

No. 6

No.6

A novel by
Atsuko Asano

Translated by
Nostalgia on 9th Avenue

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

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

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

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

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Volume I

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

1

NEZUMI, DRIPPING WET

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

—Anticoagulant. They had coated the bullet with it.

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

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

His legs buckled. Dizziness overcame him.

—Not good.

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

—But maybe I wouldn't mind.

He heard a voice inside him.

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

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

—I want to sleep.

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

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

—An hour left. No, thirty minutes.

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

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

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

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

* * *

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I'm not."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Break it.

Destroy it.

Destroy what?

Everything.

Everything?

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

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

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

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

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

Heh.

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

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

* * *

"Don't move," he said.

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

something a normal person could do.

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

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

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

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

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

The grip around my neck loosened slightly.

"Shion."

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

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

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

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

"I know."

I could hear my mother laughing on the other end.

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

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

"What?"

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

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

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

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

"This..."

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

"A bullet wound?"

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

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

"Of the Gifted Curriculum?"

"Starting next month."

"Wow. High IQ, huh?"

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

"Are you making fun of me?"

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

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

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

"What are you doing?"

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

"Local anaesthesia. Alright, here goes."

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

"Sew it."

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Believe what?"

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

His lip curled. He was smiling.

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

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

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

"What do you mean?"

"That there are hunters, and the hunted."

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

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

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

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

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

"You're gonna sew it."

"Yeah."

"Do you have any experience?"

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

"Basic knowledge, huh..."

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

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

“You’re strange.”

“Why would you say that?”

“You haven’t even asked for my name.”

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

“Shion¹, right? Like the flower?”

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

“Nezumi².”

“Huh?”

“My name.”

“Nezumi... that’s not it.”

“Not what?”

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

“Right, here goes.”

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

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

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

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

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

“So you *are* smart.”

Nezumi’s forehead was also damp with perspiration.

“I’m just good with my hands.”

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

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

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

* * *

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

“You can use it. But change first.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Are you always like that?”

“Huh?”

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

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

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

“Then why?”

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

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

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

"And?"

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

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

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

"Can I really go to sleep?"

"Sure."

"Thank you."

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

* * *

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

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

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

"VC..."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

—*But how did he take the chip out?*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Break it.

Destroy it.

Destroy what?

Everything.

Everything?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Mother peered into my face again, her expression concerned.

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

* * *

“Don’t turn on the light.”

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

“I can’t see anything.”

“You don’t need to.”

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

“Something smells good.”

“I brought stew and cherry cake.”

I heard a whistle of appreciation in the dark.

“Want some?”

“Of course.”

“You’re gonna eat it in the dark?”

“Of course.”

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

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

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

“I’m a rat. Of course I can.”

“VC 103221.”

In the darkness, I could sense Nezumi freeze.

“You were all over the news. Famous.”

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

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

“Can you get away alright?”

“Of course.”

“What did you do with the chip?”

“It’s still inside me.”

“Want me to take it out?”

“Surgery again? No thanks.”

“But . . .”

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

“What do you mean?”

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

“A toy, huh.”

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

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

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

“Of course.”

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

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

“How can you say that?”

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

“I don’t.”

“Huh?”

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

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

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

"Really?"

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

"Yeah. Big trouble."

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

"I know."

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

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

"That's considerate of you."

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

"Then are you gonna leave?"

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

"Make up your mind."

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

"Sounds like a great father."

His fingers withdrew from my arm.

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

“Nezumi?”

“Hm?”

“How did you get to Chronos?”

“Not telling.”

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

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

“Let you in?”

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

“Escorted? By the police? To where?”

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

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

Nezumi crawled into bed.

“Probably the Moondrop.”

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

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

“Why not?”

“I’m tired. Let me go to sleep.”

“Is it something you can’t tell me?”

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

“I guess, but . . .”

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

“Huh? About what?”

“About how you were yelling out the window.”

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

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

“Hey, wait a minute—”

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

“Shut up!”

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

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

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

A muscle in my throat twitched. Amazing.

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

"Huh?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"You're pretty warm too."

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

"Living people are warm."

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

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

2

A QUIET BEGINNING

Index Case (First Discovered Example)

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Oh well.

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

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

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

Huh?

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

“May I dispose of this as trash?”

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

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

— *Wait, help me...*

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

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

* * *

“Shion, take a look at this.”

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

“Hmm... Sampo’s acting strange.”

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

¹three steps, or a *stroll*

“What’s the image like?”

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

“Strange?”

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

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

“Can you focus in a little more?”

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

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

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

“Any signs of life?”

“Huh?”

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

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

“I’ll go check,” Shion said abruptly.

“I’m coming too.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

—*It was too soon.*

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

—*Impossible.*

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

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

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

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

* * *

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

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

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

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

another city.

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

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

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

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

“It... just doesn’t seem right.”

“The rigor mortis and its dissipation time?”

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

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

“Internal cause, huh... like what?”

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

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

Safu sniffed indignantly and glared at Shion.

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

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

* * *

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

“I want to ask you something.”

“What?”

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

“Why’re you asking now?”

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

“You’re giving me too much credit.”

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

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

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

“And why did you lose your privilege?”

“I don’t want to talk about it.”

“But I’d love for you to tell me.”

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

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

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

You knew that he was a VC, then?

Yes.

Why didn’t you call the police immediately?

Well...

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

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

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

It ended up as so, yes.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

* * *

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

had sounded somewhat dejected to his ears.

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

Safu raised her face, and grinned.

“Jealous, aren’t you?”

“Yeah.”

“That’s awfully truthful of you.”

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

“Liar.”

“Huh?”

“You’re not jealous at all.”

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

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

“Can I help you?”

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

“Sixteen.”

“The both of you?”

“Yes.”

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

“Yes, but it’s still before eight.”

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

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

“Your Citizenship Numbers, in order.”

“SSC-000124GJ.”

“Qw-55142.”

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

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

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

“Let me walk you there.”

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

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

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

“That scared me.” Safu clutched her chest. “I’ve never been scolded by the Security Bureau.”

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

“Really?”

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

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

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

“Shion...”

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

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

Safu sighed as well.

“You’re still a liar.”

“Huh?”

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

“Safu, what—” Shion began in exasperation.

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

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

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

“I know.”

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

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

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

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

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

“Huh?”

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

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

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

Safu shrugged. They were approaching the station.

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

"Safu," Shion said wearily.

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

* * *

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

Hope. What do I hope for?

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

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

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

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

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

"In two days."

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

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

Safu jutted her chin out defiantly.

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

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

"Your sperm."

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

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

"Uh— what? Safu... um—"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Well..."

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

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

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

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

"What?"

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

"I want to have sex with you."

Her words rang clear in Shion's ears.

"Safu..."

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

"Wait, uh— wait a minute... Safu, I—"

"Right now."

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

"Not now."

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

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

“So it’s because it’s with me?”

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

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

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

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

“Safu, in two years—”

“Hm?”

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

“If I want to have sex?”

“Yeah.”

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

“Stay safe. Don’t work too hard.”

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

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

“A mouse!”

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

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

"Pretty friendly, too."

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

"Still a natural," it whispered.

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

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

"Nezumi!"

"Shion, what's wrong?"

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

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

"Sorry—"

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

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

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

“Walking.”

“In this rain? From where?”

“The station.”

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

“I was cooling off.”

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

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

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

“Like cherry cake?”

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

"That sounds great," Shion enthused.

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

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

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

"Did something happen?"

"Huh?"

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

"Now?"

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

Shion exhaled shortly.

"Someone died in the park today."

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

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

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

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

“And that’s why you’re agitated?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Shion, were you asleep?"

"Ah—um, no."

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

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

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

"Huh?"

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

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

"Huh? Wait—did I look that bad?"

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

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

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

"Yeah."

He even surprised himself at his prompt affirmation.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Nezumi?"

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

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

3

FLIGHT FOR LIFE

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Yamase-san, is something the matter?"

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

“Huh?”

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

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

“Three years... but—”

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

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

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

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

“I guess that’s what it means.”

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

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

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

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

"Accident? Bullshit!"

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

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

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

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

"No previous cases?"

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

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

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

"Oh, let me—"

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

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

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

"Yamase-san?"

"Shion, bodies can be modified."

"Huh?"

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

"Modify—what do you mean?"

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

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

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

"How was it?"

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

"You think so?"

"Are you saying they don't?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Then?”

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

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

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

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

“For example—?”

“Huh?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Alright,” Shion replied uncertainly.

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

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

“Alright, let’s get to work.”

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

“Yamase-san?”

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

“Hurt?”

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

“Are you alright?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"A bee..."

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

He was fainting from shock.

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

* * *

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

“Awake?”

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

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

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

“Yamase-san.”

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

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

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

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

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

“You’re...”

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

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

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

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

This is bad.

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

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

“I’m not buying it.”

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

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

“You used to specialize in ecology, correct?”

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

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

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

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

“Well—”

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

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

“Huh?”

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

“I—”

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

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

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

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

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

What?

“Get out.”

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

“Are you forcing me under arrest?”

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

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

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

“My bike?”

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

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

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

“You really think you have any of those?”

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

“Guess I didn’t make it in time.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“A waste? What is?”

“For you.”

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

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

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

* * *

The car glided forward.

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

Rashi turned to Shion and smiled.

“And yourself? Do you have a car?”

“No. I usually take my bike or walk.”

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

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

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

"I don't know much either."

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

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

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

"Then just tell us what you do know."

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

"Such as?"

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

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

"Energy is what?"

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

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

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

"Where do you think we're going?"

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

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

"What—how could you—why—"

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

"What case?"

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

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

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

"Those are false accusations."

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

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

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

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

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

'Shion!'

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

"Care to hear a little more?"

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

"Can't you?"

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

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

"Yes."

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

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

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

"—Huh?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

He closed his eyes, and took a deep breath.

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

Shion remained slumped, and bit his dry bottom lip.

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

—*Mom.*

"Are you worried about your mother?"

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

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

"Look."

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

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

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

Rashi chuckled with his back to Shion.

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

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

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

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

Shion opened his mouth and repeated the words to himself.

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

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

—*Will I see you soon, Nezumi?*

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

“Are you smiling?”

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

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

“Almost too well.”

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

“I’m a natural.”

“A what?”

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

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

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

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

“No, I didn’t.”

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

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

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

The car stopped.

“What’s the matter?” Rashi asked.

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

“Sampo?” Shion swallowed.

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

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

“I haven’t heard anything about it.”

Sampo was scooping up fallen leaves with his metal arms.

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

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

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

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

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

The driver whimpered in terror.

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

No one moved.

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

“Nezumi!”

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Because I’m going to crash it.”

“Crash what?”

“The car.”

“What!? Why—”

Nezumi’s fist pounded the steering wheel.

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

“But we can just escape with the car.”

“I was planning to, but—”

“But what?”

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

"Really?"

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

"How about you?"

