it from the bottom of his heart.

He drained his glass of water.

Alright, let's go home.

The emergency alarm went off. The lamp flashed.

"What?"

His heart contracted. He could feel the blood receding from his face.

The door connected to the Correctional Facility was beginning to open. Getsuyaku had passed through the same door only moments before, entered the Correctional Facility, done his cleaning duties, and returned to this small room. He had resolved to finish work early that day, and had taken a shower. He had drank a glass of water.

That was it. That was it.

He shrank back.

That's all I've done. I only did my job, did it properly, as usual, and tried to go home.

'Make a good getaway.'

Hadn't a young man who passed him on the stairs said that? Getsuyaku was almost certain. The youth had a certain severity to him despite his age, and yet could manage to smile in a very alluring way. *Make a good getaway.* Was that a warning? Should he have obeyed those words and made his escape as swiftly as he could? But he had been afraid of being in a panic. He had been afraid that he would draw suspicion. *If I run, that's like admitting I did something wrong. I didn't want people to be suspicious. I still have to come in tomorrow, and the next day. Once they're suspicious of me... I—I don't want to lose my job. I was still planning on coming into work tomorrow. That's why I ignored him. I foolishly pretended that I didn't hear.*

Make a good getaway.

Oh—how wrong I was. I should have listened to that man. I should have escaped.

The door opened.

I should have escaped.

Two Security Bureau officials stood there, guns aimed and ready to fire.

"Getsuyaku, is it?"

His legs were shaking. His hands were shaking. His whole body was shaking.

No, don't shake. I'll draw even more suspicion. Pretend you don't know. Pretend you don't know, and—you haven't done anything.

"Answer me."

"—Yes, it is."

"We are escorting you. You are to obey."

"E-Escorting me... where?"

There was no answer. The two muscular Bureau officials, alike in height and shoulder width, remained silent with their guns pointed at Getsuyaku.

Nothing spoke louder than their lack of words.

Destruction was approaching. Getsuyaku understood that he was in no position to escape. But he couldn't relent.

No. No.

"Wh—why am I... what are you saying I've done...?"

This time, there was a response.

"You exhibited suspicious behaviour. At the Mannequin."

"S-Suspicious behaviour? That must be some kind of mistake," Getsuyaku stammered. "I... I was just cleaning—it was the robot's fault. I was summoned because the floor was dirty, and—and so to clean it up, I—"

"You were responsible for the maintenance of the robot, were you not?"

The muzzle of the gun moved up and down as if to cut off Getsuyaku's desperate words.

"And you performed it a whole week earlier than was planned."

"That was because—um, they didn't seem to be in very great shape, and... it happens often, actually, and..."

The officials said nothing more. Their lips were sealed, and no emotion could be read from their eyes. The two looked like robots themselves. Only destruction awaited Getsuyaku if he let himself be escorted by these robots. An inescapable destruction.

No. No. No.

I'm going to go home. I'm going to return to Lili and Renka.

He threw down the glass in his hand, and dashed outside.

I have to run. I have to run. I have to get away.

If I run straight down this road, and get through the gate, I'll be in Lost Town. Once I get on the bus, I'll arrive at the usual bus stop in ten minutes. Lili would probably be there to pick me up.

"Welcome home, Daddy."

"Feels good to be back, Lili."

"Mommy's waiting. Today, we're having your favourite — stew. We have bread that Auntie Karan baked, too."

"That sounds terrific. I'm starting to get hungry already. Oh yeah, Lili, Daddy's going to buy you some brand new clothes soon."

"Really?"

"Really. Let's go shopping on my next break, okay?"

"Yay! Thanks, Daddy."

"Ha ha ha. Alright, let's go home. Mommy's waiting, right?"

A white-hot impact hit him in the chest.

Blood and bits of flesh splattered before his eyes.

What is it?

The world teetered off-balance. Darkness closed in on his vision.

No, no, no. I'm supposed to go home. I'm gonna go home. I'm gonna...

"Daddy, welcome home."

"It feels great to be back, Lili."

Getsuyaku crumpled as he was shot through the chest.

* * *

Inukashi averted his eyes, and clenched his hand into a fist.

What the hell.

“Hey, that guy just got taken down,” growled Rikiga.

They were crouched behind some shrubs that dotted the surrounding area of the Correctional Facility. The Cleaning Management Room right before their eyes was the only department that connected the Correctional Facility directly with the West Block without a set of gates to pass through. The door that led into the Facility could only be accessed from the inside, however, so it was not possible to access the Facility from the side of the Cleaning Management Room. The doors were said to be made of a special alloy that even a small missile wouldn’t be able to damage. Infiltration was impossible as long as these doors were closed. In that sense, Getsuyaku’s workplace was more similar to the West Block, insofar as it was completely cut off from No. 6.

For Inukashi, it was no problem if they were cut off. The Facility was one place he didn’t want to step into if he could help it. He had no interest in it whatsoever, and he would have liked it to stay that way for the rest of his life.

He was more drawn to the grade and quantity of leftover food and clothing that Getsuyaku picked out from the waste collection depot adjacent to the Cleaning Management Room. These were more important to him than the Facility itself.

He and Getsuyaku had known each other for a while now. It had probably been at least three years. They were not particularly close or friendly with each other. They had just used each other as business partners.

Getsuyaku was straight-laced and cowardly, with a decent smattering

of both good morals and greed. A typical man you'd find anywhere. He was just one of countless many that one could find.

But he did care about his family. Inukashi remembered him saying many times that he valued them more than anything else in the world. He had looked truly happy as he smiled and talked about his little daughter, who was on her way. Inukashi had once asked him, 'Isn't it a pain in the ass to take care of another human? You can't take care of 'em like dogs.' Getsuyaku had lapsed into silence, his mouth half-open. He had looked astonished. Inukashi remembered the look of pity that then crossed Getsuyaku's face as he closed his mouth.

At that time, he had not understood the reason behind Getsuyaku's expression. Now, Inukashi felt like he had a better idea. It was thanks to Shionn—no, it was all his fault.

Inukashi felt like he could understand a little—just a tiny little—of the kind of love Getsuyaku felt for another tiny soul. And for the family that awaited its father, its husband, Getsuyaku was definitely not one of countless many. He was the one and only irreplaceable existence. Inukashi understood that too.

"I see. So they won't stop at West Block residents. They'll even kill their own people, too, huh," Rikiga said, wiping the sweat from his brow. His body was tense despite his airy tone.

"He lived in Lost Town," Inukashi said. "He was probably practically—trash for those people." Inukashi put up a front of unruffled calm, but he was also nervous and tense. The nape of his neck was so taut, it was painful.

To think they'd actually kill him.

He hadn't even dreamed that they would kill Getsuyaku. He had, however, expected the man to blow his cover. There were plenty of possible instances when Getsuyaku might slip up and give something away. In a worst-case scenario, he would have been taken into custody

and imprisoned.

But if the Correctional Facility itself would eventually collapse, as Nezumi said, then it was only a matter of time before Getsuyaku could get free. They would take advantage of the confusion and rescue him from his cell.

“God, the amount of trouble I had to go through because I fell for your smooth talk. That teaches you not to take a dogkeeper’s word seriously. Damn it, I fell right into your trap.”

Inukashi wouldn’t mind bearing with a complaint or two from the man. In fact, he wouldn’t even mind bowing his head and apologizing. Then, he would humbly and graciously hand over the promised gold. Three coins, plus another, “for your trouble,” he would say. That was sure to restore Getsuyaku’s spirits.

The demolition of the Correctional Facility meant the end of his business with Getsuyaku.

Thanks for all the years of business.

No problem. And I think I’ve had enough risky jobs to last me a lifetime. They’d shake hands, perhaps, and then part ways. In Inukashi’s mind, that had been his ideal way to say good-bye. But Getsuyaku lay face down on the arid ground without a single twitch. Only the wind blew over his body.

To think he’d get killed.

To think he’d get killed so easily, so unceremoniously. Gestuyaku is a citizen. He’s someone who lived inside the walls. He may have been in the dregs of No. 6, but he was still registered as a proper citizen. He’s different from us. They wouldn’t murder him pitilessly. They wouldn’t dare.

He had believed so wrongly all this time.

I was hopelessly naive. I knew in my head how cold, how brutal No. 6 could be towards people who betrayed it, refused to obey it, struggled against it... I thought I knew, but I didn’t know anything. I was naive. I should have

told him to get his ass out of there as soon as he pressed the button. Tell him to get out, and...

He felt like someone had grabbed his hair and yanked it up. His scalp hurt from how taut it was. A scream threatened to come up through his throat.

I remember now. It said so in Nezumi's letter.

Order any collaborators to escape immediately.

He remembered clearly that single line. Nezumi had predicted this ruthlessness, this brutality. *But I overlooked it. I was too caught up in trying to lure Getsuyaku in to devote any thought to the safety of the people I'd be getting help from. It hadn't even crossed my mind until now. Until now, when it was too late.*

I was careless. A careless, fucking naïve moron.

He chewed his lip.

But regretting it now wouldn't undo what he had done.

"Terrible." Rikiga wiped the sweat off his brow again.

Two men who looked like Security Bureau officials were stepping on Getsuyaku's body with the tips of their boots. They were looking at each other and nodding. They each took ahold of one of Getsuyaku's legs and began to drag the body along. The blood flowing from the corpse left red streaks on the dry ground.

"Are they really human?" Rikiga's voice turned raspy.

The dogs growled lowly beside Inukashi.

You're sure right about that. These dogs are a hundred times more decent. They've got hearts worth a hundred of those men.

Inukashi gave a quick snap of his fingers. The dogs all sprang to their feet at once. Rikiga blinked.

"Hey, wait. What're you planning to do?"

“Make them tear those guys’ throats apart, obviously. I’m gonna avenge Getsuyaku.”

“Are you stupid?” Rikiga said in disbelief. “Even your dogs couldn’t stand a chance against armed Security Bureau guys. If they find out where we’re hiding, we’ll be shot to death, too. Do you think people who can shoot up their own citizens are going to cut us any slack?”

“But if I don’t—”

“If he was alive, you could still flail around and do your thing. But he’s dead. He’s gone completely. He’s not going to feel anything. He doesn’t feel any anger or suffering now. He’s as good as that piece of dirt. Tell me, should we throw our lives away for a piece of dirt? I don’t know about you, but I’m definitely excusing myself from this one.”

Rikiga’s bloodshot eyes hardened.

“We can’t die yet. We still have an important job to do: save Shion. We can’t do it if we end up as ghosts. That’s the most important thing, and don’t you forget that, Inukashi.”

“—Fine.”

What Rikiga was saying was true. They still had a job to do. And it was a job that couldn’t be done if they weren’t alive.

He snapped his fingers again, this time more slowly. The dogs lay back down on the ground. Rikiga exhaled a long breath.

“Really, I wish you wouldn’t act on every emotional whim. This is why you can’t trust young people.”

“Old man.”

“What?”

“So you *do* say some decent things, once every ten years or so, anyway. You weren’t just a dead weight after all. I see you in a new light now.”

“Say what you will.”

“And while I’m saying what I will, lemme remind you that we’re splitting the gold even. Don’t you forget *that*.”

“I know, I know. Even half of the treasure is enough for me to live a freewheeling life. But if that guy’s gotten himself killed, how are we going to get into the Cleaning Management Room?”

“I have the key.” Inukashi held a magnetic card key between his fingers and thrust it under Rikiga’s nose.

“You had a key?”

“Yeah, a spare. In all of the Correctional Facility, the Cleaning Management Room is the only one that still uses a simple magnetic card key. There aren’t any signsof-life sensors, security systems, object sensors, or surveillance cameras in there. It’s a paradise if you wanna hide out.”

“Well, I guess they wouldn’t have a reason to spend money to watch a place that only collects garbage. So you nicked that key from the poor guy’s pockets, huh?”

“Not his pockets. I took it out of Getsuyaku’s small desk, where he eats his lunch. I borrowed it from his drawer.”

It was an old, worn desk that looked like it’d been picked out of the garbage. Getsuyaku used to eat his lunch there by himself. Once, I remember him giving me this small, sweet pastry called a muffin. It was delicious. I thought my tongue was gonna melt, it was so happy. He said he’d bought it from a local bakery.

“I guess you don’t have to return it to him now,” Rikiga muttered, with an unusually heavy tone.

“You’re right. I don’t have to give it back. So instead, I’m gonna make as much use of it as I can.”

When I see the Correctional Facility crumble, I’ll dedicate the scene to you, Getsuyaku. I’ll make sure to dedicate something that’s worth the blood you spilled. I know it probably won’t be enough to make up for my

carelessness, but it'll be the best sending-off to heaven that I'll be able to give you.

Inukashi pressed a hand to his chest. Nezumi's letter was there under his clothes.

This time, I won't mess up. I won't overlook anything. I won't let my guard down.

Their lives are depending on it—Shion and Nezumi's lives. I can't fail them again.

Cheep-cheep-cheep.

He hadn't noticed the two mice sitting at his feet. They scurried up his arm and onto his shoulder. Hamlet and Cravat. *I think those were their names.* Two small animals with intellect and their own will.

"You're here," he said to them. "Well, old man, it looks like all the supporting actors are here."

"Indeed. Now, all we have to do is get the stage perfectly ready, and then wait for the main actors to make their entrance."

"Yup. The actors of the century. We need a flashy fanfare to welcome them."

A one-act play, but a massive one nonetheless.

Hope or despair? Success or failure? Heaven or Hell? Life, or death? The curtains had already risen for this stage without a script.

It's our turn now. We're waiting for ya, Nezumi.

Cheep-cheep, cheep cheep cheep.

Perched on Inukashi's shoulder, the two mice raised their heads and squeaked together, as if to call out to someone.

* * *

“It’s stopped.”

Nezumi tilted his head slightly in perplexity at Shion’s words.

“What’re you talking about? It hasn’t stopped yet.”

The elevator was still ascending. It continued to glide smoothly up. Shion lightly placed his finger on the edge of his eye.

“No, the tears. Look, they’ve stopped.”

Nezumi’s cheeks suddenly emitted a furious glow.

“Idiot. This isn’t the time to be making lame observations. If you have time to be making fun of me, concentrate on the damn door. Once it opens, we don’t know what’s gonna hit us.”

“I wasn’t making fun of you. I just saw that they stopped—”

“Shut up. Just—shut up.”

Nezumi turned obstinately aside. His gesture was that of a sullen child.

Shion found it humorous.

Cool, ironic, stronger and more beautiful than anyone else—that was the kind of person Nezumi had always been, and that never changed. But behind it all, even he had a childish, emotional side like this. He still had some immaturity left in him to feel agitated when he was unable to control his emotions.

Shion had seen Nezumi’s tears for the first time. When he saw the boy choking on the unbearable tumult of his emotions, there was only one emotion that welled up inside Shion, and it was love. It was neither friendship nor adoration. Neither romance nor awe. Just love.

He felt an uncontrollable pull of love for the boy’s vulnerable tears. He wanted to protect him with his life.

The howling wind and the sound of rain echoed in his ears.

It was the sound of that storm. The emotions he had felt on that stormy night when he met Nezumi were revived in himself. And like

he had been so many years ago, he had been stirred to action by these feelings.

I want to protect him with my life.

Of course, this was only Shion's self-absorbed and one-sided sentiment. Nezumi wasn't fragile to the point of needing Shion's protection. He would learn this the hard way, much later. Shion had been the one being protected. It had always been this way.

The sounds of the storm showed no signs of dying down. It still roared vividly.

Shion thought of the boy who had appeared before him that night, his shoulder drenched with blood much like he was now, except the boy had been so slender and delicate then. He was so small, and wounded so badly that he could barely remain standing. But despite that, his eyes had glowed brilliantly, full of life, and carried no shadow at all. The boy had neither clung to him, nor begged for his help. On the contrary, he had coolly scrutinized Shion.

What kind of person are you?

Even now, the question still remained sitting before Shion's eyes. He had not given an answer yet.

What kind of person am I?

My reason, my passion, my folly, my greed, my justice—what shape do they take?

He spread his fingers. There was blood caked on them. Was it his own, or that man's? His palm and five fingers, dirtied in muddy red.

Could I stand and look my own self in the eye?

"I look horrible," Nezumi sighed. He glanced in the mirror, and furrowed his brow in discontent. "My hair is a mess, my face is dirty—it doesn't get worse than this. Even the witches from *Macbeth* wouldn't want to come near me. I can imagine the look of horror on my manager's face if he were to see me like this."

“You look good enough to me.”

“Shion, you don’t have to try to make me feel better. Geez, look at me, my beautiful face is ruined.”

“I didn’t realize you were so narcissistic.”

“I just have an accurate idea of myself. What’s beautiful is beautiful. Unsightly things are unsightly.”

“Are you just talking about looks?”

Or are you talking about how people are deep down, too? Can your gaze penetrate even the beauty and ugliness that lies within them?

My reason, my passion, my folly...

Nezumi recited a segment from Macbeth, the witches’ line.

“Fair is foul, and foul is fair. Hover through the fog and filthy air.”

The elevator stopped. Shion stared at the door.

He was being called—he felt strongly that Safu was calling him.

Shion.

The doors glided open noiselessly.

“Don’t go running out just yet. Take your precautions.” Nezumi’s arm held Shion back as he exited first. He was dragging his foot, though only slightly. His bleeding had stopped, but it was probably quite a serious wound. If he moved too much, it would probably begin to bleed again. Both Nezumi and Shion were nearing their physical limit.

Shion.

Safu. Are you alright? Would I get to see you? I’ve come to get you so we can escape together. Lead us on.

Shion...

A hallway stretched before them, black and glossy. The side where the elevator was located was just a plain wall. On the opposite side, there were three evenly-spaced doors. It was deserted. The elevator closed silently behind Shion.

“Which door is it?” Nezumi turned around to ask. “Right, left, or middle? Maybe they’ve got tigers or wolves ready to spring at us if we open the wrong one.”

“No—it’s none of these.”

Shion walked straight down the hallway. It was neither right, left, nor middle.

Suddenly, one of the doors opened, and a woman clad in a lab coat appeared.

“What—” Her electronic tablet slid from her hand. “You—how did you outsiders get in—?”

They continued past the woman as she stood in stunned silence.

“Wait—where are you—”

“M’lady.” Nezumi picked the tablet up, and placed it back in the woman’s hand. “I’m terribly sorry for startling you. We’re not suspicious people—okay, maybe we are—but you don’t need to worry. We have no intentions of harming you. So hush now, please.”

Shion stopped where the hall reached a dead end.

Safu.

The wall split smoothly in two.

The woman screamed. “How—how did that door open?”

Nezumi whistled. “It’s like the caves you see in the *Arabian Nights*. Shion, what kind of incantation did you use?”

“No—how could it—” The woman squatted to the ground. She was fainting from shock from the looks of it, for her face was whiter than paper.

There was another door beyond: a crimson door.

“Garish.” Nezumi clicked his tongue, and drew up beside Shion.

“Will it open?”

“Probably.” Shion placed a hand on the door. Nezumi trembled. He closed his eyes, and pursed his lips.

“Nezumi—what’s wrong?”

“I heard... a voice.”

“You can hear Safu’s voice, too?”

“No. This... isn’t a human voice. This... whose voice is this?”

“What’s it saying?”

“... Finally, you are here.” Nezumi made a fist over his chest. He let out a long breath. “Finally, you are here. I have been waiting for you.”

Finally, you are here. I have been waiting for you.

* * *

I’ve been called here by Safu. Who’s calling you? Who’s waiting for you beyond this door?

Shion felt a vibration against his palm. The crimson door opened.

“Gh...” Both Shion and Nezumi made a strangled noise. Their voices stuck in their throats.

“What—”

There were several transparent pillars filled with clear liquid. These columns, thick enough for a small child to barely get his arms around, stood in a neat line.

“Brains.” Nezumi swallowed hard.

Brains.

In each column floated a brain. Several clear tubes connected the brain to the lower part of the column. These tubes glowed bluish-white from time to time.

It was a bizarre scene. Shion hadn’t imagined in the faintest that he would see something like this. He couldn’t have imagined it.

The crimson door closed. Just before it shut completely, he thought he heard the sound of the wind. Was it an auditory hallucination? It probably was. But what he was seeing now with his own eyes was no illusion. It was reality. This scene was concrete. It existed.

His legs quaked. His heart quailed.

Nezumi's hand slid under his arm.

Oh, here I am again, being supported by you.

They proceeded slowly through the columns.

How far do we go? Is there an end?

"Shion." He heard himself being called. He looked up.

Safu stood there. She was wearing that sweater.

The black sweater which had been hand-knitted by her grandmother. There were dark pink stripes on the mouths of the sleeves and across the chest.

"Safu!"

There she was.

He could hear the wind.

Shion stretched his hands straight out before him.

Volume VIII

Shion is reunited with Safu at last. But the fates are ruthless, and their reunion is also their eternal parting. As the Correctional Facility heaves under explosions and roaring fire, Shion and Nezumi enter their last battle to escape!

You don't feel it?
Feel? Feel what?
Something off.

1

RING THE ALARUM BELL!

*I gin to be aweary of the sun,
And wish the estate o' the world were now undone.
Ring the alarum bell! Blow, wind! come, wrack!
At least we'll die with harness on our back.*

MACBETH, ACT V SCENE V

I LOVE you, Shion. I love you more than anyone else.

* * *

Brains floated in the middle of the transparent columns.

Human brains.

How many? Ten, twenty, thirty ... perhaps more than fifty. There seemed to be a light source at the base of the column, for the entirety of it emitted a soft, white glow.

A scene he had never seen before. It was orderly, inorganic, and sterile. Not a single stain marred the smooth floor. The chamber was odourless and almost soundless. But that in itself was terrifying. Shion felt that this scene was more terrifying than any he had seen until now.

He couldn't hear the tearful cries, the screams, or groans. There were no corpses, no flowing blood, no faces distorted in agony. But this scene here was so much more wicked than the picture of hell in the basement that he had witnessed and burned into his memory.

Safu stood right inside this terrifying and wicked scene.

"Safu—"

Shion staggered as he tried to break into a run, and fell to his knees. He had no strength in his legs. His heart pounded rapidly. His wounded, bleeding, and exhausted body was crying out for mercy.

I can't go any further than this.

He looked up. A stream of sweat travelled down his cheek and moistened his mouth.

Safu still stood silently, gazing at Shion. She hadn't changed at all. Nothing about her had changed: the length of her hair, her stature, her unwavering gaze.

Lost Town, No. 6. They had made a hurried parting at the station. The Safu he had seen then was standing in front of him now.

She didn't look worn out. She didn't look wounded.

"Safu . . . you're safe." *You're safe. You managed to stay safe. You managed to live. We were able to see each other again, alive.*

I love you, Shion. I love you more than anyone else.

Her confession had reached him through his ID card. A cutting-edge communication device had mediated these flesh-and-blood feelings.

Her voice was coming back to him.

"Shion, you came." Safu's voice. A little low for a girl's, yet always crisp and taut. He missed it.

It moved his heart. It squeezed his chest.

Oh, how I've missed it.

Safu, we've been separated by a pretty long distance, haven't we? I feel like we haven't seen each other for a century.

"I knew. I believed you would come..." Safu smiled. Then her face crumpled into an expression both happy and tearful. "I was waiting all this time. Waiting was all I could do. I could only wait for you here..."

"Mm-hmm."

Shion raised the upper half of his body, and took a deep breath.

"I knew I had to come sooner... I'm sorry, Safu."

Safu shook her head, and cocked her head to one side. She blinked, and a faint agitation crossed her eyes.

"Shion, your hair..."

"Huh? Oh, this hair. Well, a lot of things happened, and... I'll take my time and tell you everything later." *I'll tell you everything about what I experienced while we were separated. There are so many things I want you to hear, to listen to. One evening wouldn't be nearly enough to cover everything.*

"You must have gone through so many hardships... more difficult than I can imagine. I'm sure that getting here wasn't the average stroll in the park, was it? But you still came. For me... that's more than enough. Thank you, Shion. Thank you so much."

"Like her dying words or something," Nezumi muttered from his spot beside Shion. It wasn't a cold voice. But it was flat and emotionless.

Safu's eyes moved slowly in response to the mutter, and fell on Nezumi.

"You must be Nezumi..."

"Yeah."

"Nice to meet you. I've always wanted to take a look at you. I wanted to know what kind of person you were."

“Here I am. Usually, I look better. This isn’t the state I’d like a lady to see me in, but unfortunately I didn’t have the time to wash my face or change into my good suit. Do forgive me.” Nezumi also had his gaze fixed on Safu. He stared at her without blinking.

“Safu, I have something I want to ask you.”

“... Alright.”

“Are you the one who controlled the main computer to lead us here?”

There was no answer from Safu. A moment’s silence passed. Shion looked up at Nezumi, still on his knees.

Safu, control this Facility’s computer? There’s no way she could have.

He swallowed the words just about to leave his mouth.

It couldn’t be. But that was the only possible explanation.

Nezumi’s grey eyes slid slightly aside.

“Yeah. That’s the only explanation.” His words tracing Shion’s thoughts almost exactly, Nezumi continued in an expressionless voice.

“You said so,” he said to Shion, “you said someone was calling. Thanks to that someone, we were able to get this far. Granted, this isn’t the kind of place I’d be terribly excited to see. But that aside, I can’t think of anyone else who’d be the precious sort to send us welcoming emissaries from inside the Correctional Facility. She’s the only possible person.”

He had no choice but to nod. Shion himself had been feeling Safu calling him. He had been urged on by this voice, and been led thus far. But if that was the case, that meant Safu was somehow involved with the core of the computer system.

But how? How was it made possible for her?

“Shion.” Only Nezumi’s lips moved as he called Shion’s name. “How long are you planning on sitting there for? You can wait for as long as you like, but there won’t be any coffee coming.”

“Ah—”

Of course. What was he doing? He’d come this far: what was he doing squatted on the ground?

He willed strength into his legs, and stood up. His feet were unsteady. He managed to dig his heels in, but barely. Nezumi never tried to reach out to him. Shion also had no intentions of clinging to the figure that stood beside him.

They were wounded, exhausted, and had spilled the same amount of blood—no, it must have been much more arduous for Nezumi.

Clinging was the last thing Shion wanted to do. Even if he were to lean on Nezumi and manage to stand, taking the next step would probably prove immensely difficult. If he could stand with his own strength, he would be able to advance with his own strength as well.

Safu was still watching them. Her hands were clasped tightly together as if in prayer, and she remained still.

“I wasn’t me,” was Safu’s short answer. “I don’t have that kind of power.”

Nezumi’s brow furrowed slightly.

“I only thought it... I only kept thinking in my heart that I wanted to see Shion.”

“Then who is it? Who brought us here?”

“Elyurias.”

“Elyurias!” Nezumi and Shion cried in unison.

Elyurias.

They had heard the name from Rou, the elder who had long lived in the underground realm. He was a man who had been involved in the foundation of No. 6 as a city-state, and had lost both his legs to the parasite wasp as its first sacrifice. He was an old and close friend of Shion’s mother, Karan.

Rou had said it.

Elyurias was a great sovereign. No, I am sure she still is. She probably still reigns even now.

Shion ran a hand over his pocket. The chip that Rou had given him was in there. Once he rescued Safu safely from the Correctional Facility, he wanted to take his time to decode it thoroughly. Here lay the answers to the puzzle. The mystery of No. 6. The mystery of the underground realm. And more than anything, the mysteries surrounding Nezumi. Answers existed to these questions. There must also be considerable amounts of information loaded onto the chip concerning Elyurias, the queen.

His heart raced slightly at the thought. But he had forgotten cleanly about the chip after stepping into the Correctional Facility. He hadn't even recalled it once. They had not had the time. He had been running constantly, pushing the limits of his mind and body. One misstep, one moment of decision could invert life and death. He had to survive even one second longer—survive and move forward. This thought had occupied his mind completely.

Elyurias.

To think that he would hear this name coming from Safu's mouth.

"Do you know Elyurias?" Nezumi's tone wavered for the first time. A faint agitation crept into his voice.

"I don't. But... she was the one who led you here. She awakened me completely... she taught me the truth."

"The truth," Nezumi repeated, as if to cross-examine her. "Truth, huh. Safu, why did Elyurias or whoever it is invite us here?"

"I don't know."

"Where is Elyurias now?"

"I don't know... but—"

"But?"

“But I think she must be... very close. I have a feeling she is.”

“Is that just your intuition, or—”

Safu shifted on the spot.

“Bombarding me with questions, aren’t you, Nezumi?”

“I won’t get any answers if I don’t bombard you. We haven’t come here to have a leisurely chat. There’s a pile of things we have to know, that we ought to know. If you could just give us the answers, that’s efficient for all of us. Don’t you think, Safu?”

“You’re right. But I can’t answer even half of what you want to know. You’re not looking for the kind of answers... that you can obtain easily, right?”

“So you’re telling us to go out and search for ourselves if we want answers.” Nezumi exhaled. “Which means, to sum it up, you don’t know anything.”

“I don’t know anything about you, Nezumi. But I do know... about Shion.”

Safu exhaled as well. “Because I wished it. I wished strongly that I would get to see Shion. Elyurias heard my wish. She told me...”

Safu’s lips trembled.

“I will grant your wish. I will bring you to the person you most want to see... that’s what she said. And she didn’t break her promise.”

“So Elyurias can freely control the computer system?”

“I don’t know. I don’t know who she is, or where she is, or why she started to talk to me all of a sudden... I don’t have a clear idea... of anything.”

“She spoke? To you? From beside you?”

Safu refuted the suggestion.

No, not like that.

“She... spoke from inside me. When I was falling asleep, she called to me directly.”

“Wait, what do you mean by—”

“That’s enough.” Shion took hold of Nezumi’s arm. Nezumi’s slid his gaze languidly from Shion’s fingers to his face.

“It’s alright, that’s enough, Nezumi. We’re not here to have a leisurely chat, or to interrogate Safu.”

We’ve come this far. Now we have to escape.

There were two people up to this point, and from here on there will be three.

Nezumi continued to stare at Shion, and blinked.

“Stand not upon the order of your going, but go at once,’ huh. I don’t know how easy it’ll be for us compared to the lords going home from a banquet.”

“That’s awfully pessimistic of you.”

“I’m careful. I don’t do the naivety thing. It’s probably known all over by now that we’re on this top floor. Scary old men might be storming up from downstairs right this moment.”

“Nezumi, there’s only one route that leads here, and that’s the elevator we just came with. No one can enter unless that elevator moves. All the facilities in this building are programmed into the computer system.”

“And what makes you so sure that the system’s gonna stay on our side? Are you saying you can see when and where our situation is gonna change?”

“Well—”

He was at a loss for an answer.

“We can’t even put a finger on who or what this Elyurias person is. Don’t forget that. Think before trusting someone whom you don’t

even know the truth about.”

Nezumi was right. Neither Shion nor Nezumi had any definite information about Elyurias. What they had was what Rou had told them, and what they had heard from Safu.

He knew they could not cling to ambiguous things. They could not make a blindly positive interpretation. It took firm resolve to believe in another person. Trust was hollow without resolve. It was a fake, papier-mache indulgence masked with a thin wrapper. And even a millimetre of indulgence was enough to cost him his life.

“Safu,” Shion spoke to the girl in front of him. “Could you take us to the main computer . . . the mother computer, it might be called . . . the core of the system?”

Safu nodded. There was no time for hesitation, anxiety, or prolonged thought.

“Follow me.” She turned her back, and started to walk.

“Let’s go,” Shion encouraged. Nezumi showed a slight hesitation.

“Can we trust her?”

“Safu?”

“Yeah. Can we just follow her innocently like this? Can you say for sure that she won’t betray us?”

“I can.”

“And you’re absolutely sure?” A cold smile played on Nezumi’s lips. Declaring absolute trust in someone was not a virtue for Nezumi; it was closer to foolhardiness.

“Nezumi, I have three people I can trust one-hundred percent, no matter what happens to me. Those people are Safu, my mother, and you.”

I can believe them, no matter what. Believing has supported me. I don’t think it’s naivety. A simple and superficial trust will corner a person into

trouble one day. But someone who can't trust anyone sincerely is fragile. The only foothold they have is an unstable one on sand.

I can believe, no matter what happens. I can keep on believing to the end. That's resilience—it can't be anything else.

"If... If any one of these three were to betray me, then I would resign myself to it. Even if I were to lose my life over it, I wouldn't have any regrets. When I start doubting Safu, or my mother, or you... when I stop being able to believe in you, that's the same as annihilation for me."

The smile vanished from Nezumi's face. The colour in his eyes darkened. It made Nezumi look like someone in endless thought in search for the truth, or a lost man wandering at his wit's end.

"Shion, you don't feel it?"

"Feel? Feel what?"

"Something off."

"Off... about what?"

Nezumi watched Safu's back in silence.

"Alright, fine, we'll do as you wish. It seems like the only path open to me is the one that follows yours, anyway. Took me long enough to realize it, but I guess I have to steel myself if I want to get anywhere."

"Does that mean you trust me?"

"Don't get carried away, idiot," spat Nezumi as he began to walk. It was hard to tell that he had a bullet wound in his leg. Shion couldn't help but drag his own foot. His wounded leg felt heavy, as if it were not his own.

They moved further in amongst the transparent columns with Safu in the lead. Some moments later, they hit a wall. It was white with a faint tint of yellow, like the floor. The wall split open silently as Safu stood in front of it.

“The inner chamber of the palace, huh?” Nezumi licked his lips. Shion had opened his eyes widely, almost unconsciously holding his breath.

It was a white, brightly-lit room. It was not particularly spacious. The size was about the same as a floor or a living room of an average-sized house in No. 6. The lights glowed brilliantly, illuminating every corner of the room, which had no windows or furniture.

A column penetrated its centre. It was a size thicker than what he had seen moments earlier. There was no brain floating in it, but there was a pale silver sphere. It was covered in innumerable small projections, and the tips of those projections blinked with lights every few seconds. Some were blue, some were crimson, and yet others glowed a deep red. Thin, clear tubes extended from some of the projections and spread upwards in a tangle. It was too dark beyond that to see any further.

“This is the Mother.”

“This is the Mother?”

Safu and Shion’s voices overlapped.

“There’s an identical model in the Moondrop. That one’s the Grandmother, and people call it Grandma. A research institution that was first stationed in the Moondrop broke off as an independent organization and moved to the Correctional Facility. That was because a version of Grandma — smaller, but with the same functions — was complete. The Mother. That was one reason.”

“In the Correctional Facility, they could easily get their hands on test subjects for their experiments. Human test subjects, to be exact. That would be the second reason, right?”

Nezumi huffed.

“Either that, or they were starting to need larger quantities of them. There was no way to acquire humans in bulk to use as lab rats. Not in No. 6. Bringing in a large number of people from outside would also

be a hassle. But here, in the Correctional Facility, there would be no problem. People were overflowing in the West Block. They only had to switch the purpose of their Hunt, which was population control, to securing test subjects. It can be for the granny or the mom, but I think that might be a more likely reason for their little move than the computer, don't you think?"

"You may be right." Safu closed her eyes for a short while. Once the girl's black eyes disappeared from her bloodless face, she looked like a doll.

"The Correctional Facility was... always a place for human experimentation. Many experiments involving living human bodies were conducted over and over. Thanks to that, No. 6's medical technology saw leaps and bounds in development... And both you and I, Shion, received the full benefits of it..."

"Yeah... that's right."

Shion turned back to Nezumi and asked him a question. His voice didn't sound like his own, it was so raspy and unpleasant to the ears.

"Nezumi, that room... that room with the passageway that led from the underground chamber..."

The bottom of the elevator had opened, fast becoming a gallows, and the people were dashed to the ground along with their screams. The underground chamber had become the first page in the book of hellish horrors, and a narrow passageway from there had opened up into a room that looked nearly like a cube. Nezumi had called it a "temporary resting place".

"Yeah. Have you finally noticed? The structure from the underground chamber to that room is designed to select lab rats. The people who were able to reach that room were those who could bear the impact from falling from the elevator, and escape on their own using the blinking lights as a guide. They're lab rats with above-average strength

in both body and mind, and with a decent amount of intelligence. Superior lab rats. If you're going to use lab rats, you might as well get the stronger, more resistant ones. That's what they thought."

Safu made a small choked noise.

The eyes of a certain man rose in the back of Shion's mind. He did not know the name nor the upbringing of the man who possessed those eyes. The man had been struggling, unable to die, and had clung to Shion in his suffering, and his eyes—his eyes were coming back to him.

Nezumi had been the one who saved that man. He had given the man a peaceful death. Nezumi had called it murder, not salvation. Shion didn't know. Like before, even now, Shion struggled to grasp the answer.

The only thing Shion could answer for certain was that that man was a living human, not an experimental lab rat.

"Do you remember there being a door in that room?" Nezumi asked him. Shion remembered. The room had been illuminated then, though somewhat dimly. The light had stung at his eyes which had been used to the darkness. He had seen a grey door beneath that light. He remembered.

"That door is where they come to collect the survivors, but it doesn't lead into the Correctional Facility. It's from when the research institution still used to be at the Moondrop. People were let out through that door, then embedded with identification chips like prisoners, and then sent to the city hall — the Moondrop. The chip is a safety measure in case someone escapes. But by placing the research institution right inside the Correctional Facility, they removed all of that extra work. Efficient, indeed, don't you think?"

"Identification chip..." Something flared up in his mind. "Nezumi, you got out through that door four years ago, didn't you? And you

escaped while you were being escorted to the Moondrop.”

“Four years ago, huh... it was a stormy day. I mark it down on my calendar as the day I met a certain weirdo who opened his window in the middle of a rainstorm. But now isn’t the time to be taking a walk down memory lane. Safu, you know the truth about the Correctional Facility. Not only that, but about No. 6 itself. And Elyurias is the one who told you about it, right?”

“Yes. She taught me the truth behind No. 6, the so-called Holy City, the Utopia, even... But Shion, you weren’t just taught. You saw with your own eyes. You heard with your own ears.”

“Only a part of it.” Only a part of it. There were still an enormous amount of things he didn’t know, hadn’t realized yet, still had to ponder and think about.

Shion inhaled. He felt a faint pain deep within his chest. It wasn’t a physical pain. It was a small twinge inside his mind that had developed unbeknownst to him. It throbbed every time he thought about No. 6.

No. 6 was no utopia. It was a ruthless and cruel city-state. For its peace and prosperity, it shunned no kind of brutality. But, but, but... Shion inhaled again, and pressed a hand to his chest.

What was No. 6? Was it not a country built by human hands?

I want you to believe this much. We tried to found an ideal city here, a Paradise free of war and poverty... where we could have gone wrong, I don't know...

Rou’s words. He was sure they weren’t lies. No. 6 in its infancy had still been based on the ideology and will of human beings.

A society without war, so that everyone could be happy.

Where did we go wrong?

Rou’s thin, trembling voice and his words left a mark in Shion’s heart like a hot brand.

Where do people stray off the path? When do they begin to obey their greed rather than their ideals? Or are ideals just prone to morphing easily into greed? If so, then the same thing will happen in the future. Even if No. 6 were to fall, a second, a third Holy City would be born.

Where did we go wrong?

Are human beings capable of creating a country without going astray?

Shion shook his head. Now was not the time to be uncertain over his own questions. He was not going to flee. He would face them squarely in the near future. But now, he had to focus on the single task of overcoming the wall before him.

He drew closer to the Mother.

A thin plastic board which looked like a control panel was attached to the front of the round column. There were seven keys in each column and fourteen in each row. They were white, marked with no numbers, letters, or symbols. He tapped a key to test it out, but there was no response. He let his fingers race across the control panel, typing whatever that came to mind.

“How is it?” Nezumi peered at Shion’s hands. “Does it look like you can do something about it?”

“It’s not working.”

“Don’t give up just yet. It shouldn’t be hard to have Mama or Grandma in the palm of your hand with your brains and skills. I think you’re quite a womanizer in that sense.”

“You’re expecting too much from me, Nezumi. I’m no match against her. Forget coaxing her to like me, she’s already elbowed me away because she doesn’t want anything to do with me.”

Nezumi’s eyes narrowed, and the dark grey light in them condensed.

“So the Mother didn’t take a liking to you ... are you sure you can’t do it, Shion?”

"I can't. There seems to be a special authorization system, and you can't get close to the Mother unless you clear it. It's too bad, but ... there's nothing more I can do."

"Mama is so strict. I can't help but sigh," Nezumi said, clicking his tongue instead.

"Safu, how about you?"

"I can't, Shion. No one can go near Mother, save one person."

"One person ... the mayor?"

"No. This person has no name for his profession. He created this research institution, and presides over it ... he thinks he is the true ruler of No. 6. The Mother is his creation, and it'll only obey him. That's how it was made."

"How about this woman, Elyurias? Doesn't she have full control over the Mother? That's why she was able to open and close the barriers when she wanted, and operate the elevator, right?"

Nezumi and Shion looked at each other.

Yes, Elyurias. Maybe she can...

"Safu, does Elyurias still speak to you? Can you speak to her from your end?"

He took one step closer to Safu.

Safu took one step back.

Now, Shion finally felt "something off", as Nezumi had mentioned earlier.

Why doesn't she come closer?

Safu always kept a set distance, and didn't try to narrow that gap.

"Safu?"

"Don't come!" Safu's words sounded close to a scream as they issued from her lips. Shion watched the girl recoil, and felt his heart palpitating. A flurry of unease started up in his chest.

Why?

“Why are you running away, Safu?”

“Don’t come close. Please. Shion...”

A tear suddenly trickled down Safu’s cheek.

“I was waiting... waiting all this time. I wanted to see you, so, so much... that was all I hoped for...”

“And we did see each other. I’m right in front of you, right now. I came to save you and get you out of here. We came to escape the Correctional Facility together.”

He stepped forward and offered a hand.

“Safu, let’s get out. Out of this building. Let’s go together.”

Safu jerked her chin up. She was chewing her lip in a desperate attempt to contain her shaking. She shook her head, her face still drawn.

A gesture of rejection.

“Why!? Why are you refusing us?”

He tried to restrain himself, but he could not. His tone turned rough to match the rise of his emotions.

Safu, let me hold you. Hold you with my own arms. I want to embrace you to make up for all those years we spent apart. We’ve finally been able to see each other. Words of every kind are swirling inside me, words to say to you, to tell you, to apologize to you. Like a muddy stream. Like a howling wind, they’re ringing out.

But why do you refuse? Why are you trying to flee from the hand I’m offering you?

“Safu, I—”

He was grabbed by the arm.

“Stop.” Nezumi’s fingers dug deeply into his skin. “Stop it. Don’t get any closer. Do as she says.”

“Nezumi, even you—?”

Nezumi beheld Shion silently, still holding his arm. His gaze stopped Shion from saying anything more. Shion swallowed the rest of his sentence. His unspoken words became a muddy flow, a swift wind that further agitated his heart. His breathing turned erratic from anxiety and uncertainty. It was an entirely different type of unrest than what he had felt at imagining the difficulty of all three of them escaping the Correctional Facility together.

His body froze up at this unidentifiable fear.

“Safu, what do you want?” Nezumi asked. There was no hint of aggressive pressure. His voice was soft, deep, and beautiful. “What do you want us to do?”

Safu’s expression relaxed somewhat.

“... Will you grant my wish?”

“It’s my command.”

Safu drew a slight breath.

“Destroy the Mother.”

Nezumi’s fingers tightened their grip, but in the next instant, fell from Shion’s arm. Only the sensation of his strong grip remained.

“You’re telling us to destroy this computer.”

“Yes.”

“I see... well, if we could do that, that’d be more than I could ask for. If we could, that is.” Nezumi fished out a coin-shaped microbomb from his jacket pocket, and held it between his fingers.

“If we set this guy to maximum power, it should be able to blow apart the computer, no problem.”

“It won’t work.”

Shion lightly touched the cylindrical column.

“The computer itself might be fragile, but the problem is with this column. It’s made of special plastic. I’m pretty sure that even a missile

hitting this thing wouldn't make it budge. It's like a glass ball encased in a durable capsule. It's impossible to destroy it with a coin bomb."

"You're a hundred percent sure."

"Yeah."

"A hundred percent impossible, and zero percent possible. Then we've got nothing to go on."

"I can open the column."

Nezumi's gaze hardened at Safu's words.

"You can open the door to the Mother?"

"Not me."

"Elyurias?"

"Yes. She can do it. I'm sure she'll open it for you."

"If she can do so much already, it should be easy enough for her to stop the Mother itself. You don't even need to rely on us."

"It needs will."

"Huh?"

"She said... there needs to be human will."

Nezumi and Shion looked at each other blankly for a second or two.

"There needs to be human will in order to destroy it," Safu repeated. She was like a medium announcing an oracle. Nezumi shifted uneasily.

"Those are Elyurias' words?"

"Yes."

"So she's saying she'll help, but the final decision has to come from our will."

"Yes."

"But that means..." Nezumi trailed off. Shion was nodding. He felt like he had heard clearly what Nezumi had left unsaid.

That means Elyurias isn't human.

It was probably true. He couldn't imagine a human in the flesh able to manoeuvre through such a tight security system and infiltrate its information routes, except for "him".

Elyurias wasn't a human. Then, what was she?

A god? A demon? A spirit of nature? Could she be—

"There needs to be human will in order to destroy it..." Nezumi repeated Safu's—no, Elyurias'— words.

Safu closed her eyes, and murmured. "Humans are the only ones who wilfully destroy things. It is something only humans can do... so only humans can destroy the Mother."

It was almost like an incantation.

Shion felt a chill.

Shion knew Safu as a person of frank speech, with a very strong sense of reality. She could speak of hopes and dreams in realistic terms, not fantastical ones; but reality did not bind her too strongly, for she could still have hopes and dreams without being hindered by it. She was sensitive, but not over-sensitive. Her mind was like a straight young tree. It was upright, yet flexible.

She wasn't the kind of girl to repeat herself in a muffled murmur like this. She was definitely not.

"Fine. We'll take it on." Nezumi's voice made Shion's eardrum tremble. He was supposed to be used to hearing his voice, and yet it hit his earlobes more vividly than ever.

Safu opened her eyes.

"... Will you grant it?"

"If that's your wish."

"Thank you. I am grateful." Safu clasped her hands, and bowed her head.

"I don't need any thanks. Destroying the Mother is like shooting the Correctional Facility through the heart. I could have wished with all my might and still not gotten this opportunity. It's worth a try, if this column will really open and expose the Mother, even for a moment." Nezumi's eyes glittered. It was like the glitter of a finely-sharpened knife.

The control panel lit up without warning. Words emerged in the air. Nezumi gave a short whistle. He placed his fingers on the control panel.

"Unlocked, unlocked, unlocked... heh, a miracle transformation from haughty queen to meek lady. Now even I can handle her."

Shion's gaze was focused intently on Nezumi's fingertips. Every time, and at any time, he couldn't help but admire those graceful movements. To Shion, those fingers seemed to play a sweet melody, or breathe life into a lively rhythm.

Every time, and at any time, he couldn't help but admire him... But this time, his heart was not drawn as strongly as usual.

The restless sounds of his heart refused to disappear. Instead, they echoed even more strongly.

Nezumi's fingers stilled. A silver thread suddenly appeared in the centre of the column. One, two, three, four. The silver threads intersected to form a rectangle.

"The door," Nezumi said. "All you have to say now is 'open sesame'." Perhaps even he was tense; Nezumi's voice was low and somewhat heavy-sounding.

"Wait." Shion grabbed Nezumi's wrist. He could feel the other's body heat and pulse on the palm of his hand. "Just wait for a second."

A shadow crossed Nezumi's eyes. A breath's length of silence.

"Shion, we don't have time to be wishy-washy and hesitant."

"I know. But wait, please... Safu."

Safu's head was still bowed. Her shoulders clad in her black sweater were trembling.

"Safu, you still haven't answered my question. Why are you refusing us? Why aren't you coming any closer?"

"Shion..."

"And that sweater... your grandmother hand-knitted that, didn't she? The last time I saw that was a long time ago. I probably wasn't even ten then."

"You're right." Safu broke into a sudden smile. "You were the one to speak to me first. You said it suited me. I was happy... so happy. Everyone else was laughing condescendingly at my hand-knitted sweater. They were saying that you'd only find a wool sweater in a museum these days. But you didn't laugh. You... only you were loyal to your own feelings and emotions, and to others, too. Shion... I was able to meet you in that bleak... even lonely... world of elite education. And that, I think, is very—"

"Stop!" Shion overran Safu's words. "Why are you talking about past memories? That's not what I want to hear. What I want to say is: why are you still able to wear a sweater you got when you were ten? You've grown taller since then, and your frame has changed, too. There's no way you should be able to wear it. Or is that a new sweater that looks exactly the same? But..."

"I wanted you to remember." Safu interrupted Shion this time. "I wanted you to remember me. You said this suited me... so I wanted you to remember me wearing this sweater."

"Remember? Are you telling me to turn you into a memory? Safu, what're you talking about? You're not planning to come along with us?"

"Shion, leave it at that." Nezumi grasped his arm again. This time, he held fast and yanked. It was enough power to make Shion stagger.

Shion tripped, and bumped into Nezumi. Nezumi did not budge.

"That's enough. This is as far as it goes."

"A far as what goes?"

"Don't corner her to distract yourself from your own uncertainty. That's a cowardly thing to do."

Shion felt himself sweating. Nezumi's gaze stabbed at him.

"Me... cowardly..."

"Shion, you know already, don't you? There's no way you couldn't have realized. And if you have realized... don't avert your eyes from the truth. Averting your eyes and running away isn't going to solve anything. Nothing will change, and nothing will return to the way it was."

It will solve nothing. Nothing will change. Nothing will return to the way it was.

It was difficult to draw a breath. The sweat stung in his eyes.

"Shion, don't run away. At the very least, not now... you can't run away now."

He blinked. He caught Nezumi's gaze. He turned his head, and glanced at Safu.

"... You're saying she's not real... that she's an illusion."

"She's what the Mother is showing us: a virtual reality. Your friend doesn't exist in reality."

Doesn't exist in reality. What is that? What do those words mean?

Shion was close to screaming. Terror welled up from the core of his body. Safu had not run into his outstretched arms. She had not even tried to touch Shion's fingertips.

She had not been able to. She was neither able to embrace nor be embraced.

Doesn't exist in reality.

An incorporeal

illusion.

An incorporeal illusion.

Nezumi's tone became hurried, though only slightly. "At first I thought it was a trap. But I changed my mind when I realized there would be no point in setting a trap for us now. If it wanted to kill us, it had hundreds, thousands of opportunities to do so. It had a reason to keep us alive and bring us here. The Mother went as far as to borrow Safu's body because it needed to tell us something... that's what I was thinking. What I didn't expect was that it would send us on the task of killing the Mother itself."

"The Mother..." Shion glanced at the sphere covered in protrusions. "It's not the Mother," he shook his head. Nezumi's fingers loosened. "If the Mother had created the virtual image, it would have recreated it true to Safu. It wouldn't take the trouble to pull up the black sweater from Safu's memories. Computers don't have emotions. But Safu chose that sweater out of her own will. It wasn't the Mother... Nezumi, the Mother isn't the one showing Safu to us... it's Safu herself."

"So Safu is using the Mother to project herself?"

"Yeah... isn't that right, Safu? Or is this Elyurias' doing, too?" It sounded so unlike his own voice. Like a cowering beast baring its fangs, desperately raising its voice in aggression. That kind of growl. Twisted and ugly, and fierce but intimidated.

"Yes... Elyurias wakened me. Before then, I felt like I was drifting through a dream... just floating... Elyurias awakened my consciousness, and taught me what I could do. I... can't overrule the Mother. But I can use part of its functions... that's all I can do."

"Where are you? Where are you in reality?"

"Nowhere." Safu's voice turned strained. "I don't exist anywhere anymore."

"That's absurd. Then who made you, standing in front of me like this? Didn't you?"

"I'm not here, Shion. I've already..."

Safu took a step closer. Shion also advanced. He extended his arm straight forward. It touched nothing. His fingers had reached Safu's shoulder, but there was nothing there. Moments ago, he had felt Nezumi's body heat and pulse. That warmth and movement was proof that he was alive.

"I wanted to say good-bye to you. I wanted to say thank you. I was happy all this time... because you were there."

Safu looked up at Shion. A defiant glint shone in her eyes. "I loved you."

"Safu—"

"That's my truth. It doesn't matter what you think of me. I loved you, and only that is the truth."

Oh, that's Safu, Shion thought. Firmly-grounded strength, a beautiful resilience like that of a bird in flight: that was Safu.

"If I hadn't met you, I wouldn't have known what it was like to yearn after someone. I would never have known what it meant to love... I'm glad I was able to know. I was born, and I was able to meet you. I don't regret a single thing. Hm, well, that might be a little bravado. You did tell me once that I had a bad habit putting on a brave face."

Safu's fingers touched Shion's cheek. He didn't feel it on his skin. But he definitely did feel that Safu's fingers had touched him.

"Shion... you think so, too, don't you?"

Safu threw a glance over Shion's shoulder at Nezumi, who was standing behind him.

“You feel the same way I do, don’t you? You’re glad you were able to know. You wouldn’t be able to live anymore without knowing what yearning and love is like.”

“... Yeah.” *You’re right, Safu. I know. I came to know No. 6’s true face, and the fact that No. 6 existed within me, too. I came to know what it was like for my heart to feel moved for someone, to yearn strongly for someone. I can’t go back to when I didn’t know. I don’t want to go back. I would never want to go back to when I lived peacefully, knowing nothing.*

Shion clenched his hand into a hard fist to repress his shaking. But even his fist began to tremble.

“We don’t have to go back. There’s no need to. Safu, we just need to start off from when we do know. We can start off right now, from this place.”

It’s a starting point. A beginning, not an end. Right, Safu? We can go on living together. Together...

His eyes fell on the tubes coming out of the Mother.

What is that connected to?

What are those tubes for?

“Please,” Safu said, looking intently at Nezumi. “Destroy the Mother.”

Nezumi didn’t try to avoid Safu’s gaze. He met it silently, and nodded his assent. Safu breathed a sigh of relief. It was a breath of real relief, from the bottom of her heart.

“Thank you so much...”

“I’ll fulfil the promise. I never break a promise made, no matter what it is.”

“Yes... I know. You’re that kind of person, aren’t you?”

Nezumi faced the control panel again.

The section framed by silver lines glowed faintly red, and slid to the side.

The door had opened.

Nezumi plunged his arm into the opening without a second of hesitation. The control panel prevented him from leaning forward any further. The Mother was out of reach by a very small distance.

“Tsukiyo.”

A black mouse poked its head out from out of the folds of superfibre. It looked about, then scurried swiftly up to Nezumi’s shoulder.

“I’m counting on you.”

Nezumi held out the coin-shaped bomb, and Tsukiyo took it in its mouth.

“Nezumi, wait, Wait, please!”

“Can’t,” Nezumi said flatly. “I’m going to destroy the Mother. I’m not going to wait any longer.”

“Don’t. Wait, please. Wait. Let me check what’s on the other end of those tubes.”

“There’s no need.”

His gaze collided with Nezumi’s.

“... Are you saying you know? Where Safu is... and what’s on the end of those tubes...”

“You should know, too. You saw it, after all.”

It?

The expanse outside this room. It was like a cemetery with rows of transparent gravestones. Gravestones, or coffins? A burial vessel, each one with a human brain inside.

“Go.”

Tsukiyo dashed off at its master’s command. It leapt energetically toward the Mother, and landed on top of it.

“Alright, good. Now wedge it right there.”

Tsukiyo's movements were swift and smooth. It wedged the coin bomb between two projections, lifted its head, and twitched its nose toward Nezumi as if to wait for further orders.

"Good job."

Tsukiyo hopped into Nezumi's open palm. As he withdrew his arm, the door to the Mother closed in the same silent way that it had opened. Shion watched the events unfold before him stock-still, rooted to the ground.

Nezumi's eyes looked past Shion.

"Done. Time limit is three minutes. That's the longest I can set the timer for."

"Three minutes... get away, quickly." Safu's tone and gaze tensed. Shion looked from Nezumi to Safu.

"If we're going to escape, you're going to be coming with us."

"Shion, how many times will you make me repeat myself? I can't go. You and Nezumi escape together."

"Safu."

"Go. You don't have a second to waste. Hurry."

When they were students, they had been required to present research for their assignments once a month. When it was Safu's turn to present, some students with the same research topic had made noise and disrupted her on purpose. Even before Shion could stand up to admonish them, Safu had looked straight at those students and thrown a sharp remark.

"You should be ashamed."

The boy who had been at the centre of the noise-making stood up, and scowled exaggeratedly. "We should be ashamed? Are you insulting us?"

"I have no intention at all of insulting you. But regardless of the content, listening to others' research presentations until the end is common courtesy at the least, is it not? Even a three-year-old could do it. But you can't. Something to be ashamed of, isn't it?"

Applause rose from various spots in the classroom. The boy bit his lip, and resumed his seat in silence.

Her slightly flushed cheeks, her wilful gaze, the line of her tightly-drawn chin—the same Safu from that day was standing right in front of him. But he couldn't touch her. He couldn't even escape with her.

That can't be.

"If you're in here—" Shion made a fist, and punched the column as hard as his strength allowed. "—I'll get you out. We're going together, Safu."

No matter what you may look like.

"Stop!" Safu shrieked. "Stop, stop. Anything but that!" She raised both her hands as if to block Shion's vision. "Anything but that... Shion, please. Just don't... don't do anything cruel like that... don't."

Safu was truly afraid. Fear radiated from her words and her gaze.

"If I was going to be seen by you like this... I would never have hoped for you. I wouldn't have wished to see you again."

"But Safu..."

"Shion, I'll say this again. I don't exist anymore, but I'm still trapped. It's painful. Very. I can't—I can't bear any more of this humiliation. So please, destroy the Mother. Set me free."

He couldn't think.

Numerous white lines ran through his head, cutting off the circuits of his thoughts.

"Come on." Nezumi pulled at his arm. "Safu, I want you to secure the escape route for us until the very last minute."

“I will.”

Safu broke into a run. She collided right into Shion. He instinctively tried to embrace her, but her body passed through him with no impact whatsoever. He didn’t even feel a faint breeze.

I’m an illusion. Nothing more than a mirage. This spoke to him more meaningfully than a million words put together.

Suddenly, an alarm went off. It rang out across the entire Correctional Facility.

Emergency alert. Emergency alert.

Level 5, Level 5.

Emergency evacuation. Emergency evacuation.

He pursued Safu with Nezumi still holding his arm. Half of his mind had ceased to work, and he could neither accept reality, nor make an appropriate judgment. He couldn’t even assess the current situation.

All three of us are escaping together. Me, Nezumi, Safu—three of us, alive, in the flesh. We’re running to stand underneath the sun again. Yes, that has to be it.

The cogwheels creaked in his head. Emitting a strange metallic sound, they turned, stopped, turned backwards, and stopped again.

Creak creak creak, creak creak creak...

His torn thought circuits mended once, then were cut apart and scattered asunder; then they solidified, and turned sticky.

All three of us are escaping. We’ll be able to get out. We can get away. We can go back to that place I yearn for again.

I yearn, I yearn, I yearn, I yearn... for that place that has burned itself into my eyes, engraved itself into my soul. Not No. 6, of course, but that room. The place that brought me back to life, and allowed me to be born again.

I want to show Safu that room, where Nezumi lives.

Safu, you wouldn't believe this place. There's almost nothing in it apart from books. There's a chair. There's a kerosene heater, a bed... and the little mice. Just those. You'll probably stand there in astonishment, open your eyes wide, and look around the place again and again. You'd reach out and gently place your fingers on the piles of books. And then... and then, what would you do? Would you smile? Would you cry out in awe? Would you be so overwhelmed that you would only stand dazed?

Then, I'd tell you: 'This was my starting point.'

That room was where I started off. I took a cautious step out of the bounds of my ignorance, led along by Nezumi. Like a baby who touches the outside world for its first time, I stepped out into a world I didn't know about. I want to show that place to you. I want you to see it, too.

Oh, and Inukashi. I need to introduce Inukashi to you. He's the greatest—such a jovial and wonderful person. You could probably get friendly with him in no time. Inukashi can really understand, you know. He can sniff out the true nature of people. No matter how well you disguise yourself, he always notices the arrogance and foolishness under your disguise.

'I have a good nose, particularly when it comes to the smell of rot. It can be meat, leftover food, or someone's rotten intentions, but I'll smell it out in no time. Can't hide nothing from me.'

He said that to me once, and he's right. Inukashi will sniff out anything. It's pretty amazing. And that's why I think he'll like you. He definitely will. He'll twitch the tip of his nose, and he'll say:

'Hmmm. Shion, this girl is pretty fresh. She looks good to eat. I know for sure I wouldn't have to worry about getting food poisoning if I did.'

And he'll smirk. He has a very rough way of speaking, and—yeah, it'll probably surprise you until you get used to it... but Inukashi never lies. He won't turn against his own heart. He's someone you can trust with your whole being. You'll come to understand and accept the way he is.

Ha ha, I can almost imagine you stretching your hand out to Inukashi, and him taking it gingerly with a sullen look on his face. And I'd probably be watching, trying not to laugh.

Then, there's Rikiga-san. He's quite older, and he and my mother actually knew each other. Isn't that a surprise?

Rikiga-san also has a rough way of speaking. He also has bad drinking habits. He's a big drinker, and he'll drink for almost the entire day. Nezumi and Inukashi always tease him about that. But I listen to the way they tease him, and it's sometimes so harsh I feel bad for him. It's true that he drinks too much, though. But—how would I describe it?—he has his own likeable traits. Rikiga-san has his own passions and emotions, too, and I can feel them from him. He's the type of person that doesn't exist in No. 6. You'd agree, right? There's no one in that city who would show their emotions so openly. Nezumi says that all that drinking has loosened Rikiga's stopper on his emotions to the point that they're constantly gushing out into the open for everyone to see... and yes, Nezumi's got quite a sharp tongue too. One that would match Inukashi's.

There's also a girl named Kalan. That's right, she has the same name as my mother. She's the first friend I made in the West Block. She's still a little girl, but she's strong and smart with a sense of pride. She loves picture books, and I've read them aloud to her lots of times. It had been so long since I read picture books.

And above all, I have to tell you about Nezumi. I want you to know about him. Four years ago on a stormy night, I met him. Ever since then, I feel like I've been captured by him. When I'm with him, I lose sight of myself. No, that's not it. I'm illuminated vividly. Maybe I'm blinded for an instant because that light is so bright. That's how much my vision had deteriorated. It was so weak, I couldn't even discern myself, my surroundings, or the truth. Safu, his—Nezumi's gaze and words pierce me. They shoot through me, batter me, and save me. By his hands, I was

melted, wrought anew, and instilled with new life.

Safu, Safu you are my one and only, irreplaceable friend. You're an important friend, and no one else could compare.

Is that word so cruel? Is the love you have for me, and the feelings I have for you forever parallel, with no chance of intersecting?

Why are you such a kid?

You seemed weary when you said that. And you're right. I'm so immature, I'm embarrassed at myself. I can't restrain my emotions. If only I could love you the way you wished me to... my one and only, so dear to me...

The cogwheels turned. They continued to jerk, producing an unpleasant sound.

Creak creak creak, creak creak creak...

All three of us are escaping. I know we can get out.

They slipped hastily past the cylindrical columns. It was still and quiet. Only two sets of footsteps—Nezumi's and Shion's—echoed.

The crimson door opened. They could see the deserted hallway. The three doors were completely shut, and there was no sign of any human presence.

Safu's feet stopped.

"Go, hurry." She pointed straight at the elevator. "I'll operate it for as long as I can, up to the time limit."

"Gotcha." Nezumi stepped into the hallway. He was still holding onto Shion's arm.

"Safu, you too."

"This is as far as I'll go. Shion, thank you, and good-bye. Nezumi, you as well." Safu smiled.

The door closed again.

"Safu, wait, Safu—"

"Shion."

He was grabbed by the shoulder, and forced to turn around. A fist dug into his stomach.

“Gh—” he could hear himself emit a low groan. His body sank, and collapsed into Nezumi’s arms. He didn’t lose consciousness, but for an instant, his limbs went numb. He could not move.

He was being dragged to the elevator. He could feel Nezumi’s laboured breathing and the beating of his heart. The elevator opened as if to summon them inside. Nezumi muttered something. Shion couldn’t hear. He tripped, staggered, and they tumbled into the elevator with Nezumi still holding onto Shion.

The elevator descended rapidly.

The security alarm was still going off.

Emergency alert. Emergency alert.

Level 5. Level 5.

Emergency evacuation. Emergency evacuation.

All personnel, evacuate immediately.

Level 5. Level 5.

Emergency evacuation. Emergency evacuation.

“—Safu,” Shion choked, still thrown out onto the floor. Nezumi also crouched, breathing raggedly.

I can’t stand any more, he thought. Both his body and soul had withered. They were withered dry, yet so heavy. He felt like lead had been poured into him, down to the tips of his hair. He couldn’t move anything.

“Don’t... make noise yet.” Nezumi’s voice. It was coming from somewhere high above his head. Echoing somewhere far, far in the distance.

Nezumi, what am I here for? Why am I here, collapsed in weakness, unable to move? Where is Safu? Why did you leave her? Tell me. ‘Don’t cling

onto to others. Grasp your own answers,' you'd probably say. You scorn people who cling to others too easily. I feel shame at my weakness. But this time, please just tell me the answer. Give me the correct one.

Why am I here? Why am I here, having left Safu behind? Tell me. Tell me, Nezumi.

I cling to you.

The elevator came to an abrupt stop, and his body was thrown up by the impact, and flung across the floor again. The door opened partway, and then ceased to move. The lights went out.

He could hear thunder from far-off. A second impact hit him shortly afterwards. It was much heavier than the first one.

Thunder? No. It's nothing like that. This is—

An explosion jammed his ears. Darkness bore down on him.

Holding his hands over his ears, Shion raised a voiceless cry.

The elevator closed. It began its descent.

Safu stood silently, watching it leave.

Suddenly, a gentle voice rang out in her ears.

"It's you, Elyurias." Her eyes roved, but of course, she saw nothing. She could not see, but she could feel.

Safu, was this the right thing to do? Are you truly satisfied?

Safu tilted her head in uncertainty. She put a hand to her chest. Tears sprang unexpectedly into her eyes.

I want to raise my voice and cry.

Shion—Shion, you're gone.

You came all the way here for me. I thought that would be enough, but what am I feeling? What is this rush of emotion?

Shion, Shion, why is he the one beside you? Why isn't it me? Why did fate not allow me to live alongside you? If he wasn't here, would you have loved me instead?

You may not have been able to live together, but you could have died together.

Safu lifted her face, and clasped her hands together at her breast.

Safu, you did not wish for that?

In truth, in truth, had I wished... that you would die with me, that you would expire here with me... Shion?

She shook her head. She did not wish for that. Even now, she did not wish for it a tiny bit. She wanted him to be alive. She wanted him to live, and change this world. She wanted him to create a world in which no one was forced to die such an unfair death.

Shion, live. Live out your life. Please.

“Elyurias, what will you do?”

Me? What will I do...?

“Yes. You’ve been set free, too. What will you do from here?”

Laughter rang out. It sounded like the wind crossing a grassy plain.

You watch and see what I will do.

Safu shuddered. It was no breeze from the plains; she felt like she was being hit by a frigid wind mixed with sleet. A chill wind, signalling the arrival of the coldest days of the winter.

Safu, I liked you. Perhaps... perhaps my meeting a human like you will prove to mean very much to me.

“What do you mean?”

I wonder what? Oh, it's time. I must go. Good-bye, Safu.

“Good-bye.”

Yes, it was time. Safu closed her eyes. She felt the warm rays of the sun and smelled the fragrance of the trees. She was able to let a faint smile play on her lips.