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

"I can't just leave you!"

The wall was looming closer.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Nezumi swore.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I scraped my arm pretty badly. You?"

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

"What did you do?"

"I destroyed the steering system."

"How?"

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

“You seem to know a lot about it.”

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

“Of course.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Where? How—?”

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

“Sampo— no, that’s Ippo¹.”

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

The truck began to move.

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

“We have a card.”

“Where?”

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

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

¹one step, first step

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

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

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

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

“Huh?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Admiring my good looks?”

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

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

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

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

“So have you noticed?”

“What?”

“I’m taller than you.”

“Lies,” Shion objected.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Then explain why.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

which blanketed the town.

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

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

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

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

“But?”

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

“Huh?”

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

“The truck got destroyed at the gate.”

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

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

—*So Ippo and Sampo are both gone.*

Shion was suddenly grabbed by the wrist.

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

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

"Nezumi, it hurts."

"Shut up. Keep close to me."

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

He heard Nezumi *tsk* in frustration.

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

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

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

"Yeah."

"Lies."

"I'm not lying."

Nezumi's tone grew harsh.

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

Nezumi's fingers withdrew from his wrist.

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

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

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

"Goggles?"

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

"In here?"

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

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

"That we are."

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

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

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

Nezumi turned to Shion and gave a slight smile.

"Then follow me."

"Of course."

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

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

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

4

OF FATHOMLESS TERROR

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

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

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

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

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

"Where are we?"

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

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

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

"Where does it go?"

"The West Block."

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

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

"He?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

Nezumi turned around.

"What's wrong?"

"No, nothing."

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

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

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

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

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

"Why the serious face? Missing your mama?"

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

“Forget about it.”

“How are you so sure?”

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

“I guess you’re right.”

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

“Bullshit,” Nezumi spat.

“What is?”

“You. You’re full of it.”

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

“What do you mean?”

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

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

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

“Are there people living in there?”

“Lots of them,” Nezumi replied.

Past the ruined house were a row of several barracks.

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

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

Shion caught his breath and was rooted to the spot.

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

“Are these all... books?”

“Do they look like food to you?”

“I’ve never seen this many.”

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

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

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

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

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

"Huh?"

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

"A lot else," Shion replied indignantly.

"Like what?"

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

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

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

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

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

"I'm humbled by your kind compliments."

"Hey, really, don't be mad."

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

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

Cheep cheep.

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

“You want me to read this?”

Cheep cheep.

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Nezumi, this book—”

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

“Only the title.”

“I figured as much.”

“Are all these books classics?”

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

“Are these all your books?”

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

* * *

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

—I’m alive. I’ve been saved.

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

—I didn’t thank him yet.

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

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

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

"What? What're you shouting for?"

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

"She read *Macbeth* to you?"

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

"You're going to destroy yourself," said Nezumi quietly. His voice was cold.

"What?"

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

"Useless? Like what?"

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

It had touched a nerve.

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

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

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

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

"Because they're dangerous."

"My feelings? Dangerous?"

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

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

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

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

"Then what about you?"

"Me?"

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

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

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

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

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

"Let go."

"Make me, little boy."

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

"Biting noses off is my specialty."

"Huh? Wait a second, that's dirty—"

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

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

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

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

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

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

"What's that supposed to mean?"

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

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

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

"What's this?"

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

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

"—Heard it before?"

"No."

"I figured as much."

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

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

"And these aren't useless things?"

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

"What's wrong, Nezumi?"

"Shion, your hand."

"Huh?"

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

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

“What? What is this?”

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

“Shion!”

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

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

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

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

“My neck . . .” Shion said weakly.

“Your neck?”

“The blister . . . cut it open . . .”

“But I don’t have any anaesthetic.”

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

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

—But Yamase-san didn’t suffer.

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

his. *Maybe that means I still have a chance—*

His brain was pierced by smouldering red needles. They were countless, and came from all directions. His body writhed in pain that he had never experienced before. His own screaming turned into scorching splinters that stabbed through him. He began to sweat profusely. He felt a strong wave of nausea. Blood and stomach fluids welled up inside his mouth, and spilled over his lips.

It hurts, it hurts, it hurts.

Shion no longer wanted to be saved, or to be spared death. He wanted to be released from this pain, this suffering. He didn't need to open his eyes. He didn't need to live. He wasn't asking for much. He just wanted to be released—

He felt like someone had grabbed him by the hair from behind, and was dragging him into the darkness. He felt relieved. All he had to do was lend himself to it, and he would be taken to a better place. He would finally be able to sleep.

A thick, bitter liquid was being poured into his mouth. It was hot. It slid down his throat, and Shion could feel himself rise up out of the darkness. But it also meant that he was being pulled back into the throes of suffering.

“Keep your eyes open.” A pair of grey eyes were peering into his face.

“Nezumi... I can't take it...” Shion implored faintly. “Let me go...”

He was slapped sharply across the face.

“Don't bullshit me. You're not going anywhere. Drink up.” The strong and bitter liquid was forcefully poured into his mouth again. The darkness was lifting. Weak pulses of pain throbbed in his head.

Nibble nibble nibble... nibble nibble...

Shion thought he heard a sound— or was it a hallucination? It was the sound of his brain being eaten alive. There was a mass of countless

black little insects. They crawled all over his brain, making nibbling sounds,

Eating. Eating. Eating.

Was it a hallucination? Or was it . . . it hurt terribly. He couldn't bear it. And he was terrified. A scream tore through his throat.

"That's it. Yell. Don't give up. You're still sixteen. It's too early to throw in the towel just yet."

Shion felt the strength leave his body. He felt heavy, as if he was being tied to a lead weight. He felt suffocated. But the pain had receded just a little.

"Keep screaming. Stay conscious. I'm going to cut it open."

There was a silver scalpel in Nezumi's hand.

"I don't have anything fancy like an electronic scalpel, just to let you know. Don't move."

Whether it was because half of his nerves had gone numb from severe pain, or because all the strength had left his body, he didn't know, but Shion didn't move a muscle. He couldn't move.

There were three mice, sitting side-by-side atop a pile of books. Above them, a round clock was hanging on the wall. It was an analog clock. Tick, tick, tick. He could hear its sound. It was his first time hearing the sounds of time passing by. A second passed, then a minute. Time engraved itself. It passed, gentle, meandering, and vague. The world before him blurred. His cheeks were hot. A tear slid down, touched his lips, and was absorbed, still hot, into the sheets.

"It's over." Nezumi let out a long breath. Was the metallic clink the sound of the scalpel hitting the floor?

"The bleeding isn't too bad. Does it hurt?"

"No . . ." rasped Shion. "I just wanna go to sleep . . ."

"Not yet. Hang in there for a little more."

Nezumi's voice faded away. Shion could only hear the sound of the clock ticking.

"Shion."

He was being shaken.

"Keep your eyes open. Just a little more—please—open your eyes."

Shut up, he wanted to say. *Shut up, shut up. A little more? How long is a little more?*

"Don't give me this shit. You put me through all this trouble— you can't just go off on your own. Shion, you know what that means? Your mama's going to cry. What're you gonna do about that girl, huh? Safu, or whatever her name is. Have you ever even slept with a girl before? What a waste it was to turn down that invitation."

Shut up. Stop talking. Just stop...

"You don't know anything yet. About sex, or books, or how to fight properly. And you still think you don't need to go on living? Shion! *Open your eyes!*"

He opened his eyes. He saw four pairs of eyes staring back at him. One pair was grey, and they belonged to a human. The other three pairs were grape-coloured, and belonged to the mice.

"There's a good kid. I'll praise you for that."

"Nezumi..."

"Hm?"

"I... didn't get your name..."

"My name?"

"Your real... name..."

"Well, there's one more thing you don't know. I'll tell you when you recover completely, and that'll be your get-well present. Look forward to it."

He was fed the bitter liquid several more times. He drifted off to sleep only to be woken up again. Shion felt like he had repeated this countlessly. He broke into a fever. He perspired heavily, and vomited again and again. It felt like all the moisture in his body was being wrung out of him.

“Water...”

He pleaded repeatedly, and each time, a cool draught watered his throat.

“It tastes good...”

“Doesn’t it? The world’s not such a bad place after all.” Nezumi’s hand slowly caressed Shion’s hair.

“It’s alright now. Go to sleep.”

“Can I...?”

“Yeah. You’re past the worst of it. You’ve won. That’s quite something.” The fingers that stroked his hair were gentle, as was the tone of Nezumi’s voice. Relief washed over his body. Shion closed his eyes, and dropped off into a slumber.

* * *

With a hand still laid on his hair, Nezumi was checking Shion’s breathing as he slept. It was a little weak, but relaxed. It was not erratic.

—*You made it through.*

It was quite something. He wasn’t exaggerating out of politeness or encouragement. Shion housed a lot more vitality than his looks gave away. It was a vitality that was tenacious and strong. Nezumi gazed at Shion’s sleeping face— exhausted and weakened, but still breathing regularly nonetheless— and realized how tired he himself was as well. He was mentally, not physically, exhausted. He could neither

understand nor come to terms with what he had just experienced. A sense of unease consumed his mind and made his very blood tingle.

—*What's happening in there?*

No. 6. Something was beginning to brew in the interiors of what they called the Holy City. Something that exceeded the depths of human imagination was being born, and developing slowly but surely. Nezumi dug into the very back of a shelf and pulled out a petri dish. It contained something he had removed from under Shion's skin when he had cut the blister open.

—*I can't believe this.*

Yes, unbelievable things happened sometimes. Reality betrayed people almost too easily, and yanked people's lives at whim in unexpected directions. At times, it flung them to the depths of despair. It was cruel and violent. Absurd, even. It couldn't be trusted. Anything could happen at any time.

Nezumi knew it well. But he couldn't help being perturbed by this reality. Was it possible for something like this to happen? —But the truth was that it had already happened. It was something that couldn't be brushed away, and he couldn't turn a blind eye to it now.

Nezumi returned to Shion's bedside. He lightly stroked Shion's hair again.

—*When you wake up, will you be able to believe this reality?*

Would he be able to handle it? Here was a boy who had been cradled and sheltered in the Holy City's core until the age of twelve. Until sixteen, he lived in Lost Town — the outskirts of the city, but still part of it nevertheless — and as a citizen, he was treated as such. Would someone who had been housed in such a protective shell be able to handle reality? Was he strong enough?

—*Probably not weak enough to be crushed, though.*

But he didn't know. He didn't know how much strength or weakness resided in the boy sleeping quietly before him. Whether he would withstand it, or collapse —Nezumi didn't know. But Shion had survived, and that was another reality. To survive, you had to sink your teeth into Life and hold fast. No matter if it was unsightly or harsh — those who desired Life most greedily were the ones that survived. Nezumi, from experience, was painfully aware of this fact. The boy before him possessed that avarice. It was far more difficult to survive in an unsightly manner than to die a beautiful and heroic death. It also held much more value. Of this fact as well, Nezumi was painfully aware.