2

I'VE DONE

*"I've done with fancies, imaginary terrors and phantoms!
Life is real! haven't I lived just now? [...] The Kingdom of Heaven to her—[...]
Now for the reign of reason and light... and of will, and of strength...
and now we will see! We will try our strength!"*

DOSTOYEVSKY, CRIME AND PUNISHMENT

LILI WAS sleeping. She breathed softly, lying on the tattered sofa at the back of the shop.

She was in a fetal position, and with her furrowed brow and her pursed lips, she looked anything but peaceful. Tear streaks still stood out on her face. Out of anxiety, perhaps, she had curled up into a ball, clutching tightly onto the blanket Karan had covered her with.

"Lili... poor thing." Karan smoothed the blanket's wrinkles out. Lili's lips moved imperceptibly.

"Daddy... don't go," she mumbled in her sleep. Her fingers closed tightly around a corner of the blanket.

Tears sprang into Karan's eyes, and she hurriedly pressed her fingers to her tear ducts. Crying would not do anything. Tears had never

solved anything for her; she had wept herself dry when Shion had disappeared.

She had wept, and wept, and wept. Certainly, there were times when her tears supported her. Sometimes, crying allowed her to change her mindset and take a step towards tomorrow. She had numerous such experiences. Karan had no intentions of dismissing or being ashamed of her tears.

But this time, it was different.

I have to protect this little girl. I can't sit here and cry. I have to become stronger.

Karan gently stroked Lili's hair. She had to protect Lili from any sort of peril. *I won't let her be sad any longer. I won't let her suffer. I couldn't protect Shion; I couldn't protect Safu. But because of that, I have to protect Lili with all it takes.*

I've been given almost no power at all: no power to change the world; no power to ward off the rain of misfortune; no power to save the ones I love. I am weak, but I am not powerless. There is still a little strength left inside me. I'll use that strength to open my arms wide, and become a shield to the ones weaker and more fragile than me.

"Daddy... daddy... I'm scared."

Karan kissed Lili softly on her forehead. "Lili, it's okay. It's going to be alright."

There was a knock.

Someone was knocking at the shop door in an apologetic but hurried manner. Every time she heard a knock, Karan's heart used to soar at the idea of Shion coming home. She used to be overcome with the urge to run up to the door. Now, she was calm enough to tilt a cautious ear to the sound of the door being struck.

It wasn't because she had lost hope. As a mother, her hope for her son's return was firmly rooted in her heart.

Reunion will come.

It was Nezumi's message. That short letter was hope itself. Hope brought ease and resolution back to Karan. It bid her to be calm. It gave her something to believe in.

Reunion will come.

Yes, that's right. You'll definitely come home some day, Shion. Definitely. Karan stood and crept up to the door.

"Karan, aren't you home? It's me," said a somewhat tired male voice. It was Yoming, the elder brother of Lili's mother, Renka. He was Lili's only uncle and one of her few blood relatives.

"Hold on a minute, Yoming. I'll open it now." She pulled the blinds up and unlocked the door. A tall man entered on unsteady feet. He looked even more exhausted than he sounded.

"How's Renka?" she asked as she closed the door. The man had sunken into a chair. According to him, Renka had worked herself into a panic over worrying about her husband, who had not returned home from work.

"I gave her tranquilizers and finally got her to sleep. She cried and screamed... it was horrible. I never imagined that she'd bawl like that. She's a little tougher most of the time."

"She must be worried sick."

"You bet. No matter how long she kept waiting, Getsuyaku never came home. He didn't show up on his usual bus, nor on the one after that. This is the first time this has happened since they got married. She figured something had happened to him, and she didn't know what to do. It was all she could think about. I told her to calm down, but she wouldn't listen to anything I said... it was a pity to watch."

“But someone would call if something happened at his workplace, right? If there hasn’t been a call, then . . .”

Yoming shook his head weakly. The bags under his eyes grew more pronounced, and the creases deepened between his eyebrows.

“I don’t know where he works. I have no idea where to call, or who to ask questions to. Getsuyaku didn’t even tell his own family where he was working.”

“His workplace? Even Renka doesn’t know?”

“Yeah, she said she has no idea. She’d questioned Getsuyaku before, soon after they’d gotten married, but he didn’t give an answer. He said he wasn’t doing anything shady, but he couldn’t say on corporate orders. He begged her not to ask because he’d get fired for telling her. Renka said she had no choice but to close her mouth after that. His salary wasn’t exactly high, but Getsuyaku made more than the average Lost Town resident, and he used to hand it all to his wife. Renka eventually stopped being bothered by Getsuyaku’s workplace, and reckoned that he’d tell her when the time was right. She had Lili, and another baby was on the way. Sure, it bothered her, but a stable means of living was her main concern. So she turned a blind eye. The result— this.”

“But what kind of workplace would you have to keep secret from your own family?”

“Where do you think?” Yoming looked up at Karan. A sharp light glinted for a moment in his bloodshot eyes. Karan swallowed. Secrets, concealment, silence.

“The Correctional Facility.” As soon as the words slid off her tongue, a bitter taste spread inside her mouth. She knew it was an illusion, but it was bitter enough to make her shudder.

“Yes, that’s what I think, too. I don’t have evidence, but I’m almost positive it’s there. Getsuyaku was working at the Correctional Facility.

Of course, it probably wasn't such an important department. But a workplace that needs to enforce a gag law right to the bottom rungs of its organization... yeah, that place is the only possibility."

"But... even if Getsuyaku-san did work for the Correctional Facility, he still came home every day at the same time, right?"

"Yeah. He left home and came back every day on the minute, like clockwork. But today, no matter how long she waited, he never came home. And on top of that..." Yoming hesitated to speak.

"Did something happen?"

Yoming extracted a small bag from his breast pocket, and emptied its contents into the palm of his hand. Karan held her breath.

"Oh my, gold coins."

Three gold coins. One gold coin amounted to about half a year's worth of wages for Lost Town residents. Three gold coins. It was an enormous sum.

"Getsuyaku gave them to her."

"Heavens, how did he come by such a large amount of money?"

"Renka asked him the same thing. But knowing her, she probably interrogated him, more like."

"And Getsuyaku-san?"

"He didn't give her a clear answer. He said it wasn't shady money, and kept repeating that it was legitimate payment. In the end, it was left in the dark. It's just that... afterwards, Renka overheard him saying to himself that it should be enough to sustain them for a good while. Renka's insisting that Getsuyaku meant that they would be okay if he disappeared. As for me, I don't think she's being delusional."

"Did Getsuyaku-san feel some kind of... premonition that something would happen to him?"

"I suppose. Renka says he'd been acting strange these past couple of days. He seemed to be lost and afraid of something, and there would often be times like yesterday, when he'd be dazed and unresponsive."

"It seems like Lili had the same feeling. She was very worried about Getsuyaku-san." Karan's voice trembled at the end of her words. Her heart pounded frantically.

A large amount of money with no identifiable source; an utterance predicting his failure to return; his inscrutable behaviour—it all smelled of destruction. She could understand why Renka had become upset, unable to bear her anxiety. Adding to this fact was that Renka had witnessed her previous husband's sudden and mysterious death.

The same thing will happen again.

That thought would make her fear and anxiety burgeon. Renka's household with Getsuyaku was her small paradise, attained at last after a hard struggle with her daughter. For her to have it wrenched from her, for her to lose it all again—it was too cruel.

Yoming suddenly stood up. He began pacing inside the small store. His footsteps echoed.

"Are they linked?" His footsteps almost drowned out his low voice, now almost a mumble.

"Hm? What did you say?"

Yoming's feet stopped abruptly. He turned his body to stand in front of Karan. His face was tense, but his flushed cheeks betrayed his excitement.

"Is there a link between the incident with Getsuyaku and the incidents in No. 6? What do you think, Karan?"

"No, why, there's no way—"

"—that could be true? Are you sure?" Yoming's eyes harboured a feverish dull light. In a matter of minutes, his whole countenance had

changed. Or had Yoming simply showed a side of him he had kept hidden before?

"If Getsuyaku wasn't able to come home, it wasn't from personal reasons. You know him; if it was, he would definitely contact his family somehow. Right now, he's in a situation where he can't contact them even if he wanted to. Maybe he's completely forbidden to make contact with anyone."

"You mean he's been detained somewhere?"

"Yes. But if he was detained, there would be some kind of notice to his family from the Security Bureau. At least, that's how it's been up until now. But there hasn't been any contact. If his workplace happened to be the Correctional Facility... can't we say that maybe some abnormal incident has occurred there?"

Correctional Facility. Safu was probably taken there, and Shion was likely there as well.

"It's not only the Correctional Facility... hey, Karan. Right now, this city, No. 6, is undergoing a huge shift. You feel it too, right?"

"Yes," Karan said hesitantly.

Yoming resumed walking. Click, click, click. His footsteps rang out more loudly, more incessantly. "Holy City citizens are dropping dead left and right. The authorities aren't trying to deal with it. In fact, they can't. No one knows what to do. This is probably the first time something like this has happened. No. 6 was the ultimate utopian city, called Holy City by people, even—and it's crumbling. By tomorrow, it may be completely gone."

"Yoming, you're getting ahead of yourself. It can't possibly be—"

"No, I know," Yoming interrupted Karan firmly, and a smile crossed his lips. "There's a horror circling within this city, a horror no one's experienced before. It's the horror of having your life threatened. Soon, it'll turn into discontent towards the city authorities. In fact,

the discontent has swelled up so much, it's probably almost bursting by now. Citizens were used to obeying and accepting the false prosperity thrust upon them, but now they've woken up. They've woken up, and realized what an unfair and confining world they've lived in. Yes, yes, they've finally awoken. And they're nearly out of their wits panicking. Goodness knows why they didn't try to wake up sooner. No one tried to look at the truth."

"Yoming..." Karan took one step back. Yoming appeared not to notice Karan's unease. He looked like he had forgotten about Getsuyaku and his only younger sister, Renka, as well. Getsuyaku, Renka, Lili, and Karan. Jarred by the tumult of his emotions, Yoming was not able to spare a thought to any individual person around him.

Karan knew people with eyes like these.

It was a long, long time ago, when Karan was young. No. 6 had not even developed its outline. Those people were carried away with their words and ideals; their gazes smouldered with passion and their voices were ablaze. They blinded others with their brilliance, but they were also terrifying. Humans were nowhere to be found at the other end of their heated gaze. They discoursed of ideals, but they were barely interested in people. Perhaps they had not even realized that they no longer regarded the existence of humans. They spoke of the foundation of the ideal city as something of the near future, and yet humans never factored into those thoughts... it was unnerving.

Karan gradually distanced herself from them. She was afraid of being with them. She was afraid of their gaze. Those men were people who gradually went on to build the foundation of No. 6, and yet she found them terrifying, unnerving, and hard to relate to.

Terrifying, unnerving...

They had similar eyes. Those men discussed the creation of the utopian city. The man in front of her spoke of its destruction. They stood on

opposite ends, and yet they had similar eyes.

"Karan, this is our opportunity. Our one in a thousand chances of choking the life out of this artificial Holy City. Who knew it would come so soon?" he chuckled. "Even heaven has turned its back on No. 6."

Yoming stopped and began to laugh out loud. Karan felt a chill. She felt her back tense with cold.

"Yoming... what are you thinking? What are you planning to do?"

Yoming's eyes shifted aside, and his eyes trained on Karan.

"What am I trying to do? Hmm... well, Karan, I guess I can tell you everything. You're almost like one of us anyway."

"One of you...?"

"There are many people like me in this city who have had their family torn from them ruthlessly. You're one of those people too, aren't you?"

She had no choice but to answer 'yes'. She had certainly been ruthlessly and suddenly torn apart from her son.

"It was almost impossible to make contact with each other because the authorities were so strict with their surveillance. It's almost a miracle that you and I were able to meet and talk freely like this. By coincidence you happened to be friendly with Renka as a neighbour, and that must've worked in our favour. But with this commotion, their surveillance should be even more lax. The authorities have probably got their hands full dealing with the emergency. We're going to penetrate that gap. Just watch, Karan."

"Yoming!" Karan said shrilly. "Answer me. What are you planning to do?"

"Shh, don't raise your voice," Yoming warned. "Be cautious. We can't let our guard down yet. Look here, listen carefully. Soon, I'm going to use the electronic information network to call on the citizens. I'll

tell them: the authorities are going to watch their people die, and do nothing about it. Instead of taking any effective steps to battle the emergency, they're just twiddling their thumbs and watching their citizens perish. Let's all storm the Moondrop. We have to drag the mayor out. The higher-ups intend to give themselves a special vaccine so that only they survive. We can't let that happen. That's what I'll say."

"Wait, what special vaccine? Does that exist?"

"I don't know."

"You don't know... you mean it doesn't exist, then?" Karan said incredulously.

"We have no time to be worrying about whether it exists or not. But don't you think it's a likely story?"

"That's much too vague to circulate... Yoming, do you plan on releasing a false story to cause an uproar among the people?"

"Yes," said Yoming promptly. "The citizens' discontent is reaching an all-time high. This will hit the spot. It's the last drop that'll burst the entire dam. Karan, think about it: the majority of No. 6's citizens are going to gather in droves to the Moondrop, their faces drawn in anger and fear. What a sight it'll be. Just thinking about it makes me shiver in glee."

"No, stop. You mustn't do that."

"I mustn't? Why not? Why are you saying things like that?"

"People will die." Karan looked straight into Yoming's face and spoke slowly, as if to chew on each and every word. Her tongue felt heavy and sluggish. A part of her head felt numb. "Many people will die. Yoming, don't tell me you can't imagine what will happen. What will the authorities do to that mob of people? You shouldn't even need to think about it; they'll try to suppress them with brute force. No. 6—this city-state—never, ever forgives people who rebel against

it. They'll try to suppress each and every person with the military... with military force... Yoming, you understand, don't you? You understand, very, very well."

Yoming looked away from Karan and sighed.

"But if tens of thousands of citizens storm in, even the authorities will have no way to deal with it. Only an army would be able to handle that."

"And what if they mobilize the army?" Karan raised her voice.

"Don't be foolish. No. 6 doesn't have an army. Every type of military force is forbidden by the Babylon Treaty."

Yoming closed his mouth. His jaw was rigid and taut. Karan felt like laughing.

No. 6, honour the treaty? How can you say such rubbish when you don't even believe in it? Were you always the sort to speak so easily what you didn't mean? Yoming, you told me once: this city devours people ruthlessly. Weren't you fighting against the ruthless state who refused to treat humans like humans? Weren't you fighting to honour people's lives?

"People will die," she repeated. And she would repeat it as many times as she had to. "If the civilians and the army collide, lots of... lots of blood will be spilled. You can't let that happen. Yoming, think. All those people who will die—they have families of their own. They have people whom they love. They have family, like Lili here, or Renka. You can't murder them."

"It can't be helped." Yoming's mutter put a stop to Karan's words. For a moment, she didn't understand what had been said to her.

"What? What did you say?"

"Karan, the world is about to change. People will be sacrificed, but we can't help it. Nothing will change if we keep fearing bloodshed."

"Yoming... are you insane?"

“Am I insane? Of course not. I’m not the one that’s insane; it’s them, No. 6. I’ve got my wits about me, and I’m not afraid. Even if I were to lose my life now, I’d have no regrets. I only have to accomplish what I set out to do. Yes, I know my death won’t be in vain. For the founding of a new world, I would gladly offer my life. I’d become the stone upon which the new world stands... a true hero.”

Do you need sacrifice to found a new world? Must you offer up lives? A world that seeks sacrificial offerings is just the same—just the same as the Holy City you’re so desperately trying to destroy. It’s not new at all. Not a single thing will change.

She felt a tightness in her chest. Her breathing grew ragged, her words were thrown into disarray, and she gasped for air.

“Do you think your wife... do you think she would have wanted you to die... all those people to die?”

“My wife... you’re right, I’ll finally be able to avenge my wife and son. They’re probably overjoyed.”

“Yoming, your wife wouldn’t want revenge. I’m sure she definitely wouldn’t want you to die. Snap out of it, please. Peace won’t come from vengeance. Hatred only gives birth to more hatred. You have to keep living.”

Yoming’s eyes hardened. Wrath flared within them.

“Karan... why are you stopping me? Are you not one of us? Are you siding with No. 6?”

“No one said I was. I’m just—”

“Enough.” Yoming strode swiftly to the door, and put a hand on the doorknob. “Karan, I’m disappointed. I thought we could have understood each other more. It’s such a shame. I’ve lost hope in you.”

“Yoming,” Karan protested.

“In time, you’ll realize how right I was. And when that time comes, celebrate for me. I’ll forgive you.”

I'm right, I'm right. There is no way I could be wrong. Once a man completely believed that he was right, that he would never err, he was already wrong.

"Look out for Lili and Renka for me. I probably won't be able to see them for a while." The door opened. The wind blew in. She could see the darkness. The sun had already set, and a breeze crawled across the ground. The man's tall figure disappeared into the wind and darkness. The door closed, and only the scent of nighttime remained.

Karan had crumpled to the floor. She covered her face with her hands, and screwed her eyes shut. She felt dizzy. She felt ill.

"Ma'am," called a girl's thin voice. Lili had sat up on the sofa and was watching Karan. "What's wrong?"

"Lili... no, it's nothing, dear."

"Really? Is there really nothing wrong?" Lili held her hands out. Karan embraced her, blanket and all. Her tiny body was trembling.

"It's alright, it's alright. You have nothing to worry about. It'll be alright," she murmured slowly as if in song. Lili's trembling stopped, and her quick breathing calmed down again.

"Daddy isn't home yet."

"No, he isn't. He must have had a busy day at work."

"Ma'am, I'm gonna go home. I have to stay with Mommy. I can't leave poor Mommy by herself."

"My, Lili." *Yoming, do you see this? Your niece is so young, so weak, and yet she's still concerned about her mother. In her own way, she's trying to protect those who are important to her. There are many children out there like Lili. We can't make them suffer. We can't take their loved ones away. Please, let no one be killed. Don't die, Yoming. Don't be killed.*

"Lili, your mother is asleep right now. Let her rest for a while. We'll wait a bit, and then go and call on your mother, alright? For now, we have to wait here for your father."

“Here at your bakery, ma’am?”

“Yes. We have bread here—fresh bread and milk, and a little fruit. I know! Let’s have a party with the three of us. When your father comes home, he can join.”

“A party?” Lili blinked. A faint blush crept into her cheeks. “I’d love a party.”

“Right? I can’t bake a cake now, but I do have some muffins. I also have some chocolate cookies left over, and I think I had some marshmallows, too. Lili, would you arrange them on a plate nicely?”

“Yeah! I’ll do it, I wanna do it!”

“Then I’ll leave it up to you. We’ll arrange everything nicely, get prepared for the party, and then we’ll go call on your mother together. Renka would be happy, right?”

“She’ll sure be happy!” Lili said ecstatically. “Mommy likes your muffins as much as I do . . . oh, Cravat!”

“Hm? Cravats?” Karan instinctively glanced at the display case, which had barely anything left inside. She had not sold out; rather, she had not been able to bake a decent amount of pastries or bread in the first place. Her usual supplier had not come. Stores everywhere had closed their doors. She was running low on flour, sugar, butter, and oil. If she continued without replenishing her stock, she would run out within a few days. Karan had no choice but to close her shop.

The distribution chain was crumbling.

“Lili, I haven’t made any cravats,” she said aloud, and realized immediately that Lili was not talking about the pastry. It was Cravat, the small brown mouse.

“—No,” Lili exhaled. Disappointment etched her face. “I thought I saw Cravat, but it was just me.”

“Do you want to see Cravat, Lili?”

"Yeah. I really like that little mouse. He has such beautiful eyes, and he's so soft and warm when you hold him in your hand. I like him lots and lots. Ma'am, where does Cravat live?"

"Hmm... I wonder where."

"You don't know either, ma'am?"

"I don't, unfortunately. I have no idea."

"Oh," Lili said. "You know, I really wanna go see Cravat's house. I feel like it would be so much fun. There are probably lots of other little mice beside Cravat, too, right?"

"Hmm, I think you're right. I feel like it would be like that."

Cravat's destination and his home—that's where my son is.

Shion, what are you doing now? How are you doing? Are you with Nezumi? You, Nezumi, and Safu are all alive, right? I can't do anything for you. I know I'm undependable, but these hands don't reach far enough to touch you.

Live, Shion. Please cherish your life. Treat your life and the lives of others with compassion.

Reunion will come.

Yes, of course. We will not be beaten. No matter how dire the situation, we'll live to meet again.

"Ma'am, I'll get the plates."

"That would be great, dear. I want you to get the big painted plate at back of the cabinet. There are tea cups and a tea pot that match. Can you find them?"

"I will. Leave it to me!" Lili bounded up to the cabinet on light feet.

Karan placed a hand on her chest, and quietly took several deep breaths.

No matter what, we will survive. We'll reach the end of our lives, not as glorious heroes whose names will remain beyond our time, but as ones who have lived modestly. We'll hold in our hands a life not forced upon us, but a life we decided for ourselves.

That will be our victory.

Right, Shion? Right, Nezumi?

* * *

“How long do we have to stay like this for?” Rikiga stifled a yawn. He fished out a flat metal bottle from his jacket pocket. The stench of alcohol stung Inukashi’s nose.

“That stinks. What’s in there?” he asked as he pinched his nose.

“Do you want to know?” Rikiga flashed a vulgar grin, and lightly shook the bottle. Inukashi could hear liquid sloshing inside.

“I don’t even have to ask. It stinks of cheap booze. Ugh, that smell! Makes me wanna throw up.” He pulled his face into a scowl. It was no act. The bottle was not even open, but the nauseating odour radiating from it assaulted his nose.

“Don’t ask if you already know,” Rikiga said.

“I was bored, alright?” Inukashi retorted. “Unfortunately for me, the only person I have to talk to is an alcoholic geezer. Can’t start a conversation without a topic, right? I’m doing a lot of work on my end here.”

“You have your dogs.” Rikiga jerked his chin underneath the desk. A large black dog was stretched out on the floor. In a corner of the room, there were also three dogs lounging in various comfortable positions. The small mice were curled up and asleep on the back of a black and white patched dog. In a way, it was a peaceful pastoral scene.

Rikiga did not seem to take a liking to this, for he furrowed his brow and growled.

"Take your choice of the dogs or the mice as your conversational pals. They suit you."

"It's important for them to get their rest. I don't wanna disturb 'em."

"Hah, talking big, huh? As if this room wasn't small enough with the dogs taking over the space. I'm human; why do I have to curl up in this tiny chair?"

"It's a matter of rank."

"Rank?"

"I mean class. I'm just saying that my dogs are at a much higher level than a drunk man blinded by greed."

"You go on saying what you will. You're just an underdog howling about its loss." Rikiga shrugged, and emptied the contents of the bottle into his mouth.

"Underdog? Old man, don't tell me you're waving your white flag already. Let me tell you something: if we've come this far and we lose, it means—" Inukashi cut himself off, and reached for the bag on top of the desk. Rikiga glared at him with bloodshot eyes.

"If we lose, it means what? Stop being mysterious about it. Or have you just forgotten how to speak like a proper human? Ha ha ha, Inukashi, you're becoming closer to a dog every day. Soon you'll grow a tail, turn furry, and start prowling around on your hands and feet. Ha ha ha!"

Inukashi glanced at Rikiga's flushed face, and clicked his tongue softly.

"Become a dog? Bring it on. I couldn't wish for anything better. If I could turn into a dog by praying, I'd pray to any God out there." He was almost serious.

If I were to be reincarnated, would I choose to be a dog or a human? What

would I say if someone—or even God—asked me? I would probably puzzle over it, unable to come up with an answer.

He could not say that humans were loftier or more decent than dogs. Inukashi knew of both the noble souls of dogs and the foolish hearts of humans. Dogs only sought food enough to keep them alive, but human greed knew no boundaries. Once a man's belly was full, he desired wealth; when he had wealth, he desired more wealth and power. Were not dogs more intelligent and sound in judgment? They knew when they were fulfilled, whereas humans continued clawing for more and more.

Rikiga burped rudely.

"They're more intelligent than this old man, at least."

"Huh? Did you say something?"

"Nothing. I was just speaking in Dog."

"Hah. So, what was that? If we lose, what will happen to us?"

"We'll become like Getsuyaku."

Rikiga's hand froze, his bottle poised mid-air. Whiskey spilled from the mouth and splashed on the floor.

"We'll turn into corpses and be dragged across ground," Inukashi continued. "Or maybe we'll be dragged across the ground before we become corpses. Either way, it doesn't make much of a difference. Right?"

"Right," Rikiga answered. He twisted the cap tightly on the bottle, and tossed it back into his pocket. He seemed to be remembering Getsuyaku getting shot through the chest, and his sagging cheeks began to tremble.

Rikiga was afraid of death. Inukashi didn't have the heart to sneer at him and call him a coward. Inukashi was afraid of death as well. He was afraid of it more than anything.

Getsuyaku had died almost immediately, with next to no suffering. In a sense, his last moments were lucky. For Inukashi, who had seen countless grisly deaths, a painless death was like a gift from heaven. If he was going to die anyway, he wanted to die without pain. But if it was possible for him to survive, he wanted to do anything he could to live. If only death awaited at the end of his suffering, he wanted none of it. But if suffering meant he could live, he could bear it. He would endure, and live on.

He did not want to become like Getsuyaku.

I won't become like Getsuyaku. I won't let No. 6 kill me so easily. I'd like to see them try to hunt me down.

He drew the zipper on the bag, and examined its contents. Two foldable automatic rifles. A few grenades and magazines of ammunition. All were outdated secondhand items.

"Pathetic," Inukashi muttered under his breath with a sigh. Rikiga didn't miss it.

"If you've got complaints about it, secure us some supplies yourself," he said indignantly. "How hard do you think I had to work to prepare that many weapons, huh? Tell me where in the West Block I would be able to buy the latest photon or electric gun, or a controlled-detonation automatic microbomb. I'd like you to introduce me to those suppliers if you've got contacts."

"Huh, well I thought getting weapons would be nothing with mighty Mr. Rikiga's connections and networks. I guess I overestimated you. What a disappointment."

"Oh, there's nothing that delights me more than Eve or you being disappointed in me. I'm telling you never to expect anything from me again. I'd rather all the the women in the world get sick of me than you lot having expectations for me."

"No need to worry, the ladies are probably sick of you already." Inuka-

shi dismissed Rikiga's insult lightly, and began building the automatic rifle.

"Inukashi."

"What?"

"Do you know how to use a gun?"

"We'll see."

"Have you... well, it doesn't even have to be a person. Have you ever shot a dog or cat, even a rat?"

"I've been shot *at* before, by the old butcher guy. It was when I nicked a joint of meat. He flew into a rage and started firing his rifle. I almost came away with a hole in my forehead. Thank heavens I didn't."

"Well, that's unfortunate," Rikiga replied sarcastically. "Maybe a few holes would have aired out that brain of yours. Then you'd learn how to speak to people properly."

"Hah, well, too bad for you. As you can see, my skull is still chock full with brains. The old butcher, on the other hand, is probably turning into a rotting hunk of meat under the rubble."

"Did he die during the Hunt?"

"Yeah. Looked like his arm was torn clean off. I don't think he'd ever be able to fire a rifle with that."

Rikiga wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, and questioned Inukashi again. "So, what about you? Have you ever fired a gun, even once?"

"No."

Rikiga's pupils darted about. His uncertainty was apparent in his roving gaze.

"How about you, old man? Have you ever gone on a long romp with any of these ladies?"

“... I can't say I haven't. But let me tell you, my shooting skills are no better than a blindfolded monkey.”

“Stop being modest.”

“Besides, why did Eve make us prepare this? This is the hygiene management room. What does he plan to do, making us wait with these weapons?”

Inukashi suddenly spun around, gun in hand. He aligned the sight with the chest of the man sitting in front of him, and stood poised.

“This is it, old man.”

“What? H-Hey, Inukashi, what's this about?”

“This is what it's about. Relax, I won't miss. I'll send you underground in one shot.”

“H-Hey, idiot, stop it. I said stop!” Rikiga yelled, and sprang to his feet. His momentum made him stumble, and he fell to the floor.

“No, Inukashi. Have you gone insane? Stop!”

“Bang!” Inukashi pointed the barrel at the ceiling and grinned. “Oops. I forgot to load it.”

Rikiga looked up at him, curled up and gasping.

“Inukashi... don't you get carried away. What would you get out of teasing me, anyway?”

“It kills time. I just wanted to give you a little scare. I didn't realize you'd live up to my expectations this much. This is awesome.”

“Stop messing around, damnit!” Rikiga said angrily. “I'm not going to let some doggy boy get the better of me. I'm going home. I've had enough of being alone with you in this stinking place. I can't take it. I'm gone.” He appeared serious, for he stood up and made for the door.

“If you take one step out that door—” Inukashi aimed his gun again. “I'll shoot for real this time.”

“It’s not loaded.”

“Know a joke when you hear one,” Inukashi retorted. “Sure, I might not have any shooting experience. But even a blindfolded monkey can hit its target at point-blank range.”

Rikiga clucked his tongue. *Cluck cluck cluck*. Then he looked around, and gave a sigh.

“It’s dark.” Rikiga’s fat fingers felt for the light switch. The lights came on; they were bright, too bright for Inukashi’s eyes which were used to being guided by the moon or a candle. He had barely any time to blink when his gun was violently yanked from him. He staggered, took a step forward, and was struck across the face. For a moment, his mind went blank. This time, Inukashi was the one to land with his bottom on the floor.

Rikiga began to shower him with abuse.

“You good-for-nothing brat,” he roared. “As soon as I’m a little nice to you, you start thinking you’re entitled to everything.”

The black dog snarled menacingly as it got to its feet. The other dogs also acted swiftly. They circled around Rikiga, growling softly. The mice huddled in a corner of the room with a steady eye on the proceedings.

“Stupid mutts, don’t underestimate us humans. Come at me, but before you do, I’ll blow a hole through your master’s head.”

“Wow, old man. Those were some moves. Almost as fast as Nezumi, I’d say—but that would be giving you too much credit. Impressive. Ah, I see you in a whole new light now. You’re a fast drunkard, aren’t ya?”

“Go on saying all the crap you want. I’m actually angry now. I’d feel so much better if I could swing two or three punches into that face. Hmph, you better watch yourself.”

"Unfortunately—" Inukashi smiled wanly, and stuck his finger down the barrel. "There aren't any bullets in here after all, Mr. Rikiga." Then he whistled lightly. The tension in the dogs unravelled immediately, and they rolled onto their sides on the spot. The black dog wagged its bushy tail. No hint of its previous aggression remained.

"Did I go too far with my joke? Sorry, old man." He stood up and bowed his head to Rikiga. His battered cheek still burned.

"Goodness..." Rikiga threw his gun down onto the desk, and collapsed into a chair like a broken marionette. "What the hell are we doing here? In a place like this... forced to do nothing... only to sit still and wait..."

"Can't bear it?"

"If I said I couldn't, would you laugh?"

"Nah. I don't think I can bring myself to laugh, old man. I'm not in the position to. Which means I feel the same way."

"How, now. You and I are at a consensus for the first time."

"You can say that again. This must be some kind of evil omen. It's bad luck." Inukashi tried to make light of it, but his mood remained gloomy. He had never expected waiting to be so hard.

They were to wait for Nezumi and Shion in this room, which had been Getsuyaku's workplace.

That was all he knew right now. Inukashi couldn't even imagine how the two would arrive here. Rikiga, of course, knew even less. Maybe even Nezumi himself wasn't sure of the details. Yes—what if neither Nezumi nor Shion arrived? What if they waited and waited, still waited, and were fruitless in the end—? *Stop it, don't even jinx yourself. This will make me an underdog for sure. I don't want to be a loser before the fight even begins.*

But it was hard.

How long did he have to wait? What was about to happen? It was hard to wait without being able to predict the future. It was like being pricked by countless transparent needles. It was like being broiled over an illusory fire. His heart, which had been so jaunty when he had set foot into the room, had now shrunken and shrivelled like an exhausted old man. He was ashamed. He was embarrassed. He felt lame, and he knew he was. But...

His heart was resolute; he had prepared himself; and yet this purposeless passing of time made doubt creep into his decision and set will. He didn't want to quote Rikiga, but he wanted to get out of here. He was also worried about Shionn. It was almost time for him to wake up.

Shionn would probably cry if he woke up and didn't see me there. Oh man, what if he's wailing for me? I wish he would just keep sleeping forever, protected by the dogs, but of course things aren't always going to go that well.

He shook his head.

I can't think about Shionn. It'll make my heart weak. It'll make me want to go running back home. I can't think of him now. Forget him. Forget. Think... think of... Nezumi's letter. He put a hand on his chest.

On Nezumi's scribbled note, there was but one message which ordered them to prepare weapons to defend themselves with.

*Secure weapons to defend yourselves.
Wait with utmost caution.
Never let your guard down.*

Would that mean they would be faced with a fight? Would that fight be with Security Bureau officials stationed at the Correctional Facility? But there was no way Bureau officials would come all the way down to the hygiene management room. The one man who had worked in this room had been killed. He was already a corpse. No one would have business here.

He swallowed his saliva. *Wait with utmost caution. Never let your guard down.* Inukashi pounced on the wall switch, and turned the lights off.

"Hey, what was that for? Now I can't see anything," Rikiga complained.

"That was bad."

"Bad? What was?"

"The lights. We turned the lights on."

"So what? When it's dark, we turn on the lights. Electric lamps might be a luxury in the West Block, but here in No. 6 they're commonplace."

"Dumbass, that's not what I'm talking about!" Inukashi said testily.

"What are we gonna do if someone saw that light?"

Even in the darkness, he could see Rikiga's features tense. Inukashi's eyes were naturally used to the dark. *Damnit, we didn't even need these lights in the first place.*

"It'll be alright," Rikiga muttered. His voice was hoarse and hard to hear, like he had forced it out of his throat. "No need to get so jumpy. Stop acting like a lost rabbit. That light was on for maybe one, two minutes max. Who the hell is going to care if the hygiene management room burns down? You said it yourself: this place is like Paradise. It doesn't even have surveillance cameras."

"It has been, up until now."

On one hand, Getsuyaku had been marked as a suspicious person, and had been shot and killed. On the other, Nezumi and Shion had

been able to infiltrate the Correctional Facility successfully. This connection had raised the question of whether the cleaning staff were on the same side as the intruders, or whether they had collaborated together.

If that was so, was not this room more of a dangerous territory than a Paradise? It was likely that surveillance had been tightened around the area. It was very likely.

The black dog suddenly got to its feet. It cast its eyes around with a low growl. Its gaze quickly trained on one point—the door. The door connecting to the Correctional Facility. The black dog continued growling at the metal door that only opened from the Facility side.

Shit.

Inukashi snatched a gun and hurled it at Rikiga. Rikiga barely caught the outdated carbine in his hands. His lips trembled.

“Inukashi... what’s going on? What’s going to happen?”

“A visitor, old man. An unwanted one at that.”

Thud. This time, there was a sound behind them. The entrance. He could feel the moving presence of people through the worn grey door.

“A pincer attack. You must be kidding me.” *Shit, we’ve done it again. We’ve made another mistake. A life-threatening one.* Inukashi chewed his lip. He knew it was useless. He could chew his lip to shreds and it would undo none of the mistakes they had made.

Inukashi, get moving.

Nezumi’s voice echoed in his ears.

A thousand regrets aren’t going to open a path for you, but one act will. Move. Just move.

Why do I hear his voice? Even at a time like this—no, maybe it’s because we’re in this situation that I hear it.

Move. Search for the path to life.

Shut up, Nezumi. I've learned my own fair share of tricks to keep myself alive.

He grasped the bag.

"This way."

He rammed his body into the door that led to the waste collection area. The door did not budge. An alarm went off. The metal door was opening up. He could see the tips of military boots.

"Inukashi, this." Rikiga touched the switch on the wall. The doors slid sideways.

"Alright!" Inukashi roared to cheer himself on. The dogs swarmed into the collection area behind Inukashi and Rikiga. Hamlet and Cravat wove swiftly between their legs.

"Ugh, it smells." Rikiga broke into a coughing fit. He was right; there was an odour. The stench of rotting meat juices filled the air. It was no doubt the odour from the capsule that he had given Getsuyaku. The capsule had been sucked in through a vacuum and brought to the collection area along with other waste. If he had not been shot through the chest, Getsuyaku would probably be sorting through this pile of trash tomorrow. He would have been at his usual job.

"Makes me want to throw up," Rikiga groaned softly. A light flared inside Inukashi's head. He swung around to see Security Bureau officials with guns in hand beyond the glass. They had stormed into the small room.

One, two, three, four... four people.

"Follow me, old man."

There was a small power shovel in a corner of the collection depot, near the waste outlet. With this, Getsuyaku would deposit the waste onto the conveyor belt and take it to the incinerator. Inukashi hid himself behind the yellow-painted heavy machine.

The lights came on, illuminating everything with a glare.

Why do people from No. 6 hate darkness so much? Inukashi thought idly. Why do they hate what they can't see, places light can't reach, and the fact that darkness exists? Why do they try to illuminate it all?

Security Bureau officials opened the door and stepped in. Suddenly, they covered their noses and mouths with their hands and bent over double.

“What is this?”

“It stinks.”

All four of them retreated. All of their faces were contorted. One of them fell to his knees and vomited on the spot. Inukashi grinned in satisfaction, and still grinning, aimed his gun.

Hah, what kind of Security Bureau officials are these? They've got huge egos but no balls to go along with them. I can't believe they're making such a fuss over a little smell. Hmph, so that makes them softies as well as crazies. Makes me laugh. You guys should all go home and suck on your mommy's nipple.

He pulled the trigger.

An impact slammed into him. He felt like he had been hit hard in the forehead. He tumbled backwards, and he felt a dull stinging from his neck up.

“Horrible. What kind of aim have you got?” Rikiga shouted.

“Cut me some slack, it's my first time. Why don't you try shooting, old man?”

“Never. I'm a pacifist through and through. I could never fire at other humans, even if they're Bureau officials.”

“I'd like to see you hit your target at least two, three times before you make a sick joke like that.”

The Security Bureau officials fled desperately from the stench. They would probably not set foot into this place again without gas masks.

How fragile they were.

They were not civilians; they were specially trained Security Bureau officials. Yet, they could not even endure a mild odour like this.

But at this point in time, Inukashi wanted to thank them rather than scorn them for their fragility. The officials had bought them some time. He was not foolish enough to be relieved, thinking that danger had passed. But bought time was bought time. He could draw a breath.

But what'll I do with the time I bought?

After I catch my breath, what'll I do next?

He licked his bottom lip. His tongue ran across the dry membrane.

This room had only one entrance and exit: it was the door they had come running through. The Security Bureau officials—their enemy—were stationed outside. They were in a sealed room. There was no escape route. *Soon, those crazy softies are going to attack us. When that happens—*

The more he thought about it, the more hopeless the situation seemed to him. But Inukashi did not give up. *We'll manage. There's no way we'll end like this. Isn't that right, Nezumi?*

He didn't know whether he was believing in Nezumi or himself. But he knew that he believed. He believed—so he did not give up.

We'll manage. We'll make do. We won't be finished off like this.

“Inukashi.” Rikiga grabbed his shoulder. “What are they planning to do?”

“Huh?”

Inukashi glanced at the small room, and inhaled sharply. He stood rooted to the spot.

The Security Bureau officials were loading in an odd-looking device. It was about as big as the black dog growling fiercely at his feet. One

end of it fanned out widely, and the other end narrowed to about a third of the width. Numerous spiralled tubes extended from it, but Inukashi could not see where they led. The body, as well as inside the mouth of the machine was a colour between grey and blue, and shone in the light. It reminded him of a highly- polished brass instrument.

“What’s that? A huge trumpet?” Rikiga’s face relaxed comically, but his voice was a mixture of tension and fear. “They should have told me there was going to be a recital. I would have worn my dress coat.” Inukashi was too on-edge to respond to Rikiga’s joke. He couldn’t swallow the breath caught in his throat. The thudding of his heart rang in his ears so loudly, he felt like his eardrums would burst.

Various scenes in the West Block came back to him vividly. It was right after the Hunt. His surroundings were an expanse of rubble.

The market, where throngs of people moved to and fro among the barracks, tents, and two-storey brick houses that lined the street, was razed completely. All had turned to debris.

This destruction did not come from blasting explosives. There had been no distinctive smell of gunpowder. He had also not seen any burns or singes. There had been no embers, nor rising smoke. No. 6 had not used firearms as it usually did for this Hunt. He even felt like No. 6 had used a giant hand to crush the whole market.

But what had No. 6 used instead of a giant hand?

“Acoustic shockwaves.”

Rikiga’s ear twitched. “Wait, what did you just say?”

“No. 6 used acoustic shockwaves for the Hunt. Like spleen whales do, or sperm whales, or whatever they’re called.”

“What are acoustic shockwaves? Where did the whales come from? Can you explain it in a way I can understand?”

“I can’t. I’m just repeating what Nezumi’s told me. Old man, you saw for yourself what happened to the marketplace.”

"Yeah—it was a clean sweep. The perfect model of a cleanup. And you're saying they used acoustic shockwaves for that?"

"Yeah."

Rikiga's eyes opened wide. They bulged so much, Inukashi could count each capillary running along his eyeball.

"Inukashi, so you're saying that weird trumpet—"

"It might be a smaller version of what they used in the West Block."

Might be? Hey, Inukashi, you can't fool yourself anymore. That has to be a miniature sound cannon. That's what No. 6 was developing.

"And—and they're going to fire that on us?" Rikiga bellowed.

"Don't ask me; ask them. They're the ones with the answers."

Rikiga growled still. Through the darkness, Inukashi could see his face growing pale. Inukashi aimed his gun, and fired at the blue-grey weapon of destruction before him. This time, he did not stagger. With great effort, he held his ground and maintained his posture.

He could not discern where the bullet had hit. Perhaps it had not hit anything. Perhaps it had flown away into the distance like a whimsical crow.

"Couldn't you have attached an automatic target tracker?" he grumbled.

"Do you think the West Block would have such a luxury item?"

"Hah, I'm sure you pinched as many pennies as you could. Look what you've ended up with: something slightly better than a toy."

"That's not the gun's fault. It's your aim."

They peeked out from behind the power shovel at the small room. The Security Bureau officials were moving busily. They showed no signs of retaliation. They did not fire a single shot back.

They don't need to. They did not need to hit a wretched man right before delivering his execution. That was probably their concept.

How compassionate of them. Brings tears to my eyes.

“Inukashi, hey, Inukashi. What are we going to do? If we go on like this, we’ll be—” Rikiga yelled and ducked down. He cradled his head and arranged himself in a defensive position. His whole body was shaking.

There’s no way I’m gonna die here. I haven’t been born into this world to die in a place like this.

Violent emotions churned in his chest. He had never thought about why he had come into this world. Not once. It had seemed so trivial, he had never felt the need to think about it. To Inukashi, finding a reason for being born was nothing more than a foolish game. He had been born into this world, and that was why he was going to live in it. That was it. His life was no one’s but his own.

I’m going to decide whether I throw this life away or protect it. It’s no one else’s business.

He fired wildly. *Shooting skills? Go to hell.* The glass dividing the room and the collection area shattered with a mighty crash. The Bureau officials’ panic was apparent.

The stench had become a torrent, tiding into the small room.

Move! Nezumi’s hand thumped his back. *Move, Inukashi. Act in order to live!*

Just what I was planning to do, Inukashi answered in his head.

He sprinted up.

The black dog bounded past him and gave a great leap. It soared through the broken window, making straight for the Bureau officials.

3

CEASE FROM THE STRUGGLE OF WAR'S IMPARTIAL CONTENTION

*"Zeus-sprung son of Laërtes, Odysseus of many devices,
hold back, cease from the struggle of war's impartial contention,
lest wide-thundering Zeus son of Kronos be angry against you."*

HOMER, *THE ODYSSEY*

THE DOOR of the elevator was open by a crack. Nezumi hooked his hand on it.

Give me strength. Please. He prayed, but not to God. He prayed to the girl with the wilful gaze. *Safu, give us strength. A little more, just a little strength for us...*

The door opened, but not by enough. They could not escape yet. Nezumi heard laboured breathing behind him.

"Shion..."

Shion was getting to his feet. He silently stretched his hands out, and his fingers grasped the door. They looked at each other. Tsukiyo poked his face out of the folds of superfibre and cried once, loudly.

Cheep!

Nezumi and Shion took that as their signal to push the door with all their might. The gap widened so that one person could slip through with some effort.

The elevator careened. His feet stumbled unsteadily.

“Hurry, get out!” Nezumi pushed Shion out before squeezing through the gap. The elevator gave an irritating screech, which turned into a rumble. It hurtled downwards as if it had been waiting for the two to escape before setting off.

Nezumi closed his eyes for a moment. *My gratitude, Safu.* Sweat poured down his cheeks. The wound on his leg throbbed. His heart pounded against his pectoral muscles from the inside.

He was in pain.

His mental and physical strength was whittled down, crumbling off, and barely remaining. He was in pain, yet—this pain, this throbbing, this heartbeat was nothing less than proof that he was alive. He was still alive. Still alive.

He opened his eyes and took in his surroundings.

He saw scattered glass shards and a wet corridor. Two men lying dead. The black-haired soldier and Rashi were unchanged from how Nezumi and Shion had left them.

One was lying in the corridor covered in blood, and another was thrown out on the ground near the wall. The barriers were gone. The sprinklers were off. There was no human shadow or presence.

Nothing. Only Nezumi and Shion’s breathing could be heard, almost too loudly.

Whoom. Something exploded. He spun around and saw smoke coming out of a room at the end of the hall. It was the room they had fallen into after destroying the ventilation duct. Flames soon licked through the door left ajar.

It was burning.

A similar-sounding explosion rocked them from the floor below. He could hear the commotion and people screaming.

The computer systems on each floor were executing the same program of exploding and bursting into flames. Like loyal subjects, all devices within the Correctional Facility were following after the mother computer.

Were these machines following in their master's footsteps, despite the fact that they had no soul? No; they had only been programmed to do so. The mother's failure meant death for all systems within the Correctional Facility. They were configured to self-detonate as soon as they stopped receiving signals from the mother. It was nothing as lax as the information being wiped or deleted, or the device itself going out of operation. They were forcibly destroyed.

So were they following the master to her grave after all? It was forced suicide. The system ended everything along with itself. It allowed nothing to survive. Had the creator of this system directly applied the dictator's logic?

The flames had crawled into the corridor. The heat attacked them. Smoke filled the air thickly. None of the extinguishing devices were operating. Neither smoke extraction devices nor air filtration devices were working. A system which had been so flawlessly tuned to eradicate unwanted objects was completely useless.

"Shion, go down. We have to escape downwards."

They clambered down the stairs. Hot air blew at them here as well. Personnel were screaming and rushing to escape.

"Fire! It's a fire!"

"No, it was an explosion! Suddenly I couldn't control the thing anymore. Oh, look at this mess!"

"Help me! My arm, it's been blown off—a doctor—"

“Oh, I’m so scared—we have to escape, quickly!”

“What’s going on? What’s the matter? Nothing seems to work. The automatic doors aren’t opening. What’s wrong with the lights?”

“Someone, this person’s covered in blood. Someone, please!”

“The smoke . . . it’s choking me.”

“We can’t use the elevator. The stairs—only the stairs are left.”

It was truly a pandemonium. A mob of lab coats stormed the stairs as each one tried to get down before the other. Some slipped and fell on top of others. Some tried to help their friends; others stepped over the fallen ones and fled; some wept; some cried out directions for the emergency route. A woman helped a bleeding man to his feet; a man shoved a staggering woman out of his way as he ran past her—each one showed his true colours in this tragic scene.

An even louder explosion shook the air.

It had evidently blown a hole somewhere, for the air began to move in a current. The smoke cleared somewhat. If even for a moment, they could catch their breath.

Again, the same sound, and the faint roar of a crowd.

Nezumi turned around and confirmed that it had come from the direction of the prison wing. The trapped prisoners were causing a commotion. But if all of the prisoners’ wing had been computer-monitored, then every door should be unlocked by now. Perhaps that noise was the sound of the prisoners cheering and roaring at being set free.

But if that was so . . .

They reached the third floor. The flames, smoke, and confusion were more subdued than the fourth. Some people had caught a breath on the stairwell, restored their reason and were attempting to escape this hell by supporting each other.

Can we keep at it and escape? Hope flared. A ray of light pierced the darkness.

All systems had died. The Correctional Facility was being reduced to a mere building, an empty shell with no function. With the addition of the prisoners, the chaos was bound to get worse.

And when that happens... Perhaps it would be easy to take advantage of this situation to escape. There was not much blocking their way.

"Shion, let's go." Nezumi restrained his over-eager heart, and grabbed Shion's wrist. Shion did not move. "Shion!" he said urgently. "What is it? We have to get out of here."

"Why did you kill her?" Shion muttered, barely moving his lips. It sounded almost like a gasp. Nezumi let his hand go, and met Shion's gaze. He could feel his blood turning cold. He was freezing over gradually from his extremities.

"Nezumi, answer me. Why did you kill Safu?" Shion's voice caught in his throat, and took on an unnatural murky tone. Nezumi felt like he was listening to static-filled music through outdated speakers.

"We— I came here to save Safu. Save her... not kill her." Shion's whole body began to tremble, but no emotion could be read from his face. Not agitation, nor wrath, nor sadness, nor anguish.

"Shion, we were too late. She was already—"

"Safu was alive." Shion's murky voice jolted him sharply. He felt like he had been slapped on the cheek. "She was living, and standing right in front of me."

"That was an illusion. You should have known yourself. That wasn't her. It was just an illusion."

"No! No! No!" Shion yelled. "Safu was alive. She was alive, and that was why she could appear in front of me. Nezumi, I don't care what form she took. Safu was definitely alive."

"... No matter what form, huh."

“Yeah. Safu may have lost her body, but she was alive. She was alive and waiting for me. I needed to save her. I should have stayed here with her. Isn’t that right, Nezumi?”

Safu was alive. Was she? Had she really been? Nezumi ground his teeth. She had been alive and waiting for Shion. She had been waiting devotedly, just for him. She had been alive just to see Shion once again. And her wish had been granted.

Safu, Shion overcame hardship and danger to come to you. You were able to meet your most beloved person. But what you wished for next was to disappear from Shion’s sight. Yes, you wished for it.

You didn’t want Shion to see you.

That was why...

“Shion, we couldn’t have saved her. She and the mother were fused together. And she... she chose to die with it.”

“Is that your reason? Your reason for murdering Safu?”

“Then what should I have done?” Nezumi yelled. His blood, which was supposed to be frozen, boiled and raced through his body in a hot stream. “Don’t you understand how she felt? She summoned us because she wanted to see you. And—and couldn’t you see it was because she wanted to be saved? I don’t mean escaping from the Correctional Facility. She’d already known it was impossible. That was why she wanted you at least to save her from that wretched situation. You were the last person whom she wanted to see her like that. I mean, wouldn’t you feel the same? You understand, right?”

Nezumi’s breathing was erratic. Shion’s expression did not change. Not even a twitch of an eyebrow. The smoke stung at Nezumi’s eyes. *We have to run. We can’t waste any more time here. His thoughts were clear, but his feet would not move. They quaked at Shion’s eyes.*

“Shion, I can’t think of it as you do. We *were* too late. Safu was already dead.” They were his true thoughts. “You aren’t looking at reality.

It would have been impossible to separate her from the mother. She even said so herself: she had no body, but she was still trapped. She said it hurt, that she wanted you to set her free. She wished to be set free from that situation, from her humiliation.”

He was not wrong. Shion was the one with the wrong idea. He was unable to accept the reality of losing Safu. He was trying to avert his eyes from the truth.

“You used her.” A low, low mutter. Nezumi did not catch it.

“What?”

“You used Safu to destroy the mother. Isn’t that right?” Shion’s eyes shifted slowly from right to left. Tsukiyo peeked out from the superfibre, but soon ducked back inside again.

“Destroying the Correctional Facility was your purpose from the very beginning. Your object was never to save Safu, it was to destroy the Correctional Facility, and to use it as a gateway to destroy No. 6. You were waiting for that chance all along. That was why you didn’t hesitate to destroy the mother. You didn’t hesitate at all. You used her for your own purposes. You sacrificed her.”

Nezumi stared at Shion. *Used her? Didn’t hesitate at all? Sacrificed her? Shion, you really think so?*

But is he wrong?

He heard a voice questioning him back. It was not Shion’s. It was his own voice. *Did you not use her? Did you not sacrifice her? Did you not prioritize your own wishes over saving another life?*

Didn’t you? Didn’t you? Didn’t you?

Roar. Roar.

A knot of people wearing dark green shirts came storming down the stairs, screaming. They were prisoners. Their loud cheering hit the walls around them, bounced, and echoed clamorously.

Roar. Roar. *Get out, get out.*

“Stop! I said stop!” The Security Bureau official’s orders were drowned out by the din. Suddenly, a gunshot rang out. A man trying to run past Nezumi careened backwards and fell onto the floor in the corridor. He had been shot through the head.

“Stop! Stop, or I will shoot!”

“Run! Get outta here!” the prisoners yelled. “Don’t stop! Escape! Hurry, hurry and get outta here!”

All the prisoners had bloodshot eyes. Some were foaming at the mouth. Every one of them roared like beasts as they ran.

To become a prisoner of the Correctional Facility meant death. Whether guilty or not, regardless of the severity of the crime, as soon as they were imprisoned, they were on death row.

We’re going to get killed anyway, so why not cling to this miracle? We’ll latch onto this one-in-a-million chance, and be free.

To the outside world. To the outside world. Run to the light.

Gunshots. Sprays of blood. A white-haired prisoner crumpled over the railing. Gunshots, explosions, smoke, fire.

“Shion, it’s dangerous here.” Nezumi grabbed Shion’s arm and yanked. He met no resistance. Shion staggered and bumped his shoulder on the wall. He slid to the ground, still leaning on the wall.

“Nezumi... I’m sorry.” A whimper spilled from his bloodless lips. “I’m sorry. I—I—” Shion covered his face with his hands, and drew several ragged breaths.

“I know,” Shion said. “I know we had no choice but to do it. You granted Safu’s wish... I have no reason nor right to blame you. It was me... I should have been the one to do it. It was my job to set Safu free. But I couldn’t. I was scared... and I couldn’t do it. I leaned on you again, thrust everything onto you, and made you do the dirty work. I didn’t want to acknowledge my cowardice, so I blamed you, ran you to the ground...”

Nezumi looked down at Shion's snowy hair. Despite having been through such a hellish ordeal, it had not lost any of its lustre. Every single hair shimmered elegantly.

"I got you involved, and even dragged Rikiga-san and Inukashi into it... and if the result was this... Nezumi, we didn't come here for destruction. We came here to give salvation. But look—"

"We came for destruction."

Shion lifted his face. It was smeared with sweat and blood.

"You're right. I had only one purpose, and it was to destroy the Correctional Facility. I never had plans to save Safu from the beginning."

"Nezumi..."

Nezumi looked away from Shion. He couldn't hold the other boy's gaze.

"I needed you. I knew that without your memory and judgment skills, it would be impossible to get around inside the Facility. You were my last, and my best trump card. I thought for a long time how I would use you, and... this is the answer. The thing about Safu was just an excuse. I just... used you and her to satisfy my own purposes."

Yes, Shion, you aren't wrong. I betrayed you. I was tricking you all along. You didn't get me involved; it was the other way around. I set the cunning trap.

"My plan was a success. Look at this confusion. The Correctional Facility is crumbling. Shion, I—I directed things to proceed according to my intentions. Frankly, I didn't expect it to turn out so well. You served your purpose a hundred times better than I expected. You were... really useful to me."

Shion stood up unsteadily.

"Nezumi, what are you talking about?"

"I never believed that Safu would be safe. The moment she was imprisoned, I knew the possibility of her escape was close to nil. Shion—

saving Safu never mattered to me. When I planted the bomb in the mother, I was only thinking of destroying it and getting out of there as soon as possible. That was it.”

The superfibre cloth slid from his neck and fell at his feet. Had he been bowing his head unwittingly? Nezumi stooped to pick the fabric up, and stared intently at the boy in front of him.

“I’m not asking you to forgive me. It’s not something I can apologize for and be done with.”

“What are you talking about?” Shion said loudly. “I’m not getting a single word.”

Really? Can you really not understand?

You’re a liar, Shion. You do get it. You understand every single word. And you’ll never forgive me. You’ll lose faith in me and loathe me. Or would you—

Cheep!

Tsukiyo squeaked sharply. Nezumi felt his spine tense. He felt like transparent arrows were stabbing into him. It was murderous intent. He turned around. A man stood there, aiming a gun at him. He was not a Security Bureau official. He was one of the soldiers who had been under Rashi’s command.

Nezumi had noticed him too late.

“Shion, duck!” He shoved Shion as hard as he could. Immediately, the impact came. A beam of light seemed to pierce his entire body.

It scorched him.

He tried to scream.

Escape, Shion. Hurry, he thought, but no voice came out. Somewhere—somewhere in his body, he was burning. It was hot.

“Nezumi!”

He could see Shion, wide-eyed. He could see clearly the boy's screaming mouth, his extended hand, and the shape of his fingers. The image was so vivid, it seemed hardly real.

The vivid scene blurred, and darkness closed in.

All colour faded.

* * *

Raugh!

The black dog was thrown out across the floor. Its limbs convulsed as it foamed at the mouth. The Bureau official had propped himself up and was holding a small gun in his hand. The black dog eventually stopped moving. Despite its aggressive nature, it had loved to nap in the sun. It would often lie in the sunlight much like it was doing now, stretching its legs out. It had a temperamental disposition, but it was loyal to Inukashi,

I'm sorry.

Inukashi cast a glance over the dog, and apologized inside his heart. *I'm sorry for putting you through this. Forgive me.*

He could see down the barrel of the gun. He could see the hollowed cheeks of the thin-faced man who held it. Inukashi did not flinch. He did not stop. A moment of hesitation, a moment of confusion could cost him his life. Once he started to move, he had to keep moving. With the enemy before him, he had no option to cower.

He aimed his gun and fired blindly in furious succession.

Damnit, damnit, you bastards. You arrogant murderers. You're all cruel, dirty thieves. Give back everything you've stolen from us. You guys have trampled over everyone in the West Block for this whole time. You killed people indiscriminately. You cold-blooded murderers. Have some shame. That's right. You shameful, despicable people. Damnit.

He mentally hurled as many insults at them as he could. He could not voice his vilification. If only his wrath could turn into bullets and shatter that blue-grey weapon.

Can't you give us a miracle like that for once, God? You were quick to turn your back on the West Block, like a mother abandoning her infant on the barren plains. Doesn't your moral conscience bother you at all? So give me a miracle, at least, to make up for it. Hand over that miracle so we can survive.

His foot slipped. He lost his balance and landed on his bottom. Bullets bounced at his feet. If he had not fallen, he would have been shot cleanly through.

Phew, I still have some luck left.

"Don't move, filthy sewer rats." Bureau officials pointed guns at them. Simultaneously, a nerve-racking bass rumbled.

"We'll exterminate you well. Be prepared."

Sewer rats? Don't you dare put me on the same level as those lowly animals.

Inukashi tried to pull the trigger, but realized the gun was out of bullets. He glanced at the power shovel.

What the hell are you doing behind there, old man? The baritone rumble was issuing from the somewhat comically wide mouth of the shock-wave cannon. Preparations seemed to be set.

What? No way. Is this it? A frigid wind blew up at him. Is this the end? Am I gonna die here? That can't happen. You gotta be kidding me. Nezumi, this isn't what you promised. The whole show is gonna be ruined before the main actors even appear. What the hell do I do now? Do something, do anything, Nezumi!

Suddenly, the lights went out. An alarm sounded.

"What? What is it?"

"I don't know. Something's happened inside."

“Hey! Did you hear an explosion?”

“Huh? Oh, now that you mention it—”

Inukashi could feel strongly the agitation of the officials.

“I can’t see! I can’t see anything in here!”

Shrill screams, almost shrieks, echoed in the darkness. *It’s the same as with the smell. They’re really, really weak.* Inukashi smirked.

The people of No. 6 were so unbelievably, so laughably weak when even a small change occurred in their clean and comfortable environment. Perhaps soldiers would have had a little more resistance. But the Security Bureau officials were cowering, clearly exposing their fragility.

Look at what a loss you’re all at. You build that murder weapon with a cool face, but you’re afraid of the dark. Disgusting. Inukashi hurled abuse at them, still sitting on his bottom. He restrained himself from rushing out.

“Not yet. Don’t rush it,” he told himself.

The alarm grew louder. Its enormous volume rattled his eardrums.

Emergency alert. Emergency alert.

Level 5, Level 5.

Emergency evacuation. Emergency evacuation.

All personnel, evacuate immediately.

Level 5, Level 5.

“Level 5!? What is it, what’s going on?”

“I don’t know, but we should evacuate. We have to get out of here, or we’ll be in danger.”

“Hey, there it is again. I heard it. Things are exploding everywhere. Get out!”

“I-I wish I could, but it’s so dark... why aren’t the backup lights coming on?”

“This is a trash depot. Do you think they have backup lights?”

Now! Inukashi leapt to his feet, using his whole body for leverage. I'm used to the dark. You'll see how different I am from all of you.

“Bastards!” He yelled as swung his gun around. It hit something. The dogs snarled and pounced. Inukashi started yanking out all the pipes and cables attached to the cannon.

Bastards. Bastards. Making crap like this. You guys made a monster that's good for nothing but killing people.

Level 5, Level 5.

Emergency evacuation. Emergency evacuation.

“Outside! Get outside! It's dangerous in here!”

“Yeah, get out! We have to evacuate!”

The Security Bureau officials fled through the door leading outside.

Inukashi stood, breathing heavily. Sweat poured off his whole body. But he was shaking. He could not stop. His teeth chattered. His heart was palpitating so badly, he had trouble catching his breath.

He fell to his knees as the strength left him. His dogs approached. One with a patched coat pushed its nose up against him. Inukashi latched on to its furry collar and buried his face in its soft fur. It smelled like dog. He had known this scent for as long as he could remember. It was the scent of his mother, his siblings, and his friends. It smelled more sweetly than any flower.

Tears spilled over. They streamed down one after another. *We're saved. We've been saved.* The dog licked away the tears on his cheeks. *It's warm. Oh, it's so warm. I'm still alive.*

“I owe it to you guys. Thank you. Thanks so much.”

“Inukashi...” Rikiga came crawling out through the door of the waste collection area. “Looks like they ran off.”

"Yeesh, old man," he gave a purposely long sigh. "What good are you gonna be now? Were you off shopping for today's dinner or something?"

He gently brushed his tears away so Rikiga wouldn't see them. Rikiga shrugged, and laughed softly in the dark.

"I told you, I'm a philanthropist. I'm also a born and bred gentleman. No one is more ill-suited for killing than me. Fortune could turn every which way, but I would never be able to go wild and let loose like you."

"Well, *you* can turn right back around and never come back again. You're just a useless drunkard even when you're around, anyway. You'd only hold me up."

"Nothing to be angry about," Rikiga said lightly. "Ah, but I have to say that was an impressive fight. I have a new regard for you now. If I were a girl, I'd have fallen for you right there. Bravo, bravo."

Inukashi wrinkled his nose at Rikiga's applause.

"You falling for me, old man? What a horror story. You just gave me the goosebumps. I just came out of deadly territory, alright? I'd appreciate it if you could lay off that stuff, it's bad for my heart. The last thing I wanna do is keel over from fright here."

Rikiga paid no attention to Inukashi's insults. He cupped his hand around his ear and listened intently. The alarm stopped as abruptly as it had started.

Inukashi also pricked his ears.

He could hear something like the distant rumble of the sea, or distant thunder.

What is it? What is that sound?

"Something's exploding inside the Correctional Facility," Rikiga said in a queerly languid voice. "And that's not it... I can hear screaming in there, too. It's in there. Yeah, I can hear it."

The door connecting the Correctional Facility to the waste processing area was still open, which was why they could hear what was going on inside. Two spaces which had always been firmly divided were now connected.

“Hey, Inukashi. Is this a precursor? Is this the beginning?” His voice quavered as it tapered off. Inukashi could not see his face, but he knew that Rikiga was probably flushed with excitement. He did not even need to look. *My face is probably that colour, too, Inukashi thought. I’m excited. I’m restless.*

It’s beginning. It’s finally beginning. It’s actually beginning.

Nezumi, Shion, you guys actually did it. I don’t know what the hell you did, but you did it. You set the alarms off throughout the Correctional Facility. Level 5. Is that the highest hazard level? If it was... hah, this is getting interesting. This is gonna be fun.

Those must be gun salutes in the distance.

Inukashi had been licking his lips unwittingly.

Nezumi, that fraudulent bastard wasn’t just a talker. He did what he promised.

“You think the Correctional Facility’s going to come tumbling down?” Rikiga murmured, his voice still trembling.

Suddenly, the lights flashed. They went out again, and the room sank into darkness. The door closed, opened, tried to close again, but stopped at about two-thirds of the way.

“What is it? Is it practicing a dance?” Rikiga cracked a lame joke. Inukashi didn’t even feel like laughing.

“Go dance along with it, old man.” He was licking his lips again. *This isn’t a dance. These are its last spasms. Its last struggles before its life gives out. Just like that black dog, the Correctional Facility is writhing in pain at the brink of death.*

"Don't tell me the whole building is going to collapse." The excitement faded from Rikiga's voice, and uncertainty crept in.

"All's good and well if it collapses," Inukashi replied. "Once this place becomes a mountain of rubble, I'll be the first to plant a memorial tree." *I'll plant one for Getsuyaku, my black dog, and the countless people who were murdered here. A tree that'll grow huge and bloom with pure white flowers.*

"You sounded so happy the other day wishing this place would come falling down, old man," he added.

"That was a form of expression. I don't mind the Correctional Facility falling down, but I have a bit of a problem with this building becoming a pile of rubble."

"Why?"

"Inukashi, think *really* hard about it. If this building collapses completely, the gold bullion underground will be buried along with it. It's going to be a hell of a lot of work digging it back up."

Inukashi stared at Rikiga. The man's face was earnest.

"Old man... did you really believe that?"

"What?"

"The story about the gold bullion. Do you actually believe it's down there?"

Rikiga's eyes wandered. His throat contracted.

"Inukashi, what are you joking about now? Of course it's there. My information sources are trustworthy. There's no room for doubt."

"Okay, if you say so," Inukashi said indifferently. "Who was your source again? Ann or Oon or something like that, right?"

"Sulu, the redheaded beauty. She heard it directly from a high official of No. 6, in bed. No doubt about it. This tip isn't a dud."

"Is that how it goes?"

“Yeah. You might not know, since you’re still a snot-nosed kid and all you deal with are dogs. The thing about men is that they can’t lie to women after the deed. Wives are a different story, but men don’t lie to women they buy. They don’t need to.”

“That’s why they accidentally spill the beans about confidential stuff they’d never talk about.”

“That’s right. So you do understand.”

“And can you trust this Sulu woman?”

“I sure can. I pressed her over and over about whether this story was true. Sulu said she definitely heard it. She’s sure of it, and so am I.”

“Are you two together, old man?”

“None of your business, kid. Inappropriate subject matter for children. As a well-meaning adult, I refuse to answer. No comment.”

“Anything that comes out of your mouth is inappropriate, old man,” Inukashi retorted. “Any well-meaning intentions of yours are probably dissolved in alcohol by now. You’re as inappropriate as adults get. I would never want my baby around you.”

“Back to the topic,” Rikiga said impatiently. “How does my relationship with Sulu have anything to do with what we’re talking about?”

“To get straight to the point, I’ll just say that between you and Nezumi, Nezumi would get girls a lot more easily. Yeah, I think ninety-nine out of a hundred . . . no, all hundred girls would rather sleep with Nezumi than you. Of course. And I don’t think Sulu is an exception.”

Rikiga’s brows furrowed theatrically.

“Inukashi, what are you trying to say? Stop trying to beat around the bush. Do me a favour and be clearer about it.”

“Clearer, huh. Well, there’s not much to say, anyway. Say I’m Sulu, and I love to watch plays, and I get totally hooked onto this good-looking actor called Eve. If he whispered into my ear with that sultry

voice of his, what would I do? I think I'd be pretty eager to feed false information to a certain beer-bellied old man, no matter if he was my ex-boyfriend or not. Just a thought," Inukashi said offhandedly.

Rikiga swallowed hard. He opened his mouth and started panting like a dog in scorching heat.

"How—no, how—why would Eve ask Sulu to do that? Th—there's no plausible reason—"

"To manipulate you, old man. Actually, maybe I was part of the plan, too. He wanted to draw us in by hinting to us about some gold bullion. It's the easiest and most effective way. Doesn't it sound like something he'd think of? He's unbeatable when it comes to being wily. He's astonishingly smart. I'm actually really impressed."

Rikiga stood still and speechless for a good while.

"Inukashi... when did you realize that?"

"When? I dunno. I think from the moment I heard you got the tip from a pretty girl, Nezumi was in the back of my mind. Hah, I guess that means I know a little bit more than you about Nezumi's true identity, huh? Not much to brag about, though."

"If you knew, why did you still come? Why are you putting your life in danger to do this?"

"Because there's gold bullion."

"Huh?"

"I actually don't know why I'm not curled up quietly in my nest right now. I really don't know. It's just—something I thought would never break is breaking. Something I thought would never change is gonna be turned upside down. It's almost as amazing as a mountain of gold. And God's not making that miracle—humans are. An airheaded boy and the fraud of the century. Doesn't it give you a thrill? It gave me a thrill. That's why I decided to act on my own. I wasn't gonna wait 'til someone changed things. I'm gonna go ahead and do it. I wanna think

that I have a role in changing the world. Nezumi and Shion threw that opportunity down right in front of me. They said, 'How long do you plan on curling up there and pretending you don't notice?' and tossed the bait in front of me. Bait that's bigger than gold."

"And you latched onto it knowing you were being tricked."

"I guess you can say that."

"I see... so you got in on it and tricked me, too. What a shameful day for Almighty Mr. Rikiga. I've been strung along by a couple of brats. I've grown old. I think it's really hitting home now that my life is entering its retirement stage."

"Hey man, don't be so down about it. It's just my guess. I think it's about ninety-percent right, though. There's always the possibility that Sulu seriously had the hots for you, and she gave you the gift of juicy information."

"Serious about me, huh... impossible." Rikiga gave a great sigh, and slumped his shoulders. True to his word, he suddenly looked like he had aged by many years. "So what do you plan to do now?" he looked up at Inukashi, and exhaled again.

"Me? I'm gonna wait."

"For Eve and Shion?"

"Yeah. Nezumi told me to wait here. What other choice do I have?"

"Like a loyal dog waiting for its master."

"More like a cunning fox preying on a field mouse."

"Where are they coming back from? From that half-open door?"

"Who knows? I can't read that far into it. I don't think even Nezumi would know. They're gambling for all or nothing—there's no way they can foresee that far. Climaxes are best left in the dark, anyway. So what are you gonna do, old man?"

Rikiga sighed yet another time. His back was hunched and his posture was truly that of an old man, though Inukashi wasn't sure if he was doing it on purpose.

"I'll wait," he replied. "Feeling like a loyal dog."

"Even if the gold bullion was a lie?" Inukashi was a little surprised. He had been almost certain that Rikiga would beeline right out of this room as soon as he found out that the gold bullion was an illusion.

Here, you don't know what's gonna happen next. There's no way of guessing what kind of danger is coming, and when it'll come.

Anyone with some smarts would get the hell outta here and go back home. And Rikiga's not stupid. He might be prone to wandering off, blinded by greed, but he's got the smarts it takes to survive. If not, he wouldn't be able to hoard money in a place like the West Block.

Rikiga only got involved in things that benefited him. Emotions and sense of duty were not in his criteria for taking action—only potential wealth was. This was Rikiga's philosophy of life, and Inukashi agreed with it. That was why he was taken by surprise.

"Why're you gonna wait, old man?" he questioned sincerely. He was truly curious.

"Because I can't move."

"Can't move? Doesn't look like you're hurt to me."

"I'm out of breath, and my heart is palpitating. My legs and back are shot. I have no choice but to rest here. Besides, there's nothing to prove that you're a hundred percent right. Sulu's tip might be a good one after all."

"You're saying Mr. Gold Bullion is just sitting on his ass under our feet."

"Yeah. I've come this far believing in it. There's no way I'm going to leave with nothing. If it comes to this, I'll clean out the Correctional

Facility of anything that's worth money. And I'll get you and Eve to help. For free. I'm not taking complaints."

Inukashi shrugged, and turned aside. He wasn't convinced that Rikiga was telling the truth. What was he waiting for? What was he staying behind for? Inukashi was sure even Rikiga himself did not know the answer. He knew at least that it was probably not because of his palpitating heart, his shortness of breath, or the gold bullion, which was nothing but an illusion.

So whaddaya know, the old man actually believes that they're coming back. Inukashi meant to sneer, but ended up compressing his lips.

Changes are happening inside the Correctional Facility. It's almost time. They're almost coming back.

In the dark, Inukashi quietly balled his hand into a fist.

* * *

"It's delicious," Renka sighed. "I didn't know hot tea could taste so nice."

"More sugar? They say sweet tea soothes you when you're tired." Karan placed the pot of sugar in front of Renka. It was something she had bought to celebrate the opening of her store. It was a small and cheap pot, but it was Karan's favourite.

Renka pinched her tear ducts.

"Karan—thank you. I'm so glad you're here. Thank you."

"Oh, Renka, don't cry." Karan placed a hand on Renka's knee, and added strength to her tone. "You have Lili. Don't cry. Be strong."

Lili, who had been looking up at her mother with concern, gripped the cup in her hands tightly. Karan knew how harsh it was to reprimand Renka and tell her to be strong when she was so overwhelmed with uncertainty and exhaustion. "Be strong"; "smarten up"; "try your

hardest”—at times, words of encouragement from others hurt the soul much more brutally than insults.

I'm at my limit. What am I supposed to try harder at?

Karan herself had come close to screaming so. How ruthless, how shallow, how crude they were—such superficial words of encouragement or reproach. *I know. But I have to say them.*

“Renka, you have Lili and the baby in your womb. You’re a mother—you have to be strong. You could cry any other time. But now isn’t the time to let your feelings go, is it? You have to pull yourself together.” Renka blinked, and swallowed her breath. Then, she straightened her back.

“Yes, senpai¹.”

“As long as you understand. Be careful next time.”

“Of course.”

Lili’s gaze darted between her mother and Karan.

“Ma’am, you’re Mommy’s senpai?”

Renka gently drew her daughter’s shoulder close. “Yes, she is. My senpai in life. I’d want her to teach me a lot more things in the future.”

“Ma’am, you must be really old.”

Karan and Renka looked at each other, and burst out laughing almost simultaneously.

“How mean of you, Lili,” Karan exclaimed. “That’s not true. Your mommy and I are only—oh, we’re eight years apart. I guess I am pretty old.”

“Oh, Karan!” Renka laughed, and softly brushed the tears from her eyes. “No, Karan, I really am thankful. Who knows what would have happened if I was alone. I would probably be bawling from anxiety.”

¹Senpai means *upperclassman*, which also functions as a respectful address to someone who is older or more experienced.

"You're not that weak," Karan said firmly. "You would have gotten your strength back as a mother without me telling you to. And—you know, Renka, this might seem like a temporary fix, but why don't we wait a little longer for Getsuyaku-san? I feel like it's too soon to give up hope."

Perhaps it was really just a temporary fix, something to disguise the truth. But sometimes, you needed that something to ease your conscience, something to mask the grim truth. Like a spoonful of sugar in a cup of tea.

Renka put her cup down, and nodded slowly.

"Yes, yes... you're right. It's too soon to give up hope... absolutely right. I'll wait for him a little longer. Maybe he'll come home tomorrow."

"Right." Karan almost sighed. As long as Renka could not confirm Getsuyaku's safety, she would have to keep waiting for her husband, and Lili for her father.

It was too soon to lose hope. Yet hope without direction was a painful thing.

Karan felt Renka clasp her hand. Renka's fingers were warm and soft.

"Karan, I won't be defeated. Even if by some chance, he doesn't—Getsuyaku doesn't come home... the two of us will live—no, the three of us will live together. I'm going to give birth to Getsuyaku's child. I'll have his baby, and I'll raise it proper."

Strength shone in Renka's gaze. No hint of her previous tears remained.

"I have people like you who support me, so I'll be alright. I'll do what I have to do. I'm a mother, after all."

"Renka!" Karan circled her arms around Renka's slender neck. "You're an incredible mother. The best."

Look at us, Fate. Look how strong we can be. We won't be swallowed up. We'll hold our ground and keep on living. O Fate, No. 6, we won't submit; we won't be trampled on.

"Karan, there's one other person I'm actually concerned about." Renka's tone turned heavy.

"Yoming, isn't it?"

"Yes, it's my brother . . . I'm wondering what he's trying to do. I just have this nagging feeling that—has he come here?"

"Yes, he has."

"What was he like?"

"Well, let me see . . . he seemed to be worked up."

They heard a scream. It was from outside; it came from the direction of the front entrance. It was followed by what sounded like someone falling down. Karan stood up and hastened to the door. She peered through the blinds. A group of men were squatting under a street lamp. A chubby woman was cradling one of the men in her arms. Karan remembered her. Her name was Koka, and she ran a tavern. The young man in her arms looked like her second son. He was a boisterous youth and a spitting image of his mother, and was dedicated to his job at the tavern and helping his mother out. Once in a while, he dropped by Karan's shop. Last time, he had bought all the butter rolls on the shelf, laughing and saying it was because his mother adored them. Karan did not know his real name, but she remembered hearing him being called "Good Guy Appa".

Half of Appa's face was covered in blood, and he was slumped against his mother's arm with his eyes closed. He did not stir. He did not seem to be breathing.

Karan burst out into the street.

"Koka, what's the matter?"

"Oh, Karan! My son—they got my son."

“Who did it?”

One of the men swung his fist in the air. “The army. The army shot at us with guns.”

Karan felt a jolt as if she had been hit by lightning. She thought for a minute that she had been the one to collapse noisily on the road. But in reality, she had clasped her hands tightly together, willed her legs to stand fast, and was holding her ground.

I knew it. I knew it. I knew it.

“Army? What are you talking about? There’s no such thing as an army!” Koka wailed through her tears.

“There wasn’t supposed to be, but there was. They weren’t dressed like Security Bureau officials. They were in military gear. And—and those guys, they . . . they started firing at us . . .”

“Wait!” Karan said sharply. “Give me more details. You went to city hall, didn’t you?”

“Yeah. There was a summons through the Internet. We were on the move because of it.”

“A summons . . .”

“It was about this scary, mysterious illness. All these citizens are dying, and yet the authorities aren’t doing anything. And get this—the mayor and all the big-shots have vaccinated themselves already, and plan to abandon the rest of us. How could we let that pass? That’s why we stormed the Moondrop. You should have seen the amount of people there. It looked like they came out from all over the city. Even Chronos residents. We formed one huge mob and headed for the Moondrop. Our plan was to get inside and see the mayor. That’s what the message told us to do. It told us to protect our own lives, and get our hands on that vaccine. And that wasn’t the only thing.”

The man swallowed, and shook his fist even more furiously.

"We've been mistreated all this time. Our living conditions aren't even half as good—no, even a tenth as good—as people living in Chronos. Even though we're the same citizens. All this time we'd given up, thinking it couldn't be helped. We all thought we had no choice but to bear with it. But I've had enough of that. A horrible disease is going around right now; I'm not gonna be left behind with no means of dealing with it."

Another man got to his feet. Blood soaked through the cloth wrapped around his forehead.

"Yeah, that's right! Some consideration they must have for us!"

"Let me hear your story properly," Karan said. "So you all stormed the Moondrop. There were a lot of people, and the army suddenly materialized there. Is that what you're saying?"

"That's right. I was surprised, I tell ya. They even had tanks. It was a weird kind of vehicle with a dull gold colour. I think they're called tanks, at least. First time in my life I've seen them... but I'm pretty sure. And in front of them, a huge row of armed soldiers were lined up... lined up, saying, 'This is a warning. Vacate this area immediately.' And they repeated it a couple times. 'This is a warning. Vacate this area immediately.'"

Fear flashed in the man's eyes.

"We didn't leave, though, obviously. Some people tried to escape, but a lot of others were screaming to keep pressing forward. So we just—I mean, we never expected to be attacked. We're citizens. And like I said, the people there weren't only from Lost Town or other districts; Chronos residents were there as well. Elites, and their families. I never even considered... that the city would use military force against its people."

"But the city did," Karan said softly. All too easily, it had pulled the trigger at its citizens.

Judgment for those who do not obey.

Punishment for those who do not submit.

No. 6 had exposed its true colours. It had flung off the costume it had been donning so cleverly until now.

Death to those who are not meek.

A penalty to those who rebel.

“Appa was beside me when he was shot, right through the head. He didn’t even make a noise, he just fell... everyone fell into a panic, and started trying to get out of there all at once. Oh, you wouldn’t believe. We took turns carrying Appa... and we ran out of there as fast as we could. When we came to, we were sitting here...”

Koka lifted her face to the heavens and cried out.

“Oh, my son is going cold! Why! Why did this have to happen? My son!” Her anguished cries did not ring out, but were sucked into the night sky.

“Hey! It looks like people are gathering in front of the Moondrop again.” A man who had been staring at his mobile computer raise a bellow like a battle cry. Everyone except Koka glanced back at him.

“Looks like there are two—no, three times as many people this time. They’re all coming out to get the vaccine. With this many people, neither the Security Bureau nor the army would be able to do anything. They can’t just massacre all the citizens. Now is the time to ask the mayor to come out of the Moondrop so we can hold a discussion.”

“Everyone is gathering... is that true?”

“Yeah. The people are coming together again, and this time they’re going to use force to drag the mayor out. This is our first chance, and our last. Now is the time. This is it.” The man’s voice cracked, and his eyes roved over the computer screen.

“Yes, now.”

"Let's head out one more time. We can't let Appa's death go to waste. If we withdraw now, what would Appa have given up his life for?"

"It's not only Appa. My cousin and my mother are dead, too, from that disease. We can't let the souls of the dead go unrequited."

"My younger sister died, too. She was gone so fast. Can you imagine how angry I was? If only I had the vaccine, if only the city had dealt with this faster, she wouldn't have had to die."

"Right, let's go."

"Yeah!"

The men rose at once. They looked at each other, then broke into a run. Only the woman and the dead man remained.

"My son is dead. He's left on a journey alone without me," Koka continued to lament. Her voice travelled across the ground and crawled up Karan's feet.

I knew it. I knew it. I knew it. People have died. Even more people will die in the near future.

"Karan," Renka said in a trembling voice from behind. "What's going to happen? The summons over the Internet... is that what my brother is doing?"

Karan turned around and gripped Renka's shoulder.

"Renka, how do I get in contact with Yoming? Is there any way?"

Renka promptly shook her head. "No. I can't get through to his cell phone or e-mail. I think he's refusing contact."

"I see..."

"Mommy? Ma'am?" Lili extended her hand straight out, and pointed down the path. Shadowy figures appeared from alleyways everywhere, and were forming a black mob.

"To city hall, to the Moondrop."

"We have to get the vaccine."

“They can’t just watch us die.”

“Yeah! Is that what they’re expecting from us?”

“Come on, everyone. Get together!”

Yelling and footsteps clashed and mingled, and became a roar. Where in the city had this energy lain dormant?

God, everyone in this damn city is so obedient and naive, Yoming had once muttered. They did not even have the energy to doubt orders from higher-ups. *They don’t try to think. They just go with the path of least resistance*, he had spat, his words full of frustration and contempt.

But now, the ground radiated with heat from the people, and was a step away from exploding. Such enormous energy had lain hidden inside them all along. No. 6 was not supposed to have any hint of unrest, discontent, or anxiety. But this was what had been swirling in its depths. What had flowed hidden deep underground was about to erupt. It was like a miracle.

Maybe this world will really change. Maybe—but no. This isn’t it. It’s different. Not right. A miracle wrapped in blood and anguish is no miracle.

Yoming had predicted No. 6’s fall. He had cried for the Holy City’s destruction. But he had not spoken a single word about creation. He had not expressed a specific vision for what kind of world he wanted to realize here, what he aimed to create after No. 6 had ceased to exist. Not a single word.

Karan put her hand to her heart, which was pounding frantically.

Koka’s cry of mourning was swallowed up in the din, and shattered to pieces. It reached no one’s ears.

“Renka, go back inside the shop, please. Lock the door and stay in the back room with Lili.”

“How about you, ma’am?”

Karan crouched in front of Lili.

"I'm going to take Koka home. I'll be back soon. You take care of your mother while I'm gone, alright?"

"Alright!"

She kissed Lili on the cheek. Then, for a moment, she closed her eyes. A vision of Shion's smile graced the back of her eyelids. Karan drew a breath of the nighttime air deep into her chest, and opened her eyes.

4

TO THE EVENING BREEZE

*For more than a thousand years sad Ophelia
Has passed, a white phantom, down the long black river;
For more than a thousand years her sweet madness
Has murmured its romance to the evening breeze.*

ARTHUR RIMBAUD, OPHELIA

NEZUMI FELL very slowly and quietly. It was like watching a slow-motion film. An ancient, monochromatic film...

A dull impact hit his chest. Nezumi had fallen on him. Shion caught the boy's weight and heat in his arms. Suddenly, the black-and-white screen regained its repulsive colours of reality.

Nezumi collapsed in Shion's arms, letting his whole body weigh down on them. The stench of blood assaulted Shion's nose.

Nezumi...

But no voice came out. He could not understand what had happened. He just could not. *What is it? What just happened?* Soldiers were pointing their guns at them. Rifles. The bayonets attached to them shone starkly white. One of the soldiers let his tongue peek out from between his lips.

A new wave of prisoners came in a torrent down the stairs. They formed a blockade between the soldiers and Shion. Of them, a bald, gigantic man gave a short cry. He staggered, clutching his chest.

“Damnit . . . you’ve done it now.” The giant took two, three steps towards a soldier and suddenly let out a great roar. “Goddamnit!”

The giant lunged at the soldier. At the same time, there was an explosion. Smoke and flames burst from the monitoring room near the stairs. Shion saw the soldier being flung to the wall by the blast. White smoke rapidly filled the corridor. Like a giant white snake, it slithered up the stairs and crawled down the hall.

Shion hoisted Nezumi up, and made for the end of the hallway. In regards to the movement of the smoke, the typical way to escape was probably downstairs. But down this hall was the Hygiene Management department.

The Hygiene Management Department. From the layout, Shion guessed that a simple medical examination room had been built adjacent to it. He stepped in through the door, which had been left flung open. He closed it to prevent further smoke and flames from filtering in.

He tripped. Nezumi’s body nearly slipped from his grasp. Shion attempted to catch him, but fell down with him in a tangle. He instinctively thrust his palms out, and noticed they had left red hand prints on the floor. His palms were dyed with blood—with Nezumi’s blood.

“Nezumi!”

He couldn’t help but raise his voice. Words were tearing through his throat and streaming forth.

“Nezumi, can you hear me? Nezumi!”

Nezumi’s eyes remained closed, and he remained unresponsive. The blood had spread from his shoulder, stained his chest, streamed down

his arm, and was dripping from his fingertips.

“No, how—how can this—” He knew that he could not lose his wits. He had to be rational. He had to calmly carry out what he had to do. *I know. Of course I do. But I can’t move. My mind and my body are frozen still.*

“Nezumi, Nezumi. Please, open your eyes.” He gritted his teeth.

You dumbass. He heard a scolding voice. You’re a helpless idiot. Useless, good-for-nothing. You’re bigheaded and slow and cowardly.

Inukashi? Is that you?

Can’t you even protect your most precious person? Can you only cry without even trying to save him? What do you have to show for being with Nezumi all this time, then? Are you still the same spoiled elite as you were in No. 6?

He could not tell if it was Inukashi’s voice or his own, but someone was giving him a severe reprimand.

Shion, are you sure? Would you be indifferent if you lost Nezumi? Would you even be able to bear it?

Shion drew a deep breath. The smell of blood reached all the way into his chest. He brought his ear close to Nezumi’s lips and checked his breathing. He took Nezumi’s pulse by placing his fingers on the boy’s wrist. He felt blood throbbing against his fingertips, but it was a faint pulse that seemed close to disappearing anytime now.

Shion stood up and glanced around the room. Thin flames and smoke issued from the instrument panel in the centre. There was a cabinet against the wall beyond with glass doors. The glass had been broken, and plastic bottles lay tipped over. Some had loosened caps, or the bottles themselves had been damaged, for the contents were leaking. Shion drew closer, but smelled nothing strange. Hand-written labels were fixed to each bottle with the name of the drug. Shion would perhaps have smiled at the rounded handwriting if he had seen them

in a normal situation. He would have smiled unwittingly at the idea of someone handwriting labels in such an inhuman-like place like the Correctional Facility, instead of using printed labels.

But now, he had no room in his thoughts for that.

Shion went through all the labels one by one. He suppressed his agitated heart, and told himself to calm down over and over, like a mantra.

Disinfectant; hemostatic agent; painkillers; purified water; general syringe; hemostatic clamp; gauze; absorbent cotton pads... in a corner of the shelf, there was an emergency flashlight tipped over on its side. As he expected, there was an adequate range of drugs and apparatuses for simple medical treatment.

Would he be able to manage something with these? A minor injury would have been no problem; but would he be able to treat a wound so severe it had caused the patient to suffer massive blood loss and loss of consciousness?

Most of Shion's medical knowledge was theoretical. He had almost no practical experience. In this situation, furthermore, how well could he give emergency treatment? Could he do it? He felt like the bayonet he had seen just now was being held to his throat.

Can you do it?

I've got to. There's no time to hesitate. I can't just sit idle and trouble myself over it. I can't let Nezumi be stolen from me so easily, without a struggle. I won't hand him over to you.

"Nezumi, you can hear me, right? I know my voice is getting to you." *There's no way you can't hear me. There's no way my voice won't reach you. No matter when or what situation, you always caught my words firmly, You heard me through the noise, you grasped my words, and you answered me. You came back to me. This time, I'm going to bring you back. I'll take you back by force.*

“Nezumi!”

Shion tore the other’s clothes. The bullet had pierced him below the left shoulder through his upper arm. If the shot had been a little further inwards, the bullet would have pierced his heart and he would have died instantly.

Live. Cling onto life. Heaven left that possibility for you. I won’t let it go to waste. First things first, I have to stop the bleeding. My priority right now is to stop this blood. Then, I have to take him to a place where he can get proper treatment. Quickly, even a second sooner. Just that.

He illuminated the affected spot with a flashlight. He sprinkled disinfectant on the wound. He washed the wound from the inside outwards, and he examined the inside with his naked eye. The artery was not severed completely. He applied pressure on Nezumi’s collarbone and temporarily controlled the bleeding. His fingertips were trembling.

Calm down calm down, calm down. I have to calm down. Banish all your emotions, and focus only on the bullet wound that’s penetrated him.

He pinched the artery with the hemostatic clamp, placed gauze on it, and pressed over it with an absorbent cotton pad. He wrapped a bandage tightly around it.

This is the best treatment I can give him right now.

He had broken into a sweat, which formed droplets and streamed down his face. They seeped into his mouth, and left a bitter taste on his tongue.

How long will he last with this? Three hours—no, more like two, considering how much he’s bled. If Nezumi doesn’t get proper treatment within two hours from now, he won’t make it.

Time limit: 120 minutes.

“Ugh...” Nezumi groaned softly. His eyelids fluttered slightly.

“Nezumi! Can you hear me? Nezumi!”

“... Shion...” he mumbled.

“Just a little longer. I need you to bear with me. I’m taking you to the hospital. Hang in there, and stay with me.” He instilled as much strength as he could into his words.

“... Shion... I can’t... move...”

“No problem. I’ll carry you.” *I’m here. I’m right here. So you’ll be alright.* Shion slung Nezumi’s arm around his neck, and hoisted him up. He circled his arm around the boy’s waist to secure him, and stepped out into the hallway.

The smoke stung his eyes. He dissolved into a fit of coughs. Pain raced through his throat, and his airway clogged up.

He had no survival knowledge, but he had the will, and his heart was prepared to do whatever it took. Nezumi had taught him plenty about that.

Shion crouched, and dragged Nezumi almost at a crawl. Heat and smoke swirled around them on the stairs. It was too dangerous to jump into this. But there was no time to survey other escape routes. If they dallied here, they would be engulfed by the smoke, and die of suffocation.

What do I do? What should I do?

His mounting agitation and the smoke that crept into his body almost made him lose his calm. *Don’t panic. Whatever you do, don’t panic. There is always a way.*

“Shion...”

Nezumi shifted his body. “Get out ... through the garbage chute...”

His voice reached Shion in fragments. He could tell that Nezumi was clinging desperately onto his consciousness. Once he lost it, it would be more difficult than ever to wake up again; Nezumi knew this all too well.

Garbage chute. Right, there was that option.

In the lower floors like the first to third, a garbage chute was installed in the middle of the hallway on each floor. It looked like small apparatuses were discarded there along with everyday waste, for the chute was quite wide. The first time Shion had found this out, the idea of using the chute to infiltrate the Facility had crossed his mind. But the idea was short-lived. It was impossible to climb up a chute almost perpendicular to the ground with no footholds whatsoever. Also, the chute was programmed to sense and set alarms off at any strange objects protruding from the openings. Infiltration was impossible. But it was possible to use it as an escape route.

He and Nezumi had talked about it before. It was—two days before the Hunt.

The day of the Hunt had been a cold winter day with a blustering wind, but two days before, it had been sunny with milder weather. A blue sky spread out above the West Block instead of snow clouds, and the rays that shone down were so warm that it was hard to believe it was winter. People seemed to be making the most of this short bout of pleasant weather, and strolled down the marketplace at a leisurely pace. Old beggars and starving children still overflowed in the streets as usual, but they seemed to breathe easier than most days. The shopkeepers, who would usually drive them away in a spiteful and unforgiving way, narrowed their eyes at the sun and let their faces relax. They didn't go so far as to give hand-outs, but they seemed to be willing to turn a blind eye to the beggars as long as they didn't steal any of their goods. Some even joked with familiar beggars.

Out of them, how many could have foreseen the hell that unfolded two days later? How many could have escaped the inferno of the Hunt?

Nezumi and Shion had been dining on hard bread they had bought at the market, soaking it in hot water first. Perhaps Nezumi's smile had

done the trick; the female head baker had given them some cheese for free. It was superb cheese, free of mould.

There was no sound in the basement room except for the voices of the two boys. Strangely, even the howl of the north wind which had begun to blow around sunset did not find its way here. Had the wind died down during that time? Or had Shion been so engrossed in the conversation that his ears had refused to catch anything other than Nezumi's voice?

"Shion, the garbage chute could be an escape route. Is it doable?" Nezumi asked, turning his cup of hot water in his hands.

"The garbage chute, huh... I see, it's like having a road that leads straight from the third floor to the meeting place in the basement."

"Yeah. From the blueprint, I'm guessing the entire chute apart from the openings probably isn't integrated into the object-detection and disposal system. Heh, seems like No. 6 is lax all over the place when it comes to its waste disposal facilities."

"You're right," Shion had replied. "And it's bigger than a typical chute. Technically, we should be able to get through."

"Exactly. Aren't you glad we both happened to be skinny? If any of us had been around old man Rikiga's size, we'd get stuck in the middle. Oversized garbage, indeed."

"That sounds a bit severe."

"You're welcome. I'm just telling the truth. *You* tell me if you can imagine that beer-bellied geezer hurtling down the chute like it's nothing."

"Well—I guess you're right." The image of Rikiga with his fleshy underbelly rose in Shion's mind, and he almost burst out laughing. He swallowed it back down, and pursed his lips. Nezumi's question was not the kind he could answer with a smile.

Was the garbage chute a plausible escape route or not? After some moments of thought, Shion spoke.

“To tell you the truth, I have no idea if we can really do it. But there’s a possibility. All theory, just saying,” he answered. Nezumi put his cup down, and sank deeply into his seat.

“Possibility, huh.”

“Yeah.”

“There is a possibility, then.” Nezumi crossed his legs, and closed his eyes. Shion also leaned back against the bookshelf and hugged one knee. It was then that Shion noticed the sound of the wind for the first time. It was a raspy sound, similar to an old woman’s hushed weeping.

The room dimly lit by a lamp; Nezumi’s meditating profile; the low rumble of the wind—he felt like he was looking at a scene from a play. Shion was sitting in the audience, eyes fixed to the silent tableau on the darkened stage before him. A fulfilled comfort, a wistfulness, and an emotion close to awe, along with others he couldn’t name, mixed, tangled with each other, and filled Shion to the brim.

If only this moment could last forever. If only time would stop right at this moment. If only my entire world consisted of the things right here. The wish rose suddenly in his heart.

“*Life’s but a walking shadow, a poor player.*” A line from *Macbeth* suddenly rose in his mind.

“*Out, out, brief candle.*”

“*Life’s but a walking shadow, a poor player.*”

Nezumi opened his eyes. His gaze tangled with Shion’s own.

“What?”

“Huh? No, nothing...” Shion shifted his body, and backed away slightly from the lamplight. He did not want Nezumi to see his

cheeks, which were probably flushed red.

“Shion, do you know what I was thinking about just now?”

“You? Well... the garbage chute, probably?”

“Of course not. I’m not gonna trouble myself over trash forever. Besides, we solved that problem. It’s possible, which means it’s worth a shot. So far so good?”

“Right.” It didn’t matter if it was only theory. No matter if the idea was nothing more than speculation; if it’s possible, you have to drill it into your mind— that was what Nezumi was telling him. Shion nodded slowly as a sign that he understood.

“Good. But if you ask me, I’d rather make my gracious exit at the front door, complete with all the accompaniments. But that’s a luxury I probably won’t have.”

“Probably not. I’d warn you not to expect VIP treatment. So, if you weren’t thinking about the garbage chute, what were you thinking about? Other ways to escape?”

Nezumi re-crossed his legs, and let out a doleful sigh.

“I was thinking about food.”

“Huh?”

“Food. F-o-o-d. I was thinking about what I’d order if I could stuff myself with whatever I liked.”

“—Materialistic of you, huh?” Shion commented.

“Food is important. Sometimes, a roll that an old baker man has slapped together is much more meaningful than an eternal truth discovered by an esteemed philosopher. That’s the nature of life. Anyway, right now I’m so hungry I’m starting to feel sorry for myself. I probably won’t be able to sleep if I went to bed now.”

“You just ate. You ate two rolls.”

“Rock-hard, withered bread, hot water and a piece of cheese is not nearly enough.”

“Don’t be greedy,” Shion said sternly. “Thanks to that madam at the bakery, we were able to get our hands on some good cheese. It was a pretty decent dinner.”

“If only you’d been a bit more friendly, and we probably could have gotten some canned lamb or a bottle of milk on top. Shame.”

“Me? I’ve got nothing to do with it.”

“What’re you saying? You’ve got everything to do with it. You should have seen the way that lady was looking at you. I thought you were ignoring her on purpose. Don’t tell me you actually didn’t notice!”

“I had no idea.”

Nezumi grimaced at him and shook his head. “Shion, you need to brush up a little—no, forget that, *a lot*— on your perceptions of the other sex. If you don’t do it soon, things’ll get pretty bad.”

“What do you mean, bad?”

“So bad I can’t put it into words. You won’t hear anything from me, at least. Oh, but geez, that’s serious. Just thinking about it gives me the goosebumps.”

“What are you talking about?” Shion asked in annoyance. “Now you’re making me curious. It would probably keep me up if I went to bed now. My curiosity and your hunger would make a good contest.”

Nezumi laughed out loud, which was unusual for him. His laughter was carefree and full of delight. It entered into Shion quietly, and deeply.

“Nezumi.”

“What?”

“Can you recite *Macbeth*?”

“Macbeth? Which part?”

“Act Five Scene Five, right after Macbeth is told about his wife’s death.”

“Why *Macbeth*?”

“I dunno,” Shion replied. “I wonder why. I just suddenly wanted to hear you do *Macbeth*. Won’t you?”

“Well, I don’t mind.”

Hamlet and Tsukiyo climbed up onto Shion’s shoulder. Nezumi’s voice, serene yet wrung with sorrow, reached Shion’s ears.

*Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow,
Creeps in this petty pace from day to day,
To the last syllable of recorded time,
And all our yesterdays have lighted fools
The way to dusty death. Out, out, brief candle.
Life’s but a walking shadow, a poor player...*

Shion and the mice listened entranced with bated breath. The flame of the lamp wavered, and their shadows wavered also. Shadows also etched themselves into Nezumi’s voice and expression, and Shion felt himself being lifted out of reality and taken up to the heights. A fleeting levity; eternal fulfilment. How rich, how plentiful and beautiful were these hours that passed.

Two days before the Hunt, in that room was the scene which left an impression like no other in Shion’s life. What took place only a while ago felt like something of days long past.

Tears spilled over.

It was the smoke, and not because his heart had been torn in nostalgia. *Cheep-cheep, cheep-cheep, chit chit chit.* Tsukiyo alighted on the floor, and squeaked incessantly. The superfibre had fallen to the ground. Shion stooped abruptly to pick it up. The strength left Nezumi’s body, and his weight bore down on Shion’s shoulder.

“Nezumi, hang in there. Stay awake.”

“... Get out of here... hurry...”

“I know. Even I wouldn’t take a rest here. Nezumi, we’re almost there. Bear with me for a bit longer.”

“Shion... we can’t. Not... with two of us.”

“Huh? What’re you talking about?”

“Run... on your own... just run.”

“Idiot!” Shion snapped. “Don’t give me that crap!” Anger reared inside him. It was wrath toward Nezumi. He felt like his white hair was standing on end. Scorched air blew not only from outside, but from within Shion as well.

Telling me to leave without you? That I should just escape by myself? Don’t give me that. Don’t you dare. Is that how much you look down on me? How little you think of me? I’m not so weak that I’ll leave you and choose the path of my own survival. I can protect us, you know. I have enough strength to protect you and me.

“Don’t underestimate me, damnit,” he said angrily.

Anger swiftly transformed into energy to press forward. He willed strength into his arms, and glared ahead. The place was void of any human presence. Shion felt a slight breeze. The flames began to lick the ceiling. Some chemical had apparently caught fire, for there was a small explosion, followed by a characteristic sharp odour.

“Tsukiyo, come on.”

Tsukiyo dove into his pocket. He poked his head out, and emitted high-pitched squeaks. To Shion, it sounded like the orders of a navigator, and he felt encouraged. He had to escape even a second sooner, also for the sake of this tiny creature who kept up its cries even through its shortness of breath.

He tripped on something and almost fell over. A giant of a prisoner

was lying face-down on the floor. He had died with his face in a pool of his own blood. Shion stepped over his body, and continued forward. *Stairs here, which means the location of the garbage chute is...* He recalled the accurate details of the floorplan which he had drilled into his mind. He traced it in his memory. It was in a corner of the hall, where the smoke was billowing now. He nudged Tsukiyo's head back into his pocket with the tip of his finger.

"Nezumi." *We're going in.* Shion held his breath, and plunged into the smoke. He had neither time nor way to check the opening of the chute. His field of vision in this smoky corridor was close to zero metres. A slight hesitation, and he would meet his end through suffocation.

Believe. Believe in yourself. If you're gonna cling, cling to yourself.

His feet stopped. He could see the opening of the garbage chute. A soldier was slumped against it as if to block his way. His legs were thrown out, and he lay still with his eyes half-open. His neck was twisted at a queer angle. His rifle, which he had apparently held fast onto even while being blasted by the explosion, sat in his lap. The same rifle which had shot Nezumi.

Shion did not feel any sort of emotion rise toward this soldier. No hatred, nor ire, nor pity. Not even respect for one who had died. The thing in front of him was not a human body; it was but an obstacle. Shion had to think that way, or else he could not survive. *It's just an obstacle.*

He kicked the soldier.

The soldier's body rolled over, its neck still bent at an odd angle. The opening revealed itself fully. *It hurts. I can't breathe. My throat is burning. I want air.* His veins swelled. His heart was wreaking havoc in his chest. Strength began to leave him. *Damnit, I've come this far; I won't give in now. I've come so far...*

Nezumi. What? Can you recite Macbeth? Macbeth? Which part? Act Five Scene Five...

The wind was howling. The flame was flickering. And I desperately wanted to hear you recite that line. I don't know why. Maybe I just wanted to lend my ears to your voice, and immerse myself in your breathing. As I listened to Macbeth tread the path to destruction, I felt elevated; I was fulfilled.

"Out, out, brief candle."

"Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player..."

Nezumi, we're going home. We're going back to that room. We can't turn back time, but we can create it anew.

Usually, the garbage chute was programmed to open automatically when it sensed someone standing in front of it. Of course, right now it did not move at all. Once Shion laid Nezumi down, he grabbed a rifle and fired the whole round of shots into the opening of the chute. The lid blew into smithereens.

A black square void yawned at him. Triumph pierced his body.

Nezumi, we're almost there. Almost there. He wanted to call out to Nezumi, but he couldn't speak out loud anymore. He wrapped Nezumi in his superfibre cloth. If he could, he wanted to slide down the chute while holding Nezumi, but the chute was too narrow. It was wide enough for just one person.

Shion heaved Nezumi up, and stuck him into the chute feet-first. Shion slid in after him, and he gripped the opening with his left hand while he secured Nezumi's head to his belly with his right. He could feel vibrations from the explosions. The wind roared.

Shion closed his eyes and released the grip on his left hand. Two bodies slid down the perpendicular chute.

* * *

“Ow!” Inukashi yelled. He had been bitten on the earlobe. “The hell was that? That hurt. You freaking rats.”

With a hand to his ear, Inukashi glared at the two mice perched side-by-side.

“I guess calling you guys rats doesn’t make for much of an insult. You’re close enough. Damn it, that hurts.”

He had evidently fallen fast asleep, slumped over the desk. *I guess I’ve got some guts to fall asleep in this situation. Heh heh.* He mentally congratulated himself while he massaged his earlobe. In reality, he had probably lost consciousness from exhaustion, but it didn’t feel bad to compliment himself like this.

He heard snoring. Rikiga was curled up on the floor at his feet, snoring liberally. Even a legendary monster couldn’t produce such a horrifying noise.

“Tsk, looks like old man here has got more guts,” Inukashi clicked his tongue. The little mice scurried up his arm.

“Hey, stop that. I just clicked my tongue. I wasn’t inviting you to play. I don’t have food, either. Hey, don’t bite my ear! I’m hungry, too!”

Chit-chit-chit. Chit-chit-chit.

Screek! Screek! Screek!

The mice scurried up and dashed down Inukashi’s arm in turn. Their actions and cries were clearly out of the ordinary.

“What is it? Is something wrong?”

His nose twitched. It smelled like something was burning. Smoke was seeping through the door, which was slightly ajar. It was burning inside the Correctional Facility.

“Shit...” Inukashi muttered to himself.

The smoke would probably fill this room in no time. They had to escape before then.

This is serious. And it's amazing. If the smoke has gotten this far, it must be a serious fire. What about the fire-extinguishing devices? Did they not work? Devices not working in the Correctional Facility? Is that even possible?

Inukashi swallowed. *Is it their doing? Did Nezumi and Shion stop all the systems? Did they pull this miracle off?*

"You can make miracles happen more easily than you think, Inukashi." Are you telling me you weren't lying or putting on a front when you were saying that?

The smoke streamed in with even greater speed, along with a burning smell and heat. His spine froze. *Wait. Wait a second. Are they still in here?*

This smoke, this stench, this heat. He could not imagine people surviving in this. His spine grew even colder.

Nezumi, you better know that you're only allowed to call it a miracle if you come back alive to say it. If you die in there, that's not a miracle. You won't even get a memorial. If you don't end up coming home after giving me all that big talk, I'll laugh. I'll laugh my ass off.

Rikiga choked on the smoke and started coughing. The mice screeched. It looked like they were roaring with all their might.

"What is it? What do I do? What happened to your masters?" Inukashi felt like screaming too. What the hell am I supposed to do?

One of the mice—he couldn't tell if it was Cravat or Hamlet—dashed into the collection area. It darted madly around the very bottom of the garbage chute, where a square opening had been cut out. The other joined it, and they both ran in dizzying circles around it.

Garbage chute? Wait a minute, why did Nezumi make us wait here in the first place? The garbage chute...

Inukashi roused himself, and kicked Rikiga's hind quarters.

"Help me out, old man."

“Wh-What? What’s going on?”

“They’re coming back. Help out.”

In a corner of the collection area, there were a few old and worn mats. Getsuyaku had supplied them to prevent further damage to apparatuses as they came falling down the chute. The less damaged the goods were, the higher the price he could resell them at. Getsuyaku made considerable money from garbage that came falling down this chute.

There were bits of broken glass strewn in the waste heaps in the collection area, and the bare concrete floor was exposed in some parts. If the boys came falling down here, their bones would shatter. *I can let that happen to unwanted machines, but they’re human. I can’t let their bones break.*

“Hurry up, old man. Stop loafing.”

“R-Right.” Rikiga waddled over, and grabbed a mat.

“We’re gonna line these up. Stack them. Hurry!”

“Right... but Inukashi, are Shion and them really coming back? How are they—”

“Shut up and get a move on! Quickly!”

Inukashi strained his ears while moving the mats. *Come back, Nezumi. Come back, Shion.*

“Inukashi, the smoke is getting bad!” Rikiga yelled. The small room was being swallowed up in white smoke.

Just come back, Nezumi, Shion. Please, just come home.

He heard the wind rumbling through the chute.

Come home.

Please, come home.

O Lord, watch over them. Inukashi clasped his hands together, and prayed to God for the first time in his life. *O Lord—*

Volume IX

Shion barely manages to escape the Correctional Facility as it crumbles into ruins. Nezumi is close to dying, and they join with Inukashi and Rikiga to head into the city to save him. After he has learned of all that surrounds No. 6, Shion embarks to the Moondrop, with the future of the people in his hands!

So this was No. 6.
This was Elyurias.

1

THAT WHICH I SAY I SAW

*Gracious my lord,
I should report that which I say I saw,
But know not how to do it.*

MACBETH, ACT V SCENE V

THEY WERE falling. Falling, almost straight down.

It was faster than anything Shion had imagined. He knew it was impossible, but he heard the sound of the wind. It was the same wind from that stormy night.

It was September 7, 2013—Shion's twelfth birthday. The Holy City of No. 6 had been directly hit by a hurricane. The rain was pounding on the ground, and the wind was roaring. The trees in his yard careened wildly, and leafy branches broke off and whipped through the air. It was an extremely large and severe hurricane, a kind not seen in recent years, but he was sure that no one living in Chronos felt threatened or anxious. Shion and his mother, Karan, had been the same.

This was No. 6. A utopian city, the results of human wisdom and cutting-edge technology. And in that utopia, Chronos was in the

highest ranks among the luxury residences, a town where only the chosen ones were allowed to live. Mere natural disasters could not disturb it.

Everyone had believed so without a doubt. They had been allowed to believe otherwise.

That stormy night, I opened my window.

Why? he sometimes thought. *Why did I open that window? Was it because I was excited at nature's madness, and I was stimulated, or I was stirred by a violent impulse—was that it? I certainly did open the window, and I yelled. I screamed as if I were pouring out all of the ferocity inside me. If I didn't scream, I felt like I would shatter to bits. In my own way, I felt a fear that I would be entrapped and tamed into domesticity by No. 6. A vague fear—maybe something that you wouldn't be acquainted with, Nezumi.*

I felt like I was suffocating. I was scared. I wanted to scream.

That was why I opened the window—wasn't it?

No.

That's not it.

You called to me.

I heard that voice—your voice—calling me.

It ducked through the wind, tore through the rain, and came to me.

You called me, and I was called by you.

That's why I opened the window. I flung it open wide to the outdoors.

I extended my arms in search of you.

Would you laugh? Would that breathtaking smile cross your face as you sneer at me? Would you shake your head with exasperation in that graceful way of yours?

'Meaningless fancies. An intolerable mass of self-consciousness, like a half-baked artist's work'—would you spit those words at me? You probably

would. Go on and laugh. You can dismiss them as my delusions; I don't care.

But it's the truth.

You called me, and I listened. I reached out, and you caught my arm. I opened the window so I could meet you.

That's our truth, Nezumi.

A noise was ringing in his ears. It wasn't the whirl of the wind. It was the sound of sliding through a plastic tube. But what if this tube was not a garbage chute, but a steep slope that led straight to Hell?

Suddenly his consciousness began to fade. All the wounds he had suffered on his entire body grew hot and throbbed. The strength left him.

Going to Hell doesn't seem so bad when it's with you. Should I stop resisting, then? Why don't I just give up on struggling, on fighting, on wanting to live?

If I let myself black out now, I'll be free from this pain, this weariness.

Shion closed his eyes. Darkness fanned out before him.

Just like this... just like this...

"Ugh," Nezumi groaned softly. It stabbed Shion's eardrums. Like lightning flaring up in a night sky, it tore the darkness away from his consciousness.

Damnit. Shion bit his lip and inflicted pain on himself. He scolded himself severely. *You bastard, what were you thinking? You can't give up now. Live. Survive. We have a place to return to, and we have to get there in one piece.*

He had made that vow. He had vowed to himself that he would protect Nezumi through to the end, and survive this ordeal together.

His hand slipped. Nezumi's blood was caked on his palms. A black mouse leapt out of his pocket and ran along the garbage chute wall. It

wasn't falling; it was definitely running.

Tsukiyo, I'm counting on you. Tell Inukashi that we're alive.

Shion jammed both feet against the wall and gritted his teeth. He focused all the strength in his body on his legs. His bones creaked. Their falling speed decreased somewhat. His bones continued to creak as if they were screaming from the pain.

Damnit, I won't give in yet. Shion chewed his lip still harder. He did not taste the blood. His tongue was already numbed to its rusty metallic taste.

Inukashi—Inukashi, help us.

Inukashi!

* * *

Rikiga fell into a fit of coughing. He recovered and breathed raggedly. "Inukashi, I can't do it anymore. I'm at my limit."

"Limit of what?" Inukashi said tersely.

"I can't breathe. Are you planning on suffocating me like this?"

"What good is it to me if I suffocate you, old man? You gonna leave me a giant inheritance? The most you'd probably leave behind is a pile of empty booze bottles."

"Hmph. See if I even leave you that."

But even while griping, Rikiga did not try to flee. He was still stacking mattresses under the opening of the garbage chute. With each mattress he stacked, he had a coughing fit, gasped and wheezed, and griped some more.

Smoke had saturated the hygiene management room. The collection area was no exception; it was almost engulfed by thick, grey smoke. The dogs lay low on their bellies, their breathing hushed. Even the

little mice who had been squeaking clamorously at each other were now huddled motionless.

The limit—Rikiga was right, the limit was near. Inukashi himself was choking on the smoke, and the air wasn't passing through his throat well. His heart pounded frantically.

It hurts.

The air is stuck in my throat.

But he was not miserable. He was not in despair. On the contrary, a part of his heart was pounding, soaring in anticipation.

What is this smoke? This hot air that blows at me from time to time? The restless buzz that comes with its snarl?

A clear precursor to destruction. The Correctional Facility is raising its last dying shriek.

Many times Inukashi felt like barking out of excitement. He wanted to bark and howl until his throat trembled. Just once, he opened his mouth wide, but he only choked on the smoke that rushed into his mouth.

He licked his lips while carrying the mattresses. *If I can't bark, the least I can do is lick my chops.*

What he thought was absolute was crumbling before his eyes.

Will you look at that. Is that what life is, Nezumi? Shion? If it is, that means you guys taught me what it is to be alive. You never know what happens. There's nothing absolute about what humans create.

I won't thank you; you guys have caused me too much hassle. You'll never hear a word of thanks come out of my mouth.

But I owe you praise. I'll give you my best compliments. I'm actually impressed that you guys turned out as decent as my dogs are. You guys are really something. I have new regard for you. I'm impressed—just a tiny bit.

The smoke assaulted his eyes, his throat, and his nasal passage. A tear rolled down his cheek. It was just the smoke stinging his eyes.

You come back, you hear me? If you don't, I can't praise you. Hurry, hurry, while my breath can still last me. Hurry.

Inukashi! Someone called him. He whirled around. Rikiga was kneeling on the floor. He was holding a white cloth to his mouth, and coughs were racking his bent back.

"Call me?"

"—What?"

"Did you call me, old man?"

"What would I... do that for?" Rikiga wheezed. "You want me to... give you one last kiss or something?"

"Knock it off. That's creepy, even for a joke."

"I'm... past the point of... caring whether it's creepy. Really, I can't... stand this anymore..."

"That's a shame. My heart goes out to you, man. But it's a bit too late to repent. A man as corrupted as you isn't gonna get any closer to Heaven, no matter how hard you try."

"Damn it... still smart-mouthing me... are you?"

Explosions. Smoke pouring into the air. The dog with patched fur raised its head. Terror swam in its eyes. But the dogs did not move. They did not try to flee.

They're waiting for my orders. They were waiting for Inukashi's command, fighting their fear of death. Dogs never abandoned their master. They never betrayed him.

I can't murder them like this.

"Go." Inukashi pointed at the entrance door. "Escape by yourselves."

But the dogs did not get to their feet. They remained lying on their stomachs, watching Inukashi.

“What? I’m telling you to leave. Get out of here, quickly.” He met the eyes of the patched dog. Its eyes were serene. The shadow of fear that had crossed his eyes moments ago was wiped cleanly away.

“I see...” *You won’t move if your master doesn’t.*

“Aren’t you gonna... tell me?” Rikiga coughed and wheezed. “Aren’t you gonna... tell me to run?”

“You? You can get the hell out of here if you want to. You wouldn’t be any use if you stayed.”

“Inukashi.”

“What?”

“Do you... plan to die here?”

“Die? Why would I?”

“There’s barely any... chance that those two... Shion and Eve... are going to come back. If you’re gonna gamble on that slim chance... if you’re gonna gamble and choose to stay... that’s like killing yourself.”

No way. Heaven and earth can turn upside-down, but I’m never gonna kill myself. I’d be missing the spectacle of a lifetime. The destruction of the Correctional Facility was only the beginning. It was only the preamble. The devastation of No. 6 itself was what came next.

No. 6 was falling apart.

I’ll get to see the very moment with my own eyes. And you’re telling me I intend to die? You must be kidding me. You bet I’ll live to see No. 6’s last. I’ll thoroughly enjoy its final act.

Heh heh heh.

Lighthearted laughter rang at his ear. No, it was in his ear—inside his head. Someone was laughing. It was carefree and joyful, yet an icy laughter.

“Who is it?”

His gaze darted about instinctively and caught a small black shadow passing by.

A bug?

The shadow was soon swallowed up by the smoke as it disappeared. The laughter ceased. *Were they both hallucinations? There's no way a bug could be flying around in this smoke.*

Shiver. A chill ran down his spine.

Screech, screech, chit-chit!

Cheep-cheep-cheep-cheep-cheep. Squeak!

Suddenly, the mice began to cause a commotion. They raised their voices again, but much higher this time, and dashed around on top of the mattresses.

Inukashi held his breath.

A small object came tumbling out of the chute. It was not trash. It was a small black mouse.

“Tsukiyo.” Inukashi tried calling it. The black mouse flew through the air; it leapt straight for Inukashi. It latched onto Inukashi’s hastily extended arm, and squeaked insistently.

Cheep cheep cheep cheep! Cheep cheep cheep cheep!

It was Tsukiyo; there was no doubt about it. It was the same little mouse that Inukashi himself had commanded to go to Nezumi. His blood stirred. His body grew hot.

“Wake up, old man.”

“Eh?”

Rikiga blinked feebly, still squatted on the ground. His eyes were bleary and red. His face was sooty, his hair was mussed, and he looked like he had aged a good decade.

“They’re coming back.”

“Eh?”

“Coming back. Hold onto the mattresses.”

“R-Right.” Rikiga got to his feet in a surprisingly swift move.

The wind was howling.

As Inukashi and Rikiga held the mattresses down, they felt a heavy impact almost simultaneously. The mattress sank, almost sending Inukashi’s slender frame flying. He summoned all the strength in his body to cling onto the mattress.

He had instinctively closed his eyes, but now he opened them carefully. He saw two bodies lying in a heap.

“Shion, Eve!” Rikiga yelled before Inukashi could speak. “You alright? Hey! You alright?”

“Gh...” Shion’s arm jerked. A part of his white hair was dyed with his blood. Blood was streaming from his shoulder and his leg. His clothes were torn, ripped, and hanging in places. Inukashi couldn’t tell if the dark flecks all over his clothes were from blood or the trash in the chute.

Horrible. Inukashi kept his eyes wide open as he swallowed his spit, which smelled like smoke. *You guys are a mess. I think even the undead would look a bit better crawling out of their graves.*

“... Inukashi.” Shion lifted himself up and turned his face to Inukashi. His cheeks were streaked—whether it was with sweat or tears, he didn’t know, but they engraved prominent marks on his skin.

“Shion, you’re alive.” *You made it back alive.*

“Inukashi, save Nezumi...”

“Nezumi? What about him? What—” Inukashi was barely able to hold in the scream that threatened to burst from his throat.

Nezumi was lying on the mattress, totally still and unmoving. His clothes were soiled reddish-black from his shoulder to his chest, and he gave off the smell of blood.

“Nezumi, hey, what’s wrong?” Inukashi asked tentatively, but there was no answer. On his pale, bloodless face, only his lips were vividly red. To Inukashi, they did not look human at all. Nezumi had always had a face that was somewhat otherworldly, but the face in front of him was one of a doll. A skillfully and meticulously crafted piece.

But dolls don’t bleed.

“To the hospital—hurry,” Shion screamed, as if wringing the voice from his throat. Explosions rocked the foundations of the building. The whole room shook with its impact. A draft was coming in from somewhere, and the smoke wavered and thinned slightly. The shaking did not stop.

“We need to get out of here! This place is coming down!” Rikiga yelled as he wrenched Nezumi away from Shion’s arms. He slung the boy over his shoulder.

“Shion, can you run on your own?”

“I can.”

“Right, then run. Get outside.”

One more sound, more violent than before, rang out, and the door to the Correctional Facility was blasted away.

“Run, run! This place won’t hold much longer!”

Rikiga broke into a run, bearing Nezumi. Tsukiyo dove into Shion’s pocket, and the two mice, Hamlet and Cravat, leapt onto a dog’s back.

“Get out, goddamnit! Get out of here!” Rikiga’s bellows slammed into him.

His back was blistering hot. Inukashi turned around to the flames filling his vision. Beyond the blown-open door, the Correctional Facility was burning.

The door blew apart? Wasn’t the door between the Correctional Facility and the Hygiene Management Room supposed to be made of some special

alloy that even a small missile couldn't penetrate? And it's been blown apart like it's nothing?

For less than half a second, he stood stupefied. Flames slithered. A fire-coloured monster was writhing on the floor. It writhed and twisted towards the corpse of the black dog and swallowed it whole. It was the same dog that had been shot to death protecting Inukashi, but Inukashi was unable to give it a proper burial.

Sorry.

"Inukashi, hurry!" Shion grabbed his arm.

"Get out, get out! We have to get out of here!" Rikiga continued to bellow. He seemed to be turning his yelling into energy to move forward. Inukashi was pushed along by the heat and the hot air from behind, and quite literally stumbled into the outdoors. Fresh air flowed into his body.

Oh, I can finally breathe.

"Not yet. We can't stop yet. Keep running." Shion's grip tightened. Inukashi was dragged along by his arm. The gravel crunched under his feet.

"Ow! Shion, that hurts! Stop—" Inukashi abruptly closed his mouth. His eyes had met with Shion's.

His eyes, dark with a wash of purple, were the same as always. They were completely unchanged. They were bloodshot, and the eyelids were swollen, but they were Shion's eyes.

Yet Inukashi closed his mouth and felt his body stiffen. He did not know why. The boy in front of him telling him to run seemed a complete stranger. He was someone Inukashi did not know.

No. Those aren't Shion's eyes. Shion, what's gotten into you?

But the confusion and foreboding vanished in an instant. Shion was right—he could not fall to his knees just yet. His instincts sounded

the alarm. This physical sensation was much more reliable than any cutting-edge security device.

Get out of here, run. Get out of here.

Inukashi leapt to his feet, and ran as fast as he could. From behind, he could hear the roar of a beast. Yes, those were not just explosions. A monster was baying. It was raving madly.

Get out of here, run. Get out of here.

Run and survive.

Tsukiyo had crawled out of Shion's pocket and was clinging onto his neck. It had opened its tiny round eyes as wide as it could, and was staring over at Inukashi.

You're kinda cute.

Dogs' eyes and mice's eyes were alike, and all such innocent beings were loveable. Inukashi thought of Shionn. He had not forgotten about him for a moment. He had only pushed the infant to a corner of his heart so as not to remember him when he was not supposed to. Shionn was innocence itself. He was so small, yet he had so much inside him.

The dogs are probably managing alright. I left him with a dog that's birthed and raised a ton of her own puppies. Apart from her, there are a few other caring females in waiting. He's probably sleeping right now, protected by his loving nurse.

"Shionn, my baby," he murmured. Just then, Rikiga, who had been running in front of him, disappeared. He heard a shout, and the sound of a body falling over.

"Whoa!" Shion tripped over Rikiga's fallen body. In turn, Inukashi's feet were swept from under him by Shion, and he was slammed to the ground. The pain racked him to his very core.

He could not speak. Lying on his stomach on the ground, he could only draw strained breaths. He could feel the frozen ground on his

cheek. It was soothing. It had not the iciness of winter, but a cold that harboured a faint hint of warmth and softness.

Spring was coming. A late spring was starting to arrive in the West Block.

No. 6 was probably fully furnished with flowering parks and streets lined with cherry blossom trees, but one would be hard-pressed to find even a single flowering tree in the West Block. But the weeds growing on the shoulders of the road faithfully opened their petals year after year. Flowers usually sparked no interest or intrigue in Inukashi since they were not edible, but once in a while they pulled at his heartstrings.

Oh, I've lived through another winter, he would think. Then, for a fleeting instant, in the back of his mind he saw faces of those who had frozen to death that winter—the old beggar lady he had been familiar with; the man who had hung around the ruins for a good while; the woman who was so emaciated, it was hard to tell her age—but they disappeared as quickly as they had come.

Spring was coming. Would those flowers bloom again on the side of the road?

“Nezumi,” Shion gasped. He lifted himself up, and crawled over to Nezumi’s side. “Nezumi, Nezumi. Can you hear me? Nezumi—”

Inukashi also lifted himself up. They were lying in the shadow of some shrubbery. When was it that he had hidden himself here, witnessing Getsuyaku being shot to death?

It felt like it had happened only minutes ago, but at the same time a thousand years back.

“Nezumi, open your eyes. We’re out. We were able to get out.”

Shion’s voice sounded like the wind that whistled through the ruins. It was mournful. It froze the hearts and ears of those who listened.

Inukashi peered over Shion's shoulder at Nezumi's face, and compressed his lips into a hard line.

Is he dead? The statement pushed his lip up and threatened to spill out. Shion, is Nezumi dead? Or is he just acting? Who's he playing? Macbeth, Hamlet, or some other weird name that you guys used to mention?

Hey, Shion. Don't tell me Nezumi is really—

"Gh—" Nezumi's eyelashes trembled very slightly.

"He's alive," Shion shouted as he lifted Nezumi in his arms. "He's alive! Hurry, to the hospital!"

Yeah, you're sure alive. You can't trick me, Nezumi. There's no way you would be wiped out that easily.

"Old man." Inukashi called to Rikiga, who was squatting on the ground. His car was parked beyond the shrubs. It was a piece of junk, a step away from scrap metal, but it could still chug along with a couple passengers. They had taken this gasoline-fuelled car to get here, after all.

"Old man, hurry up."

"—I know, but—"

Rikiga held a hand to his mouth, and stuck his head into the bushes. The sound of retching reached them.

"Dumbass! This is no time to be puking! Hurry the hell up, come on!"

Inukashi grabbed the man by the belt of his trousers and dragged him out of the bushes. Almost as if in answer, an even larger flame burst out of the window of the Correctional Facility. It threw a bright light on the surroundings. Black smoke formed a thick stream as it rose into the sky. It engulfed and blacked out the stars.

Can you see these flames from No. 6, too? What would West Block residents be thinking right now as they watch the flames burning the night up?

Look at it, it's falling. A place that used to mean Hell for us is collapsing. It's gonna be wiped out, just like that, even quicker than our marketplace.

Rikiga got to his feet unsteadily. He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, and wiped the sweat on his brow while he was at it.

"Why do I... have to go through this? Besides, you know, I—"

"Enough crap," Inukashi interrupted. "No one's listening. If you've got time to bitch and moan, get the car moving."

"Moving where?" Rikiga snarled. "Eh? Answer me this, Inukashi. Where are we going to take someone who's hurt so badly he's as good as dead? Answer me, I'd like to see you try! If you can give me an answer, boy, I'll take you wherever the hell you want."

Inukashi drew his chin back and fell silent. He could not answer.

He was not intimidated by Rikiga's angry outburst. He genuinely did not know. 'To the hospital,' Shion had said, but there were no medical facilities in the West Block. There were seedy witch doctors and questionable medicine shops, to be sure, but they had all been blown clean off their foundations during the Hunt. But even if they were still around, they would probably not have been of much use.

Rikiga continued his furious tirade.

"Someone who's bled this much is going to need a decent amount of medical equipment. Where do you suggest we find that, huh? Nowhere here, for sure. You can scour the whole West Block and you won't find a single damn syringe. You should know that best, Inukashi."

Inukashi looked down at Nezumi. His lips were parted slightly. He was breathing. But—

This is the end, huh? The strength withered in his legs, and he felt like he would collapse. *This is it, Nezumi. There's nothing more we can do.*

"There is." Shion stood up. "There is a hospital."

Inukashi and Rikiga turned to each other. They peered into each other's eyes.

"Hospital—? Where?" Rikiga asked in a hoarse, scratchy voice. Shion's gaze slid to the side. On the other end of it was the special alloy wall, illuminated brightly by the flames.

"Inside."

"No. 6!" Inukashi and Rikiga's voices overlapped.

"Yes. We'll find plenty of hospitals there."

"That's absurd!" Rikiga blurted. "How are we going to get inside? My car won't even be able to pass the gates. They'll register it as a suspicious vehicle and it'll get blown up within a few metres of even entering. Impossible. Absolutely impossible. Wait, I know! Shion, how did you escape from No. 6? Can't we go back in that way?"

Inukashi almost interjected in agreement. If Shion had come out that way, perhaps he could get back in through it. *That old man is a quick thinker once the alcohol's gone out of him.*

But Shion shook his head firmly.

"We can't do that. That would take too much time. And Nezumi wouldn't last on the strength he has left. We have an hour—we need to get him to the hospital within an hour..."

"But how are we going to manoeuvre through the gates?"

"We don't need to."

"What?"

"The Correctional Facility is destroyed. All its functions have shut down. That means the gates mostly likely aren't operating, either."

"You're planning to enter No. 6 through the Correctional Facility's private gates?"

"Yes."

“Shion, you . . . do you know where the Correctional Facility’s gates are?”

“I don’t know for sure. I’ve heard, though, that they’re directly connected to the Correctional Facility.”

Rikiga’s throat contracted as he swallowed his saliva. Inukashi found himself doing the same. The back of his throat burned from the smoke.

“You’re right.” Rikiga’s voice grew even more hoarse. “You’re absolutely right. It’s directly connected. About a hundred metres beyond the gates, you’ll find the back entrance of the Correctional Facility. That’s where you two were carried through during the Hunt. But you probably couldn’t see anything from inside the cargo container you were loaded into.”

Inukashi realized he had unknowingly clenched his hand into a fist, listening to Shion and Rikiga’s conversation.

Getsuyaku had also been coming and going through those gates. Inukashi had heard him complain countless times about being treated the same as prisoners. Inukashi had given the man an offhand answer.

“Prisoners are killed once they get caught. They’ll never come back out through those gates again. But you’re coming and going through them every day. Not to mention you’re getting paid to do it. That’s way different from being a prisoner.”

“Well, I guess, now that you mention it. I wouldn’t be able to go home if I were just a prisoner, huh,” Getsuyaku had shrugged and smiled ruefully.

But in the end, he was the same. He was shot dead in the blink of an eye, just the same as a prisoner. Even worse—like an insect.

Inukashi remembered Getsuyaku’s rueful smile. He closed his fist more tightly.

“Then we can take the car to the gate from here, right?” Shion asked.

"We can if there are no obstacles along the way. No one is crazy enough to get close to the Correctional Facility now, apart from you lot."

"Rikiga-san, lend me the keys to your car, please."

Shion extended his scratched and bloody hand. Rikiga's face twisted visibly. Deep creases appeared between his eyebrows.

"What are you going to do with them?"

"I'm going to drive. You two can stay behind. The keys, quickly."

"Bullshit!" Rikiga bellowed angrily again. "Have your eyes rotted and fallen out? Don't you see those flames? You idiot!"

The Correctional Facility barely remained standing, spewing flames and black smoke. The alarms that had been ringing so loudly had died out somewhere along the way, and only the ferocious wind sounded as it was drawn in by the flames.

"We've barely gotten out of the Correctional Facility in one piece, and you're going to prance right back in?" Rikiga said incredulously.

"This is no time for jokes. How many lives do you think you have?"

"I don't plan on going inside. The gates are outside of it."

"A hundred metres away. *Only* a hundred metres. The gates aren't a safe zone, you know."

"That's why I'm going. Usually we wouldn't be able to get through, but right now, the gates are nothing but an opening."

"The car runs on gasoline. If you happen to drive into fire and it catches—"

"Hand it over," Shion commanded in a low voice, cutting through Rikiga's yelling. Commanded. That was indeed how the words came out. Shion had neither snapped, nor yelled harshly. On the contrary, it was a quiet and heavy utterance.

Rikiga retreated half a step.

“Hand over the keys.”

It was the voice of a ruler giving orders to his subject—it was unmistakable.

Rikiga rummaged through his pocket and extracted a worn silver keyring. His fingertips were trembling.

“... Stop it,” said a voice even lower than Shion’s. To Inukashi it seemed to spring from the depths of the earth. A chill ran through his spine. Nezumi had slowly lifted himself up.

“That’s enough. Stop it.”

Inukashi could hear his words clearly.

Nezumi’s voice. Nezumi could use ten, twenty different voices, but what Inukashi’s ears had caught was unmistakably Nezumi’s natural voice.

“Don’t... stay away, Shion.”

Shion did not answer. He did not even try to look at Nezumi. Instead, he bowed his head to Rikiga.

“Rikiga-san, please. Give me the keys. Please, I’m begging you.” It was not an order, but a plea.

This was the Shion that Inukashi knew. Intelligent, gentle, faithful, airheaded and clumsy Shion.

“Just give it to him, old man,” Inukashi said with a deep sigh. He didn’t know why he had sighed. There were a lot of things he couldn’t make sense of. He couldn’t even understand himself.

“Shion, I’ll go with ya.” The words spilled out along with his sigh. He surprised himself. *Look at me. I’m so reluctant to put my life in danger, I’m so desperate to survive, yet here I go saying ‘I’ll go with you’. I can’t believe myself sometimes. And what’s worse is that it isn’t even a lie or bravado. I really mean it. I told him I’d go with him, and I meant it. What on earth is wrong with me? I can’t understand myself. What’s going on, what’s going on, what’s going on? Oh, hell.*

“Fine.” Rikiga clicked his tongue. “If that’s what you want to do, then do as you will. You guys probably aren’t the type to listen to your elders, anyway.”