—You'll be alright.

Nezumi moistened Shion's parched lips with water. Then he quietly opened the door and slipped outside. Dawn was breaking. The sky was lightening from black to purple, and a sprinkling of stars winked in the sky.

"No. 6." Nezumi addressed the mammoth city darkly looming in the distance. "You just wait. Some day, I'll carve out that infection of yours, and lay it out in the open."

A streak of light shot across the sky. A flock of birds took flight. The sun was rising. Morning was coming. The West Block was still thrown in the depths of darkness, but the Holy City, bathed in the light of the rising sun, glittered as if to laugh in contempt at it. Nezumi stood still, facing the City in silence.

* * *

The streets below were brimming with light. He never tired of gazing out at the morning scene from this room; that was how magnificent it was.

—*Exquisite.*

The orderly streets, and the lush colours of the abundant trees that lined them were beautiful. It was a place of full functionality and vigour. Nowhere could one find anything wasteful or ugly. This was a product of human hands, the highest possible—

There was a chime. A monitor set into the wall flickered, and displayed the long, thin face of a man.

“I apologize for disturbing you so early in the morning.”

“No need. I’ve been waiting for you.”

“The investigation is complete. I would like to report the results to you directly, in person.”

“In person? That’s rather cautious of you. Is there something amiss?”

“The suspect has escaped.”

“It seems so— I’ve heard. But surely that’s not of overt importance.”

“He was involved in it. He aided in the suspect’s escape.”

The man on the screen pushed his glasses up his nose. They were rimmed black, and visibly old-fashioned. Perhaps he was under the impression that they suited him best, because he had not changed his frames once for the past ten years.

“Are you sure of that?”

“We’ve confirmed it. The vocal signatures match.”

“Aiding in escape, huh . . . and his method?”

“I’ll report all the details to you shortly.”

“Understood. I’ll be waiting.”

“If you’ll excuse me, then.”

The image disappeared, and the monitor faded back into the wall. The man let his gaze wander around him, then out the custom glass panels of his window to the sky that expanded beyond. It was a deep blue that pierced his eyes. The seasons were taking their course again.

—*So you've come back.*

What did he return for? Why did he show himself again? A single petal loosened itself from the bunch of roses displayed on his desk, and fluttered silently to the floor.

—*You should have stayed quietly where you were... idiot.*

He crushed the crimson petal with his foot. It smeared on the lush carpet, leaving a stain that reminded him of blood.

* * *

Yamase was squatted on the floor, hugging his knees, his head bowed. He looked like a child sulking after being scolded.

"Yamase-san." Shion called over to him. There was no answer.

"Yamase-san, what's wrong?"

Yamase dissolved into tears.

"Yamase-san, don't cry."

Shion placed a hand on Yamase's shoulder. Yamase's anguished sobbing tore at his heart. It was painful just to listen to him.

"What's making you cry like this? Is there anything I can do?"

"There is." Yamase's hand grasped Shion's ankle.

"Shion, I don't want to be alone. Why did you have to get saved?"

"Huh?"

"Come with me," he pleaded. "You will, won't you?"

"Yamase-san, what—?"

The hand grasping his ankle changed colour. It was beginning to rot. Chunks of flesh decayed and fell away from Yamase's arm. Shion could see his bone peeking through.

"We'll go together... right?"

Shion's ankle was being tugged harder. He was being dragged into total darkness. Yamase's arm continued to rot as it grew in length, and wound around Shion's torso until it finally reached his neck and began to choke him.

"No—stop—"

"Shion..."

Shion reached out as far as he could. He felt something firm and definite, and closed his hand around it, gripping hard. And he screamed.

"No!"

Shion awoke with a start. His throat was painfully dry.

"No, what?" Nezumi was peering into his face with a serious expression.

"Nezumi..." Shion murmured dazedly. "Oh... I'm alive..."

"You are. Congratulations on your safe return. And I'm sorry for ruining your moment, but can you let go of my hand? You're holding on pretty tight, and it hurts."

He had been grasping Nezumi's hand, so strongly that his fingers were digging into his flesh. He had clung to this hand to escape from the darkness.

"Want some water?"

"Yeah," Shion said gratefully.

The water was cold, and quenched every corner of Shion's body.

"I remember you giving me water like this... again and again." Words formed slowly on Shion's lips, and left them in awkward fragments.

"There's a spring nearby that's not too bad. It's free, so you don't need to worry."

"You... saved me again."

"I'm not the one that saved you. There aren't any adequate doctors or medical facilities here anyway, and even if there were, they wouldn't

have done any good. No one could have saved you. You brought yourself back. You put up quite the fight. I'm a bit impressed, actually. I promise I won't call you a little boy anymore."

"It's all... thanks to you..."

Shion brought his hand up to his face to gaze at it. It felt somewhat dry and rough, but there were no spots or wrinkles on it. It was still the same young hand. He breathed a sigh of relief.

"I had a bad dream..." Shion began softly. "I wanted someone to help me, and I reached out as far as I could... and I grabbed onto your hand."

"That frightening, huh?"

"Yamase-san was there— he told me I can't be the only one to be saved... his arm was wrapping around me, from my torso to my neck..." Shion trailed off to feel at his neck. It was wrapped in bandages.

"From your torso to your neck?" Nezumi gave a short intake of breath. He lowered his gaze, and moved away from the bed.

"Yamase-san was never the kind of person to say that..." Shion continued reflectively. "He would have been happy for me, that I was saved... why would he come into my dreams and..."

"Because you feel guilty about it," Nezumi said shortly, wrapping the superfibre cloth around his shoulders. A mouse leapt up onto one shoulder from a pile of books. "That Yamase guy died, and you survived. You're feeling guilty over it, and that's why you're having stupid dreams like that."

"Everything's stupid or useless to you, isn't it..."

"Whoever lives wins. Don't feel guilty about having survived. If you have time to be feeling guilty, work on living a day longer, a minute longer. And once in a while, remember the ones that died before you. That's good enough."

“Are you saying that to me?” Shion questioned.

“Who else could I be talking to?”

“It sounded like—” Shion hesitated. “Almost like you were telling it to yourself...”

Nezumi blinked. He stared at Shion for a moment, and then muttered “ridiculous” under his breath.

Shion tried to lift himself up on the bed. He still couldn’t move his body as well as he wanted. He noticed that his entire torso was wrapped tightly in bandages.

“Why are there so many...”

“You were tearing at yourself in pain, that’s why. Lie down, it’s still too early to move around. And take the medicine by your pillow. When I get home, I’ll treat you to some soup.”

“You’re going out?”

“I have work.”

Nezumi turned his back to Shion, and briskly left the room.

Shion swallowed the white pill as he was told to. A brown mouse squeaked at him from beside a glass of water.

“Thanks.”

The mouse nodded as if it understood his word of thanks, and perched on Shion’s chest as he lay back down.

“What kind of work does your master do?”

Cheep cheep.

“What’s his name? What kind of life has he lived until now? Where was he born, and what...” he trailed off. He was getting drowsy. It seemed his body was in want of a little more quiet rest. Shion nodded off to sleep. This time, he had no dreams. When he awoke, the heaviness and lethargy in his body had disappeared. He didn’t feel

any discomfort other than a dull pain from the wound on his neck. His body was recovering quickly.

There was no one else in the room. It looked like Nezumi had not returned yet. A dim darkness had settled, and it was quiet. Shion turned his head to see the three mice curled up fast asleep by his neck. He rose quietly, and put on his shoes. He wanted badly to catch a breath in the outdoors. He wanted to fill his lungs with fresh air. Shion took several cautious steps. He was sweating underneath the bandages on his neck and chest. He unwound the ones around his neck. Now it was much easier to breathe. His feet were light, and he didn't feel dizzy or nauseous. Shion opened the door and climbed up the stairs. A cold draft of air stung him. The world at ground level was bathed in a reddish light. It was dusk. Coloured leaves were falling from the trees. They danced in the wind, and with a dry rustling sound, fluttered to the ground. Looking above, he could see the dark branches of the trees, mostly bare, cast in stark relief against the sky. In the distance, he could see No. 6.

Shion felt a hot pricking at the back of his eyes. It wasn't from nostalgia for the city where he was born and raised. It was the sights of late autumn, this unremarkable scene, that had tugged at his heart. The faint rustling of the fallen leaves, the smell of earth, the colour of the sky, all resonated in his heart deeply as if to coax the tears from him.

—He'll have another good laugh if he sees me like this.

Shion bit his lip to hold back his tears. He inhaled deeply.

He heard the sound of high voices raised in laughter behind him. Shion turned around, and saw three children amongst the trees, coming up the slope toward him. There were two girls and one boy. Did these children live in the ruined house that he had seen earlier? They all had similar round faces. He didn't know what they were laughing so joyously about, but Shion felt his own feelings lift just watching

them. Karan loved children, and always used to hold sales that went by names like “Half Price for Children Under Ten”, so the bakery was always filled with the voices of small children. That was inside No. 6. This was outside No. 6. But despite how bizarre the world on this side of the wall was, the sound of children’s laughter was still the same.

The girl, who looked the oldest out of all of them, noticed Shion first. She stopped in her tracks and opened her eyes wide. Her face stiffened. Shion didn’t meant to scare her. He raised his hand in greeting and spoke first.

“Hi there.”

The small boy standing behind the girl burst into tears.

“Huh? Oh, don’t cry—” Shion made to take a step closer. The girl’s face contorted.

“Snake!” she shrieked.

Hastily scooping up the boy in her arms and taking the other girl by her hand, she clambered back down the slope. Her shriek echoed high into the sunset. Shion stood in stunned silence.

—*Snake? What did she scream for? What snake?*

He didn’t understand the girl’s words.

—*What did she see?*

He turned around. There was nothing save for the scenery of late autumn. There were no snakes, or birds. There was no sign of any living thing.

—*Did the shadows of the branches look like a snake to her?... No, that girl was looking straight at me. She was looking only at me.*

Shion shivered. His scalp was tingling. He ran a hand roughly through his bangs, and pulled hard. It was a habit of his when he was agitated.

“What—”

Shion's breath caught in his throat. There were a few hairs clinging between his fingers. They were an almost-transparent shade of white. They caught the light of the setting sun, and glimmered.

"How—what—"

He raked his head, pulling out more hairs. They were all the same. He felt his face. The skin under his palm was firm. There were no wrinkles or sags. But he felt a strange sensation on his neck. There was a slight swell under his skin that was winding around his neck. Shion half-tumbled down the stairs in haste.

—A mirror, I need a mirror...

He knocked over a pile of books. The startled mice darted underneath the bed. He found a wooden door next to the bathroom. He opened it, and found a space about big enough for one person to lie down or stand up. The back wall looked like a mirror. There were various things hanging on the other walls, but Shion was in no mood to check. He turned on the light, and moved closer to the mirror. His legs quaked. His hands were trembling. But he forced himself to gaze into the mirror.