“Don’t lump me in with the airheaded young master, man,” Inukashi protested. “But, oh well. There you have it. The votes are in and it’s two to one for driving into No. 6. That’s that. Too bad, Nezumi.”

“Three to one.” Rikiga clenched the keys. “I’m coming along for the ride.”

Inukashi blinked and glanced at Rikiga. The man also blinked repeatedly, his eyes ringed with soot, dirt and sweat.

What on earth is wrong with me? Why did I say something like that? And I actually meant it, his facial expression seemed to say. Inukashi felt like laughing and crying at the same time. *What a weird feeling.* He felt scared, yet exhilarated. Dismal, yet optimistic. *Your heart can be weird like that.*

“It’s my precious car,” Rikiga said. “I won’t tolerate you trashing it. Besides, I doubt you snot-faced kids would be able to drive. Young’uns these days get better and better at mouthing off, but can’t do anything for themselves.”

Rikiga mumbled complaint after complaint. It was most likely because he would end up sighing if he didn’t talk.

Rikiga’s car was a minivan. It was dented everywhere, and the right side mirror was bent. It was an outdated gasoline-fuelled model that could easily have been displayed in a museum in No. 6.

But it had a sturdy frame, if anything. The engine also had a lot more power than it looked. Being able to drive a car in the West Block was a symbol of a certain level of wealth, and hence there was always a risk of being ambushed by thieves on the road. Inukashi remembered listening to Rikiga boast that for this reason, he had modified the car to be as durable as a tank.

Inukashi sat in the passenger seat, while Shion sat in the back holding Nezumi. The dogs climbed into the car last.

“Why do you have to bring your dogs? They’ll stink up the car.”

“They smell way better than your alcohol. My dogs are loyal to their boss. They’ll go wherever I go. Just like how these tiny mice are faithful to their boss.”

The mice were huddled together on the seat. They sat noiseless, as if they had forgotten how to squeak.

“Dogs and mice, huh. That settles our destination, then: the zoo. Hmph, what a fun drive this is going to be.”

Rikiga turned the ignition. The engine sputtered comically, and the car seemed to give itself a shake.

“Let’s go. I’m going to floor the gas, so you better prepare yourselves.”

The car lurched forward. It continued to mount in speed as it made straight for the Correctional Facility.

“Hey hey, old man. It seems like you’re being a little reckless about this.”

“How can I not be? Look at what I’m doing. Damnit, what the *hell* am I doing? Why the hell am I doing this?”

“Because you’re in love with Eve, duh.”

“What?”

The back gates to the Correctional Facility had been thrown open. Perhaps some people had escaped through them. These gates had always been tightly closed, refusing all who came near, but now it was open and exposed. Flames spiralled up behind them, and the building played its melody of destruction. Inukashi could hardly believe that this wasn’t an illusion.

Is this reality?

The gates to the Correctional Facility had opened, and the special alloy door had been blown apart.

Things that were not supposed to be happening were happening. Things he had believed would never happen—no, had been made to believe would not happen—were inverted. There was no good or evil. No justice or injustice.

This is reality.

The car veered around the back gates, nearly scraping against them, and gained speed. Inukashi saw the security gates beyond.

“What!?” Rikiga yelled. “What did you just say, Inukashi?”

“You were totally into Eve, old man. You’re still a passionate fan, aren’t you? You’re head over heels. Or else you wouldn’t be able to sprint like that while holding him. Those were some good moves out there on the field, risking your life. Bravo.”

“Knock it off. Once we get to a medical clinic, the first thing I’ll do is sew that mouth shut. Sew in that rotten tongue of yours while I’m at it.”

“Why, that’s just splendid. An honour of honours to be able to get treated at a clinic in No. 6.”

“Say all the crap you want!” Rikiga gripped the steering wheel.

Inukashi snapped his eyes open, and shrank back. The gate was approaching at an astonishing speed. No, they were approaching it.

“It’s burning,” he murmured. He had resolved not to voice it; he had restrained himself from putting anything he saw into words. But he could not help it.

The gates were burning.

They were engulfed in flames. Small explosions, still not as large as the ones in the Correctional Facility, were ringing out. Fragments of glass and metal battered the car ruthlessly. Each time, the car made an

unnerving *bump-bump* sound. The sounds were like the car's screams themselves.

It hurts. I'm scared. I'm gonna die.

"It's burning." Once he put it into words, terror gripped his whole body. It was like the roots of his hair were standing on end. But one point of curiosity slipped through the wave of fear washing over him, and clung to Inukashi persistently.

How can it crumble so easily?

He understood that Shion and Nezumi had utterly destroyed the core of the Correctional Facility. He was in awe at their accomplishment. But there was something wrong with it. It happened too fast, too easily. *Was it always this fragile? Is it supposed to just collapse like that?* He did not think for a bit anymore that No. 6 was an absolute existence, or an omnipotent ruler. It was the same as that special alloy door. It had bent out of shape, crumbled, and now lay in a disgraceful mess.

But—but this is No. 6 we're talking about here. An artificial city, the epitome of human intelligence and scientific technology. The Correctional Facility is another No. 6 that's supported its darker workings. It's No. 6's bastard child, an evil spawn that's a spitting image of its parent.

Evil things often possessed evil powers. *Couldn't it have stood its ground somehow? Is it going to be defeated just like that, without a choice?*

Heh heh heh.

He heard it again. That lighthearted but terrifying laughter. It was more frightening than the flames in front of him.

Inukashi screamed. Rikiga gave a shout beside him almost at the same time. This one was from the fear of being on the brink.

"Ahhhhhhh!!!"

They plunged into the wall of fire. The dogs continued to bark incessantly. Inukashi did not close his eyes. He kept them open, and watched the flames swallow them up. They were not a uniform colour.

The vermillion of sunset, the crimson of blood, the red of flowers all blended together. They shone golden, then sank into a muddy red.

A part of the windshield shattered. Hot air blasted at them full-on in the face. He smelled burning hair. The heat evaporated the moisture from everything around them, and they began to shrivel up.

Oh, so we're gonna die here. So that's how it is, he thought. *I'm going to die with them after all. In the end, I'm just...*

"Elyurias," said a voice from the back seat. Inukashi could not tell if it was Shion's or Nezumi's. He did not know what the word meant. Was it an incantation? It sounded too strange to be someone's last utterance. But then again, they were always strange, weird, ridiculous people from the beginning. *This doesn't surprise me now, but... it's nagging at me.*

Elyurias? What the hell is that?

His hair singed. His skin was being roasted. It was hot. *Goddamnit, it's hot.*

The flames wavered. They wavered, and seemed to retreat just slightly. The heat also receded just slightly, and he could breathe a little.

Huh? Why? Inukashi blinked. *Are the flames retreating on their own? No way. That's impossible. Absolutely impossible.*

"We're out! Rikiga roared with laughter. He laughed as if he had gone mad. "We're out! Take that, bastards! We're out safe! Ha, ha, ha ha ha ha ha ha! Take that! We've done it! Ha ha ha ha ha ha!"

Tense laughter echoed inside the car.

Ha ha ha ha ha! Ha ha ha ha ha! Ha ha ha ha ha!

They had gotten through. He was right; they had certainly gotten through.

The land around them wild and barren, with few grasses or trees. It was no different from the West Block. But at least in this wasteland,

there was a straight, two-lane road. A lush, green forest probably awaited them at the other end. In the dark, Inukashi could only make out a black mass, but Inukashi's nose caught the rich, earthy smell of the trees.

Maintained roads and lush forests—all were things he could never see in the West Block.

We've made it inside No. 6. I've stepped inside, for the first time in my life.

"Look at that. That was quite something. Ha ha ha ha ha! Only natural for Almighty Mr. Rikiga! I'm quite the hero. Ha ha ha ha ha, I did it! Take that, bastards! Hooray for Mr. Rikiga, hip-hip-hooray! Ha ha ha ha ha!"

Rikiga's voice cracked even more, and whined in a higher pitch. Inukashi swept up a liquor bottle that had been lying at his feet, and knocked Rikiga over the head.

"Ow! What was that for?"

"I went easy on you. Your head hasn't cracked open, now, has it?"

"Idiot! How dare you act like that to a hero!"

"I calmed your hysterical fit. That's really sad, old man. Even my dogs and the mice are calmer than you. What's so heroic about what you did? You went on a reckless joy ride, and you jumped through fire. That's it. Ugh, for shame."

"Shut up. Can a dog or a mouse drive a car? I'd like to see them try. You think you've got a right to say whatever you want—"

Once Rikiga finished yelling to his heart's content, he gave a great sigh.

"Shion, what are we going to do now?" he said. "I have no idea what it's like inside No. 6. I've been away for ten years."

Inukashi could feel Shion shift in his seat.

"Lost Town is just a little ways in from here. The outskirts of No. 6 are beyond that forest, and further beyond that are the central districts. The forest is there to hide the walls from the citizens."

"I see. So they can go on living without being reminded all the time that they're surrounded by a wall."

"Yes."

"And how about medical facilities? Where should we go?"

"Go straight through the forest. There will be a fork, and if you turn right, there should be a small clinic."

"Will that be good enough? Eve's hurt pretty badly, isn't he?"

"He's been pierced by a rifle bullet."

"Wouldn't you need a pretty sophisticated facility to treat that?"

"Maybe," Shion said. "But that clinic is the closest. They have a surgery. You can only find fully-equipped facilities in the city centre. We don't have time to go there, and this car might get caught in inspections along the way. They get stricter as you get closer to the centre. Also, you need a citizenship card to get into most medical facilities."

"You don't have one?"

"I threw it away."

Shion paused for the length of a breath, and continued.

"It was a useless card to have, anyway. Lost Town residents aren't allowed into most central facilities."

"You can't get in?"

"No. The type of ID you have—in other words, your position as a citizen—decides what facilities you can use, where you can live, and what you can ride. It's not only with clinics; Lost Town residents aren't even allowed into the central facilities for daily shopping needs or entertainment. When it comes to places with the best equipment, the number of allowed people gets even smaller.

“That thorough about it, huh?” Rikiga commented. “I’d heard about it before, of course, since I did business with high officials. I did get the idea that there was some vague uncertainty and discontent brewing in that city, and that a hierarchy was in place. But to think that such an old-fashioned system was being enforced... I would never have imagined. What a surprise.”

“High officials are elites close to the summit of the hierarchy. They don’t know what it looks like from the bottom.”

Inukashi snorted.

Rikiga was right. He was surprised, or rather, struck dumb in amazement. He was taken so off-guard, all he could do was growl.

So that city, No. 6 not only divided people inside and outside with a wall, but they even sorted people within by creating more tiny differences?

The wealthy and the poor; the haves and have-nots; the superior and the inferior; the strong and the weak—No. 6 drew countless lines that had formerly never existed between humans, pruning and selecting to its liking.

Why was such a system ever needed? Who needed it? If you were unlucky, you were dead. If you were lucky, you were alive. The line between good and bad luck was the only thing that divided people in the West Block.

“And the hospital we’re headed to right now doesn’t need an ID card?”

“It does. There isn’t any place in No. 6 that doesn’t need an ID.”

“Then—”

“The doctor at the clinic used to be a customer at my mother’s store.”

“Karan? Her store—a bakery, right?”

“Yes. He used to come once or twice a week to buy bread for lunch.”

“What’s his name?”

“I... don’t know. We all called him ”doctor“. That usually sufficed.”

“You don’t even know his name?” Rikiga said in disbelief. “Are you sure you can trust this doc? Is he good-hearted enough to treat someone who doesn’t have an ID card? Who’s not a citizen of No. 6?”

“I don’t know. But he’s our only chance.”

Rikiga lapsed into silence. There was no time to waver or hesitate.

As they approached closer to the forest, the rich smell of vegetation and earth grew stronger. Could anyone in No. 6 see the Correctional Facility burning where they were, or was it blocked out of sight by the forest?

He’s so calm. Inukashi thought about Shion. Shion’s words were composed and undisturbed. The usual Shion—he was not. If Shion were as he normally was, he would be fraught with hesitation, fighting desperately against his own heart.

When did he learn to repress all of his emotions and put on an act of calmness? Had something in Shion changed, like a cloth that loses its colour after being passed through water?

Inukashi licked the back of his hand. It was blistered from a burn.

He was afraid to turn around. If he turned around and focused his eyes, he would see the bloodied figure of Nezumi, and inscrutable Shion. He knew it was just his imagination, but he was afraid. The back of his neck was so tense, he felt like it would seize up.

Well, I’ll be damned if he changes. He repeated inside his head while licking the blister. *Shion is Shion. He’ll never change; I’ll be damned if he does. Just like I’ll keep on being who I am, just like how I’ll never change, there’s no way he’ll ever change.*

The car entered the forest.

“Oh—!” Shion cried out softly. “The sky . . . it’s burning.”

Rikiga also let out a muffled shout, and leaned out. The car swerved, almost hitting the streetlights standing between the trees.

The sky was burning.

The sky, darkened even more deeply by the night, was coloured by the flames. The Correctional Facility was not the only place. No. 6 itself was spewing fire. Places across the city were being engulfed in flames.

What's going on? Inukashi turned around, his mouth still hanging half-open.

"Hey, what just happened?"

Shion sat frozen. He sat still, holding Nezumi in his arms without even blinking. Only his lips moved imperceptibly.

"... It's burning."

Far away, they heard the sound of a blast. It came from behind, not in front—the direction they had just escaped from.

"The gate—" Inukashi fell speechless. No further words came out. He closed his mouth, unable to believe his eyes.

What the hell is about to happen? It was neither excitement nor expectation. It was not fear. He was being toyed with by emotions that he found hard to describe.

Shion spoke.

"We'll be out of the forest shortly. Then, we'll be in Lost Town."

2

BUT ONCE

*Cowards die many times before their deaths,
The valiant never taste of death but once:
Of all the wonders that I yet have heard,
It seems to me most strange that men should fear,
Seeing that death, a necessary end,
Will come, when it will come.*

JULIUS CAESAR, ACT II SCENE II

THE STREET was filled with people.

Hundreds, thousands of people were running in the same direction. They flowed like a giant river. But a large river would have meandered gently; it would not be full of murderous intent. It would surge as these people did now.

Karan stood with her back to the wall, watching the people go by. The rows of small houses lining the street had all tightly shut their doors and turned off their lights.

Were their residents huddled quietly inside, or were they somewhere in this flow of people?

On her back she felt the cool emptiness of the abandoned houses.

“To the Moondrop!”

“We have a right to live, too!”

“Show us the mayor! Why are you pointing guns at your own people?”

“We won’t stand for this!”

That was all Karan could pick up. The rest became angry yells, shouts, calling cries and responses that mingled, twisted and tangled with each other in the air.

The sheer energy of the sound was so great, Karan was seized by a floating sensation. Karan dug her heels in, and pushed her back up harder against the wall. If she didn’t, she felt like she would be pulled into this flow, this cyclone. Her body and her soul would be carried away.

“Aghhh!!”

Suddenly she heard a scream that was a pitch higher than everything else. It was very sudden. It pierced the roaring din and impaled her eardrums.

A heavyset man standing diagonally in front of Karan fell on his side, clutching his neck. For an instant, the people ceased their clamour.

“H-Help... help me, someone... help...”

The man stood up, stumbled for a few steps, and collapsed again. His hair turned white in seconds, and his body began to wither. The man stopped moving.

“There it is. It’s happened again. Another casualty!”

“We’re going to be next!”

“Do something! We have to do something quickly!”

The buzz of the crowd shook the air, and people began to flow again. No one tried to pick up the fallen man and carry him out of the crowd’s path. People stepped on him, over him, around him, and pressed forward.

Spring was still far-off, the night was still chilly, but beads of sweat adorned everyone's face.

Karan also felt the sweat streaming down her cheek. She was unbearably thirsty. She felt like she was fainting; her hands and feet were growing numb, and she almost lost consciousness. She bit down on her lip.

I have to go back. Lili and everyone are waiting.

With her back still to the wall, Karan edged her way back to her shop. She moved against the flow of people.

The storefront was pitch-dark. She entered an alleyway and made for the back. A light was on—in the storage room, which had doubled as Shion's bedroom. Karan cleaned it every day so it would be ready anytime Shion came home.

That room was lit.

Phew. She let out a long breath that surprised even herself. Although it was impossible for anyone to have heard it, the door to the storage room opened just slightly. A small white face peeked out, and looked around cautiously.

"Lili."

"Ma'am!"

Lili ran up to her. "I'm so glad you're back, ma'am. You know, I had this feeling, I really did. Like you were outside. I could *actually* tell."

Karan embraced Lili's body tightly. She was almost brought to tears by the softness and warmth of her small, young body.

"Was Madam Koka alright?"

"Yes..."

"Was she crying?"

"Yes."

Karan had taken Koka back, the mother whose son had been shot to death. Koka had sunk to the ground by her son's body with vacant eyes, as if she had forgotten how to cry.

Every word of consolation was meaningless.

If Shion had gone through the same thing— Just the thought of it racked her chest. She could vividly feel Koka's despair. That was why Karan could not find the right words to say to her.

"Ma'am Koka laughs, like, in this huuuuuge voice. And she laughs all the time," Lili chattered.

"I know."

"Do you think she'll laugh for us again? Is she gonna be able to, ever?"

Lili's face clouded over. Karan could not answer. How could anyone stand up again from the despair of losing her most beloved?

She softly placed her hand over her breast pocket. It contained three letters. They were from Shion and from a boy called Nezumi. They were scribbles, almost too short to be called letters.

Mom, I'm sorry. Alive and well.

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. —Nezumi

Reunion will come.

Nezumi

Words could not describe how much these letters had supported her—supported her, and kept her alive.

What will Koka turn to for support to live on? She didn't know. She could not answer Lili's question.

"Ma'am?" Lili looked up at her. Karan nodded and flashed her a vague smile.

I'm sorry, Lili. I've been alive for so much longer than you, and I can't answer any of your questions.

She heard a muffled sound in the room.

"Lili, where's Renka? Where's your mother?"

"Mommy's looking at the computer. Uncle Yoming is in there."

"Yoming?"

She held Lili's hand and walked inside. She closed the door and locked it. The room doubled as storage, and there were sacks of flour, sugar, and raisins piled high along with jars of honey and jam in rows.

In a far corner was Shion's bed, and beside that was an old desk. Shion's desk. In the drawer was a half-written report that Shion was planning to hand in.

Renka was crouched over the desk, engrossed in the monitor of the outdated computer.

"Renka," Karan called. Renka twitched slightly and turned around. Her bloodless face was illuminated by the dim light.

"Karan..."

"Renka, what's wrong? Has something happened?"

"Karan, it's my brother." Renka straightened up awkwardly. "Look." She pointed at the computer screen.

Yoming was there. His fist was raised, and his expression was fierce. He was definitely Yoming, and yet he seemed a total stranger.

“Now is our time to stand!” he declared. “If we do not stand up now to destroy everything, we will be slaves forever! Yes, slaves! You all must realize by now how No. 6 has deceived us all this time! How much unfair abuse we have suffered; how much exploitation we have endured! It has always been this way. It has always been this way, comrades. This city’s horrific history is steeped in bloodshed. Let me tell you, comrades, about the hundreds of lives that have been banished to eternal darkness because they disputed the authorities; because they objected; because they resisted. Let me bring everything to light. Look, comrades!”

Yoming swept his hand towards the wall behind him.

Countless faces appeared on it. Youth, the elderly, young boys and young girls, even infants. A girl in her wedding dress; a muscular labourer; a thoughtful elderly gentleman; a smiling elderly lady; a sleeping infant; a girl running this way, laughing; a middle-aged woman with her eyes cast down; a young doctor wearing a stethoscope—many, many faces appeared before them.

Karan’s heart thudded loudly.

Da-dum. Da-dum. Da-dum.

Shion was there.

He was facing this way, with a slightly sheepish grin on his face. It was his first birthday since coming to Lost Town, and Karan had taken a picture.

“Aw, please, can we not take photos?”

“Why not? It’s an occasion to remember.”

“Fine, but no pictures outside.”

“Oh, you’re more bashful than I thought.”

Such was the conversation that passed between them as she took the picture.

“I want to know what kind of boy your son is. Can you tell me what he looks like?”

Karan had shown Yoming that photo among others on his request. He had copied the data without her even realizing.

“Look at these people,” Yoming continued. “They are people who have been taken away by the Security Bureau, never to return again. They are people who have been murdered by No. 6. Unbeknownst to you, comrades, the authorities have been obliterating anyone who poses an inconvenience to them. You didn’t know that, did you? No, you didn’t. But I am not blaming you, comrades. You have already come to know No. 6’s true identity. You now know what kind of people the authorities really are; who the mayor really is. The question now is what we will do from here on out.

Comrades, I am not talking about the past. I am talking about the present. Even while we stand here now, fellow citizens are dying. They are dying horrific deaths. A terrible disease is sweeping the city. Already, many citizens—good and innocent citizens—have suffered at its hands. But the authorities have failed to take action. Instead, they have given themselves an effective vaccine and so are able to keep living lives that they do not deserve.

Comrades, did you know? A considerable number of vaccines is still being stored in the Moondrop. But the authorities are doing their best to hide it. They won’t give those vaccines to us citizens. They have paid enormous expenses to develop them, and they don’t want to hand them out to just anyone—that’s their standpoint. Have you ever heard of anything so ridiculous?

Comrades, I disclose to you an even more shocking truth. All of this is fact: this is something I have been investigating in secret for years. This is the truth, and it is a horrific reality we must face. The upper echelons of No. 6, including the mayor, have been predicting

this situation for many years—that a mysterious disease was going to spread throughout No. 6. That was why they were developing a vaccine in secret, while we citizens were kept in the dark. And when the situation becomes dire, they are only interested in saving a select few. And look! Open your eyes wide, and look at what is happening!”

Next, an image of a mob flashed across the white wall. They were people who had crowded in protest around the Moondrop. They were all shouting something, their expressions tense. A red ray of light streaked across the corner of the screen. At once, every face took on an expression of horror, and people frantically began to flee. Next, an image appeared of soldiers at arms and several bloodied people collapsed in the square. The video looked like it was from a hidden camera; the footage was blurry and kept shaking sideways and diagonally.

“What is this, comrades? Do you know what this is called?”

Yoming’s voice rang out, loud and pronounced.

“Yes. Our fellow people have been murdered. Killed like vermin. The authorities have pointed their guns at their own citizens. Is that something that ought to be forgiven? Of course not. We cannot let them go for what they did.

Comrades, let us stand! Put the power of the government back into the hands of the people. Take it away from the Moondrop, which has rotted through completely. We will not stand to be trampled on anymore. We will not be suppressed anymore. We are humans. Let us take back our freedom and safety. To battle, to battle, to battle, comrades! We must rise up in arms! Surround the Moondrop! Destroy No. 6! To battle, to battle, to battle!”

It was a jarring cry. Renka turned the power off even before his yell began to taper. Her legs curled under her as she dropped weakly to the floor.

"It's been like this forever. About once every five minutes, my brother's speech gets played."

Renka held her swelling belly, and her mouth twisted. The noise out on the street grew even more agitated. It hit Karan and Renka like waves crashing onto the shore.

To battle, to battle, to battle, to battle, to battle.

Rise up, rise up, rise up, rise up.

"Karan, what's gotten into my brother? Why is he saying things like that? Why is he screaming?" Renka covered her face with her hands.

"Mommy." Lili huddled close to her, and placed a gentle hand on her mother's knee. "Mommy, don't cry."

"I'm fine, Lili. I won't cry. But—but you know, Mommy is a little scared." She then said to Karan, "My brother was such a gentle person, but he... he looked like a completely different person... no, in fact, he *has* become a different person. He's changed ever since my sister-in-law and her baby went missing after being abducted by the authorities... he's changed. From that day, the only thing in my brother's heart has been—"

"Revenge."

Renka lifted her face at Karan's words, and opened her mouth slightly. She looked like a gold fish with not enough air.

"Yoming wants revenge on No. 6. He's wants this city completely destroyed."

"Yes," Renka answered. Her voice was croaky. "Yes, you're right, Karan. My brother never said it. I never heard the word 'revenge' come out of his mouth. But I *knew*. I'm his little sister, after all. I could tell how he'd changed, I could tell he had vowed in his heart to get revenge. That's why, some day... I was afraid this would happen. I was worried... but scared. I was really scared."

Renka's lips trembled. Her large eyes turned watery, and she turned even paler. Karan looked from Renka to the blank black screen.

Lies, she thought vehemently. I won't say all, but half of Yoming's speech is made of lies.

Certainly, the authorities had placed its citizens under its vigilant regime, and ruled them in a manipulative and ruthless way. It was true that Karan and most of the citizens had been living blinded and oblivious. Yes, many people had been sacrificed; an unidentifiable disease *was* spreading like wildfire; the authorities *were* failing to come up with any effective solution; they *had* opened fire on citizens—it was all true.

But his claim that the city had foreseen this situation—this unfathomable, horrific situation—and had launched the development of a vaccine—that was false. If by some chance this was true, there was no reason for them not to vaccinate the citizens. If they had a store of vaccines in the Moondrop, it was unthinkable for them to withhold it. What good did it do No. 6 to kill its own citizens? If anything, it would do more damage than good. They were in this situation precisely because they had no vaccine to combat the disease. Right now, they were in the middle of a worst-case scenario.

Besides—besides—Shion is not one of them. Shion will come home. Shion isn't someone who is "never to return again". Yoming's words were half truth, half lies. There is no vaccine in the Moondrop. That was a lie. He's a perfect demagogue.

Yoming was manipulating, encouraging, and agitating people's fears, along with their long-festered suspicion and discontent towards No. 6. *Yoming, please don't. This is wrong.* She thought of Koka, who had refused to move from her son's side. She remembered her unseeing vacant eyes, frozen open from her overwhelming grief.

The soldiers had been the ones to shoot Koka's son to death. But

Yoming was part of the cause. Yoming was deeply involved with the brutal death of a man who had been referred to affectionately as “Good Guy Appa”.

The truth was noble, as long as it remained the truth. That was how it made the world turn. But now, Yoming was not speaking the truth. He was twisting it conveniently to match his intentions.

“My brother has changed,” Renka said in despair. “It started gradually after my sister-in-law went missing, and when this commotion began, he changed completely.”

“You’re right,” Karan said resignedly.

Yoming had been waiting. He had lain low, waiting for an opportunity—not to flourish onto the scene, but to exact revenge on No. 6.

And this was the opportune moment.

“To battle, to battle, to battle, to battle!”

His cry rumbled deep in her ears. It stirred the soul like a magnificent soundtrack.

Karan overlapped her hands over her chest.

No, Yoming. What you’re doing is wrong. What will come of involving so many of these nameless people? What will you try to create from their sacrifice? Can you see them? Can you see each and every person’s face as they die bleeding? Have you ever tried to look at the life each of them has lived, and the days that they’ve spent?

Yoming, now is not the time to fight. We don’t have a second to lose; we have to find a way to deal with that unknown disease.

We have to protect lives, not use and dispose of them. If you loved your wife and your son, then you should respect life all the more.

Do you—do you plan to cross that line?

Please. Cast your thoughts not to the group, the people, the citizens, but each and every person as their own! Make a place in your heart for me,

Renka, Lili, Koka, Getsuyaku, and all the people whose names you don't know!

You're a human, aren't you? You're not No. 6.

"Karan," Renka said in a feeble voice.

"What is it?" Karan's voice also sounded faint to her own ears.

"You know . . . I've wished for a long time that you and my brother would be together."

"Why, Renka—"

"My brother liked you. I think he was in love with you. When the topic would turn to you during dinner, he'd always turn very quiet. But he looked so happy. I haven't seen my brother look so happy in a long time."

"Renka . . ."

"Then, someday you and my brother would get married, Shion would come home, I would give birth to my baby, and Getsuyaku and Lili would visit you so you could get a look at the baby, too. You and my brother and Shion would kiss the baby in turns, congratulating it, and you, Karan, would bake a cake to celebrate. Getsuyaku and I would stretch our savings a little to give out "Fortune Bread" to everyone in Lost Town. They'd be little rolls that you made, Karan, and we'd hand them out as a symbol of our happiness. We'd package them in little bags, tied with a cute ribbon . . . We'd share a little bit of happiness with everyone. Both Lili and the baby would wear a ribbon, too. I would put a white bib on the baby, and a light pink apron on Lili. Lili would carry a basket full of "Fortune Bread" and we would walk down the street. Everyone would come up to greet us, saying, 'Congratulations, Renka. Congratulations, Getsuyaku, Lili.'"

"Renka."

"That's all I wish for. That's not greedy at all. Is it, Karan? Is it being greedy?"

“Of course not.”

It was small—such a small wish.

“Then why won’t it come true? Why does everything have to fall apart and disappear? Why?” Unable to contain herself, Renka let a sob escape her lips. Lili embraced her mother firmly with both arms.

A small, small wish. But it could not come true.

As long as they lived in No. 6, all their hopes were like towers of sand. They melted away all too easily. *Then, what are we to do? What must we do so we can build our lives on firm ground instead of sand?*

If No. 6 isn’t an idyllic city, then what is ‘ideal’ supposed to be? How are we to create an entirely new world, so different from No. 6?

“Renka, Yoming isn’t working alone, is he?”

“No... there must be other people who have gone through the same thing—who have lost their family.”

“And Yoming is with them, right? They must be acting together.”

“Yes, I’m sure of it.”

“Do you have any idea where they might be?”

After some moments of thought, Renka shook her head.

“No. It looks like they’re in some basement studio. He would need proper equipment to make that video clip.”

“You’re right. But neither of us know where that is. We have no way of meeting Yoming.”

“Karan,” Renka held her hand out. Karan grasped it. “What will I do? What should I do, Karan?”

Karan could feel a presence. It pressed upon her from the street.

To battle, to battle, to battle, to battle, to battle.

Destroy it, destroy it, destroy it, destroy it.

Kill, kill, kill, kill, kill.

“Let’s think about it, Renka.” She cupped her hand gently around Renka’s belly. Then, she touched Lili’s cheek.

“We still have hope.”

“What?”

“Hope. The baby in your belly, and Lili—they are our hope. We have to do our best so that these children will have a real world to live in. Right, Renka? We have our children. Not all our hope has been taken from us.”

“Shion, too.” Renka wiped her tears away and nodded. “Shion is our hope too, isn’t he? And a big one, too.”

“Mm-hmm. Thank you, Renka.”

“He’s coming home soon,” Lili blurted without warning. “Onii-chan’s¹ coming home soon. I can tell.”

“Why, Lili.” Karan scooped Lili up and kissed her on the cheek.

“It’s true,” she insisted. “He’s really coming home.”

Shion is... coming home.

Please come back, Shion. And Safu, you too.

Please come home safe.

I pray for you.

Her prayers led also to the boy named Nezumi, whom she had yet to meet.

I would love to meet you, Nezumi. I would love to see you, and thank you. I want you to know how grateful I am for your support. Shion, Safu, Nezumi. You, too, are my hope. My very large hope.

Come home to me.

* * *

¹A term of endearment that means *brother*.

No. 6's city hall, known informally as the Moondrop, was surrounded. The citizens crowded the square and overflowed into the streets. Each shouted his own words of protest. Their voices melted into one, and boomed so loudly it seemed to shake the canopies.

But no matter how loud the clamour got, it did not reach the mayor's office. The office was on the highest floor of the building, with sound-proof walls and windows. Whatever happened outside never disturbed the constant silence inside.

"Why? Why has something like this happened?" The silence was broken as the mayor spun around and shook his fist.

"Fennec, will you calm down?" the man in the lab coat answered. "You should be the last to be agitated." He sank deeply into the leather chair and crossed his legs.

Pitiful, he thought as he mentally clicked his tongue. *He has always been like that. Ambitious but timid, and a coward.* The man switched his legs and recrossed them.

But he has been able to come this far precisely because he is so timid and cowardly. He opens his heart to no one. He trusts no one. He is suspicious of everything and acts cautiously. A fennec indeed, the world's smallest desert-dwelling fox.

The mayor paced the room. He flitted back and forth busily. The thick carpet absorbed almost all of the noise generated by his footsteps. "It wasn't supposed to be this way. Citizens are supposed to gather at the Moondrop to celebrate the Holy Day and the greatness of No. 6, are they not? To think it would turn out like—like this, I—how could such a thing have happened?"

The man gave a deliberate sigh. The mayor stopped pacing, and deep creases appeared on his brow as he looked over.

"Please, Fennec," the man said. "Compose yourself. All that's been coming out of your mouth these days is 'why' and 'such a thing'. I'm

starting to get rather bored of it.”

“Answer me. Why has this happened?” The mayor’s voice grew strained. The man gave another sigh.

“Because you haven’t given it your all.”

“I haven’t?”

“Yes. You mobilized the army, but you only cleared them away with a handful of firearms. Surely you wouldn’t call that decisive action. Nothing is more effective than the army when it comes to subduing the imbecilic masses. That was not the right way to use them. You should have used them with more flourish, more decision, and an iron finality.”

“You’re telling me to mass-murder my citizens?”

“They’ll prostrate themselves to you before they get themselves killed. They’ll bow down in awe and fear. They’ll tremble as their very hearts are seized with regret for ever opposing you or No. 6. They will be like neutered dogs. No matter how badly they are treated, they will never be able to bite back. Fennec, it is not too late. Mobilize the army again, and clear away the mob that is milling in the square. It may even be wise to use the shockwave cannon, depending on the situation and the course of events. You’ve already completed on-site testing in the West Block, have you not?”

“That’s almost like—” the mayor swallowed. “That’s almost like a reign of terror.”

“Reign of terror? Absurd. I have told you before: you are the ruler of No. 6. Its King. You reign over this country. You embody justice itself and all its forms. Opposing you is the same as defiling justice. It is only normal to use force to make them comply.”

“... Stop it,” the mayor said weakly.

“Fennec, what are you afraid of? This is not like you. You have always acted like the King that you are. You are conscious of your position

as the chosen one, and you have always lived under that notion.”

“I have.” The mayor slumped his shoulders, and dropped his gaze to his feet. “I am the mayor. In No. 6’s highest position of responsibility, highest position of power. It’s only natural. We were the ones that built No. 6. We launched the revival project, and brought salvation to the dying land and its people. We built a utopian city, the most idyllic—most idyllic city possible by humankind.”

“Precisely. You and I were both central members. In fact, only the two of us truly understood the ideals that No. 6 strove for. The other members were highly qualified, yes, but they lacked creativity. Or you might say they severely lacked ambition, or an ability to observe the changing times. But fortunately for us, we had those abilities, almost in excess. That is why we have come this far.”

“This far?” the mayor said sarcastically. “You mean being surrounded and condemned by our citizens? Was our creativity and ambition and skill all for *this*?”

“This is only a temporary situation. It will conclude instantly if only you would take effective measures.”

“Effective measures? I’ve taken several.”

“And those are?”

“There are people fanning the flames of this chaos. I’ve ordered the Security Bureau to catch them as quickly as they can.”

“Any ideas as to their location?”

“Not yet. They’ve gone underground.”

“A clearly faulty plan. You should have obliterated all such dissidents beforehand. You ought to have destroyed them to their very roots. And what else have you done?”

“I used all sorts of mass media to broadcast my speech. I called on the citizens to remain calm, not to panic easily or be influenced by false rumours. I announced a state of emergency and put a lockdown order

in effect. I commanded people to stay inside until the order was lifted, and announced that anyone deemed as a dissident would be arrested and detained, regardless of whether he or she is a Chronos resident. I listened to your warning, and I... mobilized the army."

"Hm. Well, no big mistakes so far. This would have been resolved much more quickly if you had used the army properly. But, well, small errors can be remedied. Everything will go smoothly."

The mayor bent over and scrutinized the sitting man.

"Go smoothly? How? What part of this is going smoothly for you? The citizens aren't retreating at all; in fact, they're out of control. No matter how much the soldiers try to suppress them, it doesn't work. Do you know why? Because casualty after casualty keeps occurring. Citizens are still dying, one after another, for a reason no one can understand. Everyone thinks that a new type of plague has suddenly broken out in the city. They think we're hiding the vaccine somewhere. It's absurd, absolutely absurd! That thing is no plague. It's because of *them*. Why are they going around killing citizens as they please? Why? I thought they were supposed to act however we wanted them to. I thought we had absolute rule over them!"

The wan smile vanished from the man's face. The corner of his mouth twitched ever so slightly.

"Fennec, how many times will you make me repeat myself? Yes, true, this was an unexpected happening. A random, totally unpredictable event. I acknowledge that. I acknowledge too, of course, that my predictions were much too optimistic. But this is not as dreadful as you make it out to be. It is nothing more than a precursor—a precursor to Its awakening."

"You're saying this chaos is just a precursor?"

"Why, yes. It is a mere response to Its awakening. Which gives you an idea of the enormous amount of energy this thing holds. Once It

awakens completely and comes under our control, we will be able to harness that energy, and this chaos will calm.”

“Are you . . . really sure?”

“Have I ever lied or given you false information? I have always told the truth. Fennec, you haven’t forgotten, have you? I was the first to see your true potential to blossom as a politician instead of a researcher.”

“—I remember. You pushed for me to enter as a candidate for No. 6’s first mayor.”

“Yes. You won that election, and you have reigned over No. 6 to this day. And you will continue to. There is no need for an election. There will be no need for the citizens to choose you of their own will. Fennec, don’t waver now. You have to act at all times like the mighty man you are.”

“A mighty man . . . is that what I wanted to become?”

“What did you say?” the man said sharply.

“I certainly did want to create a utopia with our very own hands,” the mayor said pensively, “and I wasn’t the only one. Back then, anyone who was involved in the building of No. 6 should have felt the same. We all spoke about how we would realize a utopian city here, embodying the dreams of humankind. We talked about how we would be the ones to build its foundations. Not a single person . . . hoped to become an exalted man.”

“A utopia cannot exist unless there is one to wield absolute power and lead his people behind him. You should know this the best. Yes, the ones with overwhelming power are the ones who draw the majority along with them. If it weren’t for that, No. 6 would not be called the utopia, the Holy City that it is called today. It is a victory on the part of your power and our ideology.”

“Victory, you say.”

"A complete victory," the man affirmed. "Some bumps along the way cannot be helped. Once we overcome those, No. 6 will continue to engrave its glorious history in time."

The mayor did not answer him. He clasped his hands behind his back, and resumed walking.

"When will It awaken?"

"Soon."

"Soon? It isn't like you to be so vague. Be specific."

The man shrugged. *Well, well. So he tells me to be specific. He must be getting impatient. People tend to want specific numbers the more they feel they are being cornered.*

"Let me see... within twenty-four hours. All will be settled and finished at this time tomorrow. Everything will be quiet and in its right place."

"Twenty-four hours... I can't wait that long. Within twenty hours, at least... no, twelve hours is the time limit."

"Impatient, are we, Fennec?"

"Impatient?" the mayor said incredulously. "How in the world could I be otherwise in this situation? The city hall—the Moondrop—is being hemmed in by citizens!"

The mayor's fist pounded the mahogany desk. The man shrugged one shoulder slightly.

"Fennec, surely you don't think the Moondrop is still the heart of No. 6?"

The mayor froze.

"What? What did you just say?"

"No. 6's most important function now lies in the Correctional Facility. The Moondrop has been reduced to a mere administrative body. It can be surrounded by anything, for that matter, and nothing serious

would come of it. As long as we have the Correctional Facility, our No. 6 is in safe hands.”

The colour receded from the mayor’s face. The tip of his tongue twitched in his half-open mouth.

“What do you mean by that?”

“Mean? I just told you. The Correctional Facility is the heart and brain of No. 6.”

“What...” the mayor croaked. His voice was overlapped by an electronic chime. A man’s long thin face appeared on the television screen embedded in the wall. He was one of the secretaries under the mayor’s direct order.

“Mayor, there are fires happening throughout the city.”

“So the rioters have found their way in to set them.”

“That’s one thing, but there’s more. The emergency systems in all the buildings are not functioning at all. In some buildings, I’ve heard that the core computer itself has caught fire and exploded.”

The man was rendered speechless. There was only the sound of his wheezing breath whirling in his throat. *What is this footage?* The man let his throat rasp even more. *Some kind of trick? A scene from some cheap drama, what? What is he showing me this for?*

“The Correctional Facility is about to crumble!” The secretary’s high-pitched yell tore into him. The man, unable to endure it, took two, three steps back.

“Wait, what’s that shadow?” The mayor pushed the stumbling man back upright again, and brought his face close to the screen.

“What is that?”

The man looked as well. It was a black shadow looming up clearly against the flames.

“This . . . isn’t this a wasp? No, but . . . wasps like this don’t exist. They simply don’t.” The mayor’s jaw trembled.

The man’s chin was also trembling. The tremor raced through his entire body.

“Elyurias.” The name slipped from his trembling lips. The mayor turned around.

“Did you say Elyurias?”

“Yes. It is Elyurias. But, no—she is supposed to be more beautiful, more demure. She is not supposed to be this—this enormous. She was supposed to be controllable to my every whim.”

Supposed to be. Supposed to be. Supposed to be. Supposed to be.

The screen turned black as the video was cut off.

“Mayor, the citizens have gotten inside the Moondrop. Please, be careful!” the secretary continued to yell from the other screen.

“This cannot be!” the man and mayor’s voices overlapped.

3

THIS QUINTESSENCE OF DUST

*What a piece of work is a man, how noble in reason, how infinite in faculties,
in form and moving how express and admirable, in action how like an angel,
in apprehension how like a god — the beauty of the world, the paragon of animals!
And yet, to me, what is this quintessence of dust? Man delights not me...*

HAMLET, ACT II SCENE II

THE DOCTOR was much older than how Shion remembered him. The tall, liberal man used to come to Karan's shop once or twice a week to buy a sandwich or meat pie. A handsome beard and moustache adorned his face, and he spoke in a beautiful, clear baritone.

He had also once invited Shion to specialize in medicine and work at his clinic.

"You'd have no problem with picking up the necessary specialized knowledge and technique. I recommend taking the certification exam if you're interested."

It was an attractive offer, but Shion did not take it up. There was no way someone like him, who had been stripped of all his privileges and exiled from Chronos, would be able to pass the exam. But he was

happy that the doctor had looked out for him—a stranger and a mere baker’s son—and offered him a path in medicine. He was also grateful. In the months that Shion had not seen him, the doctor had transformed so much he hardly looked like the same person. There were white streaks in his beard and his hair, and he looked like he had shrunk a size. But in terms of appearance, Shion admitted he had probably undergone a more drastic change. His hair was completely white, and his face was smeared with blood, dirt, and soot.

The small clinic in the outskirts of Lost Town was run by the doctor, a nurse, and a nursing robot. The nurse screamed as the bloodied, dirty group burst in. Shion yelled over her shriek.

“Doctor, please—please, he needs treatment!”

“You . . . could you be—”

“The baker’s son. Doctor, please. Treat him.”

The doctor’s eyes shifted to Nezumi. His gaze trained on the blood that dripped from him.

“Prepare for an emergency operation.”

The nurse sprang into action even before the doctor finished speaking. She hastily disappeared into a room adjacent to the examination room. A robot came pushing a stretcher.

“Please place the patient here.”

Shion laid Nezumi down on the stretcher.

“Nezumi,” he called tentatively. His eyelids remained tightly closed. “Nezumi . . .”

“Please remove your arm. Please remove your arm from under the patient. Now transporting the patient to the operating room.”

The robot urged him, but Shion’s arms were stiff and unyielding, still holding Nezumi as he had all this time. Only his fingertips shook violently.

“Shion!” Inukashi grabbed his arms and yanked them for him.

“Now transporting the patient. Now transporting the patient. Entering emergency operating mode. Commencing oxygen intake. Commencing measurements. Now measuring blood pressure, pulse, heart rate, blood type.”

The doctor swiftly cut Nezumi’s clothes away. Several pipes grew from the robot’s torso and connected to him.

“Transporting the patient. Transporting the patient.” The stretcher and robot entered the operating room.

“Doctor.” Shion grasped at the doctor’s white coat. “Doctor, please... save him. Please...”

“Shion.”

He did not expect to be called by his name. Shion lifted his face.

“I’m a doctor,” the man said firmly. “If someone is in need of treatment, I will do everything in my power to give it to him. But this is Lost Town. I don’t have the equipment it takes to perform delicate surgery.”

Shion knew. But as he had told Rikiga, he had no choice but to rely on this doctor.

“I see that he’s already gotten temporary treatment. Was that you?”

“Yes.”

“What kind of wound is it?”

“A gunshot. A rifle bullet pierced him.”

“Pierced, you say,” the doctor muttered as he strode briskly into the operating room. Shion bowed his head deeply to the man’s retreating back.

He felt faint. He sank to the floor.

“Shion...” Inukashi sat beside him, and put an arm around his shoulders. “Shion... I just want to ask you, do you... do you, by any chance, want me to be with you?”

“Inukashi...”

“Listen,” Inukashi said brusquely, “I’ve never comforted anyone before. I used to think it wasn’t worth a crumb of bread. Still think so. But... but if you want me to comfort you right now... if I can comfort you somehow by being here, then... then, I’ll be here.”

Inukashi gently rubbed Shion’s arm. The tension gradually loosened, and blood began to course through his veins again. Shion closed his eyes, and let his head droop onto Inukashi’s chest.

He felt an almost imperceptible soft bump. If this was the usual case, he would jump up in a confused panic. But right now, he only felt soothed. Right here, there was a body to support him, arms to hold him, a voice to murmur to him, and the warmth of another to comfort him. This was happiness that could not command a price. Was it not?

“Inukashi... thank you.”

Oh, but... Shion bit his lip with his eyes still closed. But this is not the warmth I long for. Not this body, these whispers, nor these arms.

Something warm flitted over his eyelids. Inukashi had licked them. Inukashi was gently licking off the blood that had dried and caked on them. The little mice were curled up in Shion’s lap, and the dogs had lain down in a corner of the room.

“It’ll be alright,” Inukashi said. “There’s no way he’d die. He’s not wuss enough to give in just yet. I’ve seen my share of bad people in the West Block, but no one was as cunning, conniving, and dangerous as Nezumi. I told ya before, didn’t I, that the guy is the devil himself. You just don’t know his true face. And I’m still right. He’s still the devil he always was, and devils aren’t done in so easily. Tomorrow, he’ll wake up as if nothing happened, and go right back to setting traps for us. He’s that kind of guy. He’ll be alright, don’t worry.”

Shion opened his eyes, and lifted himself up.

“Inukashi, I’m grateful. Thank you so much.”

“I was only insulting Nezumi, dumbass. What’re you feeling grateful about? You’re a hopeless idiot, you know. Hopeless.”

Inukashi turned aside obstinately. But he did not move away from Shion.

Ungh, nghoaaaaar, nghoaaaaar.

A snore rang out, making the very air of the room vibrate.

“Whoa! Will ya listen to that racket.”

Nghoaaaaar, nghoaaaaar, nghoaaaaar, ungh, ungh.

Rikiga was fast asleep, lying on his back on a bench.

“Just now he was saying he wouldn’t be able to sleep without some drinks in him, and now look at the guy. Like a log. I’m surrounded by hopeless people.” Inukashi sighed theatrically. Then, he gave a short whistle. The dogs got to their feet and approached. They nestled close to Inukashi and Shion, and lay crouched on their bellies.

“These guys can make the best sleeping quarters out of any hole. It’s time for us to catch a wink, too.”

“Yeah...”

“We need to sleep, Shion.” Inukashi pulled at Shion’s shirt. “We won’t be able to fight tomorrow if we don’t. You don’t think our fight is over yet, do you?”

He did not. Nothing had been solved yet. The fight would still continue tomorrow. *But if I lost Nezumi, if I had to face a tomorrow without him, then I wouldn’t be able to remain a soldier.*

You’re weak. Unbelievably frail, he could hear Nezumi say in derision. *Laugh at me, Nezumi. Look on me with contempt. Make fun of me. Give me a scornful laugh, a cold laugh. I just want to hear your laughter. Let me hear it, please.*

“Sleep,” Inukashi said, almost like an order.

* * *

The Correctional Facility was burning. The flames roared up around it as it crumbled. *This is a dream*, his reason told him. *You've escaped the Correctional Facility. You're already in Lost Town, No. 6. That's why—this must be a dream.*

This is an illusion.

The flames roared. They were revoltingly real. He could clearly see the tip of each writhing flame. His skin smarted at the scorching air that blew at him. The acrid smell stung his nose.

This is a dream? This is an illusion? Absurd. This is unmistakably reality. But does that mean I've come back again? Have I slipped back in time to right after I escaped the Correctional Facility?

The flames burned with even greater vigour. They roared, wavered, and overlapped. He saw them stretch out into thin strips before a black streak slashed through it.

Shion stood stock-still with his breath held. All confusion, agitation, and astonishment fell away. He simply stood in a trance.

The black streak kept widening. The flames split into two.

“A wasp...”

The rest failed to materialize as words.

It had a coal-black body, a slender curved torso, a long belly, transparent wings embroidered with thin golden lines; golden antennae and compound eyes; three simple eyes that shone a dull silver.

A giant wasp appeared out of the flames. It was a wasp, coloured coal-black, gold, and silver—light and darkness. Shion took a step backwards. Its beauty was almost terrifying. He was so overwhelmed, he was almost brought to his knees.

What... is this?

“Elyurias,” a mutter touched his earlobe.

“Nezumi.”

Nezumi was standing right beside Shion. He stared unblinking at the flames. No—he was not looking at the flames engulfing the Correctional Facility, but at the enormous wasp. Nezumi was holding his ground against it.

“Elyurias? This wasp?”

Nezumi did not answer. He did not stir. He was almost like a statue. For an instant, the wasp in front of Shion faded in his consciousness. Nezumi was standing there. His eyes were open wide. His profile expressionless, but blood coursed through that face.

“Nezumi, you really did—” *You really survived.*

Nezumi inhaled. His lips moved very slightly. A melody flowed forth. Gentle music found life as it left Nezumi’s lips.

Shion smelled the lush scent of greenery. The sound of the rustling canopies reached his ears. He felt the beating of wings. The buzzing of small insects echoed in his eardrums, until even that melted into music, forming its ebb and flow.

His body was being lifted up. He no longer knew where he was. His body and soul were suspended in Nezumi’s music. Shion let his whole body relax as he lent himself fully to it.

He could hear singing.

*The wind steals the soul away, humans thief the heart
O earth, wind, and rain; O heavens, O light
Keep everything here
Keep everything here, and
Live in this place
O soul, my heart, O love, my feelings true
Return home here
And stay*

*The wind steals the soul away, humans thief the heart
But here I will stay
to keep singing
Please
Deliver my song
Please
Accept my song*

Shion had broken into a thin sheen of sweat in the midst of his ecstasy.
A bead of sweat slid down his forehead.

Suddenly, he was blasted by hot air.

He was slammed to the ground. Charred pieces of debris grazed his cheeks, his body, as they bounced and tumbled across the ground.

“Don’t get up.” Nezumi’s hand pressed on his back. “Keep lying low.”

The wind kept blowing. Fragments of rock and debris rolled over the ground in front of Shion as he lay face-down on the ground.

Chuckle chuckle chuckle.

Chuckle chuckle chuckle.

Laughter welled up from deep underground. Or was it raining down from the heavens?

Chuckle chuckle chuckle.

Chuckle chuckle chuckle.

The wasp spread its wings wide open. The flames streamed sideways, crawling across the ground.

Chuckle chuckle chuckle.

Chuckle chuckle chuckle.

The wasp took flight. It ascended to the sky without a sound, leaving only the wind behind. A piercing buzz of wings rose all around. Thousands of small black specks took flight after the giant wasp. The swarm of them formed a wide band as they rose.

“Elyurias,” Nezumi murmured again.

* * *

He couldn’t breathe. There was something weighing down on his upper torso.

Shion awoke. Inukashi’s head was on his chest. He was asleep with his ear pressed to Shion’s chest as if to check his heartbeat. He was breathing softly. Two dogs were nestled close on either side of them.

I see what he meant. You definitely wouldn’t freeze to death like this.

Another dog was curled up beside Rikiga. Despite his grumbling, Inukashi had also looked out for Rikiga to make sure he didn’t freeze. Perhaps that explained why Rikiga’s snores had turned into peaceful breathing.

They were in a small hospital room, Lost Town, No. 6. There was no mistake: time had not turned back. But that was not a dream. What he had seen was reality.

Elyurias—was that it? A wasp born from a cocoon of flames?

Shion gingerly touched the nape of his neck. He thought about the wasp that had tried to tear through that spot and crawl out of it. He thought about Yamase. He thought about the thousands of wasps

which had taken flight in a dense black stream. If those were all parasitic, what would become of No. 6?

He did not know.

He slipped a couch cushion under Inukashi's head, and stood up stealthily so as not to wake him. He had probably only been asleep for a short while—not more than thirty minutes. But his body felt surprisingly light. Was it because he was relieved?

Nezumi survived. He was certain. His heart, which was fraught with tension until then, gradually began to unwind. Shion took several deep breaths.

He was concerned about where the wasps were going, as well as what kind of fate awaited No. 6. But his relief at not losing Nezumi trumped it all.

He inhaled once more, deeply, and exhaled.

A computer was embedded in the doctor's desk. He pressed a button, and the screen silently began to load. He dug into the pocket of his sweater.

"There it is." The chip had been given to him by the man called Rou. He wondered what was going to happen to that underground area now that the Correctional Facility had crumbled. What had happened to Sasori? Or the boy who had handed him a bowl of water? The girl who had stared at Shion in wonder? And Safu?

Rou had said that the chip contained the entirety of his research, and that he entrusted it to Shion.

"After you have saved your friend, please try to decode it." His voice had been hoarse and feeble. *After you have saved your friend...*

Safu. I couldn't save her. She had been his precious friend, and he had abandoned her.

His last glimpse of Safu had been of her smiling. She looked a little more mature than Shion remembered, and she was beautiful.

I couldn't save her. In the end, I couldn't save her.

He made a fist and struck his chest. *I've made another wound here. A wound that'll ache for the rest of my life. I'll never forget. I won't be able to forget.*

Safu. You're forever out of reach, no matter how strongly I feel for you. But you'll still be in my heart. I'll continue to think of you, and of what you left behind for me.

He inserted the chip. He was not asked for a password. Shion bent forward and stared intently at the screen.

Everything to do with No. 6 during their underground conversation with Rou was written here. Elyurias, the Mao Massacre, the Forest People, destruction, predation and parasitism...

As he read on, wading through the mix of unintelligible technical language and numbers, he felt his fingertips growing colder.

Shion finished reading, and extracted the chip. His mind was half-numb and in a daze.

So this was No. 6.

This was Elyurias.

The door of the operating room opened and the doctor walked out.

"Doctor." Shion stood up, and the man nodded at him.

"He'll be alright. He's hanging in there."

"Thank you so much, doctor. Thank you."

The doctor removed his mask and grinned.

"You mentioned that you were the one who stemmed his bleeding and gave him temporary treatment?"

"Yes."

"You did a very nice job. He was also lucky that the bullet hadn't remained in his body. It pierced him, but thankfully it just missed the fatal spot. He's very fortunate, indeed."

“I told ya so.”

Shion had not noticed Inukashi standing behind him. Inukashi had a hand on his hip, and shot a quick glance at Shion.

“Nezumi has a notorious amount of good luck when it comes to getting out of bad situations. You don’t need to worry about him.”

“And I think I need to worry about the rest of you,” the doctor smiled crookedly. “Where were you hit, Shion?”

“You know my name?”

“I do. It did make the headlines when you got arrested and taken to the Correctional Facility.”

“I see...”

“Everyone who had any knowledge of you was surprised. I don’t think anyone could believe that you were the ‘fallen elite turned murdering monster’ or the workplace murder suspect that the authorities made you out to be.”

“You too, doctor?”

“You could say that. I was more pained than surprised. I’d caught on that the authorities were trying to paint a false picture of you as a criminal.”

The doctor then let out a long breath.

“It was the same with my younger brother,” he said.

“Your brother?”

“Yes. We were far apart in age. Our father passed away early on, so I raised him like a son. He was abducted by the Security Bureau five years ago, when he was eighteen. Take a guess at why.”

“Because he refused to declare his loyalty to No. 6?”

“Absolutely right. My brother refused to partake in the allegiance ritual held at their school every morning. He didn’t like being forced to submit. I think it came from his youthful pride and sense of justice.

And as a human, it was normal for him to feel this way. My brother was indeed a proper, normal adolescent. Maybe he was a little more rebellious and stubborn than most. He was also a little inexperienced in the ways of the world. My brother was summoned to the Moondrop the same day, and he didn't come back until two weeks later."

"He came back?"

"He came back, but he was transformed. I don't mean dead—he was alive. But he may as well have been dead. You could see no remnant of the cheerful, active captain of the basketball team that he used to be. He hardly spoke or responded to me, and just gazed blankly at the sky all day, just vacantly stared... He killed himself not long after coming home. I can't even bear to think about what he must have gone through during those two weeks. I said he killed himself, but in truth, he was murdered by this city. Our mother collapsed from shock, and she never... she passed away not more than three days later. Her will to live was torn from her once she saw what her beloved son was reduced to. Our mother may as well have been murdered, too. No, she I believe was. It was definitely murder." The doctor nodded vehemently as if to convince himself.

He killed himself.

Shion recalled the doctor's words in his head again.

In the idyllic city of No. 6, cases of suicide were infinitely close to zero. All citizens were promised blissful and peaceful lives. But what an empty, artificial promise it was.

The doctor bit his lip as if to endure a throbbing pain. This man had also suffered at the hands of No. 6. Already how many lives had the city devoured?

Shion clenched his hand into a tight fist.

No. 6 did not permit people to be people, nor for each to be his own.

Why? he almost screamed. *Rou said so. He said he tried to construct a utopia—one without war, discrimination, or unhappiness.*

When did it go wrong? What went wrong to transform it into such a ruthless monster? What went wrong—?

The doctor's face unravelled into a smile as his lips relaxed.

"But Karan was fearless. She continued to open her shop, bake bread, and put it on the shelves. Every time I passed Karan's bakery, I couldn't help but breathe in the delicious aroma of freshly-baked bread. She is amazing for carrying on her daily work in spite of her loss. She probably strongly believed that you were going to come home. I felt pity for Karan, you know. I thought there was a slim chance, if there was even one, that you were coming home. I believed if you did come back, you would be just like my brother. But you did come back, and in one piece. You came back proper."

"I did change in appearance, though."

"Appearances don't matter, as long as your soul isn't broken. That's precisely No. 6's plan—to govern human souls. To rule the hearts, minds, and even thoughts of people."

Inukashi stifled a huge yawn.

"So tell me what else is new. I thought this was obvious to you guys already. For us West Block residents, No. 6 ain't no utopia. It's like a bloated, fat vampire."

"A vampire... I can see that." A smile spread across the doctor's face.

"And that vampire is writhing in pain from the changes occurring in its body. To think—to think this day has come—ha ha ha! I wish I could have shown this to my brother and mother! Ha ha ha ha!"

The doctor's laughter gradually gained momentum until it became a roar. Inukashi furrowed his brow and recoiled.

"Hey, Shion. Is the doc okay? I mean, up here?" He pointed at his head. "You sure he hasn't got something loose in there?"

“He saved Nezumi’s life,” Shion said sternly.

“Sure didn’t do anything for me,” retorted Inukashi.

The doctor was still laughing. Shion slowly enunciated his words as he spoke at the man’s trembling back.

“Doctor, can I see Nezumi?”

The laughter stopped. The doctor turned around. The echoes of his laughter and the residue of his mirth still swam in his eyes.

“Nezumi? Ah, you mean that boy. What a peculiar name. Not his real name, is it?”

“I don’t think so.”

“And what is?”

He had opened his mouth to say “I don’t know” when the door to the examination room opened a crack. A tall, thin man was edging his upper body into view. A crow was perched on his shoulder. The mice gave a terrified screech. One dove into Shion’s pocket, while the other two squeezed under the belly of a dog with patched fur.

“Yoming, what’s the matter?” The doctor strode over to the man. Yoming whispered something into his ear. The doctor’s eyebrows rose dramatically.

“The Correctional Facility!” The doctor’s mouth gaped open. “The Correctional Facility—is that even possible?”

Yoming answered him. Shion could not catch it. He didn’t want to. Right now, he was in no mood to listen.

I want to see Nezumi. All of his thoughts concentrated into that one point. His heart pounded in anticipation.

I want see him and know that he’s alive.

Shion put his hand on the operating room door.

“He’s upstairs.” The doctor pointed an index finger straight up at the ceiling. “There’s a recovery room on the second floor. Aria is

attending to him. There's a direct-route elevator in the operating room, too, but I want you to use the stairs in the hallway."

"Thank you, doctor."

"Oh—wait a minute," the doctor said. "Don't tell me you've come from the Correctional Facility—"

Shion did not hear the last of the doctor's sentence. He tore into the hallway.

"Hey, wake up, old man! Looks like we're paying Nezumi a visit. We need to get some flowers."

"Nnnngh, what? Who said I ever wanted to go?"

"Quit talking in your sleep and wake the hell up."

Shion left Inukashi and Rikiga bickering behind him, and dashed up the stairs. His legs faltered for a moment as he reached the corridor, dimly lit by nighttime lights.

It reminded him of the long, straight corridor of the Correctional Facility. But this atmosphere was not impregnated with fear; it did not prick his skin as before.

He exhaled softly.

Only one room by the stairs had the lights on. Shion regulated his breathing, and gently placed his hand on the door. It slid silently open. The room walls were painted a pale yellow. Across from him, darker yellow curtains were drawn across what he supposed was a large window.

By the window, the nursing robot was making faint electronic sounds by the bed. When Shion entered, it raised its arm as if to reject him.

"Resting. Resting. Not taking visitors. The patient is resting. Not taking visitors."

I see, this robot must be Aria. He bent low to talk to the robot.

"Aria, thank you. I'm very grateful."

“Grateful. Grateful. Grateful.” The nursing robot’s visual sensors flashed, and turned from red to green. It seemed to have acknowledged Shion’s presence.

“Aria, I want you to let me see your patient. I want to see him really badly. I’ll do anything.”

Aria’s visual sensors stopped flashing—or rather, she stopped blinking. Her green eyes were fixed on Shion.

“Want to see. Want to see. Request accepted. Request accepted.”

Aria glided across the floor. She retracted her arm, and settled herself in a corner of the room. She looked like a quirky but lovable piece of interior decor. The dogs lay around her peacefully.

Nezumi was sleeping on the bed. He was connected to many tubes, and his eyes were closed. A tinge of colour had returned to his cheeks, perhaps thanks to a blood transfusion. His superfibre cloth was folded neatly and placed beside the bed, no doubt by Aria.

Shion bent over Nezumi and took his pulse. It was faint, but regular. Shion could definitely feel it. A sigh of relief escaped his lips.

“Nezumi...” He felt his body unravel as he released a sigh.

He made it. He survived. Shion knelt by the bed and buried his face in the sheets. He could feel Nezumi’s heartbeat. He wanted to raise his voice and cry—as loudly as his voice would allow.

He’s alive. He’s alive. Nezumi’s alive.

“I could do with a few more winks.” Rikiga yawned, showing a full array of teeth.

“I’m hungry,” Inukashi said. “And my dogs are hungry, too. It’s all good that Nezumi made it, but it ain’t gonna be funny if we die from starvation instead. Ah damnit, I’m starved!”

“If ‘we’ die? Don’t lump me in with the likes of you.”

"You've got nothing to do with it, old man. I'm talking about me and my dogs. Hey, robot, uh—Aria, was it? Struck lucky with a pretty name, haven't ya? Doesn't suit you at all. So, Ms. Aria, can you get us some grub or what?"

"Grub. Grub. Grub. Cannot comprehend. Cannot comprehend."

"I mean a meal. Patients and injured people still need to eat, right?" Inukashi made a motion of wolfing something down.

"Meal. Understood. Understood."

Aria's torso opened up. A row of three steaming paper cups appeared. Inukashi whistled, and Rikiga swallowed hungrily.

"Two more, two more," Inukashi said. "For my dogs. And some bread and meat, if you've got any."

"No meat. Have bread." Her torso opened again. Two more paper cups and some rolls appeared.

"You're the best. I think I might fall in love with you. I'd give you a huge kiss."

"I wouldn't do that," Rikiga said. "Think of the poor robot who has to get a kiss from you. It would probably stop functioning. Don't turn such a good girl into a lump of scrap metal. Hm? What's this?"

Rikiga furrowed his brow as he brought the cup away from his lips.

"It's bland. It may as well be hot water. And this bread... it doesn't taste like anything."

"It's hospital food, don't complain about it. Look how easy it was to get hot soup and bread. Can't beat No. 6. In the West Block, you could only dream of a feast like this. Right, Shion?"

"Yeah. It's really tasty." He was not simply going along with Inukashi. He really found it delicious.

This taste almost matched that of the rich soup that Nezumi made on the day he had escaped to the West Block—the day he had miraculously

lived through the wasp's attack.

It soaked into his body, quenched his soul, and revived him. Just one cup of soup restored his confidence that he would live through another day.

It's delicious.

Nezumi, wake up. Wake up so you can sip this cup of soup. Look at me again with those eyes full of life.

"Mm..." Nezumi shifted. The whiteness of the bandage around his shoulder and chest stung Shion's eyes.

"Nezumi, Nezumi!" Shion called to him. He poured his soul into the name he had called so many times before. Nezumi's eyelashes fluttered ever so slightly.

"He's probably still knocked out from the anaesthesia," Rikiga said. "He won't be waking up for a while. Hmm, but even a devil like him looks like an angel when he's all quiet and asleep like this. Strange, isn't it?" he murmured pensively.

"Hah, you still hung up on him, old man? How many times have you been shafted because you were fooled by his looks?"

"I've been shafted enough times, with or without his good looks. By both Eve and you." Rikiga sighed. "Am I just going to spend the rest of my life being bossed around by rude, filthy brats? Just thinking about it makes me depressed. I need a drink to stomach this. Lady Aria, you don't happen to have some booze on you, do you?"

"Booze. Booze. Booze. Cannot comprehend. Unable to process your request."

"Alcohol. You know, I want something that'll hit me in the guts with some oomph."

"We have: alcohol antiseptic. We have: disinfectant alcohol. We have: sterilization alcohol. Which one do you need? Which one do you need?"

"I don't need any of that. I don't need antisepsis, nor do I need to be

disinfected or sterilized. God, what a useless princess.” Rikiga clicked his tongue.

Inukashi turned aside and laughed discreetly. Shion also couldn’t help but twitch the corners of his mouth. Rikiga wore a wry smile. The three glanced at each other and laughed for some time.

“I never expected you’d make it back like this,” Inukashi murmured thoughtfully after their laughter had died down.

“Me neither,” Shion agreed.

“Not to mention that bonus work you guys did with the Correctional Facility. I have a bit of a new regard for you, to tell you the truth. I honestly never expected—had no clue how you’d pull it off. I thought you guys would never be able to escape through the garbage chute.”

“It’s thanks to you and Rikiga-san, Inukashi.”

“Thanks to us, huh. Say, Shion...”

“Hm?”

“Didn’t it ever cross your mind that we might not show up at the waste depot? What if we pulled a no-show, or we showed up but left early—you didn’t think about that at all?”

Shion searched his soul for a moment at Inukashi’s question. What had he thought back then? He searched, then gave an answer.

“I didn’t think of it at all.” He gazed into Inukashi’s eyes. “That never even crossed my mind. I believed that you and Rikiga-san would be there. Nezumi must have thought so, too. I’m sure he had solid belief in you.”

“Well, that’s all great and nice for you, but let me say that we... well, I dunno about the old man, but... I don’t owe nothing to you guys. I didn’t have an obligation to wait in there.”

“Me neither,” Rikiga chimed in. “I might have my share of grudges, but I don’t have any obligation or debts to owe, either.” He clucked his tongue repeatedly.

“Lemme tell you something, Shion,” Inukashi stabbed a sharp-clawed index finger in Shion’s direction. “Don’t think I got myself involved in this hell of a mess for free. You guys owe me now. You best be prepared, ’cause I’m putting hefty interest on it.”

“I’ll have you know that I’m going to be sending out an invoice addressed to Eve as well. He’s made me spend quite a bit of money, taking everything into account. I wouldn’t be able to rest in peace if I didn’t get reimbursed for that at least.”

Inukashi and Rikiga grimaced at the same time as if they had rehearsed it. Shion suppressed a laugh and nodded solemnly. He didn’t care how astronomical the interest rate was, or how exorbitant the invoice was. The two had stayed and waited for them. In that hygiene management room, where life and death jostled each other, they had continued to wait, believing that Shion and Nezumi would return alive.

He bit his lip.

Safu had also been waiting. She had been waiting for Shion. She was probably waiting for him, not to say goodbye, but to escape together with him.

I couldn’t hold up my end.

He had not been able to give her what Rikiga and Inukashi had given him.

“Hey, Shion.” Inukashi hugged his knees and leaned closer. “Whaddaya think is gonna happen to the West Block?”

“The West Block, huh...”

“Yeah. No. 6 is spiralling into chaos, by the looks of it. The Correctional Facility is gone. The gates are blown apart. Maybe that wall—the wall that separates the West Block and No. 6—maybe that’ll break down too. Ya think?”

“Yeah. In fact, it most likely will.”

Inukashi swallowed, and curled up just slightly.

“So, if that happens, I wonder what everyone in the West Block is gonna do. How would they face people who’ve treated them like crap all this time? Would they take their anger out on them? Would they storm into No. 6? Would they fight, or run away... wonder what they’ll do? When I think about it, I just... well, it makes my head spin.”

“Mm-hmm...” Inukashi was right. It made his head spin, too. A world without walls: it was beyond his imagination. What would hold ground there? Surely not just peace and open freedom. How would the West Block’s wind, swirling with hatred and anguish, blow against No. 6?

It simply exceeded his imagination.

“Turn the lights out,” said a low, cutting voice.

“Wh—Eve, are you—?” Rikiga fell speechless.

Nezumi was sitting upright. His dark grey eyes glinted sharply. “Turn off the lights. Quickly,” he repeated.

Inukashi’s nose twitched. He jumped to his feet, and pressed the electric switch. All the lights were cut, and darkness fell over Shion’s vision like a veil.

“Nezumi, what—”

“Shh!”

Nezumi moved in the darkness. He pulled out all the tubes that were inserted into his arm. He slipped to the floor and knelt down.

“Keep quiet. Don’t even move.”

Inukashi shivered.

Time passed. One minute, two minutes, three minutes... suddenly, noise erupted from downstairs. Footsteps, shouting, screaming, then gunshots.

“Run! It’s the Security Bureau!”

“Don’t move. Move, and we will shoot.”

“Run! Get out of here!”

“All you traitors are under arrest.”

“Kill them, it’s no big matter.”

“Their leader is getting away! Get him, and kill him!”

Those were the few words that Shion’s ears managed to catch.

He curled up in the darkness.

He curled up and sat still, feeling Nezumi’s warmth and breathing right beside him.

4

OUT, OUT, BRIEF CANDLE

*Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow
Creeps in this petty pace from day to day,
To the last syllable of recorded time,
And all our yesterdays have lighted fools
The way to dusty death. Out, out, brief candle.
Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage...*

MACBETH, ACT V SCENE V

JUST ONCE, he heard footsteps approach. Someone was trying to run up the stairs. But the footsteps died along with a gunshot, a scream, and someone tumbling down the stairs. He didn't have to see it to know what happened. The same stairs that Shion had flown up moments ago was probably spattered with someone's blood.

Not only the stairs. The floor, the entrance, and the consultation room were probably smeared with blood and littered with broken objects in a horrific scene. A body or two probably lay on the floor. *What about the doctor?* What had become of the man who saved Nezumi's life?

“Don’t move.” Nezumi restrained his arm. “Don’t move yet.”

Shion, Inukashi, and Rikiga all held their breaths and tensed as if they were bound by his words. Even the dogs lay low to the floor, unmoving like boulders, save to growl softly at the footsteps.

One minute, two minutes, three minutes...

“Freedom for No. 6! Freedom for all of us!” A hoarse, high-pitched scream resounded, its gender indiscernible. Right afterwards, angry voices and the sound of fierce beatings were heard through the window.

It’s the same. Shion made a fist. His palm was damp with perspiration. It was the same—no different from the Hunt in the West Block. The brutality he had seen under the thick snow clouds was taking place again right here.

Stealthily within the walls, openly outside of them—that was the only difference.

The sweat stung the countless cuts on his palm and made it throb slightly. Sweat streamed down his cheek, and entered his mouth.

In No. 6, he used to feel trapped and suffocated, like being forced to wear clothes that didn’t quite fit. But until Nezumi had saved him and they had begun to live in the West Block, he had never had much difficulty dealing with these vague doubts and feelings of suffocation. Not until he was given a chance to look at No. 6 from the outside. In fact, he had taken comfort in No. 6’s cleanliness and abundant lifestyle. It was true. He had been devouring this comfort and taking it for granted. Back then, the Security Bureau’s existence hardly crossed his mind. It never had to; the days still went by. On the surface, time passed peacefully without incidence.

When had it all begun?

Shion was wheeling his bike across the park after his shift. He was allowed to ride his bicycle in the park, as long as he didn’t go over the

speed limit. But the spring sunset was so beautiful that Shion had felt like taking a stroll to take it all in.

The sky was divided into dark pink, red, and carmine. The streaming clouds caught the sun, their edges glittering golden. The sweet fragrance of the flowers blended with the refreshing scent of new leaves, enveloping the passersby.

“Ah, the end of another day.”

“It was wonderful, wasn’t it?”

“All’s right with the world, as they say. What do you say to topping it all off with a mouthwatering meal and some excellent wine?”

“Oh, how splendid. That sounds great.”

He could hear the lighthearted conversation of a young man and woman—were they lovers, husband and wife, or good friends?

They’re right. It’s a perfect evening to enjoy wine over a nice meal in the company of someone close, Shion had thought, feeling a comfortable sort of weariness and hunger himself.

All’s right with the world.

Neither Shion nor that man or woman had any clue about what lurked in the depths of that day. Most people didn’t. It wasn’t because of the dreamy spring evening. Through hot summer days, sleety mornings, in autumn sunsets, they had never noticed.

The majority of the citizens were neither concerned nor interested about the Security Bureau. They probably had no idea that it would bare its fangs so ferociously at the slightest voice of protest from the citizens. They thought of the Security Bureau as an organization that maintained and protected their safety—an organization for the people—were they not? And they believed in this clause—

No. 6 exists for its citizens. It exists to ensure a plentiful and comfortable life for its citizens. No one shall be permitted to threaten the safety, activities, and lives of the citizens in any way whatsoever.

They believed the city would also abide by this clause of its own City Charter. The people relied upon the city, left everything in its hands, and unwittingly allowed themselves to be pulled along by its flow.

And this was the result.

The sweat stung in his wounds. Nezumi's hand was still restraining Shion's arm.

If this was the result, then Nezumi—where did we go wrong? Do you know the answer?

No—I'm the one that needs to know the answer, not you. I was born as a No. 6 citizen, reaped all of its benefits, and lived without any concern for the outside or inside. I'm the one who has to reach out and grasp the answer, in exchange for always choosing the comfort of lending myself to the least resistant path, rather than struggling against the current.

I know. Meeting you has taught me, and so have the words we exchanged and the days we spent together. I need an answer that I've grasped with my own hands, rather than one that's been prepared for me.

Mine, and not someone else's.

Or else I'll end up with the same result again.

"They weren't after us, then." Shion sensed Inukashi twitching his nose in the dark. "I was totally under the impression that... the doctor tipped the Bureau off. Looks like that wasn't it."

"No, it definitely wasn't."

Traitors. That was what the Bureau officials had said. The target of their sting had not been Shion, but the others—the doctor, and Yoming.

Inukashi twitched his nose again. "Nezumi... aren't we safe now?"

"Wait. It's still too early."

"Tsk, paranoid as always."

One minute, two minutes, three minutes...

“Hey, Nezumi.”

“Don’t rush. But—alright, it should be fine now. Don’t turn on the lights. Leave them off, and move quietly.”

Nezumi pushed the door slightly ajar, and whistled softly. Hamlet poked his head out from Shion’s pocket, alighted on the floor, and dashed through the open crack.

Momentarily, a lighthearted squeak greeted them.

Cheep cheep, chit-chit-chit.

Cheep cheep, chit-chit-chit.

“Alright, let’s go downstairs. Avoid the elevator, just in case.” Nezumi swiftly wrapped the superfibre cloth around himself, and slipped into the hallway.

“What the hell was that?” Shion saw Rikiga’s mouth gaping open by the light that spilled in from the hallway. “Wasn’t he unconscious just now? Or was that an act, too? Playing the part of a prince on his deathbed?”

Inukashi shrugged.

“He ain’t no prince. He’s an animal. Like a savage beast. No way he can sleep in the face of oncoming danger. He sensed the Security Bureau guys before my nose could sniff them out, damnit. Pisses me off.”

“I see. Now I have a good idea of how Eve could have survived this far. With instincts as sharp as those, and that cautiousness to boot...”

“Falling in love all over again, old man?”

“I just confirmed my notion that he doesn’t have an ounce of good in him.”

The humans, dogs, and mice crept down the stairs cautiously, step by step. There was a pool of blood in the stairwell. At the bottom of the

stairs was the owner of that blood, a man in his forties or fifties lying on his back.

The lower floor was just as grisly as Shion imagined. Blood had sprayed the walls and the floor. There was broken glass and furniture strewn about, all soiled with dirt and blood. At the end of the hall, a blue-grey door was half-open. The room was dark and the air inside cold—a basement room, perhaps.

A man lay slumped against the door, and the nurse at his feet. A figure clad in a lab coat lay a few metres away. The three of them were perfectly still.

“Doctor!” Shion ran to him and lifted him up in his arms. The chest of the man’s lab coat was dyed in blood. “Doctor, answer me, please.” His words felt painfully empty as they escaped his lips.

The doctor was clearly almost dead. There was no hope for him.

“Doctor, doctor! Open your eyes, please,” Shion continued to implore with empty words. That was all he could do.

The door to the consulting room opened, and Aria appeared, evidently from the elevator.

“Vital signs: none. Vital signs: none. Vital signs—minimal. Minimal.”

The doctor’s eyelids slowly lifted.

“Vital signs: minimal. Commencing treatment.”

Several tubes extended from Aria’s torso, and connected to the doctor’s body.

“Aria... don’t. It’s no use...”

“No use. No use... cannot comprehend. Continuing treatment.”

“Doctor, what... why did this happen?”

“... He... broadcasting... from the basement of this clinic... calling... on his comrades to defeat No. 6 together...”

“Vital signs: minimal. Probability of recovery: one percent. One percent.”

"I wanted revenge... on No. 6... revenge..."

"Doctor," Shion pleaded.

"I wanted to... destroy this world... and build it... anew."

Suddenly the doctor dug his fingers into Shion's arm.

"Shion," the man called his name in a clear, strong voice. "I leave this in your hands."

His eyes were open wide, fixed intently on Shion.

"I leave it... in your hands. Don't ever make... No. 6... this kind of city... again. Please. I'm leaving it to you."

The doctor's fingers slipped out of his own. The light went out of his eyes as they glazed over. His whole body convulsed.

Then, it was over.

"Vital signs: minimal. Minimal. Unable to register. Unable to register. Aborting treatment."

"Doctor..."

Shion laid the man down, and put a hand over his eyelids. With his eyes closed, the doctor looked peaceful and relaxed.

"Leave it to you, huh." Inukashi let out a long sigh. "You guys are the ones who built No. 6 in the first place," he said to the doctor's body. "But once something goes wrong and it spins out of control, you just shove it off onto someone else? Not exactly a friendly gift to leave to someone, is it? A little selfish, don't you think, doctor? I guess it's none of my business, though."

"Inukashi, what good is it to mouth off at a dead man? He's not going to hear any of it. Poor guy." Rikiga clasped his hands in front of his chest and bowed his head.

"The hell are you doing?" Inukashi asked.

"I'm praying to God, can't you tell? O God, please forgive this sinful man. May you bless his soul and let him rest in peace by your side."

“Hah, you don’t even believe in God. What an act. Oh, wait—you must be praying to God Moneybags Almighty, right, old man?”

“Rotten kid,” spat Rikiga. “You never get tired of spewing insults, do you? Once this settles down, you’re in for it. You remember that.” Rikiga unclasped his hands and rolled his shoulder joints.

“So, what now?” he said. “We’ve accomplished our big goal of destroying the Correctional Facility. As for me, I’m in the mood for heading back to the West Block and crawling into bed. I feel like curling up and dreaming about digging up gold from underneath the Correctional Facility. I’d wake up to the best morning ever. It puts me in a good mood already.”

“Old man, you can be sarcastic all you want, but Nezumi’s not gonna respond. I’d get a better response out of complaining to that corpse over there.” Inukashi chuckled spiritedly, his shoulders shaking with his laughter.

“But truth be told, I’m all for crawling into bed myself. And, well, there are a lot of things that I want to mull over. It doesn’t help that it’s kinda creepy being inside No. 6. It gives me a bad vibe, makes my skin crawl. Shion, don’t you wanna go home, too? It’s not too far from here, is it? Your mum must be waiting for you.”

“Yeah...” Shion’s house was within walking distance from here.

“Don’t you wanna see your mum again?”

“Yeah, I do.”

“Karan, huh. I’d like to see her too,” Rikiga murmured wistfully.

Mom, there’s no telling how much I’ve probably made you worry. I want you to see that I’m doing well. I want you to see that I’m safe. I want to say sorry. I want to apologize from the bottom of my heart. Mom, I’m sorry.

Shion was overwhelmed with nostalgia and love for his mother. He remembered the scent of freshly-baked bread. Yearning. Love. *I wish*

I could see you.

But the only place he wanted to return to was that basement room littered with books. He wanted to go back to that room and its countless volumes, the bed, the stove, and the tattered chair.

I want to go home.

Shion burned with longing.

I want to bring back those days, those moments I spent with Nezumi in that room. I would give up anything.

But he would not return. Those days had long passed, never to come within his grasp again.

Ever.

It was a premonition—a premonition which he almost certainly believed would come true. Shion purposely averted his eyes from it. He knew well it was a sign of weakness, but he did it anyway.

Shion stood up and turned to face Nezumi.

“Can you move?”

“Somewhat.”

Nezumi lifted himself up from where he was leaning on the wall, and let out a long breath. A thin sheen of sweat covered his forehead.

“Aria, can you measure his blood pressure, pulse, and body temperature? Based on that, tell me what an appropriate treatment for him would be.”

“Understood. Understood. Blood pressure, pulse, body temperature, commencing measurements. Commencing measurements.”

“No need.” Nezumi shook his head in refusal. “It’s a waste of time.”

He brushed off Aria’s extended pipes, and sighed again.

“M’lady, with all due respect, allow me to politely decline your offer. We don’t have time for treatment.”

Aria blinked, and her eyes turned yellow.

“Due respect, decline, time. Cannot comprehend. Cannot comprehend. Aborting measurements.”

“Nezumi, you plan to go?”

“Of course.”

Inukashi and Rikiga looked at each other.

“Go where?” Rikiga asked. Inukashi scowled in silence.

“To city hall,” Shion answered.

“City hall? You mean the Moondrop?”

“Yes.”

“Wh—do you know what state that place is in right now?” Rikiga exclaimed. “I mean, I don’t know myself, but . . . it’s sure to be chaos. The Security Bureau is cracking down on citizens left and right—shot some of them, even. They’ve probably gotten word of what happened to the Correctional Facility. The rest of the people will find out about it soon—No. 6 doesn’t have the power to suppress the spread of information like it used to. The confusion is only going to get worse. It’ll be completely out of control.”

“That’s why we’re going.” Nezumi smiled wanly. Nezumi had countless deft ways to smile. This one was a cold smile with a hint of mockery.

“It’s our once-in-a-lifetime chance to see No. 6 perform its last dying shriek on stage. We better hurry, or we won’t even get standing seats.”

“With the state you’re in?” Rikiga replied incredulously. “You can’t do it, Eve. Sure, you might be stronger than you look, but you’re human. You have limits. Don’t do it. No. 6 will play its star role even if we’re not in the audience. It’ll pull off its role of the wretched, self-destructing giant with flying colours.”

“You’re telling me to throw away this chance and retreat with my tail between my legs?”

“Yes. You two destroyed the Correctional Facility, and that definitely helped trigger the demise of No. 6. That’s amazing, and you’ve done enough. More than enough. Eve, Shion, don’t go further than this. Back off and let nature take its course. It’s time for you two to retreat backstage.”

“Being backstage staff is not my style,” Nezumi said. “Neither is throwing away a chance that’s already in my hands.”

“Your greed is bottomless,” Rikiga said in disgust. “Listen to me, don’t make me say this again. Your part is over. It’s not worth it to risk your lives to stand onstage.”

Shion stood in front of Rikiga and shook his head.

“Rikiga-san, we have to go. We have to go, no matter what.”

“Shion, you too? Why? What for? You were able to escape the Correctional Facility, a damn miracle it was. Why won’t you retreat to where it’s safe? Doesn’t your life mean anything to you?”

“We’re not going because we want to die,” Shion said firmly. “We’re going because he’s the only one who can stop Elyurias.”

“Elyurias?” Rikiga’s eyes darted about. “What is that? Someone’s name?”

“She’s the queen who once ruled over this land. I don’t know if ‘queen’ is the right name for her—she never tried to dominate her subjects or drain their wealth like humans do. She only protected the rules of the forest, and the workings of nature.”

“Shion... what are you talking about?” Rikiga drew his chin back. A bead of sweat rolled along his jawline, across his five-o’clock shadow.

“Humans—the humans who attempted to build No. 6 on this land trampled Elyurias’ land and tried to reign over everything within it. They burnt the forests, massacred the Forest People, and tried to build a world that was solely for themselves. Only their own abundance,

their own wealth, their own safety and prosperity was their concern. They built a disconnected utopia on a foundation of others' sacrifices." "Shion," Nezumi called. It was a quiet, beautiful voice. "You know everything?"

"No. What I know is probably only a small part. I only read what was in Rou's chip."

Nezumi sank to the floor. He curled up, and muttered, "I see."

"Hey, keep going," Rikiga said. "I still have no idea what you're talking about. Sounds like complete gibberish. So how is Elyuri-what's-her-face related to what's happening to No. 6? What do you mean when you say Eve is the only one who can stop her? Shion, give me the details."

"I'd love to hear all about it, too." Inukashi clicked his tongue lightly. His hands were full with numerous bags.

"What—where did you go? What is all that?"

"Clothes and food. Bland soup and bread just doesn't do it for me. And besides, if we're going to watch a play, I think we need to look a little more decent. They wouldn't even let us in the standing seats."

Inukashi dug out a chunk of meat and a roll from the bag, and tossed it at the dogs. The dogs promptly pounced without even raising their voices. The mice skilfully stopped a tumbling roll, and lined up to nibble at it.

"Good. Eat," Inukashi said proudly. "Eat as much as you want. You guys worked hard. You did a good job. This is your reward. Heh heh, that's the amazing thing about No. 6. Even a clinic in the middle of nowhere like this has a kitchen full of food. Not to mention expensive-looking clothes. Heh heh, heh heh heh heh, this place is full of top-notch items. I could get a good price for this in the West Block."

"You've come this far and you're still thieving?" Rikiga said.

“Who cares? The doctor is dead. Dead people don’t need food or clothes.”

“Well... I guess you’re right. Hey, pass me some ham, bread, and those blue pants.”

“I’ll sell them to you for one silver piece.”

“Inukashi, you bastard, you just said goodbye to your ride,” Rikiga snarled. “You can walk back to the West Block.”

“I was kidding, yeesh! Old man has no sense of humour. That’s why all the women trick you out of your money. Anyway, come on, let’s eat. We gotta prepare for the road ahead.”

Inukashi turned a bag upside down. Ham, apples and bread tumbled out.

“Let’s have a banquet while we listen to the story Shion The Great has got to tell. Sounds like an interesting one.”

Inukashi’s eyes glittered from underneath his long bangs. His pink tongue flitted across his lips again and again.

“Maybe he’ll tell us who Nezumi really is. This is bound to be interesting. In fact, I’m way more interested in this than a drama starring No. 6, to be honest.”

Shion scooped up an apple.

“Nezumi, can you eat?”

“Ah, I haven’t recovered to that point yet. I’m not hungry.”

“I figured as much. Aria, can you give him some glucose solution?”

“Understood. Understood. Commencing glucose transfusion.”

“I’d like a transfusion of wine,” Rikiga chimed in.

“You’ll have to settle with grape juice. There were two bottles in the fridge.” Inukashi handed a bottle of reddish-purple liquid to Rikiga.

“Alright, Shion. We’re all ready. Spit out everything you know.” His pink tongue flitted across his lips again. Shion peered at Nezumi, apple

still in hand.

“Nezumi... is it alright?”

Nezumi inclined his head very slightly. He propped his knees up, and put his face down on his arms. He looked like he was either crying, or bearing a wind that was blowing against him.

Shion took a bite of the apple. Its tart juice burst inside his mouth.

Inukashi and Rikiga leaned forward, Inukashi clutching a piece of bread and ham in each of his hands, and Rikiga gripping a bottle of grape juice.

The two had put their lives in the balance for Shion and Nezumi. They had acted on Shion and Nezumi’s word with next to no knowledge of what they were doing. In other words, they had believed in the two boys. They had invested their lives into their belief. Telling them everything was the only way to match the leap of trust they took, and to answer to their dedication.

He knew Nezumi must feel the same.

Shion began to speak.

* * *

“I don’t think I need to tell you about how No. 6 was created. Humankind tried to build a utopia once again on this planet, which was half destroyed by human hands.

Before No. 6 was born, this area was a miraculously preserved stretch of beautiful, abundant forest. I said miraculous, but this land—its forests, woods, and lakes— was actually meant to survive. Elyurias and the Forest People protected this realm. It was because of her that this land’s wildlife was spared damage.

No one can explain who or what Elyurias is. Even the name Elyurias was given to her by a researcher. —I met him, in the basement of the

Correctional Facility.”

“Basement of the Correctional Facility?” Rikiga choked on his juice and had a coughing fit. “So there was a basement in there, after all!”

“There was.”

“How about gold bullion? Was there gold bullion in there, Shion?”

“Gold? No. There were people living underground. Back when the Correctional Facility wasn’t such a brutal and vigilant incarceration facility, people who escaped but couldn’t return above ground began to build their own underground world in secret. The leader of this group was called Rou.”

“... So there was no gold, after all.” Rikiga hunched over, clearly crestfallen. Inukashi guffawed, baring his teeth.

“Rou was a member of a revival project team chosen to design and build No. 6 on this land. Before No. 6 was created, there used to be a small, pretty town at the edge of the forest. People who survived through the waste and decay lived modestly here in a tightly-knit community. This town was the mother of No. 6.

Bright young people were chosen from that town to form a team to build a utopian city.”

“My town.” Rikiga drew himself up. “That’s the town I was born and raised in. It used to be called the Town of Roses—that’s how beautiful it was. Karan also used to live there.”

“No one asked you, old man.” Inukashi bared his teeth even more. “If you’re not gonna shut up, I’ll tear apart your throat for you.”

“I’d like to see you try. You can rip my throat out, but I’ll still keep talking. Oh, yes, that revival project team. I heard about them. Back in those days, I was still a pimply youngster chasing after girls and blushing at their ankles. They were holding some kind of selection exam to gather skilled young people from the science fields to make a brighter future for humankind. Yes, yes, I remember.”

Rikiga folded his arms and nodded enthusiastically.

“That was how No. 6 began. And not long after that, No. 6 was born as the sixth and best, most optimal utopian city. It grew at an astonishing speed.”

“And before you knew it, you dropout failures were shoved outside the walls. Pity,” Inukashi said nastily.

“You should be the one keeping your mouth shut, Inukashi. I’ll yank out that long tongue of yours and turn it into mincemeat. In those days, I’d just become a journalist. The fact that the city-state was walling itself in, trying to build a barrier around itself, just seemed really shady to me. I wrote a whole slew of articles that talked about it. It was natural that I was thrown out of the city. It was around that time that No. 6 became more and more intolerant and domineering.”

“It was precisely that.

No. 6 grew at a stunning rate. Its infrastructure, governing bodies and regulations were swiftly and skilfully laid out. In the midst of it all, Rou met Elyurias.

Rou himself wasn’t able to define Elyurias well—was she a forest spirit? Or a species of animal unknown to humankind?

The only thing he knew for sure was that Elyurias existed long before the birth of humankind, protecting this land. The Forest People worshipped her, revered her, and lived in harmony with her.”

“Right, so who are these ‘forest people’ that you keep talking about?”

“Will you shut up, old man? Can’t you listen quietly for once? Geez.” Inukashi gave an exaggerated sigh.

Shion turned and glanced at Nezumi slumped against the wall. His eyes were closed. His profile was beautiful, but it looked somewhat artificial.

“Glucose transfusion, 50% complete. 50% complete. Continuing transfusion.” Aria’s eyes blinked green.

Nezumi said nothing. His eyes remained meditatively shut, his body perfectly still.

* * *

“According to Nezumi, the Forest People are those who have made the forest their home. Since ancient times, they’ve lived in harmony with the wind, the earth, lakes and rivers, and the sky.

To borrow Rou’s words, the forest is a place both of their birth and upbringing. They nurtured, respected, and continued to protect the forest. They lived peacefully within the bounds of nature without desiring prosperity or development. Even those who lived in the Town of Roses had no idea about their existence.

Elyurias’ power wasn’t what allowed the abundant forest to survive on this land. It was because the Forest People protected it. Through the long, perpetual flow of time, they continued to protect the forest. Nezumi is a descendant of those Forest People.”

Inukashi shifted.

Rikiga let his empty juice bottle roll across the floor. It continued to roll until it hit the doctor’s arm, and stopped.

“Nezumi is a descendant of the Forest People. He’s also a descendant of the ‘Singers’.”

“Singers?”

“Yes, Singers—those who had the power to appease Elyurias and converse with her. There were always a number of Singers among the Forest People.

Neither Elyurias nor nature were embodiments of pure compassion and generosity. On the contrary, they could easily turn terrifying. The Forest People knew this.

Both nature and Elyurias could bare their fangs and attack suddenly at any time. Their power was absolute—no human could compare. That made them all the more dreadful.

Yes, the Forest People knew fear. They knew how to fear as well as revere. Singers could appease Elyurias' wrath with their voices, and were able to exchange words with her. They had the ability to mediate between humans and nature. Nezumi had this ability, and so did his mother.

Rou ventured deep into the forest, met Elyurias and the Forest People, and reported their existence to No. 6. He had no idea that this had planted the seed for the Mao Massacre.”

“The Mao Massacre?” Creases appeared between Rikiga's eyebrows.

“Yes. ‘Mao’ apparently refers to the area near the lakeshore where the Forest People lived. They had a settlement there. It's where the airport is now. Apparently the lake was drained to build the airport. I had no idea.”

“I didn't know, either,” Rikiga said. “I was already kicked out when they started building it. A massacre, huh... which means No. 6 must have invaded the Mao area and tried to wipe out its residents?”

“Yes.”

“What for? Did they need land for the airport?”

“No. What they really wanted was Elyurias.”

“What for?”

What for. Rikiga kept repeating the same question.

What for, what for. Really, what was this for? What made people this brutal, this ruthless?

Shion looked down at the doctor's body. It had lost all its human warmth and was now a cold corpse. The nurse lay beyond it, and beyond her lay an unnamed man.

What made them capable of taking the lives of others so easily?

In the short instant that he closed his eyes, he could see the Hunt unfold again behind his eyelids. He could hear the groans of the people loaded onto the truck's cargo bed. In his ears rang the screams of the people who had died, piled on top of each other in the basement of the Correctional Facility.

What for?

Perplexity—not anger—snagged Shion and would not release him. Also, fear.

What set him apart from the central figures of No. 6? Hadn't Rou said so himself? Everyone was young; everyone had hopes to build a utopian city.

It had taken mere decades for these hopes and ideals to mutate. Mere decades. Shion swallowed his breath.

What kind of person will I be in a few decades? Would I still be able to hold the same hopes and ideals that I have now, at age sixteen? Would I be connected in any form with this kind of brutality?

The terror was enough to make him shiver.

“What did they want Elyurias for? Her special powers.”

“Special powers?” Inukashi's mouth fell open as he stared at Shion.

“Yeah. Elyurias embodies the form of a wasp.”

“Wasp? Like those things that fly around flowers and stuff?”

“Those would be honeybees. Elyurias is a parasitic wasp. She lays eggs in her hosts.”

Inukashi's mouth fell open wider. No words came out.

“The eggs hatch inside the host's body. They grow without the host's knowledge, become pupae, and emerge as adults. They tear through the host's body to escape, leaving him behind like an empty shell. This is what's happening to No. 6 right now.

Elyurias' children are all beginning to hatch. They're children who fed off No. 6 citizens in order to grow.

I told you earlier that Elyurias looks like a wasp. But she isn't one. No one knows who or what she really is. Rou has recorded that he thinks she might be between a human and a god. That's why she—since she lays eggs, I'll call her a 'she', but I don't think there's much meaning to distinguishing her sex. Maybe she's taken the form of a wasp because it was a convenient form for her to lay eggs inside the hosts. Maybe she only appears as a wasp to human eyes.

She has an enormous intellect—and intellect that far surpasses that of humankind. And she had the power to exert perfect control over the hosts.

Because of that power, the hosts were programmed to take actions that were favourable to the children of Elyurias, oblivious to the fact that they were being leeches from. For example, their instincts for sensing danger were honed, and they became increasingly sensitive to their nutrition. They were controlled to take every effort to maintain a healthy body; their personalities turned gentle; they began to avoid disputes. It makes sense that No. 6 citizens were the only targets. Think about how malnourished the West Block people are, coupled with their substandard environment... as hosts, they were out of the question. Nezumi mentioned before that the parasitic wasps have gourmet tastes. He turned out to be right."

"Irony, ain't it," Inukashi muttered. "We starved, we froze, we didn't know when we would die... but because of that, we West Block residents were spared."

"These were the absolutely necessary conditions for the eggs: the host needed to be alive when they hatched, and the host needed to be healthy. Even Elyurias couldn't turn the West Block into a paradise. But she didn't need to."

“You’ve already got the best hosts you could ask for in No. 6.”

“That’s right.”

“The wasps controlled the humans?” This time, it was Rikiga who opened his mouth. He breathed raggedly.

“Yes. They can make people act according to their every whim. It’s not unusual for parasitic organisms. A certain schistosome blindfolds the human immune system and makes it think that it’s harmless. A species of parasitic wasp injects its DNA into the caterpillar that it chooses as its host, and disables the caterpillar’s immune system completely. But I don’t think there’s any other example of a highly-functional parasitic organism like Elyurias, who chooses humans as her host and controls them completely without the host’s knowledge.”

“... And No. 6 wanted that power—the power to completely control and dominate over humans.” Rikiga made a choked noise in his throat. It was a dry, brittle sound, similar to the frigid winter wind.

“No. 6 had tried to attain Elyurias’ power.

They came to know of this mystical power through Rou’s investigative reports, and tried to use it in building their government.

Elyurias’ characteristics remained a mystery; however, everyone in No. 6 thought of her as a mere insect, a mutant species. They did not think of her as a being halfway between man and god, like Rou did. Not one of them saw her as such. Every person believed firmly that no being more superior than man existed.

Elyurias was nothing but a queen bee with an unusually large intellect. It would be no large task training her and controlling her according to their needs—that was what they believed.

An investigative squad was formed for the capture of Elyurias, and they set foot into the forest. There, they met adamant resistance by the Forest People.

Elyurias did not constantly reside in the forest. She appeared once every few years, or once every few decades—always unexpectedly. Everything about her—what the necessary conditions were for her appearance, when she laid eggs, and how long she lived afterwards—was a mystery. After she laid her eggs, Elyurias always disappeared. She withdrew from human eyes. A new queen bee emerged from one of the eggs she laid. It was never clear whether that was going to be a few years or decades later.

No one has seen Elyurias' body. From the time this forest appeared on this land, Elyurias had been repeating the same routine, but not a single person had ever seen her corpse.

Among the Forest People, it was said that Elyurias was immortal, that she revived endless times—that her corpse decayed somewhere where no eye could see, and became the forest itself.

When Elyurias appeared, the Forest People appeased her with song. They prayed and pleaded with her that they would not become hosts. They carried out rituals, and offered a Godly Bed. The Godly Bed was a type of man-made host, prepared from animal brains. It was an offering for implantation. Led on by the song, Elyurias would lay her eggs there. After the eggs were laid, the Godly Bed never seemed to rot or dry out; instead, it maintained an adequate level of moisture and freshness until it rotted away with the emergence of the adult wasp.

Yes, it was the same—the same way in which human hosts aged and died within the blink of an eye immediately after the adult wasps emerged.

The Forest People protected the Godly Bed with their bodies and souls. It was part of their promise with her. This rule had been passed on for ages. As long as the Forest People continued to protect the Godly Bed, Elyurias did not inflict any harm on them. She not only protected the people, but the forest and its land.

That was the rule.

No. 6 had burst onto the scene and wrenched everything from them. They had burned down the settlement of the Forest People when they resisted; they had massacred women, children, and the elderly indiscriminately. They had taken the Godly Bed back to No. 6.

The Mao Massacre—the demise of the Forest People.

This incident took place just twelve years ago.”

Shion sucked in a huge breath, and exhaled. He felt like there was no other way to let the air reach every corner of his body.

“From here on is my guesswork, not Rou’s records. I’m positive that it’s true.”

Rikiga leaned forward as if to encourage him. Inukashi, on the other hand, shrank back. He grimaced as if he had smelled some unbearable stench.

“The upper echelons of No. 6 probably attempted to hatch Elyurias’ eggs artificially in the Godly Bed that they’d brought back, and failed. They had no Singers, and therefore couldn’t maintain the Godly Bed. Nonetheless, they refused to acknowledge anything other than scientific proof. But through their countless failures, one thing they realized was that the most suitable place for the eggs to hatch and grow was inside the human brain.”

“Brain?” Rikiga grabbed his head.

“Yes. Not a cow’s, pig’s, or monkey’s. They got as far as determining that Elyurias’ eggs hatched if they used a human brain, and that one of them would be born the queen bee, as another Elyurias.”

“And then, what . . . ?”

“They implanted eggs inside a number of citizens secretly—just like a wasp would use its ovipositer to lay eggs inside its host. It was easy enough to give a needle during scheduled check-ups, saying it was only part of the procedure. They chose sample citizens who differed in

gender, age, build, and environment. I was one of them. Rou was also chosen as a host, but it seems Elyurias' will had some influence in this case. Both of us survived because the parasite's development was incomplete. The host always dies if the adult emerges successfully. That means Elyurias' eggs were effective also as assassination weapons. The upper echelons would do anything to have Elyurias in their power. They were desperate to have her under control. Maybe they already had a faint premonition that cracks would start to form in No. 6. Maybe they knew that their selective and exclusive government would some day break down, no matter how skilfully it was camouflaged. That was why they wanted definite control over others. They wished to be the queen bee, and to reign as the absolute, sole ruler."

"Were front-line research facilities set up in the Correctional Facility to, um, research those... wasps?"

"Yes. They couldn't figure out what kind of conditions Elyurias required to emerge as an adult. I think any human effort would have been fruitless—it would always be a mystery. But they built a research facility anyway, to unravel a mystery that couldn't be unravelled. In it... there were rows of countless brains, contained in special cases. I'm sure eggs were planted in every one."

It came back to him.

The rows of brains trapped in cylindrical cases; Safu, trapped in its innermost depths—it all came back to him.

"I see." Rikiga stroked his chin. "In the Correctional Facility, you could have as many brains as you wanted. Couldn't ask for a better place."

"Makes me sick." Inukashi clutched his chest. He looked truly nauseous: all the colour had receded from his face. He tossed his piece of bread aside.

"I've been starved enough to eat grass and caterpillars off the ground,

but I've never felt this sick before. I don't see whatever it is you're seeing. So—was this Hunt a massive harvest of human brains?"

"Yes. They probably wanted to experiment on human brains that have survived harsh conditions. They wanted brains affected by various things, like large amounts of stress, or the will to live, or fear, or excitement."

"I... I think I'm really going to be sick." A dog nuzzled up to Inukashi. He buried his face in its coat and sniffed.

"These guys are... are a hundred times, a thousand times, ten thousand times better than humans. Shion, I'm glad I've got dogs on my team instead of humans. I really am."

"Yeah." *You're right, Inukashi. Dogs are a hundred times, a thousand times, ten thousand times better than humans. I can see why you'd feel that way.*

Inukashi sneezed softly. He sniffed.

"So, what, Nezumi? Are you really a surviving descendant of the Forest People or whatever?"

Nezumi raised his face. The colour had returned to his cheeks, perhaps thanks to Aria's care. It made Nezumi into a glowing, living being rather than a beautiful doll.

"Yes."

"So you survived that Mao Massacre, or whatever it is. Looks like your lucky streak takes you way back, huh."

"Sure."

Nezumi's eyes focused on Shion. Shion returned his gaze without blinking. After a moment of hesitation, Nezumi began to speak.

"I was really young then. To tell you the truth, there's not much I remember about the Mao area. I just remember Gran carrying me on her back as she ran frantically through the flames. I don't know

if Gran was my real grandmother, or if she was a total stranger. But she rescued me and raised me. After we escaped from the forest, we moved constantly around in what's now called the West Block."

Nezumi's tone was brisk and seemed to contain no emotion.

"Gran taught me a lot of things. She was also the one who found a room that used to be a library vault, and suggested that I live in it. I buried myself in those books, and I grew up listening to Gran tell tales of the Forest People. These guys—"

Nezumi snapped his fingers. The three mice scurried up to him, squeaking.

"—were born in that room. They're intelligent and can feel emotion. So could their parents, and their grandparents. Those kinds of animals just seemed to gather around the Forest People. These guys and Elyurias were both—well, we didn't call it Elyurias. We just called it the Forest God. But I was too young to know what the Forest God was, anyway. I was taught that only Forest People like us had a connection to these little mice and the Forest God. But they seem completely used to having Shion around, and they seem overjoyed that they've been given names. It was the same with the rats in the underground realm. I was surprised, to tell you the truth."

"Same with my dogs, come to think of it. They've taken such a liking to Shion. They didn't even bark at him."

Nezumi smiled serenely.

"You're a mysterious one, Shion. I thought so since the first time we met—you're a mystery."

"You're talking about the night of the storm."

"Yeah. The night we first met. But let's go back to the topic for now. I was ten when the special gates of the Correctional Facility were completed. The mayor was scheduled for a visit. Gran said it was our first and last chance for revenge. Revenge—Gran said it was the only

thing she'd been living for. But a ten-year-old kid and an old woman were no match for him. Gran had a knife hidden on her, but she was shot on the spot trying to get near the mayor. I was caught along with captives of the Hunt and thrown into the basement of the Correctional Facility. It was a miracle that I didn't die. I climbed the wall of rock as if my life depended on it, and I got to those caverns. That was where I met Rou. Maybe that was a miracle, too. Rou gave me even more knowledge than Gran, and when I turned twelve, he ordered me to leave the underground realm and face a new world. At the time, Rou still had a thread,—a thin one, mind you—of communication leading to the core of No. 6. Once in a while, No. 6 delivered just enough food and living supplies for us to survive. I guess in the back of their minds, their conscience still nagged them to help the man who was once their colleague. Through that route, Rou sent in a suggestion that I be transferred to the Moondrop. He proposed to have me examined in detail as one of the last surviving Forest People. The mayor and his associates agreed. They'd probably reached a roadblock in their research about the Forest God. They were eager for any potential lead, so they jumped on the chance. On the day of my transfer, Rou handed me a special knife that wouldn't get caught by the metal detectors. He told me to find my own path. I wouldn't survive if I let myself be taken into the Moondrop. There was a good chance that I'd be dissected there. My only path of survival was to break free and run before I reached the Moondrop. As for the rest—I don't think I need to go into details. I was able to survive, thanks to you rescuing me."

Nezumi looked up at the ceiling and exhaled a long breath.

"Like I said before, on that stormy night, you threw open the window and welcomed me in. It was a real miracle. To me, you were more of a miracle than the Forest God ever was. I felt like I was being told to live—to live on, not give up... If you hadn't been there, I wouldn't

have been able to survive that night. Shion, you—only you—were the one who saved me. This time, too.”

Nezumi stood up carefully.

“Glucose infusion completed. Infusion is complete.” Aria retreated silently like a meek maiden.

“You saved my life,” Nezumi said.

“It goes both ways. If it hadn’t been for you, I wouldn’t be alive, either.” Shion stood up as well.

“Hey, hey, wait a minute here. If you’re gonna overwhelm yourselves with gratitude, it should be for us. Right, old man?”

“Of course. Eve, you’ve just made yourself a hell of a debt. You better be prepared.”

Inukashi and Rikiga nodded in unison.

“Practically finishing each other’s sentences now, aren’t you? You’ve sure gotten close.” Nezumi smirked as he wrapped himself in the superfibre cloth.

“If you’re going to keep tabs on my debt anyway, mind giving me a ride and dropping me off close to the Moondrop?”

“Are you really going to go?” Rikiga said in disbelief.

“Yes, we are,” Shion answered. “We have to. Nezumi is the only one who can stop Elyurias.”

“Don’t get ahead of yourself. We don’t even know if my singing is going to work on her yet.”

“It will. Even on that cargo bed on the way to the Correctional Facility, people still wanted to hear you sing.”

Rikiga swung his arm around. His weary and bloodshot eyes blinked repeatedly.

“Why, Eve? I thought you were going to sit back and enjoy the show as part of the audience. Weren’t you going to laugh the whole way

through while you watched No. 6 give its last dying shriek?”

“I was planning to, but it looks like my career as an actor will be the death of me,” Nezumi said ruefully. “Seems I can’t stand being out of the spotlight for more than a short while. I guess I’m not made to sit in the audience, after all.”

“This isn’t the time to be showing off,” Rikiga said biting. “Take it seriously. I thought you loathed No. 6. Just leave it alone, and it’ll destroy itself. There’s nothing more you have to do except sit back, watch, and laugh.”

Nezumi’s face contorted for an instant. It did not look like an act.

“I would if I could. But Rou told me—what about the children within the walls? What are they guilty of? He said those who twiddle their thumbs while they watch children die are no better than the murderers themselves.”

A sigh. All emotion vanished from Nezumi’s face.

“Old man, I do loathe No. 6. This destruction is what I’ve been longing for. In fact, it’s everything I could have wished for. If I ended up bloodying my hands to attain it, so be it—that’s what I used to think, and I still think that way. But I want to avoid killing children at all costs. I’m a survivor of the Mao Massacre. The last thing I want to do is be on the side of the murderers. I don’t want to become like No. 6.”

Rikiga fell silent. He sighed like Nezumi, and took out his car keys.

“Inukashi, what are you doing to do?”

“I’ll go. Don’t got a choice, do I? I’ve got my own baby to worry about. I can understand what Nezumi’s trying to say. Heh, but I didn’t expect to be completely convinced. I must be getting old.”

“Oh—Inukashi, by baby, do you mean the one I entrusted—”

“Shut up. He’s my baby, and it’s none of your business. A little slow to notice, huh, uncaring prick? You can beg on your knees asking to

see him, but you won't get a chance." Inukashi neatly gathered up all the leftover food and stuck his long tongue out at Shion.

* * *

Confusion was reaching its peak around the Moondrop. The army had fired further shots into the knots of people, resulting in even more deaths. At the same times, several soldiers also fell to the ground, growing old and dying within minutes.

A roar of fear erupted from the soldiers. As some threw their guns aside and attempted to run, their superiors shot them dead from behind.

"Obey your orders. Suppress the rioters. Disperse them."

"No! Our lives are precious to us, too!"

"Don't even think about fleeing. Desert the battlefield—the penalty is death," a senior officer barked. Suddenly, he bent backwards and collapsed. Blood spurted from his forehead. A bullet had ricocheted and hit him, perhaps—or had someone shot him? Even while his body convulsed, the soldiers trampled him with their military boots in an attempt to escape.

The crowd swarmed into the Moondrop. In their midst, each gate of the city exploded and dissolved in flames. Cracks appeared in the special alloy barrier as it, too, fell apart. The Correctional Facility was already half-demolished in a cloud of black smoke.

The bigscreen monitors in the square displayed each of these scenes.

"Shion, what the hell is going on there? Why are they playing that? Is No. 6 showing everyone its demise on purpose?" Inukashi asked with a shiver.

"That must be surveillance footage from the cameras installed in each part of the city... But that should be playing on the screens in the monitoring room of the Security Bureau. This footage is being for-

warded to public screens... which means the computer's controls have gone completely haywire."

"And that must be..."

"Yeah, you're right. Only she can scramble No. 6's controls like this."

Chuckle, chuckle, chuckle.

Chuckle, chuckle, chuckle.

He could hear lighthearted laughing. It reached his ears, threading its way through the roar of the mob, footsteps, screams, and the sound of something being beaten like a drum.

Chuckle, chuckle, chuckle.

Chuckle, chuckle, chuckle.

She's laughing. She's trying to destroy No. 6, laughing all the while.

"Nezumi, can you sing?"

"... Not here. It's too packed with people. I'll be out of breath before long, especially in this condition." Nezumi looked up at the night sky, his face shining with perspiration.

"She's laughing," he muttered.

"You hear it?" Shion asked.

"Yeah. She sounds like she's enjoying herself. Arrogant humans thought they were the rulers of the world, and now look how easily they destroy themselves—she's relishing every minute of it."

"Is she punishing human hubris?"

"Or it might be fate," Nezumi answered. "No. 6 was fated to become like this. A balloon will always burst if it's blown up too much. Maybe she just sped up those cogwheels of fate a little bit."

Chuckle, chuckle, chuckle.

Chuckle, chuckle, chuckle.

A man clutching a boy of about five ran past Shion.

"Help me, help me!" he cried through his tears.

“Nezumi, let’s go to the top floor of the Moondrop.”

“The mayor’s office?”

“Yeah. Your voice will reach the entire square from there. Not only will Elyurias hear your song, so will the rest of the people.”

“A song won’t calm the confusion.”

“It’ll be more effective than guns. That much is for sure.”

They went along with the flow of people and entered the Moondrop.

“Where’s the mayor? Bring him out!”

“This is the end of No. 6! We’re done for!”

“The wall has crumbled! The gates have been broken!”

“Bring out the vaccines! Mayor! *Mayor!*”

Suddenly, one man dashed up the stairs. With a megaphone in hand, he bellowed in the stairwell.

“Comrades, I am here! I am Yoming! I once urged you to rise for freedom!”

The crowd buzzed.

“It’s Yoming! Yoming!”

“Yes! Comrades, just moments ago, I was attacked by the security squad and I was almost killed. But yet I still stand here in front of you. I will not die until I finish rebuilding No. 6 with my own two hands. I will not die—I am immortal!”

The buzz grew louder. A mass of fists were raised triumphantly towards the man.

“Yoming! Yoming! Our hero!”

“Comrades. No. 6’s destruction is near. We’re almost there. Let us defeat No. 6, come together as one, pool our strength, and build a new utopia. We will make our bright future a reality, with our hands, comrades!”

“Yeah! That’s right!”

“Three cheers for Yoming! Three cheers for a new No. 6!”

“Comrades, let us drag the mayor and his people out before us. Here we will sentence and obliterate them. Let that be the first step towards a new world!”

Cries of assent melded together into one roar. It shook the very air.

“No!”

Shion also dashed up the stairs to stand beside Yoming. “That’s wrong. What he’s saying isn’t right.”

Yoming’s eyes bulged as he gritted his teeth.

“Everyone, listen to me: there is no vaccine here. What’s happening right now isn’t going to be stopped by the likes of any vaccine.”

“Hey, what are you—”

“I survived.” Shion took off his shirt and flung it aside, exposing his red banded scars. “This is proof of my survival. Everyone, please. Give us a little bit—ten minutes—of your time. Don’t worry, we’ll settle this somehow. I survived. There’s nothing stopping you from surviving, too. But for that to happen, we need time.”

“What are we supposed to do?” A voice questioned weakly from the crowd. It was a female voice. “Tell us what we’re supposed to do.”

“Keep waiting,” Shion answered. “Wait just a little bit longer, and everything will come to an end. No one has to die anymore.”

Wait, he says.

So we just wait here.

For half an hour or so.

Like a breeze blowing ripples across the surface of a lake, a silent wave spread throughout the crowd. Everyone gradually began to sit down on the spot. People in the square also squatted on the ground, hugging their knees.

“Thank you, everyone.” Still holding the megaphone, Shion also spoke to the dumbfounded man before him. “You, too, Yoming. Wait here.” Yoming was speechless.

“I’m going ahead.” Nezumi broke into a run, passing behind Shion.

“How on earth did you...” Yoming murmured as he gazed at Shion.

* * *

There was no one in front of the mayor’s office. The guards had likely fled as well. What used to be the safest and most comfortable place in No. 6 was now highly dangerous territory.

Shion knocked on the door.

“Come in,” a calm voice answered through the intercom beside the door.

The door slid aside soundlessly.

The room was warm, tranquil, and luxurious. The mayor was standing in front of a wide writing desk near the wall. He had a smaller frame than what Shion had imagined. And he was young.

This man... is the ruler of No. 6.

There was a leather sofa beside the mayor, and another man sat at the end of it. He was wearing a white lab coat. His neck was bent at an odd angle, and his arms dangled lifelessly. His hair had turned white before Shion’s eyes, and his mouth hung open, having already taken its last breath. A tooth dislodged itself from the man’s mouth and landed on the floor.

“Oh...”

A wasp was sitting on the nape of the man’s neck, moving its antennae busily.

“It’s a newborn,” the mayor whispered. He sounded like someone who was trying not to wake a sleeping baby. “I had no idea it was living

inside his body, either. But I think he was the most surprised. He died without even getting over his astonishment. 'It can't be'—" the mayor smiled faintly. "Those were his last words. 'It can't be'. Hah, it must be decades since I heard something like that come out of his mouth. He believed that everything in the world could be explained by science."

"Mayor. Please open the window. We're going to use your balcony."

"What do you intend to do?"

"We want to speak with Elyurias. We need to meet her, and it's urgent."

"You kids know about Elyurias?"

"Yes."

The mayor's gaze shifted from Shion to Nezumi.

"Window, you say..." he muttered, and pushed a button on his desk. The window slowly opened out.

"Nezumi."

"Yeah."

Nezumi stepped out onto the balcony. A wind blew up at them, ruffling Nezumi's hair.

A song flowed forth.

*The wind steals the soul away, humans thief the heart
O earth, wind, and rain; O heavens, O light
Keep everything here
Keep everything here, and
Live in this place
O soul, my heart, O love, my feelings true
Return home here
And stay*

Nezumi's singing was picked up by the wind, and seemed to reach every corner of the square—and every corner of No. 6. The people sat perfectly still and listened in a trance.

It was like a voice that stole the soul away and thieved the heart.

Safu. Shion spoke to the girl in his heart. *Just once—just once more, lend me your strength. Deliver this song to Elyurias. Safu, please. Lend us your power.*

The wind steals the soul away, humans thieve the heart

But here I will stay

to keep singing

Please

Deliver my song

Please

Accept my song

Safu.

The wind grew stronger. Nezumi staggered.

“Ah!”

Inukashi stood still, rooted to the spot.

“Wh—What the hell—”

A golden ring appeared in the sky, squarely in front of Nezumi. The ring shrank until it became a blinding light. The light shimmered as it wavered, and turned into the figure of a wasp.

It has been a while, Singer.

“It really has.” Nezumi turned around and beckoned to Shion.

Come closer.

Shion stepped out onto the balcony and drew up beside Nezumi. The crowd filling the square looked up all at once.

“Elyurias. Do you mind if I call you by this name?”

As you please. A name given by a human means nothing to me.

“Elyurias. We beg you. We want you to grant us one more chance—just once.”

Shion heard the beating of wings. Four transparent wings glimmered as they beat the air.

“Please don’t give up on us humans yet. Just once. Give us one more chance, Elyurias.”

Foolish creatures.

Creatures full of arrogance and deceit.

You are telling me to believe you?

“Humans are capable of both upholding ideals and succumbing to corruption. There are those who cling onto their power, and there are those who are pushed along by the majority. But there are those who uphold their ideals, live for others, and continue to fight against their own foolishness, deceit, and arrogance. Elyurias, hear our plea. Believe in us, just once more.”

Is that what you wish for yourself, Singer?

Nezumi gave a slight nod.

As one of the Forest People, you will believe in the residents of No. 6?

“I won’t believe the people of No. 6. The only one I believe is him. No—that’s not it. It’s not that I believe him. It’s just—”

Just?

“I want to see what Shion will become. I want to see what he’s going to build on the ruins of No. 6. I want to see with my own eyes what he’ll create.”

You want to see.

“O God—Forest God, you yourself aren’t omnipotent. You can’t see everything. There’s no way you could predict whether he’ll create a future that’s different from No. 6, or follow in its footsteps. It’s

something to look forward to, isn't it? How far will humans fall? Where would they be able to dig in their heels and resist? See where it'll take them—that's just another way to enjoy it. I think you're jumping the gun if you think humans are hopeless because of a small example like No. 6."

The tiny infant I remember seems to have grown into an insolent one.

"People grow up. For better or for worse."

Singer, are you sure? You do not need to keep loathing No. 6?

"No. 6 doesn't exist anymore. You destroyed it. But if No. 6 were to appear here again, I'd hate it with my heart and soul, and wage another war."

Elyurias' antennae quivered left and right. Golden powder scattered from them.

Shion.

"Yes."

I have a message from Safu. She says, "I leave everything in your hands".

Everything in your hands. They were the same as the doctor's dying words. Shion clenched his hand into a fist, and nodded.

"Please tell Safu that I've gotten her message. And please tell her that I'll never forget her for as long as I live."

Understood.

Now, then.

"Elyurias, wait! Please, for us—"

Just once. This one single time, Shion.

The golden light disappeared. The wind ceased.

* * *

Shion went back inside the room, and sank onto the carpeted floor.

“It’s finally over.”

“Over? This is just the start, Shion. Your battle is beginning, and it’s going to be an arduous one.”

“Nezumi...”

“What kind of world will you build here in the place of No. 6? Would you be able to build a real town, where humans can live as humans—and not some parasitic city wearing the mask of a utopia? Shion, your battle has just begun. You haven’t finished. The one whose end is nigh is—”

Nezumi turned around and stared at the mayor.

“I know.” The mayor sat down in his chair, and quietly closed his eyes.

“Could you excuse yourselves? I would like to be alone.”

“Going to think about what to do with yourself, Mayor?” Rikiga growled.

“That has already been decided. I’ll put an end to my own affairs. So, please, if you will.”

“Let’s go. Everyone deserves to have their last wishes respected.”

Nezumi started to walk out.

“You have my thanks.” The mayor raised his hand.

The door closed.

A gunshot rang out almost at the same time. Rikiga shook his head slowly.

Hamlet squeaked from Shion’s pocket.

Cheep-cheep-cheep!

* * *

A cerulean sky.

The sky that unfolded over the small hill in the North Block was crystal clear.

"Nice weather. Perfect for travelling." The wind tousled Nezumi's hair, and he smoothed it down with his hand.

"Shion, right here is fine. You didn't have to come out to see me off."

"... You're set on going?"

"I have to."

"When are you coming back?"

"Coming back? I don't have a place to return to."

"Nezumi, can't I... can't I go with you?"

"You and I are different. I'm a drifter; you're stationary. That's what it boils down to. When you're incompatible, you can't live together. You should know this already."

Nezumi let his gaze wander over the scene that spread below him.

Here was a city once called No. 6. From where he stood, it seemed no different than how it had always been.

"Shion."

"What?"

"Are you crying?"

"I'm not—geez, I'm not a girl—"

"I'm afraid of you."

"What?"

"I can't seem to grasp anything that's inside you, that's why. You're a mystery. You had the power to put all the people at the Moondrop in the palm of your hand in two seconds flat, yet here you are crying like a girl. You can be utterly ruthless, courageous, and noble all at once. And that's all part of who you are, isn't it? I can't understand it, and that's why it's terrifying for me. Maybe sometime in the future, it

wouldn't be so bad for me to drop by to see... yeah, to see what kind of person you've become. Your mama's muffins are also hard to resist. But I didn't expect to get a hug from her right after being introduced."

"Nezumi."

Shion grasped Nezumi's arm. He felt like he could endure no more.

"Don't go, Nezumi. I want to be by your side. I want you to be by my side. That's all I wish for."

"It can't happen."

"Why not?"

"How many times are you going to make me repeat myself? You have to stay here. You have a job to do."

"I can just let someone else—"

"You can't let anyone else do it. Shion, *you* have to do this. Did you forget your promise with Safu? What about the doctor's last words? You said you'd take it. Shion, don't run away. You have a battle to fight. You have a job to do here. You can't turn your back on it."

Shion looked at his feet.

He tightened his grip around Nezumi's arm.

I know. I understand. But—

"Nezumi, the world means nothing to me without you. Nothing."

A finger hooked on his chin, and yanked it upwards.

A set of dark grey eyes were right in front of him.

"Won't you listen, my stubborn child? Act your age." It was a woman's voice, softened with laughter.

"Nezumi, I'm serious—"

Their lips overlapped. It was a searing, but gentle, passionate kiss.

"Was that a... goodbye kiss?"

"A vow." Nezumi smiled. "Reunion will come, Shion."

Nezumi turned his back to him. Hamlet and Cravat hopped onto his shoulder, and chirruped at each other.

Cheep-cheep-cheep. Cheep-cheep-cheep.

The wind blew.

The clouds panned out.

Nezumi's figure grew smaller and smaller.

He never turned around once.

"Nezumi." I never found out your real name. But—I don't need to know.

To Shion, Nezumi had always been Nezumi. His one and only, irreplaceable person.

Nezumi, I'll keep waiting. No matter how many years it takes, no matter how old I get, I'll keep waiting for you right here, on this land.

The drifter and the stationary one—their paths were bound to intersect again. And when they did, Shion would not let him go again so easily.

Nezumi, I'll keep waiting for you.

* * *

The wind blew.

Sunlight streamed down—on Shion; on the city about to be reborn; on Nezumi's vestige.

The light streamed down, and encompassed everything.

5

EPILOGUE

"Nezumi, this book—"

"It's Shakespeare. Macbeth. Ever heard of it?"

"Are all these books classics?"

NO. 6, VOLUME 1

IT WAS a letter from Inukashi. He hadn't received one in a while.

Doing alright Shion?

Its the same old here. Old man Rikiga is having a ball because the wall is gone and he can go wherever he wants. Now he gets too see your Mum. Be careful. You never know whats gonna happen in life. If that old man somehow ends up becoming your stepfather, thats a tragedy man.

Your Mum sent over some apple pie and rolls the other day, to me and my Shionn. They were phenomenol. Tell her thanks. Shionn is going to turn 3 soon (dunno for sure, since I don't know his birthday).

Do you think you can help out with dog-washing on your next day off? So I heard your a member of the city's "Restructure!! Committee" or whatever, huh? I feel bad for asking a bigshot like you, but we need good washers. Any way, no matter how big of a bigshot you become, to me you'll always be an airheaded little boy. Hope you can find the time.

Inu

Shion carefully folded the letter scribbled on rough paper, and put it away. *I'm going, Inukashi.*

Cheep-cheep-cheep!

Tsukiyo cried at his feet. This mouse had chosen to remain by Shion's side. He was a little older now, but was as energetic and bright as ever. Karan was his absolute favourite person, and he slept in her bed at night.

Another letter was from someone Shion had not dreamed of receiving word from. It was from Sasori, the man in the underground realm. A few days ago, Shion had been paid a visit by a sewer rat carrying the letter in its mouth. In it was written a short message of thanks.

*Relocation in the forest going smoothly,
thanks to you.
You have my gratitude for your efforts.*

Following the destruction of the Correctional Facility, the people of the underground realm had fled into the forest on Rou's orders.

Promise them a land where they can live in peace. Shion had forwarded Rou's short message to the Restructural Committee, and gotten permission to allocate a part of the northern forest to those people.

The land was on the outskirts of Mao, where the Forest People used to live. The dense expanse of forest protected their eyes, which were sensitive to bright sunlight because of the darkness they were accustomed to. Shion had chosen this spot after much deliberation.

Rou chose to remain underground. He ended his life there, along with a few elders.

The remains of the Correctional Facility have now become a park. Inukashi mentioned that he took Shionn there to play sometimes.

Time ambles along.

Everything changes.

But I'll never forget.

Shion got up, and stood by the window. He threw it wide open.

Come on in, Nezumi—just like you did that night.

Only a breeze, thick with the scent of young leaves, blew at him in return.

He kept waiting.

* * *

No. 6—a city by that name once existed here.

It had existed, once the epitome of human intelligence, a utopian city-state.

Beyond

One rare, peaceful day in the West Block — Shion, who chose to remain in No. 6 after its destruction — Nezumi, who wanders like the wind. And finally, the secret of Shion's father. Vivid fragments are cut out from the lives of each, instilling spirit back into the story whose end was a sore parting for many.

*I have not forgotten about them.
The chronicle of their lives is perhaps
the only one worth telling.*

* * *

Could we fully believe in people again?

Let me tell you a story. A story that I know. Story? No—it is reality, humans will probably say. They will say it is reality engraved in human history.

But for me, the deeds of humans are all but stories. At times a comedy, at times a tragedy; sometimes predictable, sometimes wearisome—nothing but fabrications.

Yes, humans are always but foolish actors.

They act out a farce, dancing at the mercy of their greed, love, and emotions. They are foolish, ignorant, and avaricious... They destroy with their own hands what they have created. They aspire to rule over others and become the one and only king of the world.

Why is that, I wonder?

Why are humans the only ones unable to live by the laws of nature, leaving everything as is? They are such strange creatures.

In the story I am about to tell you now, the main character is also a human—no. The main character is actually a city. A city-state. People called it No. 6. Have you ever heard the name before? It is the most beautiful, yet most fearsome, existence created by human hands. Worthy of a star role in a farce, don't you think?

But... strange as it is, for some reason, I feel a sort of love towards that city, No. 6. The story surrounding No. 6, as well those who have lived in the story itself, are endearing to me. Does that make me the possessor of a "soul"?

I know of two young boys.

Night and day; light and dark; earth and wind; one who embraces all, and one who attempts to throw it all away. They are so different, yet they are very much alike. Both were deeply involved with No. 6. They lived their lives along with No. 6.

What? When was that, you say?

I wonder. It feels like only yesterday, but at the same time, it feels like a thousand years ago. I do not feel time the way humans do.

I feel no difference between a single moment or an eternity.

But I have not forgotten about them.

Sometimes I feel that the chronicle of their lives is perhaps the only one worth telling.

Come hither, now.

Let me tell you a story.

The story of two boys and of No. 6.

1

INUKASHI'S DAYS

THE CEILING was spinning. It actually felt like it was whirling.

Hub? What's going on?

Inukashi collapsed on the bed and closed his eyes. He felt ill. He was not only dizzy, he even felt nauseous. He kept his eyes closed as he took several deep breaths. He inhaled through his nose, let the air sit in his stomach, and exhaled slowly through his mouth.

Once, twice, three times...

Any ailment, physical or mental, was usually cured by this—whether it be his agitated heart, his disarrayed thoughts, his throbbing wounds, or dull headaches. No one had taught him this; it was something he had learned without even realizing. But as for his empty stomach, there was nothing he could do. No matter how deeply he inhaled to make his stomach expand, as soon as he exhaled it flattened back out again. There was nothing he could do about his body, growing colder

from his hunger.

I hate hunger. It's horrifying. Inukashi gave himself a shake. Hunger was like a demon. With its sharp fangs and claws, it uprooted and stole any will to survive, any hope of living.

But now, he was alright.

Of course, he was still hungry. Inukashi didn't remember the last time his stomach was full. Empty—that was just how stomachs came. That was his idea.

He carefully lifted himself up on the bed. He didn't feel dizzy anymore, but his nausea was still present. He felt heavy, like someone had attached weights to his arms and legs. *I feel like someone's chained metal balls to me, like a prisoner of some country.*

This is bad.

He lay back down again, and mentally clicked his tongue. Falling ill in the West Block was like beckoning Death to your side. Here, there were underground shamans of questionable nature, or self-proclaimed doctors, but no one who could give proper medical treatment. Inukashi didn't know of any, at least.

His body felt heavy. With his eyes closed like this, he felt like he was being dragged into the watery depths.

In times like these, I have to think about fun things, he told himself. Fun? Have I ever enjoyed myself?

You did. Yesterday evening, remember? You were freed from hunger, just a little bit. Yeah, see, that was it. That was ultimate happiness.

* * *

He'd eaten some meat. There had been a chunk of raw meat in the load of food scraps from the Correctional Facility. It was not someone's leftovers: this was a block of meat that had not even been cooked. It

was free of bruising and rot. Upon closer inspection, it was peculiarly flat. Perhaps the chef at the Facility staff restaurant had dropped it on the floor, where someone else had stepped on it.

“Oy! You just ruined a perfectly good chunk of meat!”

“Oh, sorry. But you dropped it.”

“Well, we can’t help it now. Can’t use this anymore.”

The meat had been tossed into a metal garbage bin and forgotten. Eventually, it had made its way into Inukashi’s hands along with other trash and food scraps—perhaps that was its journey. *Whatever. I don’t care what its journey was like, or how it got here. All that matters is I’m holding a chunk of meat in my hand.*

What incredible fortune this was.

He quite literally danced for joy. When was the last time he’d had something this good in his hands? He searched and searched in his memories, but nothing turned up. Inukashi licked his lips as he held the hunk of meat, shining with fat. He swallowed hungrily.

He didn’t know what kind of meat it was, but he didn’t care—as long as it wasn’t human or dog. Inukashi returned to his dwelling in the ruins, and jumped right into cooking. He selected vegetable cuttings and bones out of the food scraps, threw them into a pot, and let it simmer. Right before it finished cooking, he divided the hunk of meat into sections and threw them in. He considered setting aside half of it to cure, or take to the market to sell, but in the end he decided against both. Inukashi was well aware that nonperishable food was a precious commodity; he also knew that if he took the meat to market, it would bring him a decent amount of money. *But I think I’ll finish this meat off in one go. That was his decision. I’m allowed to treat myself once in a while. I’ll enjoy the good fortune that’s come to me—the fortune that heaven decided to throw my way out of chance.*

This is the West Block, where I can’t even predict what my fate will be

tomorrow. Even God doesn't guarantee anything for anyone in this place. I might as well enjoy the present without thinking about tomorrow.

Steam rose from the pot.

A mouthwatering smell drifted up. The dogs gathered around, drawn by the smell.

"I know, I know. You guys'll get some to eat, too. Don't worry."

White, black, patched, tan. Long-haired, short-haired, curly-haired. Flopped ears, erect ears, one-eared. Inukashi kept twenty or thirty dogs with him, ranging from one as big as a calf to one smaller than a cat. For some reason, that number never increased. Puppies were born every year, so that meant an equal number of dogs probably died or left.

An old female dog died yesterday. She was a great mother, having birthed many puppies and raised close to half of them successfully. *I remember her sons and daughters licking her cold, stiffening body in turn.* Dogs were deeply loyal. They were warm, and gentle. They had a definite compassion. They never betrayed their friends or family.

They're much more decent and trustworthy than human creatures.

"More fearsome than hunger, than the frozen earth, are humans."