He gave a faint cry of horror.

What was he seeing in the mirror? What was this... this...

Snake!

The girl's shriek welled up and echoed in his ears. He needed air, else he felt like he would suffocate. He couldn't breathe. Shion staggered, and leaned heavily against the wall. He stared at himself in the mirror. His eyes were glued to it, and they would not move. He couldn't look away.

His hair was white and shining. And there was a snake. A red serpent, about two centimetres wide, was coiled around his neck. That was what it looked like. He had no doubt about it.

"This can't be..." He shed his clothes. He tried to tear off the bandages that wrapped his entire body. They had been wound tightly with care, and they tangled and knotted as if to mock Shion's fumbling hands. When at last the ends of the bandage had fallen away from his body, Shion gave a strangled cry. The crimson band that had risen up on his skin began from his left ankle, coiled up his leg and extended across his crotch and torso, wound past his armpit and reached up to his neck. It was, literally, like a snake that was strangling him. It was slithering over his naked body. A red meander scar. The strength was leaving his knees. He sank slowly onto the unravelled bandages.

White hair and a red serpent. This was the price he had paid to survive. "Do you enjoy looking at yourself naked?" a voice spoke, so low it was almost a whisper. Nezumi was leaning on the door behind him. "Nezumi— this—"

"It appeared just as your fever went down. The affection is only skin-deep, it's not because your veins are engorged. Which means there's been no damage to your circulation system. Isn't that nice?"

"Nice? What's *nice* about this? This is..."

"If you don't like it, you can get rid of it," Nezumi said quietly. "Skin grafting is no big feat in this time and age, right? As for your hair, you can dye it another colour. I don't see any problem. But just letting you know—" he shrugged slightly, "we can do something about your hair, but you won't be able to graft your skin here. We don't have the technology or facilities for that." His voice was calm and emotionless, and contained not the smallest hint of sympathy. Shion remained sitting where he was, absentmindedly gazing at the bandage that was tangled around his leg.

"Shion."

"... Yeah..."

"Do you regret being alive?"

It took a moment for Shion to respond.

“—What?” he said vaguely. “Oh— did you say something?”

Nezumi sighed and knelt down in front of Shion, hooking a finger on his chin. He forcefully tilted Shion’s face up.

“Stop looking down, and look at me. Snap out of your daze and listen to what I’m saying. Are you lamenting it?”

“Lamenting...? What?”

“Being alive.”

“Lament... you mean... like wishing it didn’t happen, right...”

“Obviously. No,” said Nezumi sarcastically, “I was speaking French, like *la menthe*, for mint. Really? Get a grip on yourself. Has something happened to that gifted brain of yours?”

Regret? Toward living? Was he lamenting the fact that he was alive and sitting here, looking as he did now? Shion slowly shook his head.

“No, I’m not.”

He didn’t want to die. Even if he had been struck down, he would have crawled across the ground to stay alive. He had no clear goals or hopes. He had no sight of the future. His body had changed startlingly, and his soul was in turmoil. But he still did not want to die.

Life was in the delicious taste of the water that quenched his throat. It was in the colour of the sky that spread before his eyes, the tranquil evening air, freshly baked bread, the definite sensation of someone’s fingers, soft, secretive laughter; ‘Shion, what do you hope for?’, the unexpected confession, uncertainty and hesitation. All these things were connected to being alive. No matter what his appearance became, he didn’t want to be cut away from any of these.

“Nezumi...” he whispered. “I— I want to be alive.”

The tears that he had held back until now gave way. A single droplet spilled over his cheek. He hastily brushed it away.

“It’s no use hiding it, stupid,” sighed Nezumi softly. “How can you cry so openly like that? Aren’t you embarrassed?”

“I just let my guard down, okay?” said Shion crossly. “I’m having trouble controlling myself because I’m not emotionally stable yet. I’m a recovering patient, so stop making fun of me.”

Nezumi silently gazed at Shion’s face, and then reached out to gently grasp at his hair.

“If it bothers you so much, I’ll dye it for you later. But it looks pretty nice on its own. And besides—” Nezumi’s fingers moved to trace the red scar across Shion’s chest.

“Think about it, you’ve got a red snake coiled around your body. Quite alluring, I’ll say.”

“I’m not flattered at all.”

“Well I don’t enjoy seeing you naked either,” Nezumi retorted. “Put some clothes on. I’ll treat you to some hot specialty soup and meat.” Come to think of it, it had been a long time since he had eaten any food. There was a burning sensation around Shion’s stomach as hunger suddenly gnawed at him.

“What kind of soup? Need any help?”

Nezumi blinked.

“You bounce back pretty fast, don’t you?”

“Huh?”

Nezumi’s voice suddenly dropped low and hoarse.

*Round about the cauldron go.
In the poisoned entrails throw.
Toad, that under cold stone
Days and nights has thirty-one
Sweltered venom sleeping got,
Boil thou first i’ the charmèd pot.*

“What’s that?”

“*Macbeth*. The scene where the three witches are brewing newt eyes, frog feet, and bat wings in a cauldron, making their special soup. Charming, isn’t it?”

“If that’s your idea of specialty soup, I’ll have to say no thanks.”

“Instead of bat wings we’ll use chicken, and instead of newts we’ll toss in lots of fresh vegetables. We’ll substitute the frogs for a clove of garlic. Just a moment’s wait, your Majesty.”

Nezumi’s specialty soup was piping hot, and more delicious than anything Shion had ever tasted.

5

THE CITY OF LIGHT

AFTER THEIR meal, Nezumi placed a petri dish and a pair of tweezers in front of Shion.

“I extracted this out of your incision. Try opening it up. This is probably right in your field.”

“My field?”

In the petri dish was something black and stringy, about two centimetres long. Shion plucked it up with the tweezers. The slimy black object dangled from them, and looked half-melted. Upon closer scrutiny, Shion could make out evidence of something filmy at the end of it.

“These are— wings?”

“Looks like. I have no idea. There’s one other thing I pulled out too,” Nezumi added. “What do you have to say about this?”

It was another black lump. This one was hard, and resembled a seed. There was a hole in it as if something had eaten its way out.

“A pupa— I think,” said Shion slowly.

“Pupa? Like what moths and butterflies make themselves into? Oh wait, butterflies make cocoons.”

“Cocoons are the outer shell of pupae,” Shion explained. “Embryo, larva, pupa, and imago— most insects go through their development stages in this order. This one . . . is probably some kind of bee.”

“You can tell?”

“There are signs of wings beginning to form. The membranous qualities, the fact that there are four of them . . . and more than anything—” Shion swallowed. “I saw it with my own eyes— a black bee flying out of Yamase-san’s neck.”

“And that bee and this black thing are the same thing?”

“If I’m not mistaken, probably. This one couldn’t complete its metamorphosis in the pupal stage. It managed to eat its way out of the shell, but it couldn’t become a fully grown imago. It failed.”

“Why?”

Why? He was right, why was that? Why was same bee that had hatched, undergone metamorphosis and become an imago inside Yamase unable to break out of its pupal stage here? Was it a coincidence, or— Shion shook his head.

“I don’t know. All I know is that this is a parasitic organism, and it feeds off humans.”

Nezumi stared unblinkingly at the petri dish.

“A parasite bee . . .” he muttered. “I thought bees only fed off flower nectar.”

“Those are just one species of bee, like the honey bee. Most bees — or wasp, in this case — are hunters, and solitary by nature.”

“And there are parasitic wasps too?”

Shion nodded. Nezumi’s questions were simple and brief, and were easy to answer from Shion’s knowledge. But none of the questions were off the mark. They tread lightly but accurately on the point of focus. With each question he answered, Shion felt a growing uneasiness like he was being backed into a corner. He felt like he would unwittingly slip and let something horrific escape from his lips. *But you can’t be afraid*, he told himself. He couldn’t turn a blind eye and let things slip past him. He couldn’t pretend that nothing had happened, and refuse to enquire, to take action. He stood in the position of one who had experienced it. He had been host to the parasite, fought with it, and prevailed. And like a symbol of this battle, he bore the red serpent on his body. Yes, this was his imprint. Nezumi’s face was peering into his. Shion returned his gaze steadily, and spoke.

“There are said to be about 200,000 different species of parasitic wasps. Hymenoptera such as bees and ants are highly specialized insects, and there are still tens of thousands of species that are undocumented. This is particularly so for parasitic wasps— or so I’ve heard.”

“Which means we don’t know what we’re gonna get.”

“We can’t say what species for sure.”

“But we can still predict.”

“If we have any foundation for a basis of prediction,” Shion answered.

“Why, *you’re* the best foundation there is,” said Nezumi with mock enthusiasm. “So how was it, being a host to a parasite wasp? Could you tell if it was a new species?”

“You’re really disagreeable sometimes, did you know that?” Shion replied irritably.

“Well, you piss me off *all the time*. ‘We can’t say what species for sure’, he says. Don’t mess around. Don’t you have any sense of danger? These wasps are killing people.”

“Most parasitic wasps do.”

“What?”

“Wasps that are classified as parasites are actually more parasitoid. To reach full growth, they only need to attach themselves to one prey... their host. And ultimately, without fail, they consume and kill it.”

Ultimately without fail, they consume and kill the host. It sounded even more grotesque when put into words.

“Host? Like what kind?”

“There are lots. Moths, butterflies, ant larvae, fruits... a species of ichneumonoidea called *Rhysella approximator* lays eggs in the larva of another species, xiphydriida, and makes it its host.”

“So a wasp leeches off another wasp.”

“Not only that, but another species of the same ichneumonoidea called *Pseudorhyssa alpestris* lays eggs in the same xiphydriida right after the *Rhysella*, and its larva eats both the larva of the *Rhysella* and the xiphydriida.”

“So they kill each other even if they’re from the same species... wow, I thought only humans killed their own kind. So?”

“Hm?”

“Are there parasite wasps that attach to humans as hosts?”

“I’ve never heard of any,” replied Shion. “There are other organisms that are parasitic to humans — viruses, bacteria, ticks, fleas, and the like. I’ve heard once of a warble fly that laid eggs in a boy’s head, and one of them invading his brain, but that was an unusual case, I think... I’ve never heard of any wasps doing that. The question is,” Shion said thoughtfully, “how was it able to lay eggs in a human body in the first place? How did it pierce the skin with its ovipositor without being noticed?”

“You have no memory of it?”

“No. I didn’t feel any pain or itch. It never crossed my mind that I’d been stung by a wasp.”

“So they can lay their eggs without their host noticing at all.”

“Not only that, they also grow with astonishing speed. And when they do, they must excrete some sort of substance that rapidly accelerates ageing in the host, and inevitably leads them to death. Even the process of rigor mortis and dissipation gets sped up. And finally, as a full-grown imago, the parasite wasp eats its way out of the body and escapes outside.”