I remember that was Gramps' line. Inukashi shook his head as he stirred the pot with a wooden spatula. *Why did I have to remember him? It's not gonna help satisfy my hunger. But, no—he shook his head even more fiercely.*

I gotta remember him at least once or twice a year, for his sake. I have to remember and recall how dear he was to me. I owe that old man. We don't forget the good deeds that people have done for us: that's another virtue about us dogs.

I don't know how old Gramps was, or why he lived here in the ruins with the dogs, or where he came from or where he went. I don't feel like I need to know, nor do I intend to find out. But I wouldn't have survived if it

wasn't for Gramps. I feel the weight of what he did in every inch of my bones.

It was winter when I met Gramps.

I remember the freezing wind and the whiteness of the snow that piled up in front of me. So yes, it was winter. Years and years ago.

He had no memory of his mother, no recollection of his father; yet, he could remember vividly the frigid wind and the snow dancing. He recalled the approaching footsteps, a dog's tongue licking his cheek, the warmth of a human bosom; even the floating feeling he felt for an instant when he was scooped up.

How old was I then? Was I still a baby? Probably, huh, because I was still getting milk from Mum. Babies sure remember a lot more than we give credit for.

He was an elderly man dwelling in the ruins of the hotel, and he had picked up Inukashi and raised him. Or perhaps one could say that the man had picked him up, but the female dog was the one who raised him.

She was young, and had just given birth to a litter. Inukashi suckled at her breast, and slept nestled up to her belly with the other puppies. Thanks to her, he had avoided starvation. He had avoided freezing to death. He had survived.

This intelligent and sweet-mannered dog was Inukashi's one and only "Mum".

"You're a strange child... or special, I should say." The old man had made this statement when Inukashi had grown old enough to walk, and was able to compete with his fellow dogs in lunging for food. The old man had spoken in a warm, reflective, gentle voice. Inukashi remembered that well, too.

"Speshal?"

"It means you're different from the others. Until now, I'd never even heard of, much less seen, a baby who could feed and grow on dog's milk. When I took you in, to tell you the truth, I figured you wouldn't last three days. But I still took you in anyway, because I wanted to give you a proper burial."

"Berry-all?"

"It means digging up the earth and burying you in it. When you died, I planned to put you underground and give you a burial that way. I couldn't bring myself to let you waste away in the open air. I didn't want you to go through what most babies go through on this land, rotting in the middle of the road, being pecked at by crows, being eaten by beasts. Normally, I would have... yes, I would have just left you there. I would have passed you by pretending not to notice. It would be no different from what I've always been doing. But why did I decide to pick you off the road... why did I want to bury you in the earth?"

"Why?"

"I don't know." The old man shook his head slowly, twice. "I really don't know. I don't understand it, myself. Why did I scoop you up that day and take you home? I've watched many babies, dozens of them, die. Why did I decide to extend my hand to you? I can't seem to explain it. That's partly what I meant when I said you were a strange child."

Inukashi shivered. He made a soft strangled noise at feeling his body grow colder to the tips of his fingers. A cold sweat ran down his back. He was scared. At the same time, he was overwhelmed with the impulse to laugh out loud. He wanted to throw his head back and let his laughter echo to the heavens.

He was alive due to good fortune bordering on mere coincidence. If it weren't for the old man's impulse, his body, his flesh, his bones

would have been prey to crows and beasts. What a miracle this was, what luck. Inside his heart was a storm of fear, relief, and the stabbing impulse to dissolve into hysterical laughter.

By that time, Inukashi had already come to realize how arduous a task it was to survive every day in the West Block. He sensed that his own future was full of tribulation and hardship, much like climbing up a steep cliff with bare hands.

But he wanted to live. He wanted to live, to survive, and stretch the limits of his life, even for a minute, for a second. For that, he would do anything, no matter how unsightly, deceitful, or shameful it was. It was easy to die. All he needed was some rope and a tree with sturdy branches. He could also jump off a cliff. Or, he could run screaming into the Correctional Facility—that was an option, too. The soldiers on patrol would shoot him through the chest or the head without any hesitation.

He would be finished off in an instant, no matter which method he chose. He would not suffer for long. At least, he didn't think so. That was why he knew it was easier to choose death. It was as obvious as the sun rising from the east.

But I don't want to. Inukashi clenched his fist, though it was still very small. *I won't be finished off so easily. I won't choose death of my own will. I'll survive and I'll do whatever it takes.*

I'll step up to the challenge. I'll challenge the fate which left me abandoned on the road in the West Block; I'll challenge the world that makes survival such a difficulty; I'll challenge the guys who made the world like this—and I'll win. In fact, I'm winning right now by continuing to survive.

As a young child, Inukashi did not know how to speak. He did not know how to put his heart's resolve into words and tell it to others. But the old man nevertheless smiled serenely and placed a hand on Inukashi's head.

“I have a feeling you’d be able to do it,” he’d murmured.

It was about a year later, in the onset of winter, when the old man disappeared. His bed was already empty when Inukashi woke up that morning, and the old man was nowhere to be seen in the ruins. But Inukashi didn’t particularly go on a frantic search, either. Somewhere in his heart he had given up, knowing it was no use. He was disconcerted, but he was not lonely. His dogs were with him. As long as his dogs were here, he was alright.

Gramps probably knew that, too. He knew well when he wandered off. Did he sense the end of his life coming, or did he find a place he ought to go? Whichever it was, he’s probably out there somewhere now, a part of the earth. People can’t turn into the stars in the sky, but they can always return to the earth. They can leave their memories behind, too.

Thanks, Gramps. I’ll never forget everything you did for me. Once in a while, I’ll be sure to remember you and recall some fond memories. But you know, your face is getting blurry lately. I can still remember the little things: your scraggly white beard; how your balding forehead was shining pink; how your right eyebrow was unusually thick; how you were always soft-spoken. I remember those things so clearly, but I can’t seem to recall your face. I wonder why? But, well, there you have it. I remembered you today. That’s enough, right?

He gave the pot another stir with the spatula.

A patched dog barked. The other dogs chimed in and began barking, too.

“I know, I know. Right, let’s get this feast started. Gather ’round, you guys. But you gotta wait ’til it cools down before you eat it. You’ll have a hell of a time later if you end up burning your tongue.”

By the time Inukashi had finished doling out the soup into the dog dishes and begun to sip his own portion of meaty broth, he had completely forgotten about the old man.

The past tended to get in the way of things. If he kept turning back, he would not be able to move forward.

Inukashi ate a piece of meat and savoured the taste and sensation of it in his mouth. He felt like it was a waste to swallow it; he wanted to savour it forever. But the tiny piece all too easily slid down his throat and settled in his stomach. By the time he finished the rich, meaty soup, however, he felt warm down to his very bones. Still radiating warmth, he lay down on the bed. The puppies squirmed over each other to climb up, and licked him all over the face. Their small pink tongues were comforting.

He was happy. He even felt like he had taken all the happiness in the world for himself. Immersed in bliss, Inukashi dropped off to sleep.

He felt nauseous. He was afraid that the ceiling would start spinning again if he opened his eyes.

What's gotten into me?

A part of his head started throbbing dully. His body felt even heavier. He was breaking into a sweat. It was an unnatural feverishness, so different from the warmth of the night before.

The puppies' tongues were no comfort to him, either. His skin only smarted irritably. He had never once felt his dogs irksome before.

No number of deep breaths seemed to improve his condition.

What's gotten into me?

Right after he questioned himself, he felt a chill run down his back. Fear ignited deep in his heart.

This is beyond serious.

What if I find I can't get up at all? What if I can't even move?

It was fatal to fall ill in the West Block. It didn't take much to kill a West Block dweller, deprived of decent food and living in squalor as he was. Just a small injury was enough: a deep cut on the pinkie, a hard

scrape along the forefoot. So was a small ailment: dizziness, nausea, fever—anything to keep one in bed. Someone who had definitely been alive three days ago could be lying on the road as a corpse today. This kind of thing happened every day.

Damnit.

Inukashi bit his lip, and lifted his upper body up. He leaned against the wall, and let out a long breath.

So yesterday's meat was my last supper, huh. Damnit. This isn't even funny. I'm not gonna let this take me out.

He bit his lip harder. The taste of blood spread inside his mouth. He muttered “damnit” once more to himself for good measure. But no strength came to him. It was wearisome to lift even one finger. If he forced himself to get up, he was overcome with simultaneous dizziness and nausea. He collapsed on the bed again.

His consciousness began to fade.

A chill wind whistled through a crack in the window. The cold drew Inukashi back to reality. He wanted to scream. He wanted to scream for help, as loudly as he could.

Somebody help me... someone, please.

A dog roused itself in a corner of the room and approached him. It sat on its haunches at his bedside, and looked up at him. It was a large brown dog, an offspring of Inukashi's mother's line. It had inherited her intelligence and deep, dark eyes.

The dog sat still with its ears pricked, as if waiting for Inukashi's command.

“... I want you to... call them for me...” He pointed out the window. Beyond was a spread of wintry sky, heavy with snow clouds. The light struggled to get through the clouds, and barely reached the ground below. Once more, the West Block would end the day just as frozen as it had been at the beginning.

The dog pushed open the dilapidated door and left the room. Its rusty hinges screeched unpleasantly. Inukashi was supposed to be used to the sound, yet it stabbed at his eardrums and aggravated his nausea.

"Please. Call them..."

Help me.

The dog scrambled down the stairs. The puppies huddled together and whined pitifully.

* * *

He was dreaming. Dreaming of long ago. *How many years back?*

The old man had long disappeared. Inukashi was alone—but with his dogs. He'd finally gotten the hang of procuring himself some food scraps, as well as taught himself how to cook it or sell it off.

He was descending a set of stairs.

They were concrete steps leading underground, not as damaged as the ones in Inukashi's dwelling. The building was mostly in ruins above ground, but it looked like the portions beneath were still intact. Once Inukashi reached the bottom, he was faced with a door. He extended a cautious hand to grip the handle.

The building was located near the entrance of the West Block. The surrounding woods nearby were dotted with barracks. Also nearby loomed the Holy City, No. 6. To be exact, it was No. 6's outer wall. The outer wall made of special alloy gleamed golden as it loomed before him. The wall made a clear division between "here" and "there", heaven and hell. Nothing was lacking within the walls: warm beds, abundant food, leading-edge medical facilities, comfortable residences. There were no threats to life, and one could live without even knowing what hunger or cold was. Inukashi had also heard that suffering and fear didn't even exist there.

A utopia, worthy of its title of the Holy City.

Inukashi did not hear much of No. 6 in the West Block. Everyone fell silent, and refused to touch upon the topic as if its very name were taboo.

Fishy business, Inukashi had thought—or rather, felt.

Utopias and Holy Cities simply did not exist in this world. No. 6 was a city-state founded by humans. As long as humans were involved in it, something had to come apart. *Your ideal isn't my perfection, and happiness for me might be something you can't stand. That's the human world for ya. Humans can't create a utopia. The best they'd be able to do is quarrel, clash, bend a little for the other person, and then settle down somewhere inbetween. That's it.*

No. 6? That place is so fishy it makes my hair stand on end. The smart thing to do is stay the hell away.

That was why Inukashi never ventured close to this place. He hated seeing No. 6's wall in his line of sight. If he had experienced a better harvest that day, he probably wouldn't have gone anywhere near that place. But an entire day of wandering in the West Block had only gotten him one or two vegetable ends and a single strip of dried meat. That was barely enough to nourish himself, much less his dogs. At the time, Inukashi still did not know how to get his hands on periodic supplies of leftover food. His only choice was to clutch his empty stomach and scrounge desperately. At the market, he earned a sound beating from the butcher's club; at the tavern, the female manager shrieked curses at him, but he went on unfazed. Inukashi was long used to the abuse, the insults, and the physical pain.

I have to do something about this hunger.

When he came to, he had been standing in the wood. It looked like he had almost subconsciously walked this way, intending to find even a single nut to pick up. This was where he found the crumbling

abandoned building. He placed a casual hand on the wall, and it slid aside without any resistance to reveal stairs leading to the basement. Inukashi twitched his nose. He squinted his eyes, and strained his ears. He neither sensed nor smelled the presence of anyone.

Completely abandoned. huh.

He carefully descended, step by step.

Inukashi knew that a strange old woman and a boy (her grandson, he assumed) was supposed to be living here. He had seen them twice before. The old woman had a harsh look about her eyes, as if she'd never smiled once in her life.

I know, I know. I remember.

That old lady was funny in the head. She attacked someone important from No. 6—the mayor or chairman or whatever. All on her own, at that. She hobbled towards him, knife in hand, and was shot to death. Wait—or did she get arrested and shot? Whatever it was, she was finished off pretty quick. Not much of a surprise, haha.

Inukashi sneered at her mentally. It was a rumour he'd heard in the marketplace. He was unsure of its validity.

His stomach growled. It sounded like a cry for help.

I can't take it anymore. Give me food. Hurry, hurry, hurry, hurry, hurry. Damnit, isn't there something? Mouldy bread, rotting meat, I don't care. Something to quiet my stomach down.

He gripped the door handle. The door was unlocked. It was a little heavy, but with a little push, it opened without much resistance.

“Ho!” A sound not quite resembling a breath or an utterance escaped his throat. “The heck is this?”

There were piles of books as far as he could see. They were here and there, everywhere, piled up neatly or scattered carelessly across the

floor. The floor itself was almost indiscernible. The room seemed to contain nothing but books.

This moment was Inukashi's first encounter with books. He knew words; he could also write, as long as it wasn't too difficult. The old man had taught him. But Inukashi had no knowledge whatsoever about books. He had never heard the word "book", nor did he know that it referred to these bound sheets of paper with printed words. He had no clue where to begin understanding them. He perceived instantly that they weren't food. Just to make sure, he picked a book from a pile near the door, and took a bite. He had chosen it because the ripe apple pictured on its white background looked delicious.

Horrible.

Inukashi wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, and threw it aside. *Tough, dry, and definitely not something I can eat.*

He moved forward, kicking the fallen books out of the way. There only seemed to be books in this place.

Tsk. All that work gone to waste. Inukashi clicked his tongue and was about to turn on his heel when his heart beat a trembling pulse. He had found something other than books.

It was placed on a shelf (filled with books)—some of the volumes had been cleared away to make space for it. It was a small silver box, sitting on top of a towel.

* * *

What is this? Is someone living here?

He twitched his nose again. Like before, he did not smell anything. Inukashi took down the small silver box from the shelf. He opened the lid.

He found himself letting out a whistle.

Oh, I see. This is quite a treasure. I've found myself some booty.

The box turned out to be an emergency kit, with bandages, pincers, gauze, and a number of medicines stored neatly inside. There was even a scalpel. It looked like something that had been used in No. 6. Inukashi had no clue about how this ended up here. He had no intentions of finding out, either. He didn't care about its journey or story. What mattered was that he was holding it in his own hands. That was all.

Medical items of any kind were coveted in the West Block. Disinfectant, especially, was traded at a high price. Sometimes a small bottle of disinfectant could fetch up to two silver coins.

Inukashi brought his nose close.

This is a hundred-percent pure, with no additives—the good stuff. Look at the way it stings my nose. Heh, forget silver—this might just transform into a gold coin if I'm lucky. I made a good find. My luck is finally turning around.

Inukashi grinned to himself as he shut the lid of the box. He was about to lift it up in his arms when he noticed a small table covered with books.

On top, there was a small mouse. It was not alive. It was skilfully wrought, but it was clearly man-made. Inukashi leaned forward, still cradling the box. The belly of the mouse peeled back to reveal its complex inner parts.

A robot?

Inukashi was about to lean further in when he felt a violent chill. He felt goosebumps forming on his back.

"Don't move," he heard a voice by his ear. This time, the skin on every inch of his body bristled. It was not because a blade had been pressed against his neck. It was because the voice was completely void

of warmth. All emotion in it was suspended frozen. Its icy blast chilled even Inukashi's own emotions.

It was the voice of a murderer.

It was the voice of one who could take a human life with no hesitation, no sway of emotion.

And—and on top of that—this guy got behind me.

If Inukashi could swear on anything, it was his ability to sense the presence of people. His sixth sense was as good as any dog's. The more emotional a person was, the more Inukashi could feel the presence on his skin. Thanks to this ability, he had been able to escape danger and dispute time and time again. But this time, he had felt nothing. He was not even able to discern the slightest from the person creeping up behind him.

Maybe he's not human? A dead man come crawling out of the depths of Hell? A demon? A shapeshifter?

His teeth refused to come together. His molars chattered, making a strangely mechanical sound. It echoed deep in his ears.

Click-click. Click-click.

Click-click. Click-click.

Inukashi gritted his teeth, and clenched his stomach.

"W-Wait a minute here. I was only..."

"Put the box back."

"A-Alright, alright! I'll do as you say." Trembling, Inukashi replaced the box on the shelf.

"Th... there. I returned it. That's enough, right?"

"Enough? Are you kidding me?"

The blade moved ever so slightly. He felt a jolt of sharp pain. He struggled to rein in the scream that was about to tear through his throat. He was sweating in his armpits.

"Theft amounts to death in this place. You should have no complaints about being killed."

"Y-Yeah, but I mean, I can't complain if I've already been killed, right? H-Hey, I live in the ruins, by the way . . . know about it? It's on the far end of here, the ruins of a hotel. That's my place. I live there with my dogs. My name is . . . uh, well, I don't have a name, but you know—who needs one in a place like this, right? People call me *inukashi*—the Dogkeeper. Dogs are part of my business. Ha ha, but who cares about my name, right? I kinda like it, though. Ha ha. So if you ever wanna call me by name, it's Inukashi."

Inukashi kept talking. He felt like if he closed his mouth, his throat would be slashed in the silence that fell afterwards.

"Hey, come on. I'm begging ya. I'll apologize, so will you just forgive me? Please? I'm sorry. I'll never do it again," he tried imploring pathetically. "Don't kill me. I'm on my knees. Help me, please. I . . . I don't wanna die yet. I really don't wanna die. I'm sorry, I'm so sorry. I'll never touch your stuff again. I promise. Please, just don't kill me."

Inukashi wasn't putting on an act. He was earnestly pleading for his life.

Don't kill me, please. Let me go.

Please, please, please, please, please, please.

The knife was lifted. Suddenly, the base of his neck felt much lighter. Inukashi let out a long breath. His neck muscles hurt, likely from being taut this whole time. The spot on his neck throbbed slightly when he pressed it with his hand, but no blood came off.

The wielder of the knife had made a slight cut, as shallow as the mere first layer of skin on the neck, to freeze his victim in fear. Not enough for it to bleed, but just enough to make the victim feel pain.

I knew it. The guy behind me is no human. He's a dead man, a demon, a shapeshifter . . .

Inukashi turned around slowly, still holding his neck. The truth was that he did not want to turn around. He wanted to beeline right out of the place. But his feet hesitated; he felt like the moment he turned his back and broke into a run, a knife would be plunged deep into his back.

He slowly, slowly turned around.

Huh?

He had to blink. He knew his mouth was hanging open.

The figure in front of him was no dead man, demon, or shapeshifter. It was a boy wearing a plaid shirt. It might have been a girl. No, it was a boy. A girl couldn't produce an icy voice like that. The boy only looked like a girl.

The boy had long hair which came down to his shoulders and hid his forehead. His small, white face was almost uncannily proportionate. Inukashi had imagined the boy's eyes to be glittering full of murderous intent, but they were serene and inscrutable.

The boy had eyes of a strange colour.

An elegant dark grey. It was Inukashi's first time seeing such a colour. The boy seemed to be taller than Inukashi, but he figured their ages were about the same. But Inukashi was also unsure of his own age.

The boy sheathed his knife, still wearing a blank expression. Inukashi felt overwhelming relief. Then, he felt irritation at himself for being relieved.

I was being threatened by this twig? He wanted to click his tongue in frustration. *Geez, I'd never be able to live that down.*

"You could have picked a better shirt to wear." Inukashi wore a smirk as he jerked his chin. He intended to look smooth and unruffled. "But the quality doesn't look half-bad. Not something you'd come across often in the West Block."

"It's a borrowed shirt."

"Borrowed? Where did you borrow such a good piece of clothing, huh? Don't tell me you got it from No. 6."

He had meant it as a joke, but once he put it into words, he felt like that was the only possibility. The shirt's superior quality was evident from first glance. It looked soft to the touch, warm, and durable. The emergency kit he had just put back on the shelf was also a product from inside the walls, no doubt about it.

"Who the hell are you? Don't tell me you came from that—" Inukashi trailed off. He had just seen the boy pick a strip of dried meat out of his breast pocket and bite on the end of it.

"Hey... don't tell me that's..." Inukashi scrambled through the bag hanging from his waist. It was empty. He had most definitely put dried meat in there, but it was gone.

"I'm taking this", the boy said. "As compensation for your stealing."

"B-Bullshit! Who's the thief now? Give it back, that's my meat! Give it back!"

Heh. The boy laughed. His smile seemed both innocent and carefree.

"Wanna try to take it back by force, Inukashi?"

"Gh..." Inukashi bit his lip. This was not someone he could win against head-on—his instincts were telling him so.

Damnit, I shoulda brought my dogs. If I had them with me, I could take him down in one bite.

But his dogs were not here. Inukashi was alone.

"... Fine. Keep it."

"There's a good boy. You should know when to listen. It'll help you live longer."

"Damnit, stop making fun of me!" *Just watch. I'll get my revenge.*

Inukashi retreated to the door. He grabbed the handle. There was no need to stay here longer than needed.

The boy sat on top of a pile of books and said nothing. Only his gaze was fixed on Inukashi. Inukashi's movements were completely surrendered by that gaze. His arms and legs turned stiff and awkward, and they refused to move smoothly.

"... What the hell are you...?" He repeated his question from some moments before. This time, it was more serious. "Do you live here?"

"Yeah."

He did not expect a reply.

"Alone?"

"Yeah."

"This house has been abandoned for ages. There hasn't been anyone living in it for years—at least, there wasn't supposed to be. Where the hell did you come from? And why do you have a shirt and emergency kit that's clearly from No. 6? Oh, and that mouse doll—what is that? It looks like a robot. Don't tell me you built that thing?"

Inukashi knew he had to run away as soon as possible, but his mouth kept moving. Question after question escaped his lips.

"You talk a lot, don't you? I'm surprised you haven't bitten your tongue already from talking so much." The boy shook his head. An amused smile crossed his face.

Inukashi found himself almost attracted to him. His heart beat faster. *This guy is dangerous. More dangerous than a murderer, and hell of a lot more hassle.* This was another gut instinct of his. And he was sure he wasn't off the mark.

*Don't associate with him. Get away from here, and never come back again—*a voice of warning echoed in his ears. Inukashi usually obeyed the voice promptly, but this time he ignored it and continued to question the boy.

"What's your name?"

The boy tilted his head very slightly. "Nezumi."

His name, so unexpectedly and promptly given, seemed unusual for a human.

"What kind of name is that? Is it your real name?"

"You could say the same about yours, Dogkeeper. It's not a proper name, for sure."

"Hmph... well, you could say that. Nezumi, huh. At least it's easy to memorize."

"So you plan on remembering it?"

"Erm... well..." Inukashi felt like he was being toyed with. If he didn't wrap it up soon, he'd get sucked right into Nezumi's plot. Like an insect caught in a spider's web, he'd be immobilized and would eventually wither.

Danger, danger, danger.

"Well, see ya, Nezumi. If we're lucky, maybe we'll meet again."

"If we're lucky."

To hell with luck. I'll make sure I'll never see your face again.

Inukashi slid his hand behind him and opened the door, and slipped outside. As soon as he was out, he sprinted up the stairs as fast as he could. His feet froze halfway. About midway up the stairs, Inukashi found himself turning around. He could see the rusty door.

"Nezumi, huh," he muttered.

Would I really be able to get away with not ever seeing you again?

If we're lucky.

The line he'd heard only moments before still echoed inside his head.

If we're lucky.

We probably will meet again. He had a sudden feeling. It was almost closer to a firm belief. From hereon, he would see that boy time and time again. They would form a connection.

His body almost recoiled in disgust. But at the base of that disgust lurked something slightly tender. He muttered it under his breath again.

“Nezumi, huh.”

* * *

“Did you call me?”

He heard an uncannily crisp answer.

Huh?

“Did you call me, Inukashi?”

He opened his eyes. It was bright.

His room, tucked away in a corner of the ruins, was filled with light. Beyond the glass pane of the window he could see the blue sky behind a crack in the clouds.

The blue soaked into his retinas.

Nezumi was peering into his face. Their eyes met. His eyes were the same elegant dark grey as the time they had first met.

“... What... are you doing here...?”

“Huh? What is this treatment? You’re the one who called. Using this guy as a messenger, remember?” A brown dog wagged its tail from beside Nezumi.

“C... Called? You? Psh, of course not. I was calling for...”

“Then who were you calling for?”

“I was...”

“Inukashi, are you awake?” A head of white hair peeped out from behind Nezumi.

“Shion.”

“Yep, it’s me. You must have had a tough time. It’s alright now. We’ll make you better in no time.” Shion smiled.

Inukashi came close to tears. He stopped himself in time from clinging onto Shion and sobbing out loud.

Shion, I was scared. I thought I was going to die. I was so scared, so lonely, and I didn’t know what to do. So I called you.

“Here, drink this.” Shion offered him a chipped bowl. It contained a thick, green liquid. Its dirt-like smell stung his nose.

“What the...”

“It’s a medicinal herb. I found a book about oriental medicine in Nezumi’s bookshelf and thought I’d give it a chance. I hunted around in the woods and found a lot of stuff. This will calm your nausea down, and it’ll also help you recover from exhaustion.”

“... Huh? Oriental?”

“It’s a type of medicine that was passed down in the East. The book says it’s supposed to heighten your body’s overall healing ability. Come on, just give it a try.”

“Pinch your nose. It’ll make it bearable,” Nezumi said. Inukashi pinched his nose as he was told, and swallowed the drink in one gulp. He didn’t think it tasted half bad. The bitterness that slid down his throat seemed to give him strength. He let out a long exhale.

They actually came for me. They got my SOS. I begged for them without offering anything in return.

Shion placed a hand on Inukashi’s forehead. It felt cool and soothing.

“You’d better stay in bed for a while. You haven’t got pneumonia, but you have all the symptoms of a cold. And anemia, as well—”

“If I get trapped in bed, my dogs’ll starve to death.”

“We’ll do something about it. I’ll take over your rental duties, and Nezumi will keep you supplied with food. Right?”

Nezumi shrugged lightly. “Sure, I can do something about it. But you owe me for this, Inukashi. I’m charging interest.”

Inukashi managed a faint smile from where he lay. Nezumi’s remarks, which usually irritated him to no end, sounded unbelievably gentle now.

There’s something seriously wrong with me. If I cry here now, who knows how much I’ll be made fun of afterwards. If I’m going to cry, it has to be when only Shion’s around. Hold it in. Tears, don’t spill over.

“Say, Inukashi.” Shion smiled even more gently. “I don’t think you need to worry about your cold, judging by your physical strength. But the wound on your toe is another story.”

“Toe? Oh, my right big toe, right? It’s been hurting for a while.” Inukashi got injured all the time. Unless it was a considerably large injury, he usually just licked it better.

“It’s festering,” Shion pointed out. “If you leave it like this, it’ll swell up with pus and you likely won’t be able to walk. So—”

“So?”

“You need an operation.”

Shion took out that same emergency kit. It looked no older than when Inukashi had first seen it.

“Shion, uh, what are you—?”

“I’m going to cut open the wound, extract the pus, disinfect it, and then sew it back up. That’s it. It’ll be over in a flash.”

Shion was already wearing rubber gloves and holding a scalpel. It was a small silver blade, sharpened to perfection. Inukashi felt his spine growing cold.

“C-Cut open? Wait, wait a second, Shion. Hold on. Wh—What about painkillers? Sleeping gas?”

“I don’t have any.”

"Whaddoyou mean, you don't—"

"It's alright. It'll be over quickly. Sorry, Nezumi, could you hold Inukashi down? Make sure he doesn't move."

"Gotcha."

Nezumi held Inukashi's hips down with both hands. Inukashi's lower body was immobilized completely.

"I think this might be news to you, Inukashi," Nezumi smiled in a strangely provocative way. "But Shion loves to sew people up. He may look innocent, but he's a huge sadist."

"Wha—stop it!" Inukashi yelled. "I'm scared! Help!" It was now beyond Inukashi's power to put on a brave face. He was close to crying.

"Settle down," Nezumi said testily. "Just listen to what he says. Besides, even I can tell that this wound is pretty serious. You could be risking your life if you leave it untreated. I know Shion didn't mention it outright, but maybe this is what's behind your sickness."

"I don't care what's behind it. It hurts! *Stop*," he wailed. "Somebody help me! Shion, have mercy!"

"It'll be alright. Don't move," Shion said. "Oh, look, see? All this pus has built up inside. I'm surprised you could walk with this. You must've turned numb to the pain. Okay, it'll be over soon."

"I'm *not* numb," Inukashi sobbed. "*Owww*, don't sew it! It hurts!"

"Don't cry," Nezumi said. "There's a good boy. I'll give you a reward." A soft melody flowed forth from Nezumi's lips. It gently rocked Inukashi's heart. For an instant, Inukashi had turned back into an infant and was being held in someone's arms. He was freed from fear or suffering. He was in a place of peaceful sleep.

"There's a good boy. Don't think of anything, just sleep. We'll protect you with everything we've got. We won't hand you over to the Reaper, no matter what happens."

We'll protect you with everything we've got.

Inukashi opened his eyes and looked at Nezumi. Then, he looked at Shion's profile as the boy crouched at his feet. Both of their faces were grave. Numerous streaks of sweat marked Shion's cheek, and formed droplets at his chin.

We'll protect you with everything we've got.

It wasn't a lie.

This world was ridden with lies, but Nezumi's words were true. Even if everything in this world were a fabrication, Inukashi knew he could believe those words without fail.

Inukashi could bear no more. His tears spilled over. They kept flowing. He felt like he was drowning in tears.

Bastards, making me cry.

Inukashi pressed both fists against his eyes, and cried silently.

The blue sky was still outside his window.

2

A SONG FROM THE PAST

NEZUMI LIFTED his face. His brow furrowed slightly.

“What? What did you just say, Shion?”

“I said I wanted to see.”

Shion sipped the hot water in his cup. The bit of sugar mixed into it made it taste slightly sweet. Sugar was considered a luxury item in the West Block. Shion himself had not had flavoured water in a long time.

“I said I wanted to watch you perform onstage.”

“Why?”

“Why, well... no particular reason. I just want to see.”

Nezumi drew his chin back, and closed the book he was reading with a rather rough snap.

“That’s not an answer. If you’re looking for something to kill your time with, consider other options.”

"I don't have enough free time to kill. I have my dog-washing job at least twice a week, and I've promised to read picture books to Kalan and the rest of the kids. I've also started working at Rikiga-san's part-time. I'm actually about to go out now."

"Working part-time? At that old man's place? I hope it's not something as terribly respectable as taking photos of naked women."

"No, I just run errands and do miscellaneous work. Stuff like sorting receipts and cleaning the office. Rikiga-san actually runs a pretty wide variety of businesses. I never knew."

"Well, I bet my mice would sprout wings and fly before that old man starts running any *decent* trade. Hah! You'd better be careful, Shion. Who knows when some woman might come attacking you with a knife like she did to Rikiga."

"I don't think that would be very likely," Shion said sceptically.

"Rikiga-san has been saying for a while that he's had enough of women."

"That's all talk. He loves his women. It runs in his blood. He can't live without 'em. But if you were to put alcohol and women in a balance, he'd probably choose alcohol after a long deliberation and a ton of griping."

"You certainly don't sugar-coat your words, do you?"

"I just can't whore out my kindness like you do."

Nezumi stood up. A small brown creature hopped up onto his shoulder as if it had been waiting. It was Cravat, a mouse which Shion had named for the colour of its fur.

"Is it somehow a bad thing to be nice to everyone?" Shion's words grew sharp. He felt a restless ripple deep inside his chest. The ripple made it hard to breathe. This feeling was something he would never have known if he had remained in No. 6. Various emotions writhed inside him. They cast one pattern after another like a kaleidoscope.

Since beginning his life in the West Block, Shion found himself startled by the turbulence and wealth of his own emotions. His heart was shedding its outer layer. His soul was reviving as it ripped through its tense, rigid outer shell.

Nezumi put away the book on the shelf, and picked up his cape.

“Kind words that don’t hurt anyone—what meaning do they have?” Nezumi draped the superfibre cloth over his shoulders and donned his gloves. “Everything that comes out of your mouth is gentle and lukewarm. Like the chirping of birds or a chorus of insects. It’s beautiful, but it doesn’t lodge itself anywhere. Not even in yourself.”

“Nezumi—”

“Shion, you’re not kind. You just don’t want to get hurt yourself. That’s why you take all the thorns out of your words. With no sense of responsibility, you spew words that do neither harm nor good. Admit it—I’m right.”

Shion could not deny it completely. He could neither show his anger nor protest that Nezumi was insulting him. Nezumi’s words were full of thorns. If Shion touched them out of carelessness, they would pierce his fingertips and draw blood. Compared to that, perhaps his own words were indeed lukewarm.

Shion didn’t think that it was an evil thing to avoid hurting anyone. Nor did he think that gentleness was useless. He also knew that Nezumi was not criticizing his kindness.

Gentle words that harmed no one, and words that did not carry the weight of their consequences were rife in No. 6.

My, how pitiful. Someone should do something about it.

It’s unfortunate. My heart goes out to them.

We will make our utmost efforts with our very hearts and souls.

Everyone, we must all be friendly to each other.

In such an environment, he had unconsciously grown detached from the meaning and weight of his words. But there was absolutely no value in superficial kindness and concern, promises and love. They were just repulsive. Shion had already realized it without Nezumi pointing it out. He knew, but he wished he could pretend he didn't. Nezumi had plainly seen the thoughts bubbling from the depths of Shion's heart. He had felt irritated at Shion's lowliness and artificial kindness, resulting in his thorny words. Shion knew he deserved to be pricked by them. But—

"I'm always serious when I'm talking to you."

Nezumi turned around.

"Hm? What did you say?"

"No..." If he muddled his answer now, perhaps it would agitate Nezumi's irritation even more. But Shion found his tongue heavy and unwilling to move.

I'm standing here and facing you in all seriousness. Those words were heavy—so heavy that Shion found them hard to vocalize.

Cravat chirruped from his perch on Nezumi's shoulder.

Chit-chit! Cheep-cheep-cheep!

"Oh, crap. I'm late again." Nezumi's tone was calm. There was no sign of the irritation from moments before.

"See ya, Shion. Like I said, be careful when you're working at that old man's place." With that, Nezumi left. Shion was left alone—well, perhaps not so alone. Hamlet and Tsukiyo, the two mice, were asleep in his lap.

Shion stroked their heads with his finger, and took another slow sip of his sweetened hot water. It was delicious. He figured the expression "sweet nectar" probably referred to a taste like this.

The days Shion spent in the West Block had honed his senses swiftly, and without his knowledge: sight, hearing, smell, touch, and taste.

Back when he was in the city of No. 6, he used to eat as much “delicious” food as he wanted, until he was full. He had been able to. If he should so desire, he was able to get his hands on any meat, vegetable, fish, sweets, or fruits with no limitations. Following his move to Lost Town, his selection of food was narrowed considerably compared to his time in Chronos, but he seldom felt deprived.

His mother Karan’s cakes and freshly-baked breads were simple but delectable, and he never tired of eating them. But Shion felt that even that taste did not penetrate as deeply into his heart as the taste of this hot water.

He drained his cup. The warmth reached all the way to his fingertips, and strength filled his body.

“Alright, now it’s time for me to go, too.”

Shion cautiously transferred Hamlet and Tsukiyo to the bed and stood up.

“But you know, don’t you think I’ve learned a lot in my own way since I came here? I can even sort handwritten receipts. And he says I do wipe the floor and wash the dishes as well as any full-fledged man. Full-fledged. I’m allowed to be a little proud of myself, right?”

I’m using my own body and brain to do work and earn its rewards. I’m allowed to be proud, no matter what kind of job, no matter how small the wages. Right?

Tsukiyo lifted his head and twitched his ears as if to agree.

Geez. Nezumi ground his molars. *Hopeless guy*, he reprimanded mentally. He was not referring to Shion. He was talking about himself. Cravat cried softly from within his cape.

Skreet-skreet! Cheep-cheep-cheep!

“Shut up. You don’t have to tell me; I already know. I just took out my frustrations on Shion back there. I know.”

Sometimes—though it was very rare—Nezumi’s emotions grew unstable when he was around Shion. His self-restraint loosened, and his thoughts issued unrefined from his lips. They collided, sending sparks and sprays flying. Nezumi never intended to condemn Shion. He knew that he wasn’t just or strong enough himself to have the right to do so. But he wavered when he was with Shion.

His heart, which wanted to hate and reject all of No. 6, wavered.

No. 6. The most detestable city-state in this whole world. It was no utopia or holy city. Those names were but a facade. As soon as he tore away its thin hide, the monster would show its true figure.

A man-eating monster.

It never hesitated to destroy its surrounding states and massacre entire tribes if it meant prosperity for itself. It plundered, leeches, and dominated.

Someday, I’ll take it down. For Nezumi, No. 6 was an opponent he had to take down with his own hands, an existence that needed to disappear from this world.

But inside this grotesque monster lived a boy like Shion. Shion had let an intruder, a VC—No. 6’s term for violent convicts—into his home, treated his wounds, provided him food and a place to sleep, and as a result, had lost his secure life as an elite. Shion had lost everything, and yet still confessed to Nezumi.

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.

They were bare and honest words. They pierced through his heart. For an instant, Nezumi could not help but stare at Shion without even blinking. Shion definitely did not use words of superficial kindness, and Nezumi was sure the people around him were the same.

Shion’s mother harboured the unshakable belief that her son would return, and thought of him constantly while she waited. According

to the mice Nezumi had sent out as messengers, the muffins and bread that she baked were so delicious, they were enough to make one's cheeks swell in anticipation. And there was that girl with her unwavering love.

Those were the kind of people around Shion—those who exerted every effort in living their daily lives. They were honest with their words, did not condescend on others, and lived without losing their dignity. Those people lived inside that monster.

If he had not met Shion, he would never even have imagined this. He would have continued loathing every citizen of No. 6 and wished for the city's ruin.

But he had met him.

He had come to know.

Could I still hate, even with that knowledge?

He wavered. He lost composure. He grew indecisive.

Nezumi paused and turned around. The outer walls of No. 6 reflected the fading light of dusk. Its reddish glow made him think of fire. Long, long ago, he had seen this colour, and it had burned an imprint in his memories. It was neither crimson, burgundy, nor red. It was a mixture of all of them—a colour that could be described no better than chaos.

The colour still lingered in Nezumi's vision even after he had come out of the woods and passed through the marketplace. He would probably never forget it for the rest of his life.

It was burning. Houses, trees, his newborn sister, and his mother who held her. All burning.

"Run!" his mother had screamed as she burned. Her beautiful hair, her skin, her body, was a mass of flames. His father had covered his mother's body with his own, frantically flapping his hands as he tried

to put out the flames. A No. 6 soldier pointed his flamethrower at them.

More fire burst forth.

His father, mother, and younger sister were swallowed up in the flames, which burned high and fierce. Nezumi himself was overwhelmed with a shock of heat and pain and was thrown on the ground.

It hurts. It's hot. I'm scared.

Hot, hot, hot, hot, hot, hot, hot.

"Run!" His father's yell pierced through the flames. "Run! Even if none of us can, at least you—"

Then, everything fell apart. Nezumi had seen everything. He was supposed to have seen everything. But he had no recollection. The only things he remembered were the colour of the raging flames and the roaring—the sound of whirling flames was just that, a beast's roar—and an old woman's back.

He was being carried on an old woman's back as she ran. Her back was bony, and even at his age, Nezumi felt it very small.

But it was sturdy. Her back and her legs were stout.

The old woman ran, tearing through the flying flames, the winds swept up by them, and past No. 6 soldiers. She ran through a tangle of bushes down a wild path and crossed a swift stream.

Nezumi had lived thanks to this old woman. He had survived.

Once Nezumi had recovered from his burns enough to move, the old woman immediately began making preparations for a journey.

"We must distance ourselves from the devil now," the woman muttered as if to herself. "But we will return. We will return to exact our revenge."

While they wandered from the rocky barrens to the lower lands which would later be known as the West Block, the old woman spoke night

and day.

She spoke, over and over, of the last moments of the Forest People, the inhumane acts which would later be engraved forever into the memories of a select few as an incident called the Mao Massacre. Her stories continued even after they had settled in a basement vault in the West Block. Nezumi grew up buried in books, listening to this old woman's stories. He never felt he lacked anything. But the wound on his back ached as if in response to the old woman's tales. His mother's voice and his father's screams echoed in his mind. It was painful for him.

Run!

Even if none of us can, at least you—

Each time he recalled it, his wound throbbed harder. It was like his scar was writhing about. The old woman always looked down at Nezumi in silence as he gritted his teeth and endured the pain. Her gaze was cool and sapped of emotion.

The old woman was also reaching her mental limit. Her own hatred, despair, and anguish was threatening to crush her. She was fighting dangerously close to the border of giving into death's temptation. Nezumi could sense with instinct, not logic, the storm of emotions brewing inside her.

That night, they were sleeping outside on a stretch of wasteland on the outskirts of the West Block. It was a few days before they ended up settling there permanently. As usual, they started a campfire and slept close to it. For a while after their escape, Nezumi's whole body seized up when he saw fire. That colour, that roar, those screams pierced his body, and his wound seared him.

But within a year, his fear dissipated.

Fire was essential for warmth and for roasting meat. If he kept on fearing it, he would freeze to death. Nezumi had also reached an

understanding.

Humans are the fearsome ones, not fire.

It was their routine to take turns watching the fire after a few hours of sleep.

“You may sleep until dawn, when the eastern sky begins to lighten. You need not feel guilty. We older ones do not need much sleep.”

It had been just before Nezumi had gone to sleep. The old woman had shown a rare smile as she added a withered branch to the fire. The flames murmured gently. It was more like a mouse’s squeak than a roar.

* * *

The eastern sky was still inky black when Nezumi awoke. He got up abruptly, and looked around. He heard quiet sobbing. The voice had woken him up.

The campfire was still burning. The flames undulated.

“Gran . . . what’s wrong?”

The old woman had curled up into a ball with her face in her hands, sobbing. Nezumi had never seen her shed tears before. He inched to her side and placed a hand on her knee.

“What’s wrong? Are you hungry? Does it hurt somewhere?”

The woman did not answer him. Her silent sobbing did not stop.

“Come on, tell me what’s wrong. Does it hurt? Are you upset?”

Nezumi shook the woman’s knee. She was the only person in this wide world whom he could trust and lean on.

I don’t want you to cry.

Don’t be in pain. Don’t be sad. Please, gran.

"I am sorry..." The sobbing stopped. "Shame on me... but I could not bear it..."

"But what was wrong? Are you alright?"

The woman's hand stretched out to pat Nezumi's head.

"My beloved homeland is so close. But—now, most of the Mao forest is lost. That demonic city is giving rise in its place. Little remains of the forest that I grew up in, where your mother and father grew up in, where you grew up in. We cannot even set foot into that small patch of forest now. Yet, it is close... so close..."

"Gran..." Nezumi touched the woman's cheek with his fingertips, and wiped her tears away. They were surprisingly hot. "Don't cry. You can't cry. It'll weaken your heart."

The old woman nodded and peered into Nezumi's eyes.

"Let me teach you a song."

"A song?"

"Yes. Your mother was the greatest Singer in all of Mao. I was, too—many, many years ago. I taught your mother how to Sing."

"Are you gonna teach me?"

The old woman looked Nezumi straight in the eye, and nodded deeply once more. She was not crying anymore. Her dry eyes were darker than the sky above. Her dark eyes reflected the flames of the campfire.

"You are fit to be a Singer. You often used to go to out to the forest and sing with your mother. Do you remember?"

Nezumi shook his head.

All of his memories were vague leading up to that day when everything disintegrated into flames. He had difficulty recalling anything clearly.

"Just... a voice."

"Voice, did you say?"

"I remember a voice. A voice that said—I'll teach you a song that you will need to keep living."

Come here.

Let me teach you a song. I will teach you a song that you will need to keep living.

Had he not heard a voice say that?

The old woman gave him a startled look, and her mouth twisted.

"Was that . . . your mother's voice?"

Nezumi fell silent for a moment at her question. He could not remember his mother's voice. *Run*—only that short cry stuck stubbornly in his ears, and blotted out her singing voice and her laughter. But even if he didn't remember, he felt certain about one thing—it was not his mother's voice.

"No. It wasn't . . . human."

" . . . I see." A sigh spilled from her twisted lips. "I see—you already know."

"Huh? I don't know anything. I feel like I heard the voice in a dream." Perhaps it was nothing but a drowsy dream, an illusion in sleep. But the old woman shook her head slowly.

"It was no dream. You are a Singer. The Forest God has chosen you."

"Forest God . . ."

"Yes. She is the forest itself. She blesses the Forest People and also instills them with fear. She is always by our side, watching over us, blessing us. At times she will hurt, destroy, and obliterate us."

Destroy and obliterate. Does she mean the fire? It scorched, thieved, and banished everything to nonexistence.

"No." The old woman had keenly sensed his unspoken thoughts. She shook her head vehemently as if to interrupt his words.

“That fire is different. That is made by humans. It is a result of human malice and greed. It is not the same as the destruction brought on by the Forest God.”

The old woman threw some withered branches into the fire. The flames swelled slightly. The fire in front of him was gentle. It provided him warmth and heat for cooking.

“The people of that demonic city burned the forest to the ground. They turned the Forest God’s holy dwelling place into ashes.”

“Did the Forest God die that day, too?”

“The Forest God does not die. She will never be killed by human hands. The people of the demonic city know no God. They do not know her terror. They do not try to know.”

“It’s called No. 6.”

“What?”

“That city is called No. 6. I heard from someone.”

“Who?”

“A traveller. He said he was a bard.” Nezumi had met a group dressed in white while he was collecting branches in the barrens. All of them had white bags tied to their backs.

They told him that there were six city-states in the world, and people gathered in and around these places to live. Among them, No. 6 was the most beautiful and abundant, as well as the most isolated.

“You have a good voice,” a bard atop a horse had said to him. The man had light brown eyes, the same colour as the earth on the barrens. “A very good voice. If you train it, you could become a first-rate singer. How about it, kid? Why don’t you come along with us?”

Nezumi would be lying if he were to say he wasn’t attracted to the offer at all.

He would travel the world, with instruments and songs as his companions. Free from hatred, free from the burden of his memories, he would sing, play, and dance as his heart desired.

Nezumi was deeply attracted to the idea.

He felt a sort of pleasure as if he had immersed his body in a cold, clear stream. Yet, he took a step back, and shook his head.

He could not go away and leave the old woman. And more than that—he could not live on and let that city stand without punishment. He was not about to throw away his hatred.

“I see. That’s too bad,” the travelling bard exhaled, and bent over his horse. “I’m sure we’ll come across one another someday. You’re the same as us. You’re not stationary—you’re the drifting type. Just to let you know, I *do* have an uncanny eye for seeing people for who they really are,” he chuckled.

His long fingers, suited for playing instruments, touched the horse’s neck. The desert horse neighed. It set off on a trot on its stout, thick legs.

The group disappeared quickly behind the cloud of dust they raised.

“No. 6,” the old woman muttered as she stared into the fire. “The name does not matter. That city, and all who live in it, will fall someday. The Forest God will not forgive them.”

The branches burned. The old woman’s profile was lit up in the darkness by the flames.

“The Forest God will not forgive. She will bring judgement down upon them.”

“Does that mean we won’t have to get our own revenge?” *Could we throw away this hatred, the memory of that scream?*

“No, *I* will not forget,” the old woman said. “I will not throw my hatred away. It may be . . . too late for me. I have grown too old. I will

probably not live to see God's judgement with my own eyes. That is why I will requite myself. If I could get even one stab—"

And the old woman had kept her word. Knife in hand, she had rushed upon the mayor, who had come to the Correctional Facility to do an inspection. The woman did not even manage to slice through his clothes, much less stab him. She was shot through the chest, knife still in hand, and died in Nezumi's arms as he rushed to her side. It was almost a miracle that Nezumi was not killed along with her.

He was captured and thrown underground, where he met a man who called himself Rou. Perhaps Rou had somehow been in contact with the old woman, for he knew everything about Nezumi and accepted every part of him.

"I will pass down all of my knowledge to you," Rou had said. *Sounds a lot like what God's voice said*, Nezumi had thought wryly.

That was two years before he met Shion.

* * *

Nezumi stopped to look up at the sky. The sun's rays were fast losing strength and were on the verge of wilting. Days were short in the West Block, and nighttime came early. Since the sky was blocked out by the looming figure of No. 6, the sun only shone down on this land for a brief while.

No. 6 dominated even the skies. It tore apart and devoured a world that was supposed to belong to no one.

Nezumi gently felt his back. Even now, it still throbbed sometimes. His burn throbbed as if to command him never to forget.

Never forget. Never forget. Never forget. Never forget. Never forget. Never forget.

I will not forget. I couldn't forget, even if I wanted to.

He despised No. 6. It had killed his father, mother, and the old woman. It had burned the forest down, and massacred the Forest People. It never hesitated to crush human lives beneath its heel if it meant prosperity for itself. It desired not coexistence, but its own sole reign on a foundation of countless dead bodies.

Only its own prosperity, its own bliss, its own pleasure. What a terrible existence it was.

He despised it.

The whirlwind of his hatred almost suffocated him. But, yet—

Shion lived in that city, too. For Nezumi, each and every thing in No. 6 had always been a target of his hatred. Not only did he hate the rulers, he hated the citizens of that city as well who lived undeserved lives, ignorant and lacking even the will to enlighten themselves.

Hate? Do you really? Then can you bring yourself to hate Shion as well?

Nezumi's own self questioned him.

Could I bring myself to hate Shion completely?

It was a bitter question every time. The bitter taste that spread in his mouth was enough to numb his tongue.

My hatred is so strong, and my wound throbs so painfully, and yet...

His began to walk, and stopped again. He could hear a melody.

He strained his ears. He could hear it.

Nezumi quickened his step. He turned a corner and was greeted by a plain dotted with boulders. On the edge of this plain stood a small playhouse—his workplace.

A man leaned upon a white boulder, playing a string instrument. Both his long upper garment and his pants, whose hems were gathered at the ankles, were faded and dirty. It was impossible to tell what colour they had been before. But the instrument in his hands was magnificent enough to turn heads.

Four strings were drawn across an eggplant-shaped body, and that body caught the rays of the weak evening sun and sparkled. If he squinted, Nezumi could see that the body was carved with intricate symbols and decorated with miniscule bits of gold, silver, and hazy silver.

It emitted a strange music. It was quiet yet clear, which added to its sorrow. It gently stroked the sadness buried in the bottom of one's heart. It did not agitate the sadness—it only smoothed it gently.

The man looked up. Their eyes met. Was it that bard? The man who had invited him to join their travels long ago? He looked as if he could be, yet he also looked like a complete stranger.

The man strummed vigorously. A melody was born.

Nezumi sang a scat along with the melody. He couldn't help it. The man's music and Nezumi's voice blended together and flowed gently along. Like the sky which was now beginning to lighten, the song, reminiscent of a blooming flower, flowed like a large river under a cerulean sky.

It was a comforting feeling.

Nezumi's body felt lighter as a breeze swept through him.

Floating on the wind, he rose high into the sky.

In the air, he danced high and low, turned over, glided in a wide circle, and rose up.

The man's fingers stopped. Nezumi also closed his mouth.

"Don't stop," said a woman's voice.

"Keep singing," added a man's voice.

A throng of people had formed around the two.

I didn't even notice such a huge number of people. For an instant, Nezumi felt a chill down his spine. He was usually especially sensitive to any presence behind him. Even the footsteps of a single child were enough

to make him react. He braced himself even at the sound of a tumbling rock. Otherwise, he could not survive.

If there was any exception, it was Shion. Shion's presence was the only one he lost track of at times. For some reason he couldn't figure out, he could not perceive Shion.

"Let us hear more."

"Sing, sing!"

"Let us hear that song again!"

The man looked up at Nezumi and grinned. "How about it, young'un? Feel like going for another?"

"Nah, I think my time is up. My nagging boss is here."

"Hey, Eve!" He was grabbed by the arm. Nezumi turned around and skilfully pried the hand off.

"Hello, Manager. Looking dashing as always."

The stage manager, dressed in a red jacket and bow-tie, placed both hands on his hips and set his feet apart. He looked to be at the peak of displeasure.

"What are you thinking, singing in a place like this? These people haven't paid us a cent! I don't know what you're doing, singing for people who aren't even our customers. Ridiculous... what? What's so funny?"

"No. Just wondering if you were enthralled by it too, manager."

"Wh—don't be an idiot!" stammered the manager. "I just came to take a look, since you were taking so long. And I found you here, having your nice little outdoor concert. Do work that brings in the money, I tell ya."

The manager tugged at the ends of his handlebar moustache, then turned to the man and smoothed his face into a suave smile.

“Say, sir, you have quite an impressive hand at playing. How’d you like to come work with me? With your playing and Eve’s singing, we’re sure to be the talk of the town. We’ll draw in a huge crowd.”

The man shook his head silently in a gesture of refusal.

“I wish you’d say that line to me.”

“Eve, don’t give me that crap,” snapped the manager. “I pay you a fat sum all the time.”

“Oh, really? There must be some chasm between your perception of ‘fat sum’ and mine.”

The man stood up quietly. He drew close to Nezumi and whispered into his ear.

“Are you also the wind?”

Wind?

“A wind that blows over this earth as it pleases. It neither dwells nor sets its roots down in one spot. Like us.”

Nezumi stared into the man’s eyes. They were light blue. Could he possibly be that bard?

“You sing, we play,” he continued. “That’s just who we are. But why do you dwell here? Why won’t you be free, like the wind? What has trapped you and kept you here?”

The man drew back. He strummed just one string. Then he stowed his instrument in his bag and slung it over his shoulder.

“Best you free yourself soon, young’un.”

Nezumi could not answer him. He only watched the man off.

What has trapped you and kept you here?

*Would I be able to cut these chains free? Could I cut my chains of hatred?
And Shion, who binds me? Would I be liberated?*

Someday, I’ll choose to live that way.

That day will come.

Then it's goodbye, Shion. And goodbye, No. 6.

“Go home, go home! If you want to hear Eve’s singing, come back to the playhouse with some money. Big concert tonight!”

The manager’s gravelly voice rang out into the crowd.

Nezumi stood rooted to the spot as the wind blew past him, caressing his hair.

3

SHION'S DAYS

IT WAS raining. A drizzle—a mist, almost. But rain was rain, and it drenched the nighttime streets and the people without umbrellas.

Before entering his house, Shion lightly ran his hand through his hair. Drops of water dripped from his shiny white locks. He was wetter than he had thought. The cool night air of early spring crept up from his feet. If he didn't warm up soon, he would probably catch a cold.

Shion knew he would, but he continued to stand in front of the door, unable to move. He was cold. His spirits were heavy. He felt reluctant to see his mother Karan's face.

The back door of his house was wooden. The paint was peeling in several places, and it showed clear signs of its age. A number of times, Shion had suggested replacing it with a new one. But each time, Karan had shaken her head.

"This is just fine. It's sturdy and strong. And besides, don't you think

it has its own unique flavour? I think it's much nicer than those awful glittery metal doors."

His mother was concerned about the cost. But perhaps she really did not mind the hassle of renovation; perhaps she really did have an attachment to the worn back door. Shion understood that, so he never spoke of replacing the door again.

She was right in a sense. The thick oaken door exuded an ambiance not quite found in stylish, vividly-coloured steel doors. The round brass knob was also still firmly in place.

This door had not changed a bit since when Shion and Karan first moved to Lost Town from their privileged-class residence in Chronos (in truth, they had actually been exiled and not given any other choice of residence other than in Lost Town, but strangely, neither Shion nor Karan felt any lingering attachment to their old days). In fact, this whole house had not changed much at all.

Over a year had passed since the destruction of the city-state, No. 6. Confusion still remained, and everyone was still in the midst of groping at how former No. 6 residents as well as nonresidents could adapt to their new wall-less surroundings.

The terms "insider" and "outsider" (of the wall) had taken root, and each regarded the other like a foreigner who spoke a different language. The Insiders realized that they had been skilfully and rigidly controlled, and appreciated their liberation from a society of surveillance. But at the same time, they insisted that they did not want to let go of their wealth—that they did not want their current lives to be disturbed. The Outsiders criticized scathingly the crimes of No. 6, which had built itself and prospered on a parasitic foundation. They rallied for equal distribution of wealth and compensation for the abuse they had suffered.

Currently, with the Restructural Committee at its centre, No. 6 (of

course, there were voices that called for a new city name, but no one could spare the time to consider names. There was also the issue of inter-city relations; for the sake of convenience, No. 6 was still called No. 6) sought to restore peace and order; to swiftly establish governing, judicial, and legislative bodies; and secure lifelines.

For the moment, they would use No. 6's governing institutions.

They would designate the West Block as a special ward, and fast-track the establishment of supply systems essential for life. They would construct a temporary police force to dissolve the army and maintain peace.

There were twelve members of the Restructural Committee—former No. 6 residents, and former representatives from each Block. Under the Committee were twelve Sub-Committees, with a Committee member at the helm of each.

Shion was one of the youngest Committee members.

This past year, everything had changed. Like a crashing wave, like the torrential waters of a rapid, like an avalanche, everything was swallowed up, sucked into the spiral, torn asunder, and twisted around. Things would only get fiercer in the future.

Shion exhaled, and gazed in turn at the old door, the battered brass knob, and the small window out of which spilled a dim light.

Then, there were things that never changed. No matter what path the world of mankind took, there were always things that didn't change, both inside and outside of people.

Shion, I want you to stay as you are.

Nezumi's murmur revived inside him.

Fight it. Fight with yourself.

It was no order or command. It was a plea.

Nezumi had begged Shion as he spoke those words. *Shion, don't ever change.*

Could I answer to the feelings Nezumi laid bare before me?

Shion closed his eyes. He visualized the bazaar. It had been restored into a free market, and it now offered a wealth of options and plenty of fresh goods, unthinkable in the past. Karan often went shopping there, too.

“It’s twenty to thirty percent cheaper than shops in the city. They might not be the most attractive, but you couldn’t get better-tasting produce anywhere else.” Just yesterday, too, she had laughed as she proudly laid out her misshapen apples and gnarled cucumbers.

But mom doesn’t know—the Hunt took place in that marketplace. No. 6’s army ruthlessly fired at those people—shot them through their foreheads, their chests—not even batting an eyelash.

The air had been thick with despair, fear, and anguished screams of the people; everywhere was stained with the stench of blood as corpses lay left and right. An arm protruded from fallen debris; an army tank crushed a torn leg as it passed by; army boots trampled those still living and begging for help. It was the first volume of the inferno that Shion was to witness later.

Mom doesn’t know that. And he was glad that she didn’t. When he closed his eyes, he could recall the sights of that day, no less vivid than the day he experienced them. It was not only the marketplace. He would never be able to forget the faces of the people loaded into the cargo hold; the eyes of the man who had begged Shion to make it better; the stacked bodies and the smell of death which lingered about him; the walls of the Correctional Facility, crumbling into flames; the black smoke that rose from No. 6. He would never forget. These images had branded him for life, never to disappear.

And the fact that his index finger had pulled a trigger. The fact that he had wilfully, not incidentally, killed another man.

Shion opened his eyes and looked up at the sky. Of course, he could

see neither the stars nor the moon. A raindrop slid down his cheek. It touched his lips as it rolled down his face.

Ah, I'm alive. Suddenly, he was hit with the realization that life was within him. He felt it: right now, he was most certainly alive. Its overwhelming reality almost suffocated him. He wanted to scream.

I'm alive. I'm alive. I'm alive. I'm alive. I'm alive.

Nezumi, I'm alive, he spoke to the dark sky, void of light. *I'm alive and waiting for you. Even in those hellish surroundings, I was drawn to your eyes, your words, your gestures, your thoughts—and they supported me. Thanks to them, I was able to survive. And right now, I'm still alive. Can you hear me, Nezumi? I'm alive.*

A dog barked noisily. It was coming from inside the house.

What? A dog? Wait, could it be—

Shion's mind was yanked from the past back into the present. His heart beat fiercely. He pushed the door open. He was met with an earful of barking. They were barks of joy and affection, not aggression or apprehension. A dog with patched fur leapt up and jumped at Shion as it barked. It wagged its tail fiercely and jabbed its snout against Shion's thigh. Its black eyes contained even more joy than its voice.

"Dogs just fall at your feet, as always, huh?"

"Inukashi! And Rikiga-san, you too!"

Rikiga made an exaggerated grimace from his spot on the sofa.

"Hey, Shion. A bit rude of you to notice me after doggy-boy, don't you think? The proper way to go about it would be to cry, 'Oh, Rikiga-san!' and pounce on me, like that dog there. And then you'd add, 'Oh, Inukashi. You're here, too,' as an afterthought."

"Hah!" Inukashi bared his teeth and cackled. "Rude? Who cares? Me 'n' you don't have no need for manners, old man. Just like how my dog wouldn't need a fur coat. What do manners do? They certainly don't fill my belly."

“Shut up,” Rikiga snapped. “Don’t lump me in with the likes of you. You’re practically half-animal. I’m a right and proper man, and a gentleman at that.”

“Gentleman? Whoa, I didn’t know ‘gentlemen’ referred to guys who can’t live without money, women, and booze. Huh, well, I learned something new. Since when have meanings changed so much? What has the world come to?” Inukashi let out a long, doleful sigh.

Shion burst out laughing. It had been a while since he heard Inukashi and Rikiga bickering like this. He laughed from deep down in his belly for the first time in a long time.

“You two haven’t changed at all.”

“He’s just got a large attitude for a mutt,” grumbled Rikiga. “He has a complaint ready for everything I do.”

“And you’re simple-minded for a human, old man. You fly off the handle and have one of your tempers at everything I say. Dogs are way more intellectual. Actually, dogs are ten times better than humans in head and heart, anyway. Besides, I think you’re closer to a monkey than a human, old man.”

“Yeah, you’re right,” Rikiga said angrily. “I am a monkey. Just the sight of a dog maddens me to no end.¹ Every time I see one, I feel like tearing it apart with my teeth. *Roar!*” Rikiga raised his arms and lunged at Inukashi. Inukashi laughed mockingly while he nimbly danced out of reach.

“My, aren’t we full of energy.” Karan came in. Rikiga froze. He cleared his throat purposefully and sat down on a chair. He lightly brushed some imaginary dust off the vest of his three-piece suit, and smiled amiably at her.

“But please keep it down a little.” Karan lightly rocked the baby in her arms. It seemed fast asleep.

¹In Japanese folklore, monkeys and dogs never get along.

“Shionn!”

“Shh, Shion, not so loudly. I’ve just gotten Shionn to fall asleep, finally—hm, rather confusing now, isn’t it?”

Shionn breathed softly, wrapped in an old blanket which was so faded it was impossible to tell what colour it had formerly been. His long eyelashes cast shadows on his face, and his plump lips were parted slightly. If bliss had a physical form, then this sleeping face was it. It brought happiness to every person who beheld it.

“Looks like he’s grown bigger since I last saw him,” Rikiga commented.

“That’s because he has,” Inukashi said. “Now he’s big enough to run around and play with the dogs. Soon, he’ll be able to gnaw meat off the bone.” Inukashi beamed and placed a soft kiss on Shionn’s forehead.

“You’re very good at raising children, Inukashi.” Karan smiled.

“I’ve seen many babies in my lifetime, but I feel like it’s my first time seeing a baby look so happy when he’s sleeping.”

“Ya really think so, Momma Karan?”

“I sure do. He trusts you from the bottom of his heart, and you’re able to be there for him and live up to his trust. You two really make an admirable family.”

A faint blush rose in Inukashi’s tan cheeks.

“When my dog came home carrying Shionn in its mouth, I was actually really pissed off,” he confessed. “I thought about just abandoning it, pretending I’d never seen it. Babies only make for baggage. I really hated Shion that time for leaving his burden with me.”

“—I’m sorry. I knew it was irresponsible, but . . . I had no other choice but to leave him to you. I knew I could trust you with him.”

Inukashi’s black eyes turned to Shion.

“Shion, does that mean—”

“Hm?”

“Does that mean you trusted me?”

“Yeah.” He nodded. It wasn’t a front or a lie. In the confusion of the Hunt, when he had taken the baby from its young mother, the only person in Shion’s mind had been Inukashi. Indeed, Inukashi was the only option that he had thought of.

Inukashi will do something about it. He’ll protect this little life with everything he’s got. Inukashi will. This was what he had thought.

Inukashi grinned. He raised a finger and twirled it around.

“You trusted me, and I lived up to that trust. That’s what you’re sayin’, right?”

“Yeah. I think so.” *Nezumi was probably the same. He trusted you, so he left everything to you.* Shion swallowed his unspoken words and shut his mouth. He didn’t know why, but he didn’t feel like saying Nezumi’s name here.

“Hey, wait a minute, Shion. You’re not saying you trusted Doggy-boy above me, are you?”

“Ah, no—that’s not what I... I just didn’t associate you with babies, that’s all, Rikiga-san.”

“Of course not,” Inukashi butted in. “Because if you left him to someone like this old man, the poor little guy would be sold off the next day. Living babies fetch a pretty good price, ya know.”

“What? Are you saying people put up babies for sale?” The blood receded from Karan’s face. Rikiga hastily waved away Inukashi’s words.

“N-No—no, no, Karan, it’s not like that. I would never do that. It was just a bad joke. This one here always makes distasteful jokes. You can imagine the headaches I get. You shouldn’t take him too seriously.”

“... You’re right,” Karan said uncertainly. “You would never buy or sell babies. That’s just absurd, isn’t it?”

"Absolutely." Rikiga swelled his chest. "Karan, there's one thing I want you to know: I ran lots of businesses in the old West Block. Among them there were some that were—ah, not so savoury. Yes. Not savoury at all. And that's a fact."

Inukashi hunched his shoulders. "Don't you mean 'most'? I think your porno mag business was the most decent."

"Shut up!" Rikiga snapped. "Why don't you go off and gnaw on a chicken bone or something? Karan, listen to me," he implored. "I never dared use children or babies. I never used little ones to make my daily bread. That's the truth. Please, believe me."

"Of course I believe you," Karan said. "I can't imagine you looking at the young as a target for profits."

"Karan." Rikiga flushed and stepped closer to Karan. "Thank you. I feel like your trust in me is all the support I'll ever need."

"My, Rikiga." Karan retreated half a step before smiling serenely. "I never remember you as someone who could recite such a theatrical line. You spoke frankly and straightforwardly, and you were careful with your words."

Inukashi whistled.

"Heh heh, Momma Karan's got a good point. 'Your trust is all the support I'll need' my ass. You don't even see that line in cheap novels these days."

"Your mongrel brain has never even read a book before. No one's asking for your input," Rikiga said sourly.

"My brain is a lot better off than yours. Mine's not swimming in booze."

"What did you say?" Rikiga said menacingly.

"What? Got a problem?" Inukashi shot back.

They glared at each other.

“Stop it, you two,” Karan said exasperatedly. “Shion, don’t just stand there laughing.”

Karan crouched in the shadow of the sofa and gently placed Shionn down in a cradle. The cradle was a simple one made of wicker with no embellishments, but its rounded shape was beautiful in its simplicity. It looked very old, but showed no signs of wear.

A small golden plaque hung on the side.

For Shion, my beloved son.

Just that short phrase was engraved into it.

“Hm? Mom, is this—”

Karan’s hand gently rocked the cradle. “Yes. I used to use this when you were a baby. You probably don’t remember.”

Or do I? Shion thought. I feel like I remember hearing a gentle lullaby while being rocked back and forth, back and forth...