There was a moment of silence.

Shion and Nezumi looked at each other, and exhaled at the same time.

“I’m surprised you lived through it.”

“Yeah. I’m starting to get the cold sweats just thinking about it.”

“There are too many things we don’t know,” said Nezumi. “Where did this guy come from? What is it?”

“Hey—” Shion said suddenly. “Have there been any similar incidents like that here?”

“No. I did a little research because it was nagging me too. There were guys who got shot to death fighting, or people who got drunk and drowned in a ditch, but no one who suddenly turned old and died. There’s no media control or censorship here like No. 6,” Nezumi added, “so if anything out of the ordinary happens, it should spread like wildfire.”

“Then if it’s happened in another Block—” suggested Shion. “The Southeastern Blocks, maybe? That environment is probably the most suited for a new species of insect to appear.”

Nezumi shook his head slowly.

“I can’t imagine that happening. If it did, the city should close all the gates leading in. But they haven’t shown any signs of doing that.

Produce is still being shipped in from the Southeastern Blocks as usual. The North Block is the same.”

“Then the wasp definitely must have come from No. 6 . . . I can’t believe it,” Shion muttered to himself.

“Unbelievable— you’re certainly right about that.” Nezumi’s fingers lightly tapped the petri dish. His shoulders shook slightly.

“Nezumi?”

Nezumi’s head was bowed, and a quiet chuckle escaped his lips. It soon turned into howling laughter. It echoed in the underground room that overflowed with books. Nezumi collapsed on the bed, holding his stomach and laughing harder still. Shion lunged for a pitcher of water, and emptied it on Nezumi’s head.

“Hey!” Nezumi sprang up. “What the hell are you doing?”

“Are you alright?”

“*Alright?* I’m soaking wet here.”

“I just— I thought you were undergoing a fit of hysteria or something, so I . . .”

“What do I have to throw a hysteric fit for?”

“Well, you started laughing randomly, I just thought . . .”

“I only laughed because it was funny.”

“Funny? What is?”

Nezumi shook his head violently. Shion’s face was pelted with water droplets.

“It’s hilarious, isn’t it? Where did this thing originate? No. 6. There’s a mysterious man-eating wasp flying around in this utopian model city, the *Holy City*, if you will. This is city of the future, the epitome of modern science. And it’s being eaten by *bees*. Hilarious.”

“It’s not something to laugh about. People are dying.”

Nezumi stood up. He walked over to Shion, and drew up to him face-to-face. Nezumi was right, Shion thought. He was tall. He easily exceeded Shion in height by several centimetres.

“What?” Shion unconsciously took a step backwards. He drew himself up and squared his shoulders as best he could in spite of the wall of books behind him. He had seen something flash in Nezumi’s grey eyes with a savage, piercing glint. It was only for a fleeting instant, but he had not missed it.

“Forgive my foolish question,” Nezumi said in an expressionless voice. At the same time, a set of fingers closed around Shion’s throat.

“Have you killed anyone before?” Nezumi’s thumb slowly dug deeper into Shion’s neck.

“Never...” Shion said faintly. “Of course I haven’t...”

Nezumi’s thin lip curled slightly in a cold smile.

“I would’ve figured. But keep this in mind. The wasp might kill its host in order to keep itself alive, but humans can kill other humans for much smaller reasons than that. And *you* were almost killed by another human.”

“I know.”

“You liar. You don’t know anything.”

“I do know!” Shion said angrily, clenching Nezumi’s wrist. “I know. If I’d been taken to the Correctional Facility as planned, I would have been made out to be the murderer in the wasp’s place. At best, I would have gotten a life sentence. At worst, I would have been executed...” He paused for a moment, then continued determinedly. “The Bureau wanted to buy more time. They needed time to decode the truth about Yamase-san’s cause of death— and by making me the suspect, they wanted to file it away as a simple murder case for outside eyes. Am I right?”

Nezumi's fingers withdrew. The spot on Shion's neck burned where Nezumi's thumb had dug in.

"Good answer, full marks," he said breezily. Then his tone dropped in mock seriousness. "It seems this unbalanced young man, tumbled from the ranks of the elite, engaged in this crime out of resentment for the city. He allegedly concocted a special chemical to use repeatedly in multiple criminal acts. Thanks to the efforts of the Security Bureau, however, this young man has been put under arrest. We would like to reassure the citizens of the city that they are perfectly safe. —It was probably scripted somewhere along those lines," he broke off. "What a ridiculous farce. I'm guessing your knowledge and history fit the role of 'dangerous criminal' perfectly."

"The City has full access to all the citizens' personal information," Shion answered. "It was probably easy to find a person to fit the role they wanted."

"More like you were being marked from the beginning."

"Huh?"

"Ever since that day you helped me, the city's been marking you as a cautionary suspect. They've been scrutinizing your daily life down to every minute detail. Who you met with, what you talked about, what you ate... so I thought this murder case was something the city devised to arrest you. I was wrong, though, and we know that now."

"But why? For what purpose—"

"Because you're not a loyal citizen," Nezumi replied as he towelled his hair off. His profile was delicately chiseled. It looked almost like an artificial creation. It was all too different from a face that had skin and blood coursing through it, and carried bodily warmth, with swells and dimples of flesh or fat, the occasional eczema; a face that changed with joy, anger, grief or mirth, shone with sweat, or stained with tears. This was no human face— it looked like a doll that had been crafted

with utmost precision.

But even so, Shion thought, and clenched his fist. The wrist he had grasped minutes ago had been warm, and throbbing with a steady pulse.

“You’re spaced out again. Am I boring you?”

“Huh? Oh, no— of course not. I was just wondering what you meant by... not loyal.” Shion’s face flushed, though he didn’t know why. Nezumi sniffed dismissively.

“That city only accepts people who pledge absolute loyalty to them. They don’t allow people who resist, object, or retaliate. They make sure any foreign object is removed completely. That’s how it’s thrived up until now.”

“And I’m the foreign object this time.”

“You’re more than foreign to them— think about it. You housed a VC, you held suspicions against the city for manipulating information, and you saw the cruelty behind their façade. As a citizen, you fail the test. You’re an unwanted candidate. The city was just waiting for the right opportunity to get rid of you. —Hey,” Nezumi said abruptly. “Tell me, what does the immune system do when a virus invades a human body?”

“Huh?” Shion was caught off-guard. “Well, first the natural killer cells— that’s a type of lymphocyte— find the cells that have been infected with the virus, and destroy them. Then the ribonuclease become active and suppress the spread of the virus. Next—”

“That’s enough,” Nezumi interrupted. “Geez, I set you off explaining something, and you don’t know when to stop. That’s why people get pissed off at you.”

“You’re the only one that seems to get irritated at me.”

Nezumi ignored him and gave a short, derisive laugh.

“So basically, to the city, you’re a virus. And that’s why they tried to erase you.”

“I’m a human. I won’t be erased that easily.”

Nezumi sighed deeply in exasperation.

“It’s easy for humans to kill other humans, you know.”

Shion clenched his fists tightly again.

“But they can save people too.”

“What?”

“You saved me. Nezumi,” he said earnestly, “parasite wasps don’t help each other out. But people can save other people. Am I wrong?”

Nezumi smiled briefly, and his gaze slid away from Shion.

“You’re as stupid as they come. Hopeless. Where did you think of that sickening cliché? I told you, I’m only repaying my debt.”

“And I told you, you’ve already paid enough.”

“How generous of you to have such low estimations of my debt,” said Nezumi sarcastically.

“Then you must have had pretty high estimations.”

Nezumi let out a long breath, and looked up at the ceiling. He bit his lip in silence as if to grope for the right words. The mice gathered around his feet.

“You don’t understand,” he said momentarily. “No amount of words would probably make you understand. That day, four years ago, I’d mostly given up. Giving up means the end of you. I knew that. But there was no way anyone would help me, or lend me a hand— that’s what I honestly thought. I couldn’t ask for help, I had nowhere to run... I snuck into Chronos, so tired I couldn’t move, and I thought about how it was only a matter of time until I was caught...” he paused, then spoke quietly. “I felt so— humiliated. I wondered if the

whole reason I'd been born was just to die in humiliation like this... don't laugh."

Shion would never have been able to. The sounds of that night four years ago were echoing in his ears. The sounds of the wind, the trees, and the whipping rain meshed and undulated, rising vivid and sharp in his mind. And amidst the din and darkness, a sopping wet boy was curled up on the floor.

"And then the window opened. You threw it open wide, didn't you. And then you spread your arms open."

"Yeah, I remember. I felt really restless, and I wanted to scream."

"To me, it looked like you were calling, beckoning for me to come in. I thought— this was unbelievable, and it was happening right this moment. And you even left the window open when you ducked back inside."

"I was going to turn off the atmosphere control system."

"I don't care for what reason. That window you left recklessly open was my stroke of luck. And the fact that you didn't call the Security Bureau on me, but instead treated my wound and even gave me food was another miracle. I found out for the first time that things like this could happen. That a helping hand could be extended miraculously like that... you were the first one that taught me. Like all of these—" Nezumi slowly looked about his room.

"— These thousands of stories here, you taught me that sometimes we encounter the most unexpected things. And that's why I was able to survive..." he lapsed into momentary silence. "So you're right. There are times when people are saved by other people. And you're the one that taught me that. You were the only one that taught me that. The debt I owe for that is high— unfortunately for me."

Nezumi's voice was so quiet it was almost a murmur, but it was deep and clear, and rang pleasantly in Shion's ears. So that's what it was,

Shion thought, and spread his fingers as he looked at his palm. That night, when he threw the window open with these hands, he had called in a miracle along with the wind.

“Don’t get too carried away,” said Nezumi, his words quickly turning brusque. “I’m giving you the guest treatment because I owe you. If you get carried away and start acting cocky, I’m going to kick you out.”

“Fine by me,” said Shion mildly. “I don’t know if you’ll take my word for it, but I’m not the type to get carried away too easily. But how did you find out I was in danger?” he asked curiously. “It’s not like you were keeping constant watch over me these four years, right?”

Nezumi plucked a grey mouse up and held it out at Shion. It was the smallest among all the mice.

“Take a close look.”

Shion held the mouse in his palm, and brought it close to his face.

“Is this... a robot?”

“Pretty well-made, isn’t it? It has a set of built-in sensors. This thing is small enough that it can slip through the city’s surveillance net and move around quite a bit. Depends on the area, though.”

“Did you make this?”

“Well, yeah,” he said casually. “While I was away from No. 6, this guy was the one sending me data about you.”

Shion lightly closed his fingers around the mouse in his hand. It had none of the warmth and softness that was characteristic of living things. Conversely, he scooped up one of the mice scurrying about his feet and held it in his palm too. This one had a faint but definite warmth and pulse.

“I didn’t know when or how the city was planning to get rid of you,” Nezumi continued. “You’re smart and young. You still had plenty of usage value. I couldn’t imagine that they would kick you out so

easily. I figured once they discovered how useful you could be, they'd take full advantage of it. Writing you up as a murderer was probably a piece of cake for them. You were their scapegoat," he sneered. "They were keeping you enclosed in a corral until the ceremonial day, when they would drag you out in front of everyone and make a flashy show of chopping your head off."

"So I've gone from being a virus to a goat, huh. Not much of an improvement."

"Hey, goats are cute. More lovable than you, anyway."

"I appreciate the compliment," said Shion unamusedly. "So this little guy sensed the change going on around me and came to notify you."

"Yup. It started that day when that man died of unnatural causes at the park where you worked. After that, the Bureau started stepping up their surveillance on you. And like adding icing to the cake, your co-worker got killed too. It was the perfect opportunity to put you under arrest."

"Surveillance—I didn't even know I was being watched."

"They do it so you don't notice. Once you do, it's too late."

"That's scary."

"You're noticing *now*?" Nezumi sniffed in derision. Shion raked his bangs up. He was confused— about what had happened, what was about to happen, and what he was supposed to do from now on. He knew almost nothing. And it was terrifying not to know. But there was one idea, although it was a mere speculation, that had sparked in Shion's mind.

* * *

"Nezumi."

"Hm?"

“Could it be the park?”

“The what?”

“The Forest Park in the centre of the city. My workplace— could that be where the parasite wasp originated?”

“Why?” said Nezumi. “That park is right in the middle of the city. It might be a forest, but it’s still artificial. All the wildlife is managed and controlled by the city. If a parasite wasp sprung out of nowhere, they’d notice.”

“That’s true, but ... out of all places in the city, the park would be the most adequate environment for a new species to appear. And all the victims so far, including me, were in the park when it happened. Of course—” Shion hesitated. “I don’t know if there’s been casualties anywhere else— but I think part of the reason why the city suspected me was because the incidents were concentrated in that location. But if that’s the case—”

“That monster must have been born there somehow without being noticed by the control systems.”

“It’s plausible, right? And what’s more, the park is where lots of people gather.”

“No shortage of hosts,” said Nezumi grimly.

It was a park that was beautifully and conveniently crafted for the citizens. If a species that preyed on humans actually did inhabit it, then—

“Spring,” Shion murmured.

Spring? Nezumi echoed in question.

“Once winter comes, the wasps will cease activity as they enter a dormant stage. The eggs that have been laid already will probably pass the winter as they are.”

“Inside people’s bodies.”

“Yeah. And when spring comes, they’ll be able to resume activity as an imago. Then they’ll hatch all at once.” In a season abundant with sunlight and flower blossoms, a mass of black wasps would simultaneously break out of people’s bodies to take flight. How many would they be? How many people would be sacrificed?

“We have to do something.”

“And how are you gonna ‘do something’ about it?” replied Nezumi bluntly. “Don’t even think about going back to the city. You’ll be killed. You’re an amateur, you can’t pull any fancy tricks like slipping past surveillance. Ten-to-one, as soon as you step inside the city, you’ll be shot dead. We don’t have a trump card to pull out, you know.”

“Actually— I think we might.”

Nezumi narrowed his eyes.

“I survived that wasp attack. There’s a chance that I’ve developed antibodies that resist the toxin. If I have, then it’ll be possible to make a serum out of my blood.”

Nezumi shot an appalled look at Shion and hunched his shoulders exaggeratedly.

“And then what’re you gonna do? Go waltzing into the city’s Health Bureau and say ‘Please check my blood. And if you like, please make a serum out of it’? That’s idiotic. They’ll probably suck all your blood out and throw you in the trash with the rest of their organic garbage. Sure, what you’re saying is impressive, but are you prepared to risk losing your life for these people?”

“I don’t want to die.”

“Then don’t think about useless things. Whether you have antibodies or not, once you’re caught, you’re going to get killed anyway. It’s just a matter of how soon or how late.”

“Then what should I do?”

“Don’t do anything. Just leave them to fend for themselves.”

Shion lifted his face.

“Leave them?” he asked quietly.

“Yeah. What a magnificent stage it’ll be,” Nezumi sneered. “You can watch the Holy City crumble into ruin, glowing in the light of spring. And you’ll have the best seats in the house.”

“Nezumi!” Shion raised his voice sharply.

“Whoa, don’t go dumping water on me again.”

“Are you under the impression that the West Block is safe from this?” he said incredulously. “We’re human beings, the same as them. There’s no knowing when the wasps might attack us too.”

Nezumi fell silent. A crooked smile played on his lips.

“We’re not the same.”

“What—”

“The people inside the city sure don’t see the residents of the West Block as the same human beings. You still don’t know what kind of place this is, do you? This is the Holy City’s garbage dump. No. 6 has thrived by throwing everything it doesn’t want out here. You should take a good look and see for yourself.”

“Nezumi...”

“This is just my hunch, but listen,” he continued. “That monster is probably only going to choose residents of No. 6 to be its host— the people who have pushed everything dirty into the hands of others to live in that perfectly hygienic environment, well-nourished and in excellent health. Mr. Monster has gourmet tastes.”

“How can you be so sure?”

“I have no clue about the biology of insects, Shion. But I’m probably right in guessing that any bee, wasp, ant or grasshopper will appear most in places where there’s the most food. In terms of population density, we’re much higher than the city. But do you see any sign of

the monster here? No. Which means that there are simply no prey, no hosts here. Right?”

Shion was at a loss for words. His thoughts were becoming tangled, and there was a dull pain throbbing at the back of his head. Nezumi's hand touched his cheek.

“Sorry—” he said softly. “I didn’t mean to give you a hard time. I forgot. You’re from the other side, the inside of the wall.”

“I don’t understand what you mean by inside and outside.”

“Of course you wouldn’t,” Nezumi said gently. “That’s normal. You guys have probably never tried to understand what was going on outside your walls, have you? You probably weren’t even curious about it. Oblivious, arrogant, blissful people... But you, poor thing,” he murmured. “You’ve fallen off that pedestal.”

Which means I can no longer be oblivious, arrogant or blissful anymore. Is that what you want to say? Shion let his gaze speak for him as he looked Nezumi in the eye.

If arrogance is knowing nothing and never having tried to know, and if my blissful life until now has been built upon this arrogance, then sure, I don’t mind throwing everything away. Falling off my pedestal would be the best thing that could have happened to me.

“Nezumi,” he said steadily.

“Hm?”

“I want to know the truth. I want to know what’s real, what’s happening to this world I’m living in. I want to see its true face.”

Nezumi hunched his shoulders and flashed him a wry smile.

“Such youthful words.”

“We’re the same age.”

“I have more life experience than you. Geez, I don’t know who else would rattle off a line as embarrassing as ‘I want to know the truth’.

Except Hamlet, maybe.”

“Who’s that?”

“A prince of Denmark. I think you should balance out that knowledge bias before working on knowing the truth. You really know next to nothing about classics, huh?”

“Well, I’ve never needed them before . . .” frowned Shion. “The Arts weren’t encouraged much, so . . .”

Nezumi reached into the shelves and pulled out two books.

“If what you’re saying is true, then once winter comes, the commotion will die down. Which means we have a moratorium until spring.”

“Probably.”

“Then there’s no need to get worked up,” he said airily. “Nothing will come of it. So until you recover and you’re well enough to move around, you can read him these.”

“Him?”

A brown mouse scurried up onto Shion’s knee, and stood on its hind legs.

“He loves *Macbeth*. The other is *Faust*. Ever heard of it?”

“No.”

Nezumi grimaced, and heaved an exaggerated sigh.

*If feeling prompt not, if it doth not flow
Fresh from the spirit's depths, with strong control
Swaying to rapture every listener's soul,
Idle your toil; the chase you may forego!*

“—is how it goes. You should give your brain a break and work on training your soul. Your Mama used to read to you, right?”

“Yeah.”

The mouse squeaked insistently.

“Oh, right. Speaking of Mama, I have a message from yours. I almost forgot.”

“Huh?”

A faint colour rose in Nezumi’s cheeks as he obstinately turned aside.

“Well, since you managed not to die . . . I figured it wouldn’t hurt to tell your mother that you’re over here now. ”

“You went to see my mother?”

“Not me,” he said brusquely, “I stayed in the underground tunnel. This guy—”

The brown mouse tilted its head to one side.

“—He went for me, with the note in his mouth. One of the oldest tricks in the book, but surprisingly, it got past surveillance without being noticed.”

“Thank you.”

“Stop that.” Nezumi pulled a face. “Don’t give me that teary-eyed look. Aren’t you embarrassed at all?”

“I was talking to this little mouse here.”

“Oh— well, then.”

Shion really was grateful. Now that he knew how difficult it was to get past the wall, he felt grateful from the bottom of his heart that Nezumi had taken the same risk again just to deliver the message to his mother. *So this is what it means to gain knowledge.*

“Your mom’s got some guts,” Nezumi remarked. “She managed to give me a reply without getting caught.” Nezumi tossed him a rolled-up strip of paper that was about half the size of his finger. There was a message hastily scribbled onto it that he could barely read.

Arnd LK-3000. latch Bl. 3F. Not sure. -K

“What does this mean?” He and Nezumi looked at each other in bewilderment.

“It’s a letter that your Mama wrote to her beloved son,” said Nezumi.

“Don’t you have any clue what it might be about?”

“Not really,” replied Shion doubtfully. “‘K’ probably stands for my mother’s first name, but this...’not sure’...?”

“It’s probably an address. Not that building numbers would do any good here... Latch Building, huh. I guess I’ll look into it.”

“So that must mean my mother knows someone who lives in the West Block.” It was a surprise to him. He had never heard Karan utter a single word about anyone who lived here. Nezumi snapped his fingers smartly.

“Oh— I know.”

“Huh?”

“Maybe he’s your dad.”

“Fat chance,” retorted Shion. “Look who’s had one too many stories to read. Aren’t you embarrassed at all?”

Nezumi *tsked* in disappointment.

“You’re getting better at your comebacks. —But, well, I guess you’re right. It’s your typical script for a cheap melodrama. A father and son reunite in tears after sixteen years of estrangement.” Nezumi’s voice turned deep and burly.

“I’ve missed you, son.”

“Me too, Father.” Shion bounded into Nezumi’s widespread arms. They circled around his back. It was warm. For an instant, the frigid touch of Yamase’s dead body flashed back in his mind. But it was this warmth here, not that coldness, that he wanted to remember; and Shion vowed never to forget the heat of the body that was in his arms. He wished all beings, himself included, could continue to be living

beings. He didn't want his life unfairly wrenched away from him. He could feel it— the pleasure of living, breathing, and possessing a body of warm flesh— soak into the depths of his core. Nezumi gently detached himself.

"You're getting better at picking up your cues," he said approvingly.

"I know. I've come pretty far in a short time, haven't I?"