“I didn’t think I’d ever pull it out and use it again like this. I’m glad I went through the extra trouble to bring it when we moved out.”

When they had moved out of Chronos, the furniture and dishes they could take with them were heavily restricted. Their house, their furniture, the services, abundance, and their top-class living environment had all been given to them precisely because Shion had been certified as elite.

Once this certification was revoked, they had to return everything that was given to them from No. 6. The personal belongings that Shion and Karan brought into Lost Town were surprisingly few.

Was there a cradle among them? No. Shion would have noticed if there was.

“I secretly brought it afterwards and stowed it away in the attic,” Karan said.

“Why did you have to do it secretly?”

Karan's hand stopped.

"Because this... this was handmade by your father."

Shion's breath caught in his throat. It blocked his airway. As he exhaled, his voice slid out along with it.

"What? My father?"

"Yes. Your father made this cradle for you." Karan pursed her lips and averted her eyes from Shion.

"Dad was... a craftsman?"

"No. A geologist—that was his main occupation. And I think he was very good at it. He was chosen to be a member of the revival project team, after all."

Revival project team—it was a group of individuals chosen to make No. 6 a paradise on Earth, a utopia. The mayor, who desired to become No. 6's absolute ruler, was a member; Rou, the scientist who schemed to have the Forest God Elyurias under his control, was a member.

But their aspirations and futures morphed and drifted apart: Rou became an underground man; No. 6 transformed into a monstrous city, and moved down the path to destruction.

And Shion's own father had been one of those members. Shion was stunned. That was all he could say. He was stunned.

"But mom, you said... you said before that my dad was loose with money and women, a hopeless case and a step away from being an alcoholic. But then you said he was really kind and sincere."

"I did. Because it's true." Karan pouted even more. She looked like a sullen child. "He spent all the money that came in, and drank all day. As soon as he found a girl he liked, he'd start a relationship with her without even thinking of the consequences... even after we married, he had girlfriend after girlfriend..."

“To have a lover while being married to *you*, Karan—I don’t believe this man. Unforgivable.” Rikiga clenched his fist, his eyebrows arching angrily.

“You can say that again,” Inukashi commented. “He’s almost as corrupt as you, old man.”

“Hey, mutt. And what exactly is corrupt about me? I’m single, which is why I could get away with playi—er, having a good time with women. But if I got married—” Rikiga glanced furtively at Karan, and took a breath.

“I would love her for as long as I lived. I wouldn’t even *look* at other women. And I would stop drinking. Not to brag or anything, but I think I would make a good family man. Yeah.”

“Bullshit,” Inukashi spat. “You being a decent husband is just as likely as my dog becoming a top chef.”

Inukashi faced Karan before Rikiga could say anything in return.

“But Momma Karan, I can’t even imagine such a slob being Shion’s dad. Their personalities are way too different.”

“You could say that. But he was surprisingly good with his hands, and I think Shion inherited that from him. Actually, this—” Karan gently rolled Shionn’s blanket back. He was wearing a plain white collared shirt. The collar and breast pocket of the shirt was embroidered on the hems with blue thread. A vibrant blue.

“He sewed this by hand. Same with the baby clothes and bib. He finished it the day before he left us, and left them on the table with a letter that said he wanted Shion to wear them on his first birthday. So when you turned one, Shion, I put them on you. They were a little big back then. But I think they’re a perfect fit for this Shionn.”

This was really, truly Shion’s first time hearing such detailed things about his father from Karan. Shion had never asked because his mother

never seemed to want to talk about it. He had lived his fatherless life simply accepting that that was just how it was.

His father was loose with women and money, loved to drink, was a specialist in geology, a member of the revival project team, had surprisingly skilled hands, and left his family soon after Shion was born.

Shion glanced over at the cradle. He gazed at the baby sleeping inside, with the same name as his. He touched the embroidered shirt.

This was what his father left behind.

Shion sneaked a glance at Karan's profile.

So Karan's acquaintance with the core members of No. 6 had not been through Rou. And his father, as a member, colleague, and holder of the same ideals in his heart, had spent his younger days alongside the mayor and those scientists.

"And Shion's papa left the house because... well, because of those women problems?" Inukashi leaned forward.

"Hey, don't butt into other people's personal matters," Rikiga said.

"Not a tactful bone in your body, is there?"

"Hah, don't even talk to me about tact. You're dying to hear it yourself, old man. You're trying *so* hard to impress. Heh, I can't stop laughing." Inukashi's teeth clattered together.

His comment had apparently hit the mark, for Rikiga blushed crimson and fell silent. Karan neither appeared offended nor taken aback by Inukashi's bluntness. She continued calmly.

"Maybe you're right. That might have been an indirect reason. I was young and I wanted him to stop being ridiculous. But ever since he found out that Shion was on the way, he changed a little. All his attention was on the unborn baby, and he even stopped drinking and playing around with women, if only for a short while... he picked up drinking again not long after. But I felt like if he kept on being

like this, maybe he *would* turn into a decent family man. Inside, I was proud. That's why I know he didn't leave the family because of a woman... he had another reason..."

"Because No. 6 was changing."

Karan blinked several times at Shion's short utterance.

"You can tell?"

"I had a vague idea."

As No. 6 took shape into a city-state—a totalitarian, authoritarian state—many members withdrew from the revival project team during the process. Some were intentionally removed, while others left of their own will. Strictly in the realm of possibility, perhaps some had been deemed a hindrance and murdered secretly. It was more than likely.

"He was overwhelmed by the fact that No. 6 was gradually—no, actually, quite quickly—morphing as it developed its city structure. He was apprehensive, but he had no idea what he could do about it. Maybe he was afraid. I remember hearing him say over and over to himself, 'This isn't possible. This can't be happening.' Then, one day... it hadn't even been a month since Shion was born... he said to me, 'Let's leave No. 6. We can still escape now. But soon, we won't be able to leave unscathed from this city.' His face was so grave when he said it. He must have given up on No. 6 altogether by that time. He probably thought, 'I can't live here anymore. One day I'll suffocate, and end up taking my own life, or get killed if I don't.' That's why he tried to convince me to escape somewhere far away from No. 6, and start a new life in a strange land, just the three of us."

"But you said no, mom."

"Yes." Karan let out a long breath. "I said no. I told him clearly that I wasn't going to go with him. I just couldn't bring myself to believe what he was saying."

Karan averted her eyes and looked down as if Shion's gaze was too blinding to bear.

"When I asked him where we would go once we left No. 6, he said he didn't know. Then he just burst into a joyful laugh and... said it wouldn't be so bad to wander freely like the wind. But I had a baby that wasn't even a month old yet. Apart from the six city-states, I knew there were only barrens and tiny fields left on this earth. I couldn't bear to think of forcing such an arduous journey on a tiny infant. I supposed that as long as I stayed inside No. 6, we wouldn't have to starve or get sick. I couldn't convince myself that he could protect us better than No. 6. I couldn't trust him."

Yet another sigh escaped Karan's lips.

"I don't know if I made the right decision that day. I certainly don't regret that I didn't go with him. But the fact is that I had already become dependent on No. 6. I was trying to live a life of dependence. I lived for years and years without even realizing... I was completely ignorant of No. 6's rotting smell, when he had been one of the first to detect it. And that—is a very regrettable thing."

"And you have no idea where dad is right now?"

"No, I don't. I don't even know if he's dead or alive. But knowing him, I have a feeling he's living freely, doing whatever pleases him."

Karan's voice dropped slightly.

"Shion, would you want to meet your father?"

"Well... I've only known you, mom, so I don't really feel any sort of yearning towards him. I don't really miss him. But I am curious."

"Curious?"

"Curious about why you decided to talk to me about dad so suddenly. You never talked about him before."

Karan's lips moved, but no words issued from them. A short moment of silence followed. It was so still that Shionn's slumbering breathing

could be heard crisp and clear.

“K-Karan—”

Rikiga stood up abruptly.

“Ah, um—so, d-do you still have trouble forgetting about, ah, your former husband? That is to say, um, that you’re . . . waiting for him to come home, or . . . is—is that how you still feel now? Or are you, ah, free of any of that kind of . . . er, attachment? As in, um, if something were to happen, would it result in . . .”

“What the hell kind of language are you speaking, old man?” Inukashi jumped in. “I think a newborn puppy would make a bit more sense than you. Right?” A patchy-furred dog that was lying at Inukashi’s feet opened its eyes a crack. It gave a wide yawn.

Karan smiled.

“I’m not waiting for him, Rikiga,” she said. “To me, he’s already a man of the past. Of course I *do* hope he’s still alive somewhere, but—” An unmistakable joy crossed Rikiga’s features.

“Can’t get any more obvious than that,” Inukashi muttered.

“That’s absolutely right,” Rikiga said enthusiastically. “We can’t dwell on the past forever. If we’re going to dwell on something, it should be the future. Tomorrow is so much more important than yesterday.”

“I agree.”

“R-Right? You think so too, don’t you? So . . . ah, Karan, wouldn’t you agree that, um . . . someone with whom you can live in the future is, ah, more important than someone with whom you lived in the past?”

“Yes, of course. That’s why I invited you to dinner this evening. I wanted to dine with you.”

An exclamation issued from Rikiga’s lips that sounded like something between “oh” and “ah”.

"K-Karan, is that true? Y—You thought of me, and that's why—"

Inukashi tugged at Rikiga's jacket.

"Old man, old man. Sorry for shattering your dreams, but I've been invited, too. You're not the only one. Don't you forget that."

Rikiga scowled heartily and made a swatting gesture as if to chase away flies.

"Shoo! Shoo! Show yourself the door and take that dirty mongrel with you. You probably asked yourself over with a mind to take advantage of Karan's cooking."

"As a matter of fact, I *did* get a proper invitation. Right, Momma Karan?"

"Yes, of course. Both Inukashi and you, Rikiga, are very important teammates to Shion. And you two are very good friends to me. That's why I wanted both of you to come. I don't have much, but I do have lots of freshly-baked bread. I also have homemade jam and stew that's been simmered nice and long. Just a minute, I'll get it prepared. Shion, can I get some help?"

"Sure."

Karan opened the door to the kitchen and disappeared beyond. The aroma of bread and stew wafted into the room. The two distinct smells stimulated the nose. Inukashi's nose twitched eagerly.

"I'll help, too! Being treated to a free meal goes against my morals." He chuckled. "Did you hear that? Fresh-baked bread and stew. Just the sound of it makes me drool, but then you *smell* it, and... oh, this is the best. My stomach is grumbling like no tomorrow. Aren't you hungry too, old ma—hm? Old man, what's wrong? Your eyes aren't focused. What're you spaced out about?"

"... Teammates... friends..."

"Huh?"

“Karan says I was a teammate. A friend. To Karan, I was only ever just a member of a team, just one of her friends...”

Shion and Inukashi looked at each other. Inukashi tilted his head.

“Hmm. Well, ‘let’s be good friends’ is a pretty typical rejection phrase. Dogs would be more straight up and tell you they hate your fur or that your teeth are gross, but humans like to take the long way around. Hah, but really, old man, were you planning on seriously proposing to Momma Karan?”

“... I was serious,” Rikiga said gloomily. “Work is picking up for me, and I’ve got money enough to spare. I was confident that I’d make Karan happy.”

Following the destruction of No. 6, merchandise began to find its way out of the walls. Rikiga took advantage of the chaos and bought them off at low prices.

He hoarded artwork and handiwork, electronics, paintings, jewellery, furniture, medical machines, cars, clothes, office supplies, and even toys; when things began to settle, he sold them at high prices and made a handsome profit. Now he directed and managed a publishing company and printing company, issuing a weekly informational magazine and a daily paper.

“Well, you *are* a rising star in the entrepreneurial business, Rikiga-san. Rumour says you’re quite the power player.”

“You honestly think so, Shion?”

“Of course I do. You and Inukashi don’t need fake compliments from me, do you?” Shion took his jacket off and rolled up his sleeves.

“I keep telling you to stop lumping me in with doggy-boy,” Rikiga said wearily. “But enough of that. So, Shion, you’ve acknowledged me, then? You think I’m fit to be married to Karan?”

“Huh? Oh, I—I didn’t mean it like... well, uh, I don’t think my mother ever plans to remarry. She was telling me the other day how

satisfied she was with this life and how she'd like to keep being a baker for as long as she can."

It was true: Karan's life had not changed much, at least on the outside. She ran her small bakery tucked away in a corner of Lost Town, chatting with regulars and kneading dough for the first loaves in the early hours of the morning.

That was her regular routine, and she repeated it every day. Even in intense turmoil, Karan continued to fire up the oven, bake bread, and lay them out at the front of the shop. The people wept through their mouthfuls of small rolls and muffins.

"The world has crumbled from beneath our feet, but this still tastes the same. There are still things in this world that haven't changed."

Those were the words of an elderly man, a regular customer. He had murmured the words over and over, his cheeks wet with tears. Shion encountered the same sort of murmur many times.

Something is here which will never change—for the people, that feeling of certainty signified hope and a reason to keep living.

"Your mother is an incredible woman," Nezumi had said, with a rare note of awe in his voice.

It was on the day he had woken up.

On the day that everything had ended—no, began—Shion had dragged his exhausted and battered body back home to Karan.

After a somewhat brief reunion embrace, he had collapsed into bed with Nezumi and slept like a log. His slumber was deep enough to cut off all of his senses, and when he woke, it was already noon of the following day. It was the time of day when the sun was shining straight from above, emitting a faint reddish glow.

There was no sign of Nezumi beside him. There was one blanket folded neatly and placed at the foot of the bed. Shion placed a fist on

top of the folded blanket. A strangled noise subconsciously escaped his throat.

Nezumi, have you gone? Just like you did four years ago?

Four years ago, on the morning after the storm, Nezumi had disappeared from Shion's side. He had disappeared starkly, as if everything from the night before had been an illusion.

Back then, they had only just met. They barely knew anything about each other—not a single thing about the pasts they shouldered, the future they beheld, and the emotions they kept within their souls.

But it was different now.

Yes, there were still things they could not grasp, things they still could not understand about each other. There was a chasm between him and Nezumi that he could never fill, no matter how much he struggled to.

I know. I know. I know. We knew, but we still lived together. Not in the past, nor in the future, but in the present. We lived the present together.

But now you're leaving again without a word?

Shion's thoughts got as far as that before he shook his head vehemently.

Of course not.

We've spent so much time together, and overcome hell together. He wouldn't vanish without a word. That's not what our relationship is like. And besides, it would be risky for him to move around with such a serious wound. I can't imagine Nezumi being so reckless.

He caught a whiff of the aroma of coffee and bread. It was the smell of waking up.

Shion opened the door into the living room.

"Oh, is the prince finally awake?" Nezumi was smiling with a coffee cup in hand. "I can't say much about you, though. I woke up not too long ago."

Shion swallowed his sigh of relief, and with great effort feigned a calm demeanour.

“Nezumi. How do you feel?”

“Couldn’t be better. Or, at least I wish I could say so. It’s taken its toll. You?”

“Couldn’t be better.”

The cup twirled around in Nezumi’s hand.

“Confident now that you’re on home turf, huh? But it’s a good thing that you’ve got enough energy to act tough. But might I suggest taking a shower and spritzing yourself up before you start trying to be a tough guy? I think even King Lear wandering the wildness would look a little more put-together than you.”

Shion peered into the mirror hanging on the wall. His face and hair were covered in streaks of blood, dirt, and dried sweat. His shirt was torn in several places, and his right sleeve looked like it was about to fall right off.

He’s right. I don’t even think King Lear at his maddest would look as bad as this.

He felt a strange urge to laugh.

“So, your Majesty, will you be having a bath first? Or shall I prepare a cup of the very best coffee for you?”

“What an incredible honour it is to be served coffee by you.”

“Your mama just treated me to some delicious bread—the very best, I must say—and it was so good I felt like my tongue would melt. I think pouring you a coffee would be a small service compared to that.”

“Oh—mom...”

“Your mama has been run off her feet with work since morning.” Nezumi jerked his chin. Shion could feel the muffled buzz from beyond the thin wall.

“Huh? She’s opened shop?”

“Looks like it. Says the only thing she can do is bake bread, so she’s going to keep doing what she can. Even in this chaos, the oven is still fired up and the danishes are still baking. She says in the evening, she’ll make some cravats for me.”

“I see . . . sounds like what she would do.”

Nezumi put his cup down, and his eyes moved towards the white wall. There was no smile playing on his lips anymore. It was as if his gaze pierced through the wall, focusing on Karan who bustled about on the other side. A darkness lurked in the depths of his look.

“Your mother is an incredible woman,” Nezumi said. His voice was so low it was almost a whisper, but there was definitely a note of awe in it. “She’s like the Almighty Mother. I didn’t know there was someone like that inside No. 6. but she is one—and she’s lived here as a citizen.”

“ . . . You’re right.”

A person could never be completely dyed into one colour, no matter the circumstances. He may be dyed temporarily, but he would one day regain his own colour, and would always attempt to live loyal to himself. He would try to draw forth many different colours into this world.

Indeed, that was hope itself.

How much could one trust the days that lay before him, the people in his life, and hope? Eventually, this question would be posed to Shion himself. He knew that Nezumi would have to take on the same assignment.

Nezumi, could we ever completely believe in people? Not loathe, not condescend upon, not abuse, but believe?

Could we do it?

The aroma of coffee filled the air.

"But first, you need a splendid brunch with the best of bread and the best of coffee. At least take today to rest and think of nothing at all. Your mama's gutsy way of living is too much for us youngsters to handle yet, I think."

"You're pretty modest."

"This is 'away' territory. I'll watch my mouth," Nezumi said lightly.

"And truth be told, I'm a little tired. I haven't the slightest objection to sleeping, eating good bread, and going back to sleep again. It's quite a nice vacation."

"And you'll get to eat cravats in the evening."

"Yes, that." Nezumi snapped his fingers. "I've never had the pleasure of beholding a pastry shaped like a tie. And baked by your mother's hands. It must be delicious."

"Once you've had them, you'll be at their mercy. They'll come to haunt you every night in your dreams."

"I imagine it'll be like how Hansel and Gretel felt when they found the house made of sweets. It's one of those things where 'pleasure and trouble come arm-in-arm with each other.'"

"Someone's proverb?"

"I just thought of it now. And you better remember it: it'll illuminate the path to your fate."

A cup of coffee was placed down in front of him.

"Drink up. I've made it a little strong with lots of milk, just the way your Majesty likes it."

"What? We've never had coffee together before. How do you know how I like it?"

"I just know. I told you before—you're hopelessly easy to read, and yet also hopelessly hard to understand."

"I could say the same for you."

“But I’m not as difficult as you.”

“You’re one to talk. You should be the last person to call me difficult.”

“How the hell am I difficult?”

“It would take me until tomorrow morning to list them all.”

“Huh,” Nezumi huffed. “I’ll entertain you with my presence until tomorrow morning, then, so let us hear all the details.”

“See, that’s what I’m talking about.” Shion sipped his coffee. Its fragrance, bitter taste, and mildness spread inside his mouth. The rolls on the table were also delicious. As Nezumi had said, they were so good he felt his tongue would melt.

The taste soaked into the very core of his body and soul. It was the unmistakable taste of his mother’s cooking.

“One minute you’re as stubborn and quick to anger as a child, and the next minute you’ve got sound judgment and no attachment to anything whatsoever. You’re constantly changing your mind, and you’re in a different kind of mood from one minute to the next. I can’t see how anyone can be more difficult than you.”

“Uh-huh, I see. Not gonna candy-coat anything, are you? Well, let me say my bit, Shion—”

“Go ahead. You have nothing against me.”

Nezumi scoffed. “Only indecent people go on about how decent they are.”

“So you’re saying you don’t think you’re decent?” Shion retorted.

“Erm, well... that’s not to say I’m not a decent person, because I always am... Damnit, you’re getting quicker with your comebacks.” Nezumi twisted his mouth and narrowed his eyes.

Shion almost snorted at Nezumi’s hilarious scowl.

Everything seemed beautiful—this casual conversation, the gentle atmosphere, even the rays of the setting sun coming in through the

window.

It was a gem of a moment which had existed between the storm that had passed and the storm Shion was about to face. It was also a tender memory that Nezumi had left behind for him.

* * *

Nezumi set off, and Shion remained. Their tangled and overlapping fates had separated, and were now drifting apart.

When would they intersect again?

“Hey, Shion.” Rikiga’s face drew nearer. “I want you to give me a hand.”

“Give you a hand?”

“I’d like you to tell . . . well, hint to Karan—discreetly, mind you—how right I am as a marriage candidate for her.”

“What? But, well . . . I’m not so sure I can—”

“I’m serious. I want to propose to her because I’m confident that I can make her happy. Of course, if Karan wants to keep running her bakery, she can do it for as long as she likes. I know!” he exclaimed, “We can renovate the entire place. Make the shop bigger, put in a large front window. Make it glamorous. We’ll fix up the living quarters, too, and add more rooms.”

“I don’t think that’s what my mother would want. She seems pretty satisfied with what we have already.”

Rikiga cradled his head in his hands.

“Oh, Karan. What a virtuous woman, so modest in her wants. She’s the very embodiment of a goddess.”

“I dunno, I think she’s a bit on the chubby side to be a goddess,” Inukashi butted in. “But Momma Karan is pretty, and way too good for you, old man. And FYI, I think the problem with the kind of

women you hang around with is that they want too *much*. When they look at someone, they see a gold coin where his face should be. Either way, old man, Momma Karan only sees you as a friend. The ends of her hair are a more likely marriage candidate in her mind than you. Hah, just give it up.”

“Don’t think a brat like you can interfere with adult matters.”

“Fine, fine. Mr. Adult can keep putting up a hopeless struggle in his adult matters. Shion, let’s go help Momma out. I’m dying to have dinner.”

“Sure.”

They could hear Rikiga let out a troubled sigh behind them.

Dinner was enjoyable. Everyone ate, talked, and laughed plenty.

It was fun—very fun.

If Nezumi were here—his heart wavered in uncertainty. If Nezumi were here, he would have sat across from Shion, praised Karan’s cooking, and sneered coolly as he looked on at Inukashi and Rikiga arguing. He would have wielded his fork and spoon with elegant grace, and would have made Karan happy by finishing everything on his plate.

Nezumi, where are you? What are you doing right now?

I haven’t seen you for a year now.

Three hours later, his companions set off for home into the night.

Inukashi left in high spirits, his backpack bursting with bread. Rikiga looked thoroughly depressed.

“Mom,” Shion called out as he cleaned up. Karan, who was measuring flour, turned only her head to look at Shion.

“What is it?”

“Why did you invite Inukashi and Rikiga-san over today?”

“Hm? Well... I don’t think I really had a reason. I thought it’d be nice to have some people over for dinner for once. You’ve been so

busy you haven't even had time to sit down and enjoy a good meal."

"So you did this out of concern for me?"

Karan turned her whole body towards her son this time, and shook her head slightly.

"It's not like that. It's just—Shion, have you noticed? You don't smile or laugh a lot anymore."

"Huh?"

"It's been a while since you laughed out loud like you did today."

Shion touched his own cheek. His skin felt hard and tense beneath his fingertips. Karan was looking steadily at Shion's fingers.

"Your job at the Restructural Committee must be tough."

"Yeah. But, I mean, we *are* making an entirely new organization with a new set of functions. We've got people from all sorts of positions in one place. It's not like I wasn't prepared to deal with difficulties."

"Are things not going well with Yoming and his group?" Karan raised her chin. Her tone and gaze grew hard, as if she were challenging someone. "I imagine you two must... think very differently. Shion, are Yoming and them giving you a hard time?"

Shion was at a loss for an answer.

"I knew it," Karan said. "I had a bad feeling when I found out Yoming was selected to be a member of the Restructural Committee."

"Do you know Yoming-san well, mom?"

A shadow flitted across Karan's eyes.

"I thought I knew him. He's Lili's uncle, after all, and he used to come to the bakery a lot. He said No. 6 had murdered his wife and son. He taught me what No. 6 truly was, back when I still had no idea. He helped me. He's a very intelligent person, isn't he?"

"Yeah. He is smart. He organized the resistance. He's the one who gathered all the people who opposed No. 6 and made them into an

organization. His actions were one of the things that triggered No. 6's fall. It's only normal for him to be chosen as a member of the Committee."

"Normal? Is it really? Shion, do you really think that Yoming is a suitable individual for the Restructural Committee? I... I just can't seem to convince myself that he is."

"Mom..."

The windows rattled. It seemed like the wind outside was picking up. It would sweep the clouds away and bring an end to the rain.

Tomorrow, a blue sky would probably open up above them.

"He hated No. 6 with a passion," Karan continued. "And for good reason, too. It took his most precious family away from him. He wasn't blinded like the rest of us. He saw No. 6 for what it was precisely because of his hatred for it. And this was even while he was living inside the city."

Karan ran her hand down the bag of flour beside her.

"Hatred was his energy, and it was effective for destroying No. 6. But... but that energy isn't going to create anything new. That's what I think, Shion."

There was a forlorn note in his mother's voice that made his heart ache.

One had to either throw away one's hatred or overcome it in order to create something new. Loathing could never become a force for revival.

"Just a little before the chaos came to a head in No. 6 because of that strange disease... when we'd started to see the clear signs of destruction beginning... he came here, and we had a long talk. And he said to me, 'I've lost faith in you.'"

"Yoming-san told you he lost faith in you, mom?"

“Yes. Shion, there are a lot of things that I don’t know or can’t understand. I’ve never *wanted* to know or understand. And that’s a very shameful thing indeed. If only we adults had been a little smarter, perhaps we could have saved Safu, too...”

“Mom, let’s get back to talking about Yoming-san,” Shion said in a firmer tone as if to cut across his mother’s mourning words. His thoughts and feelings for Safu were like a bottomless swamp. No matter how much he repented or apologized, there would never be an end for him. No matter how many tens of thousands of words he piled upon, no matter how much he kept praying, he would never be forgiven.

So at the very least, he would not forget.

He would remember Safu and the wish she had passed onto him until the hour of his last breath.

Karan blinked, and nodded slightly.

“Yes, he lost all faith in me because I didn’t agree with him wholeheartedly. He was trying to become a hero, a hero who overthrew a dictator state. I don’t know, it wasn’t for revenge, or anger at being oppressed all this time... I felt like he was being taken over by a sort of—desire?—to become a hero whose name would go down in history. Yoming said that casualties were inevitable in a world that was changing. He dismissed all the people bleeding and dying and said it couldn’t be helped.

For him, if a thousand people had died to save ten thousand, their lives would not have been lost in vain—but isn’t there something wrong about finalizing it like that? There’s something wrong about converting human lives into numbers. And I think it’s wrong for a hero to stand on a pedestal built on human sacrifice.”

“... Yeah.”

“Shion, can you put up a fight against Yoming?”

Fight? Is Yoming-san someone I have to fight? Is he an enemy?

Yoming's group continued to assert that the temporarily-established Restructural Committee should be dissolved and an entirely new organization created in its place. It was clear that if they had their way, the core positions of the Committee would be dominated by members of Yoming's group. It would be a considerable departure from the Committee principle, founded upon the idea that the Committee was a place where members of many backgrounds and affiliations could exchange opinions freely. But by now, Yoming and his group had stopped listening at all to the objections and opinions of Shion's group, the minority.

Something has to be done. I have to do something.

No. 6 was already a proven example of what resulted when justice lay in the hands of a few and all others were banished.

The damage was still raw, still throbbing; why was Yoming's group attempting to tread the same path?

I have to do something—

"Shion, you've gotten so thin." Karan's gaze and tone turned to those of a mother. It was a glimpse of a mother's love, the foolish, fierce, pure, and selfish love that worried only of her own child's welfare and wished for only his happiness.

"You should quit the Restructural Committee if it's such a burden on you. There are so many other ways to make a living. You said yourself once that you wanted a job that involved kids. Why don't you look for one?"

"No..." Shion slowly shook his head. "I still have things left to do."

"But..."

"Mom, he told me not to run away. I have to stay here because I have a job to finish. He said I can't turn my back on it now. I don't want to go against those words."

Karan did not question who “he” was. Instead, she silently gazed up at her son.

The wind grew even fiercer. The windows rattled restlessly.

Karan let out a subdued sigh.

“I suppose life would have been a little less burdensome if you’d been whimsical like your father.”

“Oh,” Shion said in realization. “That’s why you suddenly decided to tell me about dad.”

It was one way to live: taking nothing upon oneself, casting off any troublesome loads, turning one’s back on everything.

Your father chose to live that way.

A mother, watching her son struggle with reality, had told him the truth about his father.

But I can’t. I can’t live like dad did.

Shion . . . don’t run away.

Nezumi’s words are supporting me. Nezumi never ran away. He never retreated in the face of fate, or from reality. And I was there beside him.

Safu passed her legacy on to me.

I can’t run away.

I can’t betray them.

I have to fight—not for anyone else, but for me to remain as who I am.

He crouched and kissed his mother on the cheek.

“I’m going to sleep. Good night, mom.”

Karan’s fingers gently stroked Shion’s white hair.

“Good night.”

Her lips twisted slightly, as if she were forcing herself to smile.

* * *

A tiny mouse was curled up on the bed.

“Tsukiyo.”

It raised its head at the voice, and squeaked softly. Shion offered some crumbs of bread and cheese to Tsukiyo, putting them right up to his nose. Tsukiyo twitched his whiskers two, three times, but did not touch any of it.

When Shion petted Tsukiyo’s back with the tip of his finger, Tsukiyo closed his eyes dreamily.

Hamlet, Cravat, Tsukiyo. Out of the three mice Nezumi kept, only this Tsukiyo remained with Shion. He was a small creature, but possessed both wisdom and intelligence. He was likely a descendant of the wild mice that lived deep in the forest alongside the Forest People. Shion had simply assumed that because this mouse was no ordinary mouse, it would have the same lifespan as a human.

But these days, he could see Tsukiyo ageing and beginning to weaken. The average lifespan of a mouse was anywhere from a year and a half to two years. Even a pet hamster would live to three years at most.

Tsukiyo was slowly nearing his end.

“Tsukiyo, hang in there. You have to live to see your master come home.” Shion stroked him gently with the flat of his finger.

Cheep-cheep.

Tsukiyo chirruped contentedly, and closed his eyes.

* * *

“What is this?” Deep creases formed between Yoming’s eyebrows.

They were on the first floor of the Restructural Committee headquarters, the former city hall which used to be called the Moondrop.

Shion and Yoming were sitting across the table from one another in a small meeting room. Shion had called Yoming out.

An electronic sheet was laid out on the table. Yoming had just glanced down at the screen and furrowed his brow.

"This is proof that you diverted the funds of former No. 6."

"What? What are you on about?"

"You have always been, and still are, in the post of managing the enormous resources of former No. 6. You took advantage of your position to claim much of that money as your own. I'm talking about embezzlement."

"Absurd," Yoming sneered. "I'm busy. I have no time to be playing along with a little boy's joke."

"Joke? Is it?" Shion pressed. "No. 6's resources were left exposed for some time because management simply wasn't functioning. In that time, a third of the funds have disappeared. Gold especially—about sixty percent has been lost."

"And you're saying that's my fault?"

"Yes."

"Don't you dare. Yes, I may be in charge of managing the funds. But how did you expect me to keep guard over the gold on top of everything else during that chaos? I shouldn't have to be responsible for that."

"The gold wasn't simply stolen. It was smuggled out, and it was premeditated. If it wasn't planned beforehand, how do you explain the fact that the other forty percent still remains? Thieves would take all the gold away. Not only that, the gold was in the innermost part of the underground vault. No matter how bad the confusion, it would have been exceedingly difficult to carry out several tonnes' worth of gold without being noticed. Even professional bands of thieves wouldn't have managed it. In fact, it's outright impossible. Yoming-san, let me say this again. The gold wasn't stolen. It was smuggled out, and it was premeditated."

“And you’re saying the smuggler is me?”

“I can’t think of anyone else.”

Yoming drew his chin back and smiled blandly. “Are you calling me a thief? What an accusation. If you don’t take that back soon, I’ll sue for libel.”

“You needed a very large amount of capital to expand and maintain the power of your group. That’s why you turned to No. 6’s funds. It was the easiest, quickest way.”

“Are you really trying to accuse me?”

“This data—” Shion jerked his chin at the table. “Is a copy of your application and authorization forms that you submitted in the Committee’s name to rent out a cargo jet. Both have your own handwritten signature. This cargo jet was used in a trip to No. 4 and back. And this—”

Shion swiped the screen with his hand, and new data appeared. Yoming stared intently at the series of numbers without even blinking.

“This is a list of your personal assets provided by No. 4’s bank. Quite large, isn’t it? Fit for a king. I think it’s safe to assume that these assets have all been converted from gold. The numbers add up. And there’s more.”

He moved his fingers.

“These figures are special benefits that you handed out to your group members. This is also quite a lot. Not even the executives of former No. 6 received this much.”

“... We members placed our lives on the line to fight with No. 6,” Yoming said quietly. “We are perfectly entitled to that amount.”

“That is for the Committee to decide, and not for you to make your own judgements about. Many other people fought with their lives in the balance. Many did not live through it, either, Yoming-san.”

Shion stood up and began to roll the electronic sheet up.

"You misused public funds by handing out compensation on your own sole judgement and pocketing money for your own use. It's unmistakable treason. You've betrayed every single citizen."

The door burst open. Two men stepped inside. They were second and third in command in Yoming's group. They were both in their mid-thirties with dark brown hair.

"You've gone and done it now, Yoming."

"How could you have perpetrated such evil behind our backs? Shame on you!"

"Behind your backs?" Yoming retorted. "That's ridiculous, you all were well aware that..." Yoming's breath caught. He chewed his lip. The colour rapidly receded from his face.

"Shion, you tricked me."

Shion maintained a steady gaze at the man's pale face, and said nothing. Shion's eyes did not budge.

"... I knew you were dangerous," Yoming said softly. "I underestimated you because you were still a young boy. That was my mistake."

"We all make mistakes in life, Yoming-san. But yours just ended up costing you your life." He snapped his fingers. A door slid open leading to the next room, and two more men came in. They were of such an enormous stature that one would have to crane his neck to see their faces.

"What do you suppose you can do with me?" Yoming said defiantly. "Give me a public hanging?"

"Of course not. You were a distinguished member in the fall of No. 6. I won't be so unforgiving. On the basis of the Committee's judgement, we will grant you a bonus for your deeds, and a public pension until you die. But we will seize all of your personal assets in No. 4. You are, of course, dismissed as a member of the Restructural Committee, and you will be stripped of all of your qualifications. There will be

limitations implemented on your activities and place of residence. You are prohibited from moving out of your designated residence, regardless of what the reason may be.”

“If I don’t comply—”

“Then, I cannot guarantee your safety.”

“Heh, so it’s basically an outwardly-unoffensive imprisonment. A modern version of exile. If I get shot through the head for acting without permission, no one will blame you. No one would be able to blame you.”

The gigantic men moved to stand behind Yoming. Yoming strode toward the door, half-shoving them out of the way. Then he stopped, and turned around.

“Shion, you have potential to be a leader like no other. I, or even that mayor, couldn’t compare. Someday, you’ll try to dominate over all, try to have everything within your grasp. You’ll reign as a cold, ruthless, and exceedingly good dictator.”

Laughter—dry laughter rang out and echoed inside the room.

“And when that happens, I wonder how Karan would look at you? What kind of eyes would she behold her son with, the son who’s turned into a monster?”

One of the men placed his hand on Yoming’s shoulder. Yoming brushed it away, and walked out into the hallway. The door closed.

“Can’t even go out without a last bitter complaint.”

“He doesn’t know when to stop.”

Number 2 and 3 looked at each other and shrugged comically. They simultaneously turned back to Shion.

“Shion, we’ve been tricked, too. We didn’t even dream that he’d embezzle public funds.”

"Really? This data lists your two names clearly as the recipients of a large sum of benefits."

Shion smiled serenely at the two men, who had begun to turn pale.

"But I've erased that part. Without your co-operation, we would not have been able to bring Yoming-san's crime to light. I'm grateful."

"So we're..."

"I myself have nothing to reprimand you about." Shion extended his hand towards the two. "Please continue to work hard for No. 6. We must join all our forces to overcome this difficulty. We need your help. I hope you're willing."

The colour rose in the cheeks of the two men. They grasped Shion's hand and nodded enthusiastically.

"See you in this afternoon's meeting, then," said Shion. "I plan to report this incident in detail from the top. I'm counting on your assistance."

"Yes, we'll testify properly. We'll also show our respect for your swift response and impressive judgement in the matter. You're really an incredible leader for the next generation."

"It's an honour. But it's a little embarrassing to receive such glowing praise."

"You don't have to be modest. Not anyone can prepare such detailed data to prove a misdeed. Even Yoming didn't have anything to argue on."

"He was underestimating us, I think. He thought once he became the leader of the Committee, he'd be able to forge and rewrite data as much as he liked. That was why he fought to get to the top as soon as he could. His desperation allowed careless blunders to happen left and right."

"Ah, now I see. Incredible."

“Indeed, it was,” agreed the other man. “Impressive. Now, I think we’ll wrap up here and get to our jobs. We will see you later, then?”

“Yes.”

The two men lined up and exited. Shion was left alone.

“Detailed data, huh.” He unravelled the computer and cast his hand over it. The image on the screen crumbled, and the numbers and words vanished.

There was no such data that evidenced the crime. It likely existed—but Shion had neither the method nor the time to acquire it. If it did not exist, he simply had to create it. Create the data that would leave Yoming with no choice but to admit his crimes. It was not easy, but it was not such an arduous task, either.

It went well. He had been able to remove one obstacle from his line of sight. He would remove, drive away, destroy, his obstacles—and then what?

Shion glanced out the window. *What am I doing?*

Creating a state in this world that is different from No. 6—one that is for humans. Make a country where no one kills, and no one is killed.

Is that even possible?

Yoming’s derisive laughter burst in his ears.

What is going to happen to me?

* * *

Tap, tap. He heard the sound of the wind. No, not the wind—was someone knocking at the window?

Nezumi!

Shion ran to the window and threw it open. The wind tousled his bangs. There was no one there. It had just been a passing wind. Shion dropped to the floor and squatted, covering his face with his hands.

Nezumi... why won't you come home? Why aren't you beside me? I just want to look into your eyes and see that I am me, that I can continue to be who I am. They are my only anchor.

Nezumi, I want to see you.

There were no tears. A growl escaped through the crack between his lips. It was an animal growl, in a voice he could hardly call his own.

An alarm went off. It continued to ring. Shion stood up, and pushed the intercom button.

A young man's voice quietly came through.

"Member Shion, I'd like to hear your orders on the draft of No. 6's new policies that we will be submitting at today's meeting."

"Understood. I'll head to Conference Room 3 immediately."

"Much obliged, Member Shion."

There was a note of excitement in the young man's voice.

"It's almost coming, isn't it? We're going to clear out the old political powers and make way to build our ideal state. It's finally beginning."

Shion took a breath, and called the man's name.

"Torey, I want you to watch what you say. For us, there is no such thing as old power or new power. We want to gather the wisdom of each and every person to progress forward, a little bit at a time. We have no other way."

"Oh... right. I'm sorry."

"You don't need to apologize, but—" *You should at least be wary of wire-taps, Torey.* Shion switched off the intercom, and exhaled one more time.

He turned around to glance out the window.

A piercing blue sky spread out overhead.

Shion closed the window, and turned his back on the endless expanse of blue.

4

NEZUMI'S DAYS

THE CLOUDS shrouded the sun, and the land cooled quickly in the shadows. The atmosphere lost heat rapidly and the daytime weather now seemed like an illusion. The barrens were dotted with low shrubs and no tall trees; if one stood on higher ground, one could probably look out across the horizon.

The reddish soil lay exposed, and angular boulders sat here and there across the land. It was the picture of ruin and fruitlessness itself. But a number of shrubs harboured natural springs of clean water within their depths. Those thickets were marked by their green colour, a shade lusher than the others, and its bushes which yielded red fruit. The fruit was about the size of an infant's fist and was much too tough to eat, but its vivid colour was beautiful, and matched well with the reddish-brown of the land and the green of the shrubbery.

Nezumi crouched by the spring and scooped up some water with his

hands.

It was delicious. For someone who had journeyed across dry land, this water was like a rejuvenating nectar that gave him strength and sped his recovery.

“Hey, you guys want to take a break, too?” Two little mice poked their heads out of his jacket pocket. They climbed down Nezumi’s leg, and once they reached the ground they gave not so much a glance to the spring as they pounced right onto the red fruit.

The skin of the fruit was too tough to bite for humans, but it seemed to pose no difficulty for the rodents’ incisors. The mice devoured a whole fruit in moments, making cheerful crunching sounds all the while.

A mouse with light-brown fur—Shion had named it Hamlet—looked up and tilted its head as if in inquiry.

“No, that’s alright,” Nezumi told him. “I don’t think I can handle that fruit. You don’t have to worry about me; I have a lot to eat.”

Apparently satisfied with its master’s answer, Hamlet began nibbling at the fruit again. Nezumi sipped another mouthful of water, then washed his face. He shed his clothes and immersed his body in the spring.

It was far from a hot bath, but the cool water felt refreshing. The spring was deeper than he thought: if he dove underwater, he could see where the water sprang from the sandy bottom.

Several small fishes were swimming around in the shadows of the algae, which swayed lazily along with the current and made him think of an elegant dance.

Here was a world that was entirely different from the world above-ground.

“Is it always peaceful underwater?”

How long ago had it been? Shion had murmured those words once, his gaze hovering in the air.

* * *

It was in that room in the West Block. It was dawn. He remembered that the steady rain had finally let up after three days, and the night had brought a biting chill that blanketed the Block. But it was now starting to lighten.

Just the day before, not long after the sun had gone down, Rikiga had made a rare appearance at Nezumi's residence.

"Shion, I brought this for you to eat." Rikiga, who had braved the cold and blustering winds to get here, placed a pointed emphasis on "for you to eat" as he handed a paper bag to Shion.

Shion peeked inside and emitted an exclamation of joy.

"Wow, this is amazing! White bread and meat!"

"There are also fresh vegetables and wine. Oh, and cheese. Quite a feast, don't you think?"

"We can hold a banquet with this!" Shion said in awe. "Rikiga-san, are you giving this all to us?"

Rikiga pursed his lips and shook his head. "Not 'us'. I'm giving it to *you*. Don't get that part mixed up. Understand, Shion? You're going to eat this. You have absolutely no need to give it to a certain serpent-tongued and cunning actor."

"We'll all eat it together," Shion beamed. "I've promised to have a read-aloud with the kids tomorrow. I'll make a nice, hearty soup that we can all eat together. It'll be a splendid lunch."

Rikiga's face contorted. His expression was like that of someone whose back itched terribly, but could not reach far enough to scratch it no matter how hard he tried. Nezumi stifled a laugh behind his book.

“What? What’s so funny, Eve?”

“Oh, nothing. I didn’t mean to laugh. But if you must hear it out of me, it was because you made such a cute face, old man, I couldn’t help but smile.”

Nezumi closed his book and stood up. He peered into the paper bag that Shion held out for him, and gave a high whistle.

“My, my. This is much more than your average wooing gift. If you seek you shall find, huh? Only a black market trader like you could pull this off, Mr. Rikiga, sir.”

“Who are you calling a black market trader? I’m a bonafide businessman.”

“A businessman who traffics women to No. 6 officials and charges exorbitant amounts for it? Such philanthropic and saintly work you do. I am ever so humbled.”

Rikiga bared his teeth and made a sour expression.

“Shion, look. You’re free to take the meat and vegetables to make soup or make them part of your interior decor, but whatever you do, don’t let him have a bite. Don’t even let him smell it.”

Shion was not listening. His eyes were aglow as he laid out the contents of the bag on the table.

“Nezumi’s soup is top-class,” he said.

Potatoes, onion, cabbage, carrots. All were fresh. The mice squeaked incessantly from atop a pile of books.

“He barely uses any seasoning, but it’s still so good,” Shion continued. “With this many ingredients, we should be able to make the best soup ever. Everyone will be so happy. Thank you, Rikiga-san.”

“Ah... but, well, Shion. What I’m saying is that I went out of my way to—”

"Before our meal, we'll say our graces to you, Rikiga-san. It won't be a half-hearted ritual. I'm sure everyone will be truly thankful when they say so. Right, Nezumi?"

"Of course. We'll say, 'I am grateful and wish nothing but the best from the bottom of my heart for this compassionate soul. I pray that his sublime soul will forever be free of any hurt or pain,'" he said in the voice of an innocent maiden. Rikiga had a soft spot for innocent, pure, and unblemished things. Perhaps it was because he had internalized his own corruption, or perhaps they were simply his fancy, but for whatever reason, he couldn't help but be attracted to them.

Whether it was an innocent maiden or a prostitute on the corner; a noble lady or loyal young man; a cunning merchant or an aged philosopher, Nezumi could become whatever the other person wished. If only for a short moment, he could show them an illusion of their desire with just his voice.

Just now, he was certain that Rikiga had seen the countenance of an untainted girl overlapped on his face. The eyes were connected to the heart, and so could not help but see what they want to see more than what is actually there. They also refused to acknowledge what they did not want to see.

"Damnit! Just a third-rate actor and his tricks. Don't think you can get away with mocking me, Eve."

"I would never think of doing such a disgusting thing like manipulating you to my every whim, old man." Nezumi shrugged.

That sneaky fox. He's as unpleasant as they come. Shion, why don't you move in with me before he starts influencing you? Eve, if you don't change your ways now, someday you'll pay for it. I know, next time I'll bring some butter. For you, I mean, Shion. And I'll bring some fruits. Make sure that bastard fox doesn't swipe them from you.

Rikiga wrapped up a lengthy rant, then went home.

“He never shuts up,” Nezumi grumbled. “The right thing to do would be to deliver his gifts and go straight home. He’s the picture of tactlessness, overstaying his welcome like that.”

“Well, I thought it was nice of him,” Shion said. “He came to deliver all of this expensive stuff to us. It’s ungrateful of you to speak ill of him.”

“Hah,” Nezumi scoffed. “Some No. 6 official must have taken a liking to a woman that the old man arranged for him. Old man got a handsome load of goods as a reward for arranging that woman, except that stuff wouldn’t have been hard to come by in No. 6, anyway.”

“But he shared it with us instead of hoarding it for himself. He didn’t expect anything in return. I think it was a noble thing.”

“Noble? Are you kidding me?”

“Am I wrong?”

Nezumi smiled with only one side of his face. He found Shion’s trusting nature at once annoying and funny. His frankness and willingness to trust were foreign to Nezumi. They were as meaningless as the frivolous embellishments on a piece of clothing.

Rikiga had done it out of guilt.

He was ashamed that he made a business out of selling West Block women to men from No. 6, and pocketing the money that came from it. On one hand, it was a sign that Rikiga’s heart had not yet been corrupted to the core, but on the other hand, it was also a sign of his weakness.

Rikiga had wanted to absolve his guilt, his own weakness, by giving Shion a part of what he had earned. He wanted to see Shion’s carefree smile, feel his joy, and draw some relief for himself. That was all there was to it. Yet, Shion could not see through this facade.

Why does he believe in people so easily? How does he do it? How does he keep doing it? It’s a complete mystery.

"Nezumi?" Shion blinked at him uncertainly. "What're you thinking about?"

"Nothing, really . . . oh, the wine wouldn't be a good idea for the kids. Let's have it ourselves."

"Sure. We'll have a bit of cheese and bread to go with. How about we boil some potatoes, too?"

"Sounds great. This is going to be a wonderful night. Let me take back what I said earlier—I am most sincerely grateful for Rikiga-san's incredible generosity."

"You're pretty material."

"Call me *liberated*. Now, I'll take care of the potatoes, then."

"Nezumi, we only have mugs to drink out of."

"Couldn't ask for better."

"We're gonna drink wine out of mugs?"

"Hey, you don't have to force yourself. I'll have it all if you don't want it."

"In your dreams," Shion cut in. "We're going to divide it equally in half."

They poured each other wine as they snacked on bread, cheese, and boiled potatoes. The label on the bottle indicated that the wine was from the western-most city of No. 3, and was quite an expensive pick. A gentle sweetness crept up from the depths of its acidity. It was delicious.

Before long, the two had emptied the whole bottle between themselves.

"You can handle alcohol pretty well, can't you?" Nezumi said.

"Impressed?" Shion grinned cockily with a flushed face.

"Not impressed, really, just a bit surprised. I didn't know you were a drinker."

"This is the first time in my life."

“... What?”

“This is my first drink ever. I didn’t expect it to taste so good,” Shion said thoughtfully.

“Huh? Wait, Shion, are you alright? You just had half a bottle of wine. You must be pretty drunk by now.”

“Mmmm, not really, no,” Shion said contentedly. “It just feels nice. And now I feel so stupid for troubling myself over such little things.”

“What little things were you troubling yourself over?”

“Uh, let me see,” Shion drawled, then chuckled. “I can’t remember. If I can’t remember, they must’ve not been that important in the first place. Ha ha, cheers to no worries! Cheers to wine!”

“Shion—you’re pretty drunk.”

“I *am* drunk. I drank wine, didn’t I? Of course I’d be drunk. Or is there some law saying I’m not allowed to be drunk?” Shion leaned so far forward that their noses were practically touching.

“Shion... please tell me you don’t pick fights with people when you’re drunk.”

“Pick fights with people? What people? You?”

“We’re the only two here apart from the mice.”

Shion stood up abruptly and put a hand on his hip.

“We’re the only two here apart from the mice.’ Ha ha ha, how was it? Wasn’t that impression spot-on?”

“Impression of who?”

“You.”

“Not even a bit.”

“Liar! I sounded exactly like you.” Shion stabbed a finger at Nezumi, and drew a circle with it. “You know, I think I’ve awakened to my talent of doing impressions. Maybe I’m a miming prodigy. I *must* be

a prodigy. The heavens have given me this amazing talent. 'We're the only two here apart from the mice.' Ha ha, see! I *do* sound like you!"

"... Is it fun imitating me?" Nezumi said exasperatedly.

"It is." Shion crouched again and brought his nose right up to Nezumi's. "It's unbelievably fun. When I'm with you, everything is such a joy to experience. Sometimes I wonder why it's so fun to be with you."

Nezumi tilted his face away, drew his chin back, and tried to smile gently like a mother indulging her baby. The muscles around his cheeks were tense and refused to co-operate.

"I see. Well, that's good for you, isn't it? Just great. But I think you've let yourself be influenced a little too much by Inukashi's dogs. We're humans here. We can communicate without having to rub noses."

"We're humans here. We can communicate without having to rub noses.' Heh heh, how was that? Didn't it sound like you? But y'know, Nezumi, people can't communicate as easily as you make it sound. Compared to the number of things we understand, there're way more things we wish we could unnerstan' but can't. A hundred times—a thousan' times more things. Thas' juss how't is."

"Shion... you're starting to slur."

"But iss great for dogs, innit? They juss hafta stick their noses t'gether 'n' go, *sniff sniff* to unnerstan' each other. An' they lick each other, too."

"Don't you dare lick my face."

"I won'. I might bite, though," Shion said, stretching out his last syllable in a singsong voice.

"Knock it off, you drunk. Hurry up and go to sleep. Don't blame me if you wake up tomorrow morning with a hangover. Besides, have you stopped to think about how old you are? You're sixteen and you have no inkling of how to drink... Shion? Hey, Shion, what's wrong?"

Shion was leaning heavily on him. Nezumi could hear the sound of his soft slumbering breathing.

“Geez, you must be kidding me,” Nezumi muttered. “Hey, don’t fall asleep here! I’m not gonna carry you to bed, you know.”

Nezumi shifted his weight. Shion shifted along with him, and they both tumbled onto the floor. Shion’s breathing did not so much as catch. It continued on, even and regular.

“God,” Nezumi grumbled. “You stay awake just long enough to blabber to your heart’s content, then you’re out like a light. I don’t know if you could get any more ‘typical drunk’ than this.”

Cheep cheep cheep! Cravat looked up from nibbling at a piece of cheese and twitched his whiskers.

He’s hopeless, he seemed to say. He almost seemed to let out a sigh as well.

Nezumi couldn’t hold it in any longer. He burst out laughing.

He continued to laugh by himself, with Shion beside him.

* * *

He woke up.

He knew it was dawn because the air in the room had gotten even colder. The chill tended to worsen just as the eastern skies were beginning to lighten. This was also the hour when the highest number of invalids, elderly, starving children, and physically weak people drew their last breath.

Death slipped into the gap between the arrival of morning and the leaving of night and stole people away. *But even so*, Nezumi thought, *the frigid air and starvation are much more merciful servants of Death. Much, much more merciful than ruthless violence.*

The scar on his back gave a great throb.

Ruthless—these hostile flames had burnt his back precisely because they were ruthless. They had swallowed his family and turned everything to ashes.

Throb, throb. The restless pain crawled up his back. Nezumi got up and regulated his breathing. He took a deep lungful of the frozen air that summoned death, and exhaled. The cool air that slid down his airway was a sign that he was alive. He was alive and warm, which was why he could feel this cold.

Living people are warm. Shion had taught him so. Shion had taught him that living was to feel another's warmth right beside him, and to pass on one's own warmth to another.

Nezumi raked a hand through his hair, then inhaled and exhaled deeply one more time. For him, living had always been about revenge and nothing else. His own survival, the fact that he was alive was revenge towards No. 6. One day, one day not so far off, he would live and survive to deliver the fatal blow to No. 6—that had always been the only thing on his mind. He cared about nothing else. His hatred and loathing towards No. 6 only mounted, never waned. But he did waver. Revenge was not the only thing in his heart. There was also something almost entirely different—something that existed completely unrelated to No. 6.

Nezumi himself could not grasp what that something was.

That's why I waver. He wavered as he wondered about himself after he had fulfilled his revenge—would he be completely emptied, or would he still be full? Would there still be a stubborn core of hatred left inside him? He wavered.

If he wavered, he wandered. Wandering created a vulnerable opening. Nezumi reached behind him and felt his back. The throbbing had subsided considerably. Soon it would go away completely.

“Mm...”

Shion rolled over. Last night, Nezumi had dragged him to bed, and Shion had continued to sleep without a sound, save for his breathing. “You are *so*—” he murmured to Shion’s sleeping face. “So high-maintenance, so hard to take care of... just hopeless.”

Shion rolled over again. His eyelids fluttered, and slowly lifted. There was no light source save for the dying embers in the stove. In nearly inky darkness, Nezumi could see a faint white outline of Shion’s profile and hair.

“Nezumi... did you say something?”

Despite the fact that he had just woken up, and that they were immersed in darkness, Shion’s vision had caught Nezumi squarely and his ears had sensed his words.

“I was giving you my morning greetings. Good morning, your Highness. How do you feel today? —Something like that.”

“I feel... not so bad.”

“Oh. Not hung over? Looks like you and booze will get along. If you don’t be careful, you’ll turn out like the old man. Don’t say I didn’t warn you.”

“You can’t get hung over from wine. It’s fruit-based, so it’s gentle on the body.”

“Is that true?”

“Yeah. I feel like I heard something along those lines from someone... maybe it’s just me.”

“Not very reliable, are you?”

“I’m not. I’m pretty unreliable—I’ve finally started to realize that.”

“So you’ve discovered yourself. Congratulations,” Nezumi teased without meaning it.

Shion always explored his own self thoroughly, diligently, and persistently. He always tried to face off squarely with what was inside of

him.

And that was worthy of awe and praise, was it not?

Nezumi knew right down to his bones how difficult it was not to run away from oneself. He even felt a sort of reverent fear towards this high-maintenance, hard-to-take-care-of, hopeless boy.

Shion lifted the upper half of his body up and let his gaze wander in the air.

"Nezumi."

"Hm?"

"Do you think it's always peaceful underwater?"

"Wha?"

"Underwater. Like in the sea, or in a river, or in a lake . . . is it always peaceful in the water?"

"What're you talking about? Did you dream of something?"

"Yeah. It was the most vivid dream I've had in a while. I wonder if it's because of the wine?"

"Was it a wine-coloured dream?"

"No . . . I was swimming underwater, along the bottom. I could breathe just fine. I just kept swimming on and on." Shion shifted and gave a small sigh.

"And then?"

"That's it. I was just swimming. It was so quiet and beautiful, and I felt so happy. It seemed like such a peaceful place, with no fighting or invading . . ."

"Impossible." Nezumi smiled wanly in the dark. *Naive, aren't you?*

"Of course there's fighting underwater. It's just as much of a dog-eat-dog world as it is above ground. I thought you specialized in ecology."

"I was supposed to specialize in it."

“Either way, it doesn’t matter. I thought ecology was a field about the interaction between organisms and their environment. Didn’t you learn that predation exists underwater, too?”

Shion shook his head. “I know that. I’m not saying that it’s Paradise underwater. I just thought, since there are no humans...”

“So what?”

“There would be no meaningless fighting. There wouldn’t be murder for the sake of murder, or any atrocious killings.”

“That’s what you were thinking about while you were swimming?”

“Yeah. It was so... beautiful. It was sandy on the bottom, and it stretched on and on. There were jade-coloured stones here and there in the sand, and they would glimmer from time to time, though I didn’t know how. I reached out to pick one up, but I changed my mind.”

“Why?”

“The stone was so beautiful, I almost felt afraid to touch it. I felt like if I touched it, the world would fall apart.”

“I didn’t know you were such a romanticist,” Nezumi commented.

“You sound like a blushing maiden.”

Shion squirmed. “Yeah, I’m a little embarrassed, too. But I can’t really help it, can I? That’s just how I felt. But I kind of regret it now. If I was going to wake up anyway, I should have picked one up.”

Nezumi almost burst out into a laugh again. He wondered if he was losing the ability to rein in his emotions.

“You should go back to sleep,” he said. “Maybe you’ll be able to have the same dream. Then, you could pick up as many rocks or coins as your heart pleases.”

“I guess. Hey, Nezumi.”

“Hm?”

"We swam when we escaped No. 6, too, didn't we? But that time, I was concentrating too much on swimming that I didn't have time to stop and feel much."

"We were swimming in sewage. That's completely different from what you dreamed about."

"But... it's true that I've seen... so many beautiful things... here in the West Block..."

Nezumi could hear the other boy lapse into quiet breathing as he fell asleep. He could feel Shion's warmth. He felt like this warmth was all he needed to get him through the frigid winter days.

What am I thinking? That's absurd. Those who could not live by themselves, those who could not stand up to fate on their own, simply did not survive. It was how things worked in the West Block.

I don't need any warmth.

Nezumi got up and filled a cup with water from their stores. He drained it in one draught. The cool water slipped down through his body. Shion muttered something unintelligible.

"Did you manage to pick one up?" Nezumi said to him. There was no answer. Only the heavy groan of the blowing wind echoed in the air.

* * *

The algae suddenly rippled. They were not languid movements like those moments before; now, it bristled like a thin tree being blasted by the wind.

It was an unsettling movement.

A silver fish burst out of the tangle of algae and sped past Nezumi's line of vision. It was but an instant—but Nezumi could clearly see it swallowing half of a little fish. Predator and prey. The eaters and the eaten.

The disturbance was brief, and before long the tangle of algae returned to its normal state and the little fish resumed swimming about as if nothing had happened.

Nezumi found a blue stone on the waterbed. He picked it up without hesitation. The stone was neither glittery nor beautiful. It was just a crude, misshapen rock.

A breath escaped his lips and formed a jet of bubbles. Suddenly, he couldn't breathe. Unless this was some kind of dream, he knew it was impossible for a human like him to remain underwater for much longer.

Nezumi paddled the water and aimed for the surface.

The sun was apparently back out, for the surface of the water was glowing white. A black shadow lay diagonally across the surface.

It was the shadow of a fallen tree. A dying tree had tipped over at the roots, and was half-hanging into the water. Nezumi grasped a branch and pulled himself up. Water rushed past his ears and his hair clung to his neck and shoulders. He could let out a long exhale now. He filled his chest with air.

The falling tree was still partly connected to its roots, and perhaps due to that, its leaves were lush and its branches grew out in all directions without showing signs of withering. Nezumi swung his leg over the trunk, and took another breath. He had not expected a tree of this size to be growing here. This unremarkable oasis in fact hid many treasures within.

Something moved in the corner of his eye, around the area where he had tossed his belongings. It seemed like a person.

Screek, screek!

Scratch, scratch, scratch!

The voices of the little mice turned harsh. They were baring their teeth in apprehension at the suspicious shadow before them.

“Ow! Stop it! Ouch!” yelled a voice. It belonged to a man. “Jesus, what the hell are these things? Go away! Go on, beat it! Stop biting me! Damnit, I’m gonna roast you whole and eat you. Ow, my earlobe!”

Apparently the little mice had launched into their attack. The man’s cries grew shriller.

“Ow, ow, ow! Damnit, you bastards!”

The man attempted to flee, leaving curses in his wake. He swung his arm around to brush off the mice. His hand firmly clutched Nezumi’s belongings.

Nezumi stood on the fallen tree and gripped the rock in his hand.

“Hey, thief.”

The man jumped and whirled around. Nezumi hurled the stone straight towards his face. At the same time, he himself plunged into the water. He swam towards the shore.

The man was kneeling on the grass, covering his face with both hands. Blood was dripping from between his fingertips. Hamlet and Cravat leapt onto his shoulder as Nezumi swiftly donned his clothes.

The little mice clamoured over each other as if making a passionate claim.

“Right, I get it, I get it. You two did a good job.” Nezumi petted them both on the head with his finger. Cravat then dove into his pocket, and Hamlet into his mop of wet hair.

“Ugh... it hurts. My eyes... I’m blinded! Help me!” The man stretched his bloody hand out into the air and flailed.

“I aimed for the middle of your forehead, and my aim is good. I’ve never missed once. I’ll go so far as to say I went easy on you.”

The man looked up at Nezumi with a hand still on his forehead.

“Went easy?” he said incredulously.

"I sure did. I could have lodged that rock into your forehead. I showed compassion to a thief. You should be thankful."

The man took his hand away. Blood was spurting out of the centre of his forehead and running down his face.

"You call this going easy?"

"Of course. No harm done to your skull or your brain. You just got a little torn flesh there. It's almost too lenient a punishment for theft."

"Why, thank you," said the man sarcastically. "I'll be sure to get my brainwaves checked out at the hospital. Ugh, god, it hurts! It's stinging!" The man groaned as he washed his face. Then, he took out an array of bottles in many sizes from the cloth bag slung over his shoulder. Inside the bottles were liquids of every colour. The man skilfully mixed some liquids together to produce a lilac-coloured, slightly viscous solution which he soaked a cloth with and applied to his wound.

"Hmm, this should do it. The wound should close up by tomorrow morning." The man then wound the cloth around his forehead and grinned. He was tanned, and deep creases lined his eyes and his mouth. There were prominent white streaks in his shaggy head of hair. Yet his voice and the glint in his eyes were lively—youthful, even.

His age was a mystery. It was hard to tell whether he was young or old, but he was still a thief nonetheless.

"But let me say, boy—" Once the man had put away the bottles into his bag, he turned to Nezumi and began to talk to him with a smile. His tone was much like that of a teacher lecturing his student on the principles of higher learning.

"Now that I can get a closer look at you, I can see you're quite the beauty. A beauty like you shouldn't be swimming naked in a place like this. This place is dangerous—breeding grounds for vagabonds and rogues. Swimming in this place with not a thread to clothe your

body—why, you’re like a sweet lamb wandering amongst a pack of wolves. Caution is what’s needed, boy, caution.”

“Thank you, I didn’t expect to be lectured by a thief. Good to know you don’t even feel guilty about what you did, old man.”

“Old man? Are you calling me an old man?”

“Well, it’s not about me, is it? I’m neither an old man nor a thief.”

The man blinked. Twice. Thrice. Four times. Once he stopped blinking, he burst out into laughter.

“Ha ha ha! That’s funny! Ha ha ha ha! That was a good one! You have a sharp tongue for such a pretty face. Ha ha ha! Ah, you’re an interesting one!” he chortled. “Ha—”

The man’s laughter ceased. Nezumi had pressed a knife to his throat.

“What an irritating voice you have,” Nezumi hissed. “Why don’t you quiet down for a little—no, forever,” he whispered into the man’s ear from behind. Nezumi knew well how much fear his whisper instilled to the person at knifepoint. He also knew how effectively this fear was at disabling the victim.

The man shuddered.

“Oh... no, c-come on, wait a minute. You don’t have to use a knife to shut me up. Really, I’m honestly sorry. I’ll apologize if I’ve offended you. I’m sorry.”

Nezumi drew back and put away his knife. The man clutched his throat and moved his lips. A long exhale hissed from between them.

“God, impatient despite your looks, aren’t you? I thought you’d have a more graceful manner.”

“I reserve my manners and grace for other people who are also graceful. You’re a thief. You tried to sneak away with a stranger’s belongings. I think you deserve a slash across the throat with a knife much more than graceful manners.”

"Have you ever killed before?" The man looked up at Nezumi from beneath his eyebrows. "Have you killed a man with that knife, young'un?"

"I don't have any obligation to answer a thief."

"No, don't misunderstand me. I wasn't trying to steal your things."

Nezumi looked down at him expressionlessly.

"It's true," the man insisted. "Believe me. Here, this is proof."

The man thrust his hand into his cloth bag and began to take out one item after another. There were several vials of medicine, a bag of cured meat, a water jug, a wrapped loaf of bread, a hunk of cheese, rock salt, and a small pouch. The man opened the pouch and showed it to Nezumi. It was full to bursting with gold coins.

"See? Sorry to say this, but I'm a little more well off than you. I don't *need* to steal your things. I hope you understand now."

"I don't understand at all." Nezumi shrugged just his right shoulder.

"I don't care how well-off you are. You still tried to walk away with my stuff. That's the fact of the matter. That was theft and there's no saying otherwise."

"I guess it can't be helped if that's what you think I am. So this wound,"—the man gently touched his forehead—"is my curse and mark of Cain. I've already been through hell, whatnot with this wound on my forehead and being bitten by mice. Can't you just take that and say I've already paid my dues?"

"Awfully in your favour, that interpretation, isn't it?" Nezumi slung his load over his shoulder and smiled faintly. Suddenly, everything felt foolish. Soon the sun would set. He had to secure a spot to sleep for the night. There was no more time to waste with this smooth-talking thief.

"Oh, leaving so soon?" The man stood up. He was wiry and tall. He was clad from top to bottom in rough, white cloth, and was wearing dirty leather sandals.

"You bet I am. I'd rather not stay to chat with a thief."

"I told you I'm not a thief. I just wanted to find something out."

"Find out?"

"Yes, find out where you came from."

"And what would you do with that information?"

The man straightened up. "No, I just thought... just maybe, that you were from No. 6. It was just a thought."

No. 6.

He had not expected to hear this name out here.

No. 6.

The artificial city which some called a utopia, which was supposed to have been the embodiment of humankind's intellect and hopes, had quickly transformed into a towering monster. The city had crumbled as if succumbing to the weight of its own horrific ugliness.

Nezumi, I'll wait here for you. I'll keep waiting.

Shion's voice echoed deep inside his ears.

"Aha, I see. So you *are* from that city." The man jumped up and attempted to grasp Nezumi's hand.

"Don't touch me." Nezumi batted away the arm that was offered to him. He hadn't meant to do it with much force, but the man staggered back and plunged one foot into the water.

"No need to be so hostile," the man said. "It's just that if you *are* a resident of No. 6, there are a lot of things I'd like to ask you."

"And I have less than a grain of sand's worth to say to you. I'm not a citizen of No. 6."

"But you know about it. Is it true that the city is destroyed now?"

The man's expression showed an obvious tension. The corners of his eyes were turned up, and they twitched slightly.

“I hear rumours everywhere, but no one knows the truth. And I think you know. I saw vacuum-packed rations and a lightweight LED generator in your pack. That’s from No. 6, isn’t it? I can’t think of anywhere else you would get it.”

Before the day of Nezumi’s departure, Karan and Shion had packed all manners of things into Nezumi’s bags, Karan with the face of a mother seeing her son off, and Shion in stolid silence.