"Quite an excellent pupil. Shall we go, then?"

"Where?"

"Outside."

Darkness had fallen outside. Here in the West Block, night and complete darkness seemed synonymous. A chill wind nipped at Shion's skin.

"Look," Nezumi pointed. No. 6 was carved out in the darkness, bathed in light as it glowed in the distance.

"It's always shining like that, morning, day, and night. Pretty, isn't it."

"Yeah."

"But where you're going to be living from now on is here." The land was sunken in darkness, with a sparse scattering of lights here and there. They burned forlornly, and made the surrounding dark look even more inky black. The clouds above broke, and the moon peeked out. It was a crescent moon. A thin sliver, almost like a clipped nail, floated in the empty sky.

Nezumi crouched down to pick something up.

"Look at this." It was a dead wasp.

"This looks like just a regular paper wasp."

"You were right, it looks like the season for wasp activity is over."

"By springtime..." Shion trailed off.

It was possible that the city would hold out somehow until spring. It gave him a few months' grace period until the fatal judgment would

fall.

"If you're serious about fighting the parasite wasps, I won't get in your way," Nezumi said. "But if that means helping No. 6, I'm backing out."

"Do you have a grudge against No. 6?"

There was no answer. The wind blew stronger. The canopies above creaked and rustled as they swayed in the darkness.

"Shion."

"Hm?"

"That city where you were born and raised in— that's the biggest parasite."

"Huh?"

"It latches onto the host, sucks out all its nutrients, and devours it whole. That's the kind of city it is. A Parasite City... do you understand what I'm saying?"

"No."

"You'll find out soon. You said you wanted to know the truth. But once you know, you'll never be able to go back. I would prepare myself if I were you."

"I've already come too far to go back anyway, wouldn't you think?"

"I guess so."

Nezumi's quiet laughter carried on the wind. His voice was dry and hollow, as if to complement it.

"If you find out the truth, and still want to protect No. 6— then,"

In the darkness, Nezumi's face turned to his. Shion could feel his gaze. He could almost see the grey of his eyes just as vividly.

"Then you're my enemy too."

Boy, it's chilly out here. Let's head back in. Nezumi's tone was light. It was as if nothing had happened. He turned his back to Shion, and began whistling as he descended the stairs.

"Nezumi."

The whistling stopped.

"You haven't told me your name yet."

"Nezumi it is, and Nezumi it shall be. Good enough."

"But it doesn't suit you. And it was a promise. You said you'd tell me your name if I survived."

There was a soft laugh, which quickly turned into whistling again. The door closed, and a silence settled over the darkness. Shion stood alone, rooted to the spot. The wind caressed his white hair. He could hear a dog barking somewhere in the distance.

He gazed up at the city that bejewelled itself in light. The Parasite City. The city whose name Nezumi had spat with disgust was shimmering and beautiful.

Shion averted his eyes from the light, and took a deep breath.

Then he descended slowly down the steps to the room below.

Volume II

It is 2017. After being chased from No. 6, sixteen-year-old Shion sees the outside world, and its reality, for the first time. *What was it that I thought I knew? What have I been seeing all this time?* Shion strives to live through every day he spends with Nezumi, but he is confronted with a fateful question— “Me, or No. 6 — which one do you choose?” Fate accelerates, and bears down upon the two.

1

OF LIFE AND DEATH

*Thou livest; report me and my cause aright
To the unsatisfied.*

HAMLET, ACT V SCENE II

SHION CLOSED the book. He could hear the sound of rain.

This underground room was cut off from most outside sounds. But for some reason, the sounds of the wind and the rain always seemed to seep through the walls.

A mouse scurried up Shion's leg and perched on his knee. It twitched its whiskers and rubbed its front paws together as if in request.

"You want me to read this book to you?"

Cheep.

"You really like tragedies, don't you. Why don't you pick something more fun?"

The mouse looked up at him and blinked its grape-coloured eyes. Shion adjusted himself in his chair and crossed his legs, with the mouse still on his knee.

The chair had once been quite a fine piece of furniture. It was evident from its sturdy build and the delicate patterns carved into the chair-back. But now, it was worn and old; the colour was peeling in various places, and the cushion had faded so much it was impossible to tell what colour it had been before. Still, it was one of the few pieces of furniture that this room had. A week ago, Shion had dug it out from among the books that covered two-thirds of the room's floor space.

"There might be an even bigger treasure hidden in these books, if you sorted them out." Shion had meant to sound serious, but Nezumi scoffed.

"Why don't you worry about building up some strength before thinking about stupid stuff like that? You're a little boy who's probably never had to do any physical labour since the day you were born. You're pale and skinny enough as it is."

"I was in charge of cleaning duties at the park. I had to do physical labour all the time."

Nezumi's shoulders hunched. His voice was tinged with contempt.

"Cleaning duties? Does cleaning count as physical labour in No. 6? All you had to do was operate the robots that did the maintenance and cleaning. What physical labour is, little boy—"

Nezumi grabbed Shion's arm and dug his fingers in so hard that he winced. Nezumi's fingers, slender at first glance, had a surprisingly strong grip.

"—is using these arms, your legs, and putting your back into it. Using your own body. Remember that."

Nezumi's biting and sarcastic way of speaking didn't bother Shion much anymore after he had gotten used to it. In its harshness and cynicism, there was often a truth that he couldn't help but agree with, and oftentimes he would come away more persuaded than offended. It was true, the work that Shion did in the Holy City of No. 6 was

just to tap the keys of the control panel. He had never experienced the kind of labour that made his own body creak under its burden. He had no experience of what it was like to be damp with sweat, to have the skin of his hands blister and tear, to have his muscles ache from exhaustion; to be famished unbearably, and to fall into a comfortable slumber after a day's work.

He had never experienced it once.

"That's why I'm going to do this," Shion said determinedly, pointing at the mountains of books that piled high all over the room. "I'm going to organize them, sort them out, and shelve them in order. If that's not physical labour, I don't know what is."

"It'll take you a hundred years."

"I'll do it in a week."

Nezumi shrugged his shoulders again. "As you wish," he sighed.

"Do what you want. But stick with the books and bookshelves. Don't touch anything else."

"You don't have much other than books and bookshelves in here."

"Like you said, you might find some amazing treasure. To tell you the truth, even I don't know what's buried under these books."

The mice were chattering to each other from the nooks and tiny spaces between the books. Shion picked up a small, light-green volume.

"Nezumi."

"Hm?"

"How long have you been living here?"

These bare concrete walls, thousands of books, this underground room— it didn't seem well-suited to be a human dwelling.

"You didn't grow up here, did you? Where were you—"

He closed his mouth. He noticed that Nezumi's grey eyes were harbouring a steely glint.

“I’m— I’m sorry.”

Nezumi snatched the book out of Shion’s hand and threw it aside.

“If you plan on staying here—” he wrapped his shoulders in the super-fibre cloth, and gave an impatient sigh. “Then do something about that interrogation habit of yours. I don’t know how much more I can take of you nosing around every little part of my life.”

“I’m not nosing around. I just wanted to know.”

“Sniffing around and questioning people for every piece of information you want is called nosing around. Remember that too.”

Shion felt a jab of irritation at the way Nezumi’s words seemed to push him away. Indignation welled up inside him. He wasn’t nosing around. He grabbed Nezumi’s arm as he made to leave the room.

“I barely know anything yet. That’s why I wanted to know.”

“And I’m saying that’s called—”

“If it was something I could get by without knowing,” Shion interrupted, “I wouldn’t want to know about it. But I do want to know. To me, this is something I need to know. I want to know, and that’s why—*ach*—” He bit his tongue. He clamped a hand over his mouth and squatted on the floor in pain. Tears stung at his eyes and the pain smarted in his mouth. Nezumi burst out laughing.

“Geez, does clumsiness come naturally to you too? I never get tired of looking at you. —You alright?”

“Somewhat. Biting your tongue is really painful.” When he had been in No. 6 — that was from when he was born, to the age of sixteen— Shion had never once tripped over his words enough to bite his tongue. And it was the first time, too, that he had grabbed someone’s arm without thinking, out of desire to say what his heart raced to tell, his words unable to keep up with his thoughts.

“So?”

Nezumi knelt down, and peered into Shion's face. The light in his eyes, which had the sheen of finely-woven cloth, had subsided to a gentle glow.

"What do you want to know?"

"You—" Shion answered. "I want to know about you."

Nezumi's mouth fell open. He blinked several times.

"Shion, have you been reading any strange books lately?"

"Strange?"

"Like romance novels, the kind that are cliché and over the top. You know, where a prince comes to rescue a damsel in distress, or when lovers who are torn apart overcome trials and tribulations to reunite again."

"I don't think I've read any of those."

"Then where the hell did you come up with that line? '*I want to know about you*,'" Nezumi echoed in disbelief.

"I don't have to learn that from anywhere to say it."

"Are you serious about what you just said?"

"Of course. Nezumi—" Shion wiped his lips, and looked directly into his grey eyes. "I want to know. I want to know because there are still so many things I don't know. All I know about you is that you've saved me. I don't know your real name, or how you grew up, or why you're living here alone— or what you're thinking of now, or what you're planning to do — I have no idea. I don't know a single thing about you."

He was grabbed by the wrist. Nezumi's fingers were always cold, and rigid.

"Then I'll tell you something. Put your hand here." Shion did as he was told, and placed his hand on Nezumi's chest.

"What do you feel?"

“Feel—? Well, it feels like a man’s chest, for one. It’s hard, and flat.”

“I know, I know. Too bad for you, I don’t have big breasts. What else?”

“Well...”

What did he feel on his palm through the rough fabric of Nezumi’s shirt? It was his heartbeat, his warmth, and the firmness of his flesh. Shion hesitated to put it into words. He didn’t know why. He withdrew his hand, and curled his fingers over his palm. Nezumi chuckled quietly.

“My heart was beating, and it was warm. Right?”

“Of course. You’re alive. It’s normal for your heart to be beating and for you to feel warm.”

“It is. I’m alive, and I’m right here in front of you. That’s all you need to know. What more do you want?”

Nezumi stood up, and looked down at Shion. His gaze, like his fingers, was cold.

“What you want is information,” he said icily. “My birth date, my development history, my height, weight, index of my intelligence, DNA data. You just want information that you can convert into numbers. That’s the only way you ever try to understand other humans. That’s why you can’t understand the living people that are standing right in front of you.”

Shion stood up as well. He clenched his fist harder.

“You’re big on sarcasm, and love to make fun of people. You don’t like fish, and you’re a restless sleeper.”

There was a moment of silence.

“—Huh?”

Shion continued.

"You have an enormous amount of knowledge, and a wide range of it too— but none of it is systematic. Sometimes you're fickle and over-sensitive, but other times you're lazy and careless about the details. You adore piping-hot soup, and you get really grumpy when it doesn't have the right amount of salt. And last night, you kicked me three times in your sleep."