We really are saying good-bye.

Nezumi had finally felt the reality of their parting in his flesh as he watched Shion’s profile, with the boy’s lips pursed in a stiff, almost grumpy, line.

Tomorrow, I’ll be leaving. Shion will stay, and I will leave.

Their two lives, connected almost miraculously four years ago, were now parting and going their separate ways. Nezumi and Shion had lived together for less than half a year. It was a very short period compared to the days he had spent alone until then, and probably to the days that were to follow. It was a brief, yet intense, period.

Would there be any period in the future more intense and finely-defined than that period I spent with him?

Nezumi shook his head. No. 6 had fallen. He had fulfilled what he had set out for.

So it’s fine.

Shion was a person of the past. Although he would remain in Nezumi’s memories, never to disappear, he was not involved in Nezumi’s present. He had to draw a line. If he didn’t he would not be able to move forward. He would not be able to live the present if he was trapped in the past.

He’d had enough. Enough of dragging the past behind him and bearing its weight. He wanted no more of it.

"Come on, won't you answer me?" A pleading tone crept into the man's voice. "I hear rumours. Lots of them. I hear that No. 6 has fallen, but I've also heard that that's all a lie, and that city is still there, still prospering. I can't tell if either story is true or false."

"You can always see for yourself."

The man drew his chin back and let his throat rumble.

"... But No. 6 is such a distant land."

"It's only about a six-month walk. That's pretty close."

"Half a year... just thinking about it makes me feel faint." The man gave such a lengthy exhale that his body seemed to shrink a size.

"Aren't you a traveller, too, old man? Or don't tell me you've settled in this wilderness?"

The man's lip curled revealing a part of his teeth, which were surprisingly white. His tone and his voice carried none of the piteousness of before.

"Oh, I wouldn't be so incredulous. It might be a more comfortable place to live than you think."

The earth was mostly uninhabitable by humans for the long-term, aside from the six cities and their surroundings—it had been said so for years.

People had built the six big cities in search of the right location, land, and conditions for survival. Those who could not get inside had no choice but to die, or to cling to their lives by hanging on margins of the cities.

But after wandering the wilderness, Nezumi realized that not all of it were badlands that inhibited any chance of survival. There was more greenery, more oases than he saw back when he had wandered with the old woman; there were even scattered streams, grassy fields, and marshlands.

It seemed as if the environment was recovering suddenly and rapidly, though Nezumi could not tell if this improvement was the earth exerting its inner strength or something that was simply temporary. Nezumi figured no one would be able to tell.

But he did feel one thing: both the earth and humankind were resilient. Humans were gathering near bodies of water and establishing small settlements. They irrigated water and ploughed the fields, planted seeds, tended cattle, produced children, and were attempting to rear them. Although they were in extremely harsh conditions, they were establishing lives that were separate from the six big cities.

Shion, the world is shifting. It's always moving and changing shape. Have your eyes caught this change? Have your ears caught the sound of this change, its movements in the womb?

He spoke mentally to Shion, who was probably still in the midst of a difficult battle in a newborn city.

"Oh, I know. How about this: why don't you stay over at my house tonight, young'un? I'll give you a night's lodging as a way to apologize for my rudeness. Will you sit down with me and tell me your story? It's a small cottage, but I have a bed and a bath. It's a pretty good lodging for these parts."

"I won't take it."

"Why not? It's a warm bed and a hot bath."

"You could offer me a marble bathtub and I'd still refuse. I don't even want to set foot into a thief's lodging."

"As I said before, I'm not a thief. I'm No. 6's—" the man abruptly shut his mouth. Nezumi could hear the clear sounds of a horse's neigh and human footsteps. There were several horses and men. The air suddenly carried a scent of foreboding.

"Oh, no. They came after us." Colour fled from the man's face. In an attempt to escape, he tripped over his feet and landed on his bottom.

"There, I see him! There he is!" Three men appeared, wading through the shrubbery. All three of them were of immense size. One was tan-skinned, and the other two were fair-skinned with a hint of pink.

"We found you, fraud! Don't think you can get out of this alive." The tan man raised a thick arm. His animal aggression was overwhelming. "What the hell kind of elixir is this?" he roared. "It's just coloured water! Stop fucking around."

"Take him down!"

"Finish him off!"

The two fair-skinned men yelled at once. One of them had his grey hair tied up like a horse's tail, and the other's head was shaven clean.

"You tricked us out of our money. I don't think anybody will have a problem if you happen to get finished off."

"W-Wait! Hold on a minute! You misunderstand me. That medicine is really an elixir. Y-you must have made a mistake while you were preparing it—"

"Shut up! Still got the balls to lie, huh?" bellowed one.

"Rip his mouth apart and pull his tongue out so he can never speak again! While you're at it, break two or three of his teeth!"

"Eeek!" the man cried. "P-Please, let's calm down and talk about this without resorting to violence. I-I'll give you your money back!"

"Money?" the tan man smirked. It made for a perfect stage villain's face. "Of course you'll give it back to us. I'll take my time with the money after I'm finished with you."

"Eeeek, help! C-Come on, young'un! Help me!" The man looked at him with pleading eyes.

"Hm? Who're you? Are you this fraudster's friend?" The ponytail man's eyes bulged as he glared at Nezumi.

"Never. I was just passing by. See ya." Nezumi turned his back on the men. The last thing he wanted to do was get involved in a scuffle, much less a dispute involving a thief.

"W-Wait! Please, don't leave me!"

"Shut up!"

He heard the dull sound of flesh hitting flesh behind him. He heard someone collapse to the ground.

"St-Stop... help me, please."

"A fraudster like you should just own up to his crime, Shion."

Nezumi's feet stopped.

"Did you say Shion?" He turned around.

The man came crawling up to him, bleeding from the corner of his mouth. He clung to Nezumi, pleading for help over and over.

"Is your name... Shion?"

"I—it's what I call myself, but..."

"It's not your real name."

"It's my son's name. H-He's an adorable baby, like an aster flower."

"Your son's name?"

No way. Can it be?

"Hey, kid." The man with the ponytail strode over to him. "If you're just a passerby, you better hand that man over to us and get going. Or else—"

"Or else, what?"

The ponytail snapped his fingers as his face twisted into a grin.

"Or else you'll be buried in the wild right alongside him."

"Oh, I think I'd like to decline, if you don't mind. I don't really like being in the dirt."

"Hey, fella." The tanned man twisted his face into the same kind of vulgar grin. "You're actually quite the looker up close. It's a waste to

put you underground. Why don't you come along with us? We'll give you a good time."

"What, you didn't realize I was beautiful until you looked at me up close? I can see eyesight wasn't one of the things you were given, along with looks."

"What the hell did you say?"

Nezumi put his pack down and gave a small sigh. *And so it goes in the end. Shion, your name always gets me involved in some kind of conflict. I hope you're aware of that.*

"Turning against us, huh, little bastard?"

"I wish I didn't have to."

"Hah, well, that's fine. We'll just beat you up a little until you quiet down. After we get rid of the fraudster, we'll have all the time to enjoy with you."

"Not the face, though. This one brings in the bucks."

"I know that. Heh heh, we found ourselves a gem." The tanned man licked his lips. Then he clenched his fist and lunged forward.

His movements were practiced and smooth, like one who was used to violence and fighting.

Nezumi retreated a step and whistled. Hamlet burst out of his hair and launched itself at the tanned face in front of it.

"Argh! What is it?!"

Before the tanned man could grasp Hamlet, Nezumi sank his knee into the man's belly. The man's enormous tanned body fell to the ground without a sound. Nezumi jumped over the fallen man and drew right up to the ponytailed man.

"L-Little bastard—"

The ponytail bore down on him, his eyes bulging. Nezumi already had an idea of the timing. He dodged the blow, slipped close to the

man and hammered the blade of his hand into the man's throat. The ponytail bent over backwards before collapsing on his back. He, too, was unable to raise so much as a cry.

"Oh, you've done it—" The bald man, the last one remaining, drew a dagger out. "I'm gonna smash you."

The bald man's movements were slightly less nimble than the other two. Nezumi spun around so that he was behind him, and coiled his arm around the man's neck, tightening his grip.

The dagger fell at his feet. Nezumi kicked it towards the spring. A moment later, he heard a clear splash.

"A knife isn't something you just swing around. I suggest you get a little more training." Nezumi tightened his headlock even more. All the strength left the bald man's body. When Nezumi uncoiled his arm, the man fell to his knees with a muffled gasp.

Hamlet scurried up to Nezumi's shoulder and chirruped softly.

He heard applause.

"Brilliant. I felt like I was watching a stage play. Amazing. Just stunning. That was good work. Hey, what are you—"

Nezumi snatched the pouch of gold coins from the man's cloth bag and placed it in the tanned man's hand. The tanned man groaned softly and raised his head slightly.

"Sorry about that. Can you take this money as an apology for what he did and write it off? Please."

The tanned man blinked. He seemed to nod ever so slightly.

"H-Hey! That's too much. It's my money!"

"There'll be no grudges this way. Or would you rather these men follow you around everywhere? Let me tell you that these types are tenacious."

The man shrugged, and resumed clapping.

"I see. But anyway, you certainly did a brilliant job of cleaning them up. I'm humbled."

"Were you a citizen of No. 6?"

The man's hands froze. Without his smooth talk and clapping, the silence seemed to ring in Nezumi's ears.

"Answer me. Did you live in that city?"

"... Yes, I did. But I said my goodbyes a long, long time ago."

"Why?"

"Why? Hmm, let's see. Because that city was fake, young'un. If it's fake, it will always someday begin to unravel. I knew No. 6 would probably begin to tighten its surveillance and become even more domineering in its attempt to keep itself together. I didn't think I could stand being suffocated like that."

I see. So this man saw through No. 6's true form and its destiny.

"And you escaped from the city alone, leaving your beloved little boy behind."

"I couldn't convince my wife to leave. She refused to leave No. 6 with me. I don't think she could trust me completely."

"That's shrewd judgement enough. If she had come with someone as irresponsible as the likes of you, she would've been a pile of bones by now."

"Not exactly a polite one, are you? But anyway, is it true? Has No. 6 really been destroyed? It has, hasn't it? An artificial world like that would never be able to exist in reality for long. It must have crumbled from its foundations... it's true, isn't it?"

"If it is, what do you plan to do?"

"I'm going home."

"Home? To No. 6? It's pretty far-off."

“Oh, six months of walking will get me there. It’s not a big deal. You said so yourself.”

“Yearning to see your wife and son again, huh, even after you abandoned them once? Pretty selfish thing to do, I think.”

“No... that’s not all of it.” The man fell silent for a while, then raised his face determinedly. “I owe you. You saved my life. So let me tell you something. Come here.”

The man invited Nezumi out of the shrubbery. Three horses were tethered and grazing. They were a dark brown colour.

“No one will overhear us here. Take this.” The man drew a bag from under his shirt. He had apparently kept it hanging around his neck. Both the fabric and string of the bag were worn and faded.

“This...”

Inside was a rock a round smaller than the fruit on the bushes.

Nezumi did not even have to take a closer look to confirm. This was...

“Is this... gold ore?”

“Yes. Listen to me: there are gold deposits in the area around No. 6. I don’t know how large the area is, but I think there’s a considerable amount of gold hidden there.”

“No way.”

“It’s true. I discovered it when I was younger. I might look like this now, but I was once a geologist. We investigated all soil around No. 6, and this was part of the discovery.”

“But you put it under wraps and didn’t report it.”

“Of course I did. Why would I have to report it, anyway? Gold would never bring prosperity to No. 6. It would result in a hundred troubles with not one good thing to make up for it.”

“I can see that.” Nezumi felt a slight chill.

"As far as I know, the ore hasn't been discovered yet. I haven't heard any rumours about any discovery. Besides, No. 6 is destroyed now, so the place must be in the throes of confusion. Which means I can enter and leave freely. I can even dig up gold in broad daylight and no one would reprimand me."

"Wait a minute. Where's this gold mine you're talking about?"

"A strip of land running from the north to the south. Part of it even reaches the region that used to be called the Land of Mao. None of it is visible above ground. The gold is slumbering away, deep inside the earth. Plus—"

The man lowered his voice and continued in a low murmur, as if to build tension.

"I can't say this is for sure yet, but . . . there's also a possibility that there's a huge deposit of rare metals right beneath No. 6. Nickel, gallium, zirconium, niobium, indium . . . I can't say much more, but what do you think? Great news, isn't it?"

Nezumi's chill worsened slightly.

" . . . It's great to hear as a fairy tale. This is how you've tricked people all the way up until now, isn't it? As the fraudster that you are."

"I'm not a fraud. I'm the one who waits."

"The one who waits?"

"Yes, I've been waiting—for No. 6's fall. And it seems like the time has finally come. I have to make preparations to go back home. Hey, why don't you come along with me? I couldn't ask for a better partner. Let's go back to No. 6 and claim that enormous fortune for ourselves. The man's eyes shone with a disgusting, slimy kind of light. It was not the lively kind of light that illuminated the way forward. His eyes were glowing dimly from their depths in an attempt to lure the prey close.

This man... Nezumi realized he had gritted his teeth. *This man isn't insane, nor is he trying to trick me. He's just telling the truth—at least the truth as it appears to him.*

“And what do you plan to do with those riches? Enjoy a luxurious retirement?” *No. That isn't what this man wants.*

“I'm going to buy it.”

“Buy what?”

“No. 6.”

For an instant, Nezumi's voice and breath caught in his throat. All he could do was stare, bewildered, at the man.

“Buy No. 6? What do you mean?”

The man stowed the ore back in its pouch and smiled amiably.

“Listen, young man. If you plan on taking over the world, you won't be needing armies, commandments, or thorough systems of surveillance and control. You need wealth. Wealth is the single largest, most significant weapon. No. 6 didn't quite get that part right. Well, the city was also unlucky to have a foolish ruler.”

“You plan on becoming the ruler of No. 6 with wealth?”

“Oh, I don't know.” The man cocked his head to the side. “Who knows what fate will bring? I'm not much of an ambitious person. I don't aspire to be an emperor or a ruler.”

“Then why?”

“For fun. I can make a mess of people's lives with these two hands. It would be jolly. Just jolly. No game could be better than this.”

“Wh...” Nezumi stared harder at the man. He was not like Shion.

Shion never looked at people's lives as something to toy with. He never manipulated them for fun.

“No. 6—that city is finally on the road to rebuilding. They're trying to establish a new city-state, and you're just going to make a mess of it

because you feel like it?”

“Rebuild? New? Impossible. It doesn’t matter who gets involved and in what manner. A state is a state. It’ll eventually strengthen its government and attempt to put people under its rule. That’s the true face of a state, and the history of humankind has proven that fact to us. No. 6 can change its robe as many times as it likes, but it’ll still be No. 6, all the same. If there is any change, it would be whether the person at the core of No. 6—its ruler—is foolish or intelligent. He’ll set his methods of rule in place: if he’s foolish, he’ll make it obvious; if he’s intelligent, he’ll be nimble and discreet. The fool would eventually destroy himself, but a man of decent intellect would gradually gain complete hold of No. 6. Those are the types you should be the most afraid of. So?”

“... Huh?”

“What kind of person is involved in the rebuilding of No. 6? From your point of view, is he foolish? Is he intelligent?”

Nezumi shook his head slowly. The base of his neck ached dully.

“He’s very bright, and holds substantial intellect. I can’t imagine him becoming the type of ruler you were talking about.”

“Ah, you have high regard for him, I see. And you must know the man—he is a man, right?—you must know him well?”

In a sense, I know him more than anyone else. And in a sense, I know nothing at all.

“And you also believe in him.”

I do believe in him. Nothing in the world would be worth believing if I couldn’t believe in Shion. I believe in him. But I was also afraid of him, wasn’t I?

Nezumi fell silent. The man glanced at him and stepped forward.

“How about it? Come with me. I’m not quite sure about the rare metals, but there’s definitely gold.”

Nezumi took a firm step backwards.

“No thanks. I’ll drift to wherever I want to go.”

“I see . . . that’s unfortunate.” The man grimaced as if he were really disappointed. “But I guess there’s nothing we can do. I’ll be off, then. I think I’ll borrow this horse here. Considering how much gold I paid back there, I don’t think he’ll mind if I take one horse.”

The man took hold of the reins of a grey horse and turned around.

“One last thing. People change, boy. That man you believe in will change, too. Anyone who stands at the top of a state will change. If he doesn’t change, he’ll be destroyed. You remember that.”

Nezumi touched the knife attached to his belt. *Maybe if I finish this man off here . . . if I finish him off, I would nip a bud that would otherwise bring harm to Shion.*

His fingers itched. Nezumi clasped his itching fingers.

I’ll never forgive you for harming, much less killing, someone for me.

Nezumi, don’t kill him. Don’t commit a crime for my sake.

Shion was holding his arm back and pleading with him desperately.

Nezumi, don’t kill him.

That’s right. That’s what you would say. I know you would say that and stop me. You’ve always been, and always will be, a naive do-gooder.

Shion . . .

“Well, if the fates bring us together, let us meet again.” The man mounted the horse with a sweep, and dug his heels in. The grey horse gave a whinny and started off. The man and the horse disappeared in a cloud of dust.

The wind blew, making the bushes sway.

The clouds covered the sky as the land enrobed itself in the darkness of nighttime.

Shion.

A tiny crack appeared in the clouds, revealing deep purple sky.

A solitary star twinkled.

Far off into that sky was No. 6.

Nezumi yielded to the wind as he gazed intently up at that star.

Side Stories

DAYS IN THE WEST BLOCK

THERE WAS not a cloud in the sky that day in the West Block, and it was bright and clear. It was truly a cerulean sky.

But of course, since the West Block lay in the shadow of No. 6, daylight hours were always short no matter how sunny it was. In the winter, it was especially so.

Shion looked up at the sky, and gave a huge stretch. The suds on his hands turned into small bubbles that floated into the air above.

They reflected the light and sparkled in rainbow-coloured hues.

“It’s such a nice day today.”

The blue of the sky and the light from the bubbles stung his eyes.

“Hey, Shion. Get a move on.” Inukashi looked up from making soap suds in a bucket to glare at Shion. The light on his raven hair made it look even more black.

“Take your sweet time, and the sun’ll be down before you know it. We gotta finish washing the dogs by afternoon. ’Cause if they don’t get washed by then, we’ll have to burn a whole extra fire just to dry them off. It’s a waste of firewood.”

“Oh, right. Yeah. Sorry about that.”

“Well... you don’t have to apologize, or anything.” Inukashi sniffed his nose. “You’re just way too thorough. You just gotta wash ’em quick, rinse ’em off quick, and you’re done. My dogs aren’t princesses.”

“But if you don’t rinse them off properly, they’re going to get skin infections.”

“Skin infections? That true?”

“Yeah. I’ve started reading more animal-related books since I started to work here. Nezumi’s got all sorts of books in his house.”

Inukashi wrinkled his nose. He flapped his hand in front of his face as if to wave away an odour.

“Do me favour and don’t mention his name around me, will ya? Makes me feel sick. If you’re gonna read something, at least read something like ‘How to Exterminate Sneaky Rats’.”

Shion couldn’t help but smile wryly.

“I remember seeing a book on how to exterminate regular rats.”

“Heh, regular methods aren’t gonna work on someone like him. But that’s enough of that. Why did you hafta bring up the world’s most obnoxious guy on such a nice day?”

“Do you hate Nezumi that much?”

“Damn right I do.” Inukashi spread his arms widely. “Even if someone gave me a hundred gold coins to like him, I couldn’t. If it was possible, I’d avoid associating with him for my whole life.”

“Inukashi, I think that’s being a bit harsh.”

“Heh, harsh? You must be kidding me. I haven’t even said half of what I wanna say. That old man’s a fake, but compared to Nezumi, he’s as innocent and harmless as a newborn baby. Shion, lemme tell ya something: there’s nobody more dangerous, disagreeable, and a pain in the ass than Nezumi.”

Shion stopped midway through washing a dappled brown dog.

He's more dangerous, troublesome, strong, and beautiful than anyone else in the world. That's Nezumi.

He caught Inukashi looking at him. He felt like Inukashi had seen right through his thoughts, and his cheeks burned. Shion looked down to hide his flushed face, and scratched the dappled dog on the back. The dog seemed to enjoy it, for he narrowed his eyes and let out a quiet growl of pleasure.

"And?" Inukashi pressed.

"Hm?"

"That skin infection you were talking about earlier. So it's bad if I don't rinse them properly?"

"Oh—yeah, that's right. When there's soap residue left on the skin, it could cause rashes and the fur can fall out. You have to wash the soap off properly."

"You serious? I can't afford my dogs getting any skin infections, man. I wouldn't even be able to rent 'em out at the hotel. Shion," he said briskly, "rinse 'em good. Get all the soap out. Be extra careful about the ones with long fur."

"Alright, but I don't think I'd be able to get through all the dogs by sunset. Should I finish the rest off tomorrow?"

"Tomorrow, huh." Inukashi looked up at the sky, and squinted at the rays that shone down upon him.

"Shion, wanna know something else, while I'm at it? No one makes promises about 'tomorrow' here in the West Block. Doesn't matter how important that person is to you, or anything. There's no such thing as a 'tomorrow' here. Sure, today might be the sunniest, warmest, most beautiful day ever. But no one knows if it's gonna be the same tomorrow. Actually, the weather usually takes a turn for the worse after days like this. A cold wind comes, and you start seeing flurries of

snow. Then the ground freezes over, along with your feet, the water from the spring, and everything else around you. Starving kids and old people start dying. Same for young, brawny guys, too. They're not free from death. Say, for example... he's walking down the street one day, with a loaf of bread that he's worked all day to get. He could get attacked from behind by a group of kid thugs who are after his food, get his skull cracked open, and it's off to heaven for him. These cases aren't uncommon. Oh yeah, you've experienced it before too, right? Some starving brats mugged you and took your bread in the marketplace?"

"Ah—yeah, that's happened before."

"Knowing you, you probably didn't even put up much of a struggle when they tried to steal your bread. That's 'cause you don't know how much a slice of bread is worth in these parts. My dog told me you practically gave your bread and meat away. He wasn't very impressed."

"Your dog was watching?"

"You bet he was. I sell information, man, it's my business. My dogs are everywhere in the West Block, sniffing stuff out. Your airheaded antics aren't worth much in terms of information, though, just to tell ya."

"I can see that."

Inukashi shrugged, and sighed impatiently.

"Well, you got your bread stolen because you were quiet—or spaced out, more like. It's embarrassing, but you might call it lucky. If you struggled like no tomorrow, they'd try harder to take it away from you. Who knows, worst-case, you might've been whacked from behind with a metal bar and had your brained splattered on the street."

Shion clutched his head reflexively. Inukashi curled up, cackling light-heartedly.

"I hear you've got some good brains, but they'd be no use if they were splattered all over the place, huh?"

"You're giving me the chills."

The smile vanished from Inukashi's face. He gazed at Shion with a stony expression.

"No one knows about tomorrow. Not a single soul here is absolutely sure that they can live to see it, Shion."

Shion directed his gaze to the sky once again.

Under this cerulean sky, there existed tragic life and death. There existed lives easily wrenched away. There were people who had to claw and struggle to even see a faint image of tomorrow. It was his own affair as much as everyone else's. *There's nothing ensuring me whether I'll even be alive tomorrow.*

That's reality.

The reality of the world I live in.

I can't avert my eyes from it. I can't turn a blind eye, or simply let it slide. I have to face, and accept this reality.

"Hey-hey, Shion." Inukashi clapped his hands. The sound echoed crisply in the clear sky. "If you got time to be spaced out, get a move on. That's one of your biggest flaws, eh—thinking too much about everything. Before you start mulling over this or that, get your body moving and get some work done. That's a hundred times more useful."

"Another of your teachings, huh, Inukashi."

"Yeah. I'm a gold mine of the kind of wisdom you need to live well. I gave you some advice for free, so you better be thankful."

"I am. Thank you."

Inukashi visibly shuddered. "Shion, I'm begging you, don't be so frank about saying thanks. It makes my skin crawl."

"But I really did feel thankful—" Shion protested.

“Geez, I don’t think I’ve ever met someone as honest and simple as you. I can’t see how you can live with such an unfathomable, shifty, difficult, and twisted guy like Nezumi. Is it true what they say about how opposites do well together?”

“Inukashi, you’re being harsh again. Nezumi isn’t shifty or twisted. I know he can be... difficult sometimes, or hard to see through, but...”

“Dumb ass! That’s what I’m saying when I say you’re naive. Nezumi is as shifty as it gets, just as much as you with your airheadedness. You should get a certificate for that, by the way. Hah, I guess if you think about it that way, you two *are* actually kind of alike.”

“Bit rude, that, Inukashi.”

Inukashi bolted up. He snapped his eyes open wide, and whirled around. Shion also twisted around to look, his hands still covered in suds.

Nezumi was standing there, catching the soft winter rays. His shoulder-length hair glowed and shimmered in the sun. His lips were curled sardonically, but mirth sparkled in his eyes.

“How long have you been there?” Inukashi swallowed hard.

“Just a little while.”

“What do you mean, just a little while?”

“Right about when you were saying you wanted to know about How to Exterminate Sneaky Rats.”

Inukashi sighed. He turned to face Shion, and gave a great scowl.

“See what I mean, Shion? This guy sneaked up from behind us, and made sure we didn’t even notice as he eavesdropped on our conversation. You can’t trust yourself to do anything around this guy.”

“Rude again, Inukashi. I wasn’t eavesdropping. You weren’t even talking about anything worth listening to. You guys were too into your animated little chat to notice my presence, that’s all.”

“What do you want?” Inukashi said brusquely.

“Don’t get so worked up over it, Inukashi,” Nezumi drawled. “I just thought I’d swing by. I wasn’t expecting to be treated to tea or lunch, or anything like that.”

“Damn right you weren’t,” Inukashi said with bared teeth. “I wouldn’t give you a single bowl of soup if I could help it. If you want me to empty it over your head, that’s another story.”

“Oh dear, see how the boy hates me. But not to worry, I’d turn down the soup anyway. God knows what you’d put into it.”

“Say what you will.” Inukashi clicked his tongue irritably, and resumed washing his dog with even greater zeal. “Hey, Shion. Never mind Nezumi. The dogs are the ones that need attention. Twenty-one left, and we’re gonna finish washing them by sunset.”

“Got it. Oh, Nezumi.”

“What?”

“Can you help us?”

“What?” Nezumi said incredulously.

“You’re off work today, aren’t you?”

“Well, yeah, but . . .”

“Then help us. We’re short-staffed here.”

“You’re telling me to wash a dog?”

“Yup.”

“No thanks. Nothing is worse than inferior soap, water, and dog hair, especially if they’re combined. The state it would put my hands in . . .” Nezumi clenched his fingers softly. Just that gesture was elegant enough to make one’s breath catch.

“Then I want you to towel down the dogs after I finish washing them,” Shion said promptly. “Get as much moisture out of their fur as you can.”

“Like I said, why do I have to associate with these mutts—”

“Please. Help out.” Shion held out a bunch of rags toward Nezumi. Nezumi drew his chin back in disgust.

“Hey, Shion—”

“This dog first. Wipe him down thoroughly. Quickly, though. He’s an old dog, so if you leave him wet for too long, he might catch a cold. Careful about that. Come on, boy, you have to ask him nicely too,” he added to the dog.

The dappled dog shook his coat vigorously at Nezumi’s feet. Water droplets flew in all directions.

“Hey—stop that! You’re drenching *me*,” Nezumi complained.

“So wipe him down. Come on.”

“Geez, why do *I* have to take care of the dogs...”

Nezumi nevertheless began to towel the dog off with a rag.

“Nezumi, you can’t scrub like that. You have to wrap it gently, and let the cloth suck up the moisture. I know that rag is tattered, but it absorbs water well.”

“Shut up. I know how to wipe a dog without getting instructions from you.”

“See, the dog doesn’t like it. You’re being too rough.”

“I know that. God, are you my mother or what?”

Inukashi hunched his shoulders and chuckled.

“You guys are hilarious as always. The way you two go on about it is just *classic*. You know, you guys could probably enter a stand-up competition. Eh, Eve? Maybe you’re more fit for comedy instead of singing onstage.”

Just as Nezumi opened his mouth to reply, Rikiga peeped out from between the ruins. His entire face was red.

“Holy, you stink of booze,” Inukashi complained loudly. “You in Drunkard Mode already, old man? It’s still morning.” He pinched his nose.

“Ha ha, big deal. Like they say, God’s in his heaven, and all’s right with the world. Cheers t’ a peaceful morning! Oh, morning t’you, too, Shion. How’re you?”

“Good morning, Rikiga-san. You’re in a good mood.”

“Just seeing your face puts me in a good mood, y’know. *Whoa*— Eve, what are *you* doing here?”

“It’s not like I want to be here.”

“I jus’ came to see Shion’s face—” Rikiga slurred, “why do I hafta see you or Doggy Boy? This is *highly unpleasant*—”

“Cut the crap,” Inukashi snapped. “This is *my* hotel. You invited yourself here, you’ve got no right to complain.”

Rikiga ignored Inukashi completely.

“Shion, I brought you something real good. Have it for lunch. Here!” Rikiga offered him a paper bag. Shion peered inside, and gave a small shout.

“Whoa, muffins!”

“Muffins?” Inukashi swiped the bag from him. “Whoa, cool! So these are what they call muffins, huh? I’ve never seen them before. It smells awesome.” His tan nose twitched busily.

Nezumi gave a short, appreciative whistle.

“Where’d you nick so many, old man?”

“Idiot, the Great Mr. Rikiga would never steal. I’m not like you. Someone gave them to me. Heh heh,” he chortled proudly. “These muffins are from No. 6. One of my customers brought them as a small gift. So how do you like ’em? They’re from a bakery that’s supposedly famous for their muffins. Hah, see? Even though I’m all

the way in the West Block, I can still get my hands on muffins from No. 6. Pretty amazing, aren't I? Heh heh."

"What, so you came to brag? Give me a break. I didn't think you were *that* pathetic, old man Rikiga."

"So Doggy-boy thinks he can be a smartmouth now?" Rikiga replied indignantly.

"Rikiga-san, do you have time right now?" Shion cut in.

"Huh? Me? Well, I am a successful businessman. Men of property like me don't have to slave the day away like poor people."

"Then I'm sure you could help us with washing the dogs."

"Huh? Washing the dogs? Wait a minute, Shion. I only came to drop off these muffins for you, and—"

"Please, if you could pour water over them with this bucket here. Slowly, and evenly."

"No, what I'm saying is, Shion—"

"You're a great help. Now, we should be able to get everything done by evening."

"Yes, but Shion, I never said I would—"

"Give it up, old man." Nezumi gave a small smile. "Do as you're told and get it over with."

Then he turned to Shion and pointed his thumb up.

"You've gotten awfully good at getting people to do your bidding, Shion."

"Well, you trained me, so..."

Rikiga punctuated the air with a single sigh. Then, mumbling something under his breath, he lifted the bucket.

* * *

The sun had begun to dip and darkness had begun to settle on the West Block by the time they had finished washing the dogs.

“Good work, everyone. Tonight, I’ll give you guys a special treat of soup and drinks. You’re welcome.” Inukashi stared around with his hands on his hips at the three sitting down on the ground.

“This is a joke!” Rikiga grumbled. “You wore us down to the ground without even any lunch to eat. Give me my muffins.” Rikiga shook his fist in the air.

“So like I said, I’m gonna let you guys eat now. *With* soup and drinks.”

“You mean water, right?” said Rikiga sourly. Nezumi smiled wryly.

“Water, properly boiled,” he added. “It’s still warm. Come on, everyone, let’s dig in. It’s a feast.”

Two muffins each, hot water in tin cups, and thin soup seasoned with salt. In the West Block, it definitely fell into the category of a feast.

This taste—

Shion’s heart thudded loudly as he took a bite of his muffin,

It tasted like his mother’s baking. They tasted just like Karan’s muffins.

Can it be—

Where did you—?

Shion swallowed his words a moment shy of posing Rikiga the question.

There was a wall between his mother and him.

Right now, it was a wall over which he had no way to climb.

He could not ask a question if he knew the answer would do him no good.

His gaze met Nezumi’s.

You’re right, Nezumi.

That’s it, Shion. Keep silent, not because you’ve given up, but because you’ve made the decision. You have to shoulder the weight of your silence.

I know.

Do you? Maybe you just think you know.

Nezumi's gaze pierced through him. Those grey eyes gave Shion the impression that they knew everything. He wondered why every time he was held by this gaze, he felt a shiver of bliss rather than pain.

"Ah, but I have to say, nothing tastes better than a meal after a hard day's work." Rikiga gave a great yawn.

"From now on, you should vow to dedicate yourself to honest labour more often, old man."

"Heh, I don't want to hear the word 'honest' come from the likes of you."

Half-listening to Inukashi and Rikiga bickering, Shion slowly brought his muffin to his mouth. Up above in the sky, the stars were beginning to twinkle.

FLOWERS FOR BEAUTIFUL DAYS

HIS HAND stopped where it had extended to sort out the shelf.

“What’s this?” he found himself murmuring.

“Shion, you’ve worked hard enough. That’s fine for now, so take a break. I made some coffee. I also have some cookies, though they’re a bit stale.”

Rikiga was calling out to him with a tray in hand. Coffee and cookies were items that one hardly came across in the West Block.

A pleasing aroma filled the air.

“Hiring you was the best decision I ever made,” Rikiga said. “You do everything, from sorting out my bills to cleaning up the room. A worker like you is hard to come by.”

“I might not be so good as a bodyguard, though,” said Shion wryly.

“Rest assured, I’ll never give you a dangerous job like that. Dirty work is more suited for a certain third-rate actor.”

“Are you talking about Nezumi?”

“Who else could I be talking about? He’s the very man, a cunning, treacherous, and fraudulent bastard.”

“Harsh as always when it comes to Nezumi, aren’t you?”

“I have to be,” Rikiga said matter-of-factly. “Once you let your guard down around a guy like him, he’ll suck you dry and gnaw at your bones. Now go on, your coffee’s going to get cold.”

“Oh, sorry. Thank you. What a treat. It’s been a while.”

“I can see you’re in rough times,” Rikiga said sympathetically. “If you’re willing, I’m more than happy to let you stay here. You’d have a much more decent life than if you lived with Eve.”

“No thank you... I’m fine.”

“Are you really satisfied?”

“Yes. Very much. Nowhere else is more comfortable for me than that basement room.”

“That room? Where there’s nothing but books?”

“Yes.”

It was a beautiful place. That place had everything. Several thousand volumes; vast amounts of knowledge; stories; words at times gentle, at times thorny; nonchalant conversation; secretive whispers; a trembling heart; new discoveries; piping hot soup; and beautiful deep grey eyes. That room had all of the things that Shion desired.

Rikiga sighed.

“You’re not a greedy one, that’s for sure.”

Aren’t I? No one is greedier than I am. I’m sure no one desires another as strongly as I do.

“Isn’t there anything you want? I’ll do anything within my power.”

Rikiga leaned forward.

“No, really, I don’t want any... oh, but—”

“Hm? What is it? Bread? Meat? Or a warm coat?”

“No, I... I was wondering if I could possibly see a play...”

“A play?”

“Yes. I’ve always wanted to see Nezumi perform onstage...”

Rikiga drew his chin back. “Eve’s performance, huh. I do remember the playhouse manager babbling on about premium tickets and whatnot. Hah, what a joke!”

“Would it be difficult?”

“Of course not!” Rikiga said crossly. “The manager and I are old friends. I can get a hundred tickets for the likes of Eve. Piece of cake.”

“Really, Rikiga-san?”

“Yes. I’ll take you wherever you want to go. You can even invite your friends along, too, ha ha ha! And besides, you know...” Rikiga cleared his throat awkwardly. “I guess you could say Eve’s performance is worth a look. It’s decent for a shoddy run-down place like this, I mean.”

“Can I bring Inukashi?”

“Of course, if that’s what you want to—what? Who?”

“I want to invite Inukashi along.”

“Why do I have to take a mongrel brat like him?”

“Inukashi’s my friend, and I don’t really have any other ones. Besides, Inukashi loves to hear Nezumi sing. I want to give him a chance to really enjoy it.”

“... Good god. It’s a bit too late to be saying this, Shion, but you haven’t exactly surrounded yourself with the best bunch. You should start getting yourself some decent friends.”

“Both you and Inukashi are the most interesting, wonderful people I’ve met, in my opinion,” Shion said firmly. It was his honest opinion. Those two were the kind of people he would never have met inside No. 6. They were the most interesting company he’d ever had.

“Like I said, don’t lump me in with the mutt. But, well, fine. I got it. I’ll take you and the dog.”

“Thank you. I’m really grateful, Rikiga-san.”

“Don’t worry about it. I just can’t seem to say no to you. Well, finish up that cookie. I’ll have a sandwich ready so you can take it home when you leave. Of course, that’s on top of the wages you’ll get. You don’t need to feel obliged; just think of it as a cleaning fee. This room looks a lot neater thanks to you.”

“Oh, which reminds me—” Shion showed him the cover of an old magazine he found on the shelf. There was a crowd of people on the cover and across the spread. A decked-out maiden; a youth wearing a feathered hat; an elderly woman wearing a silver shawl; an elderly man wrapped in a magnificently-embroidered cape; men, women, children. Everyone was smiling. Some were dancing; one had a stringed instrument in hand; another looked like he was singing. The photo was lively and joyous, yet faded with age.

“Oh, this is the Festival of Flowers,” Rikiga said.

“Festival of Flowers?”

“Yeah. We used to have this festival when this area was still a quaint, beautiful town. It took place when spring was at its finest. We prayed to the gods and thanked them for the blessings they’d bestow on the land.”

“Everyone looks like they’re having a great time. I couldn’t help but gaze at it.”

“You’re right. People back then still hadn’t forgotten their respect and gratitude to the gods. Oh, this brings back memories. A group of singers would come out from far away, just for that one festival. They sang a song for God in the most beautiful voices. There they are on the cover, the women decorated in flowers.”

“These women... where did they come from?”

“I’m not sure where. I remember hearing that they came from the deepest part of the woods, but I was never sure. They appeared for

the festival, and were gone the next day. Come to think of it, they were strange people. But by the time No. 6's wall was complete, the festival and the singing troupe were gone."

Rikiga gave a hefty sigh. His gaze wandered the air as if searching for something. Shion looked at the beautiful singers in their white costumes and white ornamental flowers.

They looked like Nezumi somehow.

* * *

"Festival?" Nezumi uncrossed his legs.

They were in the basement room. The stove was burning, and the little mice were scurrying about.

"Yeah. I borrowed this. It's a photo of the festival." Shion put the magazine down beside Nezumi. Nezumi only glanced at it, and showed no signs of picking it up.

"What about it?" he said.

"This woman looks like you."

"Me? I don't know about that. She's chubby compared to me, and her nose is flat."

"You might be better-looking, but she looks like she's enjoying herself. It's almost as if you can hear the singing and the crowd buzzing. Festival of Flowers," he murmured to himself. "I wonder what it was like."

"It's all from the past." Nezumi closed the book he was reading and stood up. "The lost past, faded days, a festival that only remains in vague memories. What good is it to me? Only a certain sentimental sheltered boy would find any use for it. To play with, like a toy."

"... I thought maybe you could sing it."

"What?"

"I had a feeling you would know how to sing the song of the festival."

"Me? Why? For your information, Shion, I know next to nothing about the Festival of Spring."

"Festival of *Flowers*."

"Flowers. Whatever. Either way, it has nothing to do with me."

"Yeah, but..."

Nezumi suddenly yanked at Shion's hair.

"Ow! What was that for?" Shion protested.

"What kind of song would you make it?"

"Huh?"

"The festival song. What kind of song do you think it was?"

"Huh? Well, I guess it would be, like, you know..."

"Like what?"

"... A song of joy, I guess. The long winter is finally ending, and the season of blossoms is on its way. The sky will turn blue, and the breezes will soften. The air will taste fresher, and the birds and insects will start becoming active. Doesn't it make your heart feel lighter?"

Nezumi sat down and crossed his legs again.

"I see. So it would celebrate the beautiful season."

"Yeah. The world, once closed off, would open up with the coming of spring. Farmers would begin their intensive fieldwork, and the children would be able to start playing outside again. It's... how should I say it... a season that would want to make you believe in hope."

"The future might just hold despair. The chances of that are much higher."

"That's why they held a festival." *People want to change despair into hope, ill luck into fortune, anguish into happiness. People have hope. That's*

why they pray to God. That's why they offer their songs, plead with Him, and seek His protection.

"They clung pathetically to God," Nezumi said shortly.

"They tried to live in harmony with Him," Shion corrected.

Nezumi lapsed into silent thought for some moments.

"Shion."

"Hm?"

"There aren't any festivals in No. 6, are there?"

"No. Only the Holy Celebration, but it's nothing like a festival. There's no singing, dancing, or joy. Nezumi, I think only festivals are born if people's hearts are free. They aren't born if people are trapped, dominated... am I wrong?"

Nezumi did not answer him.

All he did was close his eyes and repeatedly take quiet breaths.

* * *

It was unbearably stuffy inside the playhouse with the heat of the throng.

"What a turnout," Shion said. "It's beyond what I imagined."

"Ugh, booming business as always," Rikiga said sourly as he clicked his tongue. "I'm sure the manager is raking in the money. He sure knows where the business is. Damn it!"

"Just lure Eve over to your side," Inukashi cackled, his shoulders shaking with his laughter. "They're all here for him, anyway. Then you'll be the one rolling in the dough, old man."

"What? You're telling me to team up with that wily fox? Lay off the jokes, will you? There's nothing I hate more in this world than that guy. He and I are practically archenemies."

“What lies!” Inukashi howled. “You’re practically a fan boy. I know you come for almost every showing.”

“Shut up! I haven’t even turned my nose in this direction since finding out who he really was. I’m here tonight because Shion said he absolutely wanted to go, no matter what, and so I had no choice...”

“So you jumped at the opportunity and rushed over.”

“I’d say you’re the one jumping at the opportunity, Inukashi,” Rikiga retorted loudly. “You were itching to see Eve perform.” The man in front of him turned around at his voice. He was bearded and intimidating.

“Shut the hell up back there.”

“Oh—terribly sorry.” Rikiga ducked his head. The stage lights went out as if on cue. A spotlight shone down on centre stage. There appeared Nezumi—no, Eve.

The stage had only one spotlight. There were no microphones, no orchestra, or any stage equipment.

A draft was coming in from somewhere, and Shion could feel the cold creeping up from his feet. A quiet song rang out through it all.

“It’s ‘The Shimmering Things’,” someone whispered. It was a faithful maiden’s love song. It was clear and soft, yet it exuded a heated passion. Shion could only listen in awe. His heart was stolen away from the very first song. He felt as if he existed solely to listen to Eve’s singing. Once Eve finished, a moment of silence was followed by thunderous applause. It was enough to make the run-down playhouse shake.

Eve smiled graciously and slowly bowed his head.

Then came the second song.

*O soul, O soul
From where do you come? Whither do you go?
I want to keep holding you in my arms, and yet
Will you fly away
With the wind, to the high skies?
Will you soak through
With the rain, into the earth?*

“The song of burial.” Inukashi trembled. “He sang this when my Mum died...”

*Will you envelope me warmly
With the light?
O soul, before you become the wind
Before you turn into the rain
Before you glow as the light
Just once more
Come back into my arms
One day, I will also become the wind
Become the rain, become the light
And embrace you
Embrace you.*

Someone was sniffing. The giant man in front of Shion was weeping. The third song took a brighter turn with a lighthearted dance piece. For the fourth, a song of lost love between young lovers. Eve unveiled one song after the next.

Then, the last song.

“A song for the far past and far future. A song for those who believe in what’s to come,” Eve announced. He regulated his breathing, then began to sing.

*Spring is coming
The flowers bloom
The skies are blue, the breezes sweet
Come, everyone, come outside
Let us sing
Let us gather
Let us dance
Today is the Festival of Flowers; tonight the Flower Ball
A festival for those who believe in tomorrow*

Eve gave a wide sweep with his hand. Flower blossoms danced in the air. Petals of all colours and shapes, in the thousands, in the ten thousands, showered down from above. It was, of course, an illusion. But Shion could definitely see those illusory blossoms.

*Let us live and celebrate
Let us love another
And stretch our hands to tomorrow
Today is the Festival of Flowers; tonight the Flower Ball
A beautiful day for God and His people*

“Hey, is this—” Rikiga held his breath. It was. The song of the Flower Festival. A song celebrating hope.

You did sing it, Nezumi. Shion closed his eyes and placed a hand on his chest. *Nezumi, some day with you...*

He mentally spoke to the boy onstage.

Some day, I want to create a real festival with you. When real peace finally prevails in this land, we'll create the Festival of Flowers once more. We will. You won't mind if I call this hope, would you?

The song ended.

Eve lowered his head gracefully in a deep bow.

Afterwords

Volume I

Bunko Afterwords always make me terribly sheepish. It's embarrassing. Every time I write one, somewhere in my heart, I shrink back from shame. I hear my own voice telling me, *how can you do such an embarrassing thing with no hesitation?*

It probably comes from the fact I have used all my past afterwords as excuses. And unconsciously, too, which makes it even worse. I've always struggled to fill the gaping inadequacies of my work, somehow, with the afterwords. I have a feeling that's what I've been trying to do.

After I realized what I was doing, I vowed not to write any more afterwords. I thought that whatever a writer said or wrote outside of his work was meaningless.

At the time of this writing, No. 6 has become a *bunko*¹. Having been poor for a long time, as a reader, I can say I have a close relationship with *bunko*. This small and affordable book was a godsend to my wallet and its meagre funds.

Thank you, *bunko*.

So that being said, I can frankly say that I'm happy that this story has become a *bunko*, so that other people with meagre funds but a love for books can have access to it. Whether it's worthy enough to read, well, let's leave that judgment for another day. I have no choice but to leave it in your hands, reader. I have no intention of saying things like, "I've poured my life's effort into this"—those kind of words don't even qualify as an excuse. I still want to believe that I haven't been corrupted to that level.

The story isn't caught up with reality. It's very true. The things that are portrayed in this story—tragedy, cruelty, the tyranny of those

¹*bunko*: paperback edition, *tankobon*: hardcover edition

with power, human greed, murderous intent . . . take any one of these, and you'll see that what you find in the world we live in far surpasses anything told in my story.

How can humans be so cruel? So inhumane? It leaves me speechless in shock. But despite being struck speechless, I ask myself, would I still be able to find a hope for life through the story of *No. 6*? The chances of that seem uncertain, and slimmer than the contents of my wallet. But I have no other way to do it but to write, and I feel like I would lose to the cruelty and arrogance of reality—and I can't just put my tail between my legs and admit defeat, so I write. I want to face off against reality, approach it in challenge, with *No. 6* as my strength. I want to tear off that hide of what they call Reality or Human Beings, drag out what lies beneath, and build upon it not despair, but a story of hope.

That is also my ambition.

Ah, am I making excuses again? Or am I just trying to cheer myself on? Or am I brandishing valorous words to trick myself and others into believing them? Hmm. That's really terrible, actually. But still . . . *You're annoying.*

I felt like I just heard Nezumi's whisper.

What an annoying woman. If you have time to be indulging yourself in complaints, put up a fight first.

I hear a voice telling me to fight, more stoutly, more fiercely than anything—whether it be myself, or others, or the times. I grimace, and give myself a shake.

He's right. For now, before writing an afterword, I'll write my story—a story with no complaints, excuses or trickery.

So there you have it, an afterword that's not much of an afterword. I'm really sorry. If I could, I would like to make this my last afterword(-ish) thing.

So this is the end. I would like to extend my heartfelt thanks to those in Kodansha's Children's Books Office: the late Mr. Yamakage Yoshikatsu, Mr. Yamamuro Hideyuki, and Ms. Jinbo Junko from the Bunko Publishing Department.

Thank you, thank you so much.

2006, late summer

Atsuko Asano

Volume II

Tankobon As you are reading this particular page of the story right now, what sort of scene is unfolding around you?

What is happening with the wars, with starvation, with the world? Is the killing still continuing? Is hatred still overflowing? Is despair still brimming?

Do you believe in the word “hope”? I’ve always wanted to believe in it—that the world could be mended, that people would be able to throw their weapons aside. Someday.

Writing stories for young people is none other than to tell a tale of hope—because there should be nothing born from despair.

That was how I’ve felt up until now, and obedient to that belief, I’ve been weaving stories that tell of hope, but cavalierly.

“You don’t know anything. 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’re just looking for an escape route. You’re looking for a way to avoid getting hurt.”

“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.”

The numerous harsh words that Nezumi hurled at Shion were also blades bared against me, and needles that stabbed my body.

Yes: I feel like I’ve lived thus far without knowing anything, nor trying to know. I suffer no ailments; I never need to worry about food for

tomorrow; I live life without having to feel a smidgeon of fear from being blasted by landmines or rocket bombs. I love my somewhat boring, but peaceful life. And that's fine in itself. But when I peeled back a bit of that peaceful life, I couldn't go without seeing that it was actually very closely connected with foreign lands that seemed so distant; with the war and starvation that people were suffering in those lands.

Individuals are always connected to their nation, and the nation is always connected to the rest of the world. It is impossible to cut them apart. And I have finally realized that.

That was why I wanted to write this story, no matter what it took. Along with a certain boy called Shion, I wanted to reach out and touch the world. I wanted to write of a young and clumsy soul opening up his physical body, and understanding the world through the pain and joy he felt through it.

But to be honest, there were several times while writing when I thought I would never be able to be like Shion. I couldn't face off with the world as honestly as he. I couldn't yearn for another as earnestly. I couldn't weave words as truthfully. And I was afraid of getting hurt. I was always coming up with convenient excuses for myself. I couldn't beg like he could.

At this point of having written up this story, for some reason I feel something closer to defeat rather than fulfilment.

I'm sorry, here I go again, complaining. Those most unsteady in their stance are the ones that talk the most, and make the most complaints. Anyway, the story is still developing. I sincerely hope that you will be able to enjoy it as Shion and Nezumi live, move, and weave their story into existence.

I have no idea what will happen to these two, either. I'm not being mum on purpose: I honestly can't predict what will happen.

But this is for certain: I do know that I don't want to leave Shion as an idealist who is all talk; and I don't want to make Nezumi into a terrorist of pure hatred. I would not want that to happen, no matter what. So what do I need to do in order for it not to happen? What is needed for them to survive, for them to avoid "becoming enemies", as Nezumi once said? I know that I must think about this with a steady gaze not on fantasy, but reality. And that must mean to focus the spotlight on the ugliness of the nation-state, the frailty of human beings, my own low-handedness, and never to avert that gaze.

And of course, in the end, I want to tell a tale of hope—not cavalierly, with an agreeable smile on my face, using limp and lifeless words that are merely pleasing to the ear. I want to speak with words I've invested my own self into—I could mumble them, for what it's worth—but I want to speak of hope, the kind I've grasped with my own hands. I want to become that kind of writer.

I don't have the confidence I'll succeed. I already know very well how powerless and incapable I am. But to me, it seems like there's still no other way than to keep fighting alongside these young men.

I dedicate my heartfelt gratitude and hold in utmost admiration, Mr. Yamakage Yoshikatsu of Kodansha's Editing Department, but at the same time I want to complain to him, "It's so draining, this work." But I know that he would probably—no, definitely—reply with, "You're being indulgent. You're a professional. At least make sure you don't let Nezumi and Shion laugh at you. Come on, straighten up."

Well, we've come to the end. My gratitude to the following people (no complaints this time): Mr. Kageyama Toru, for creating the world of *No. 6* more realistically, more fantastically, than anything my imagination would have been able to create; and Mr. Kitamura Takashi, for giving *No. 6* its unique glow and shadow through photos. Thank you.

February 2004

Atsuko Asano

Bunko To all of you who have read *No. 6* #2: first of all, I send you my thanks from the bottom of my heart.

This time, I decided to lend the narrative point of view to Shion, and write from his place in the interior of the citadel city of No. 6, looking out into the outside world of the West Block.

What sort of image did that place reflect in your eyes and hearts, readers? By continuing to write this story, I am continually faced by my own hypocrisy, which can be emotionally stressing sometimes... no, all the time. How can someone like me, who has never starved or froze, write about people who live in the West Block?

If anything, it's arrogant and irresponsible; and for that reason I've never liked to talk about this story, and if I force myself to open my mouth, all that comes out is complaints and excuses. I'm sorry.

But still, to me, young men (and young women) of this age are fascinating, and are figures that I have a profound attraction for. I so badly want to know how they will live in this world, that instead of learning from my mistakes, I arrogantly and irresponsibly continue to write a story like *No. 6*. As I hold both joy and fear in my heart that this book will be seen and read by more people in its form as a *bunko*, I think I would like to live alongside these young men and women for just a little longer.

Thank you very, very much for reading.

February 2007

Atsuko Asano

Volume III

Tankobon So how did you find *No. 6* #3? I know there's really no need to give backstage-talk about the making of this novel, but... will you listen nonetheless?

To tell you the truth, before I began working on Volume 3, I was making big promises to my editor Mr. Yamakage Yoshikatsu, telling him, "They're going into the Correctional Facility now. It's going to be full of action, I tell you, action." At this point, I wasn't lying or trying to pique his interest. I was serious. After all, one of the motives I had for writing *No. 6* was my ambition to express thrilling action scenes through words. But once I entered the world of Volume 3, and lived alongside Shion and Nezumi, I realized it wasn't going to be as easy as bursting into the Correctional Facility, causing a ruckus and then being finished.

As I aligned my heart with theirs, wavered in uncertainty with them, and mulled it over, sighing in despair or in awe, wondering why we fight, why we love, why we hate, why we kill—my pages were up. It ended with no big changes unfolding in the plot; no solving of puzzles; not even a change in the season—it ended just when things seemed to be about to begin. I know this, and others have said so too, that I am a person of many excuses. But this time, I'm fully prepared to take complaints from readers who will tell me, "What the heck is this?" and I will confess that this time, I have no excuse to make.

But once inside the Correctional Facility, they will have to fight. The possibilities are incredibly high that they will spill the blood of others, or that their own blood will be spilt. If they had to end up killing someone, or if one of them were to get killed, Shion and Nezumi would have no choice but to undergo a change. A drastic change would occur, not in the external sense, but to their young souls. I struggled as I thought through how I would accept this reality, and

how I would write it, searching for an answer while I kept writing Volume 3.

I cannot forget reading the words of a certain adolescent, whom the newspaper dismissed as a terrorist. He is said to have mumbled the following to the hostages him and his group had captured: “What can I do in order to be friends with you?”

I don’t like war or terrorism. I despise it. And that is why I want to know what sets him and his words apart from the rest of us. Whether I have that power or not—it’s not very clear, and honestly, I can’t see myself as having that sort of power. But I want to put up a fight. Part of that fight is *No. 6*, and this story. Ah, this is becoming an excuse after all. Perhaps by the time the cherry blossoms have completely fallen, I would be able to deliver you the rest of my struggle in the form of Volume 4, as I place the focus on the two boys who had no choice but to infiltrate the Correctional Facility. That will also be a fight for me, where I put me and my excuse-prone self on the line. I extend my heartfelt thanks to Mr. Yamakage for supporting my fight, and putting up with my excuses so patiently; also I thank artist Mr. Kageyama Toru and photographer Mr. Kitamura Takashi for expressing the world of *No. 6* in their own unique and creatively abundant ways, three times so far.

October 2004

Atsuko Asano

Bunko Hello, everyone. Asano here. Thank you very much for accompanying me in the world of *No. 6*.

I would ask, how did you find it?—but a question like that is the epitome of unsophistication. Let me seal it away.

It has been nearly three years since Volume 3 was first published. I’m

sure you would agree that these three years have been worthy to call tumultuous. People's hearts, values, the state of society, and the goings-on of our world have switched directions, mutated, and changed at dizzying speeds.

Love, justice, the future—things we all believed in without question are on the verge of disappearing without a trace. Maybe that's the kind of world we live in now.

I've been alive for a good while, and have lived for over half a century. People my age are prone to thinking of this current state of the world as something like this: "Well, it certainly is a brutal world, but I guess that's how things go. A country like Japan seems peaceful on the outside. Maybe we can just say there's nothing to worry about, and leave it at that." "Well, what can we do now? We've already come so far."

But even so, after meeting these boys who tear through the streets of rubble, refusing a world ornate in artifice, attempting to face off against a harsh reality, living each and every day as themselves—I come to think there's no way I could gloss it over or simply give up after all. But with that said, I wonder what I could do, what I ought to do, and I wrestle with my thoughts and can do nothing but hesitate in a nervous limbo. Maybe I'm afraid to take that first step from fear of getting hurt.

Ugh, I'm sure Nezumi is laughing at me right now.

Adults are free to make excuses and give up; no matter what consequences arise, they will have no one to blame but themselves. But young men and women don't have it quite the same. They must keep living and survive. They cannot accept despair as easily.

To see the world at their side; to start off from a place in which I've rejected despair; to grasp this world with words that are not false trinkets—is it something I would be able to do?

I strongly hope to challenge myself and the reality around me, with No. 6 as my weapon. The chances of my winning are slim, but I'd like to believe... at least, that I won't be losing constantly.

My gratitude from the bottom of my heart to those who have read thus far.

Summer 2007

Atsuko Asano

Volume IV

Tankobon It may be a sheepish, foolish, and embarrassing thing to write only about your most personal thoughts in a space like the afterword. Thinking back, I realize I've repeated this blunder over and over again, and even I get sick of it sometimes. So I think I will make this my last. Will you put up with my complaints one last time? I'm sorry.

This year, I lost two people whom I was very close to. One was Mr. O'oka Hideaki, a critic and fellow member of our coterie magazine; the other was Mr. Yamakage Yoshikatsu, of Kodansha's Children's Books Department. Both supported me as a writer from their respective positions in their own ways. Being the crude individual that I am, I only realized after I lost these two how much their support had meant to me, and in my loss, confusion, and loneliness, I sobbed like a wandering child at sunset.

Mr. Yamakage particularly was my irreplaceable partner in creating the story of *No. 6*. He was someone who had stayed with me since Volume 1. He was also the one who gave this story its title, *No. 6*. And more than anything, he has taught me what it means to live on, and what it means to die.

The following are words that I can't forget.

It was either the beginning of summer, or the end—a time when the seasons were changing. Mr. Yamakage and I were talking about this-and-that of my next work inside a taxi, when he said:

“Ms. Asano, you know, these days I've been sweating.”

Mr. Yamakage said this suddenly, lowering his voice a little. The utterance had a hint of a smile in it, like he often used to speak. *So?* I thought. *Sweat? Isn't it a normal thing to sweat when it gets hot?* I must have had a bemused expression on my face from not understanding

the meaning behind his utterance. But he continued.

“When it’s hot, I sweat like I should. It makes me think, wow, I’m alive.”

I realized that it had only been a short time since Mr. Yamakage had returned to the workplace after recovering from his serious illness; I nodded then, thoroughly convinced. And now, I contemplate those words and feel the weight of them all the more.

—Because that is what being alive means. It’s sweating when you’re hot; it’s crying when you’re sad; it’s laughing when you’re happy. It’s walking straight down a road, and climbing the stairs. It’s the days that pass by, ordinary, mundane, that prove that we are still alive. Mr. Yamakage taught me that. *No. 6* is a story of the boys. It is also a story of life and death. To a writer like yours truly, who had been trying to write about life and death as the crux of the story, yet at the same time in a light and comedic way, perhaps Mr. Yamakage had stepped beyond his bounds as an editor to convey this message to me.

Ms. Asano, please, truly love that you are alive; cherish it, and preciouslly, preciouslly write about it. Let’s make No. 6 that kind of story—where real human ‘life’ resides.

He was a brilliant man. He was not afraid at all to live his life through, and fall into the clutches of death. I wish he could have run this course with me for a little while—no, for the whole time.

Mr. Yamakage, you went too soon. It’s not fair that you just disappeared like that, engraving yourself in my memories. When I meet you in the afterworld, I’ll be sure to bombard you with complaints. And you’ll probably flash that smile, nod quietly, and apologize in that sheepish way.

Thank you to everyone who has waited for Volume 4. And I apologize (for publishing it much, much later than I had originally promised).

And when I was ready to fall to my knees, blurting that maybe this

story was finished too because Mr. Yamakage was gone, I thank everyone who supported me: Mr. Abe Kaoru, and Mr. Yamamuro Hideyuki, who supported me in his place; Mr. Kageyama Toru and Mr. Kitamura Takashi, who finished their jobs like true professionals, and sent me vigorous encouragement that needed no words. I thank you very, very much.

August 2005

Atsuko Asano

Bunko It's an embarrassing story, but when I write afterwords, these days all I seem to end up with are complaints or excuses. I think it is absolutely necessary that every story—*No. 6* as no exception—should refuse any complaints or excuses.

For this reason, this time around I've decided to write not any sort of afterword, but just my thoughts as they come to me.

While I was writing *No. 6* Volume 4—or, rather, throughout this whole series—I've been thinking about what “hope” is.

Hope is believing in the future.

In this world right now, did I really hold a firm belief in the future as I was writing? I'm still thinking about it (since this series is still going, after all).

I think and I think, but no matter how much I do, I can't seem to grasp the answer.

It's not that I've lost hope. In this day and age, I do naturally feel a sense of imminent danger, to an extent (though it may not be directed accurately at the right things). But I'm not despairing, nor have I given up. But if someone were to ask me how much true hope I've got in my hands—then, well, I've got no choice but to tilt my head in perplexity. It's certainly an uneasy story...

Hunger, warfare, destruction, poverty, murder, despair...

Change is occurring both on the surface and within people, and these changes twist and turn; and in our every day lives, like people riding on a flimsy boat of bamboo leaves in a swift current, we don't know when we'll be sucked into the whirlpool.

The small light of hope that winked inside me while I was still writing Volume 1 has now become hard even to make out with my degree of vision.

Has my eyesight gotten worse?

Or has the light gotten weaker?

Hmm? This is starting to sound a lot like a complaint. Note to self: mind that it doesn't.

Stories detest and avoid complaints and excuses like nothing else. At the same time, they encourage your struggle to believe in the future.

Stories will not develop or be born from anyone who says, "Well, that's just how it is" with a skewed and pessimistic outlook; nor does it come from those who have thrown everything away, saying, "I don't care what happens anymore". Only those who squint at that tiny ray of light, and take that hesitant half-step forward—only from that half-step is a story born.

Perhaps believing in that half-step you take is somehow connected more largely to believing in the future.

And to you, who has read this story thus far—let's take that hesitant half-step forward together, why don't we?

Summer 2008

Atsuko Asano

Volume V

Bunko This *No. 6* series has finally reached its fifth volume. I still remember complaining in Volume 1 how I was ashamed of myself for turning my afterwords into excuses, and saying *'I don't want to write them anymore!'*. But after thinking it over calmly again, I realized that it wasn't the *afterwords* I didn't like; it was me—making excuses, justifying myself with this or that—that I disliked. So basically, I'd been taking my frustrations out on the afterword itself. I must confess, that's not getting to the root of the problem at all. I'm sick of it, really. These days I really think that people like me—who are skilled in the art of self-preservation, are cowardly, but also ambitious—shouldn't be writing a story like *No. 6*. I may have written a bit about this somewhere else, but *No. 6* to me as a work was something a little out of the ordinary. To me, the core of a work was always in humans. I wanted to write about, and know more about, none other than people. The only device I had at my hands that would let me understand people was writing. I wanted to know these girls, these boys, these men and women. I wanted to know what kind of people they were. That was the energy behind why I wanted to start writing, and it was the reason I kept writing.

But before I started writing the story of *No. 6*, I wished to know the world before I started getting to know the people. I hoped for a story that would help me face the world I was living in now. It was my first experience. That was why at first, I was not so much interested in the true form of Shion, or Nezumi—what they thought, what they loved, what they loathed as they lived their lives. The Holy City was the protagonist of this story, and the boys were only side characters. But it wasn't long before those arrogant thoughts were shattered to pieces. But of course: it was impossible to render a world in which humans were neglected a place. People are always connected to the

world. People are what comprise the world itself. The world is created by people, who make it bountiful, who make it corrupt, who destroy it, and bring it back to life.

Before I knew it, I was the one desperately following Shion and Nezumi, enchanted by the world they created, the changes they underwent, and their fates. And though it took long enough, it finally hit home for me that the only way to render this world was to follow them, watch them, grasp them, and pen them. It was a reckless challenge. I feel like a praying mantis brandishing its tiny claws at an enormous oncoming cart.² I don't have that resolve. I don't have the guts to face the world, or my own self head-on. That was also what I realized while writing this story. And as soon as I realized it, it hurt to hear Nezumi's words and feel Shion's gaze. So now we've come to this: whatever shall I do? I wish I could just throw it away... Oh dear me, now instead of excuses I'm griping. Hmm, not good. But I'll hang in there for a little more. If I don't pull myself up by my bootstraps now, I wouldn't know what I'd written this far for; so on and so forth, blah blah.

Thank you for supporting me and putting up patiently with my reckless challenges and weak-willed excuses: Mr. Harada Hiroshi from the Bunko Publishing Department; Mr. Yamashiro Hideyuki from the Children's Publishing Department. And my heartfelt thanks to you, reader, who has taken the time to read this work.

Summer 2009

Atsuko Asano

²A Japanese idiom; one who enters danger heedless of one's own weaknesses.

Volume VII

Bunko Hello, everyone. Asano here. How did you find *No. 6* Volume 7? To make an honest confession, Volume 7 was a volume that was incredibly difficult and painful to continue writing. I struggled to write, struggled to think; nothing moved forward, and while I was writing I was rocked by hesitation and an emotion similar to panic.

I don't mean that I was simply in a block (although a considerable fraction of it was). It was over ten years ago when I first started writing *No. 6*. The first volume was published in 2003, and it has already been nine years since then. When I began writing, my heart was not so much with Shion and Nezumi, but with *No. 6* itself. With a fictional city-state at centre-stage, I wanted to write about a state which ruthlessly trampled its people, and with my pen capture every scene of their domination over its people. I had that desire—no, ambition. I have already finished writing the last volume of the hardcover, and put a period to this series, at least in form. But if you were to ask me if my ambitions were realized...

What is a state? How would a country and its people interact? What is the difference between the rulers and the ruled? They were themes much too large for me to tackle with my level of strength. I feel like I am still standing, completely at a loss of what to do before a thing of such magnitude.

However, as I continued to progress writing through this series, despite its sweeping theme, my heart was swept away by these two boys, Shion and Nezumi. I became compelled to grasp them firmly with my own two hands. No matter what anyone said, to me, they were both very attractive characters whom I believed deserved to be known. Before I knew it, I feel like I have stayed fixated on this series with the singular mission to complete writing, not the city, but these boys as they lived on, dashed about, jumped, fought, became attached to others, felt love,

and felt hatred.

In that sense, you can say that this Volume 7 is the most meaningful (for me, at least) in the whole series. By infiltrating the Correctional Facility, both Shion and Nezumi lay bare a side of their selves which have before been lurking in their depths. I struggled to write because I agonized and hesitated about how to write this very part.

In the Correctional Facility, Nezumi and Shion are cornered, their movements inhibited at gunpoint.

I see. So I am going to die with you.

When Nezumi muttered this phrase in his heart, I thought of putting the two out of their misery. They would be more at peace if they were pierced by a bullet together, I thought. Of course, that would do nothing for the story. The real reason that I chose to write further, however, has nothing to do with what “ought to be” in a story. It was my own conviction as a writer. To others, it was perhaps too insignificant, but to me it was an important thing. I felt that if I didn’t write the rest of this story, my fixation with No. 6 would have been meaningless.

I can only leave it up to you to read it as you will interpret it. Volume 7 has become that kind of volume.

Summer 2012

Atsuko Asano

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). The cover was created by Toru Kageyama.

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 27, 2019.