"Hey Shion, wait a minute—"

"Since coming here, this is what I've learned about you. They're not numbers. I would never substitute you for numbers. That's not what I want to do."

Nezumi's gaze slid away from him.

"I'm just a stranger to you," he said. "You shouldn't be interested in strangers. Four years ago, you saved my life, and I owe you a big debt for that. So that's why, this time, I helped you out. So if you want, you can stay here for as long as you wish and do what you want to do. But never think of wanting to know more about another stranger."

"Why not?"

"Because it gets in the way."

"Gets in the way? Knowing things gets in my way?"

"Yes, for people like you. You're good at cramming knowledge, but you give in easily to your emotions. You're quick to trust in people, and try to attach yourself to them. I told you before, didn't I? Cut yourself off, and throw away everything you don't need."

"Yeah, but..."

"But what you're doing right now is just the opposite. You're starting to take interest in me and want to know more. You're trying to add even more to your burden. You're hopelessly stupid, just hopeless."

Shion couldn't understand what Nezumi was saying. It was more confounding and difficult to grasp than any scholarly book he had read.

“Nezumi, I don’t understand what you’re talking about.” He voiced his feelings truthfully. Nezumi shrugged slightly.

“The more you know, the more emotionally attached you’ll get. Then we can’t be strangers anymore. And that’ll be trouble for you.”

“For me? Why?”

“When we become enemies, you won’t be able to kill me.” There was a hint of a laugh in his voice. Shion dug his feet firmly into the worn carpet.

“While you’re busy being caught up in your emotions, I can go ahead and stab a knife into your heart. You know, a knife is a really ancient weapon, but it can come in handy sometimes.”

“Why do you and I have to become enemies? That’s just absurd. *That’s* what’s stupid, if anything.”

“Really? I think it’s pretty plausible.”

“Nezumi!” Shion said heatedly.

There was a loud toppling noise as a pile of books fell over. A mouse hopped onto Nezumi’s shoulder.

“Well, if you’re really gonna organize these books, you better get cracking. One week will be over in no time. I’m going to work.” Nezumi turned nimbly on his heel and walked out the door. Shion felt all the tension leave his body. He was cold and clammy. Conversations with Nezumi sometimes made him so wrought with nerves that he broke out in a cold sweat. Shion licked his dry lips.

“I don’t even know what kind of job it is that you do,” he muttered to himself. “I only wanted to know. Who’s the stupid one here?” He let his words hang for a moment, then set out to organize the stacks of books.

“Shion.” The door opened, and Nezumi’s voice called him. A pair of work gloves were tossed his way.

“You’ll crack a nail if you use your bare hands.” The door closed before Shion could say thanks, and silence settled over the room again. This casual act of kindness, or those cold, dispassionate words from a few minutes ago— which one was he to believe? Shion couldn’t grasp him. That was why he wished could reach out and take firm hold. Shion pulled the gloves over his hands, and lifted some books off the floor.

Of course. It’s good to wear gloves when doing this kind of work. That’s another thing I didn’t even know.

You just want information that you can convert into numbers. That’s the only way you ever try to understand other humans. The words that had been slapped in his face minutes before still remained stubbornly in his ears. This method of analyzing people through their data was something Shion had learned all his life in No. 6, ever since he had been deemed top-ranking in the Childrens’ Examinations and was given a top-class learning environment.

The human body is made up of 274 different types of cells, numbering 60 billion in total. He remembered perfectly the names, shapes, and functions of each. He knew the locations and functions of each organ, and had also learned about the transmission paths of signals between the amygdala, perirhinal cortex and the hippocampus.

But it was no use to him. No matter how much he put his knowledge to work, he was unable to understand the person with whom he’d been living for almost a month.

Was Nezumi honestly thinking that they were going to become enemies some day? That they would end up killing each other— was that possible? Nezumi’s words and actions were always shrouded in mystery, and confused Shion greatly.

He couldn’t grasp him. That was why he wished could reach out and take firm hold. He wanted to know the part of Nezumi that couldn’t

be substituted for numbers or symbols. Shion shook his head. The mice scampered busily about his feet. *I have to stop. Brooding over it isn't gonna help. Right now, I have to wage war with these books.*

He was soon damp with perspiration. His back ached, and his arms felt heavy. But what interrupted Shion in his work was not in his bodily ache or exhaustion, but in the pages of the books he went through. He would casually flip to a story, and find himself sinking to the floor to read the rest. Wholly engrossed, he would soon lose track of the hour. And each time, a little mouse hopped up onto the page in stern reprimand.

“Give me one more minute. I’ll put it away as soon as I’m finished reading this part.”

“*Cheep cheep!*”

“Alright, alright. I’m getting on it, okay? Are you satisfied now?”

And on the third day, he found it, under an old copy of a science journal. A small, silver box. His emergency kit.

On that stormy night four years ago, Nezumi had appeared, sopping wet, a sudden intruder in Shion’s home. His shoulder stained with blood, the dripping boy before him looked as if he was about to collapse. Shion had extended his hand without thinking. His protective instinct had stirred so strongly in him that he had even forgotten to feel fear toward the intruder. Even after finding out that he was a VC—considered a violent and dangerous criminal in No. 6—that feeling did not change. Shion took Nezumi under his wing, and provided treatment for his wound and a momentary respite. He didn’t hesitate to. He couldn’t help but do what he did. As a result, Shion lost most of what he had, as well as a large part of his secure and privileged life. That night, Shion had treated the wound, painfully evident of the bullet that had caused it, with the tools and medication in this emergency kit. The next morning, there were four things missing in Shion’s

presence— the red checkered shirt, the towel, the emergency kit, and Nezumi himself. Of them, two were back in his hands. Or, rather, emergency kit aside, perhaps it wasn't right to say that Nezumi had "come back" into his hands. Shion was the one who had fallen into a trap, and was about to be hauled to the Correctional Facility by the Security Bureau— Nezumi was the one who had saved him, and brought him outside No. 6.

He wasn't the one that came back. I was the one that burst in and took refuge here. That was the reality of it. He had fallen from the Utopian City— even called Holy by some—into this underground room, where no sunlight shone. He would probably never be able to return to No. 6 legitimately again. He had left his mother there. Was Karan still thinking of him, even after he had been cast as an escaped criminal? Shion knew it was fruitless to think about it, but his heart ached nonetheless.

He couldn't throw it all away like Nezumi. He couldn't cut himself off. He couldn't live without. He had to cling to something, else he would crumble and fall. He had to have someone in his heart always, else he would go insane.

Shion opened the lid of the box. It looked like the automatic sterilizer was still functioning. A scalpel and a roll of gauze glowed dimly under the faint reddish light of the sterile lamp. A nostalgic feeling welled up in his chest as if he was meeting an old friend.

"Cheep-cheep! Chit-chit-chit!"

"What? I know, I know. I'm getting there. Geez, you're strict." Shion laughed. As if in response, the mouse raised its front paws and chittered.

* * *

By the time a week rolled around, Shion had managed to organize almost all of the books that had been dominating most of the floor. Of course, it was impossible to find shelf space for all of them, and many piles of books still remained on the floor — but it had cleared up a considerable amount of living space.

“So what do you think?” Shion puffed out his chest proudly. Nezumi was draped lazily over the chair. He yawned.

“The emergency kit, a couple blankets, a mug, and an old heater. Is that all you managed to find?”

“That’s a lot,” Shion replied indignantly.

“Too bad you couldn’t find an entry permit into No. 6.”

Shion moved in front of Nezumi, and looked him directly in the eye. If he was going to speak in earnest, he mustn’t avert the other’s gaze. It was one of the things he had learned in his one month of living with Nezumi. Shion bent over, and clasped each hand around the armrests of the chair.

“What?”

Shion was now blocking Nezumi from the front. Nezumi shifted uneasily in his seat.

“Nezumi, my mother is still in No. 6. She’s my only blood relative. I don’t care how much you laugh at me for it, but I’ll never be able to cut her off. But— but let me say this. I have no attachments to life in that city anymore. Even if someone told me I could go back in time, I wouldn’t want to go back to when I had the privilege to live in No. 6 as its legitimate citizen. I’m serious— I wouldn’t want to return one bit.”

The grey eyes on the other end of Shion’s gaze didn’t blink once.

“You said that my life in No. 6 was fake. Now I’ve experienced it for myself. And I never, ever want to return to a life that’s fake, and only peaceful and privileged in appearance.”

“So you’re prepared to live life outside of the Holy City, is that what you’re telling me?”

“Yeah.”

“Do you know what kind of place this is?”

He hesitated to answer. Nezumi’s lips twisted into a cold smile.

“You don’t know anything,” he said softly. “You don’t know what it’s like to starve, to shiver in the cold, to groan from a wound that’s festered because it’s been left untreated too long; you don’t know the suffering that follows when that wound becomes infested with maggots, and you start rotting alive; you don’t know how it feels to watch someone die in front of you, while there’s nothing you can do to help them. You don’t know a single thing. You’re just rattling off pretty words. You’ve experienced it for yourself, you say? You’ve only peeled the surface of that city and sniffed at it, and already you’re acting like you know everything about it. It might be a city of lies, but in No. 6 you have a warm bed, plenty of food and clean water. You have fully-equipped medical facilities, recreational facilities, educational institutions. Everything that residents here would never be able to have, no matter how hard they wished. And you say you have no attachments to those? That’s arrogant of you. So arrogant it makes my skin crawl. Either that, or you’re a liar.”

Shion drew a breath. He tightened his grip on the armrests.

“It might be arrogant— but I’m not lying. Regardless of what kind of place is, I still want to continue living here. It’s not because I got chased out of No. 6 as a criminal. Even if I wasn’t— no matter how horrible this environment turns out to be, I want to stay here.”

“What’s your reason?” Nezumi shot back. “If you’re not lying, and if you’re not trying to impress me with a model answer, what lead you to make that decision?”

“I’m drawn to you.”

“Huh?”

“You know things that I don’t know. You’ve taught me things that no one has ever taught me before. I can’t say it well, but—” he hesitated. “I’m drawn to you. A lot. That’s why I want to stay here. I want to see what you see, eat what you eat, and breathe the same air as you. I want to hold in these hands what I would never have been able to get in No. 6.”

Nezumi slowly blinked twice. Then, he placed a palm on his forehead and shook his head slowly in exasperation.

“Shion, I’ve been noticing this for some time now, but—”

“Yeah?”

“Your language ability is worse than a chimpanzee.”

“I’ve heard before that the genome of a human and chimpanzee are only different by 1.23%,” said Shion, unfazed. “I don’t think you should mock chimpanzees.”

“I’m mocking *you*. Idiot. Don’t you have any idea what proper expressions to use?”

“Was there something weird about what I said?”

“Don’t use words like ‘drawn to’ so easily. It’s a very weighty, important word. You’re only supposed to use it for a special, irreplaceable person in your life.”

“Then how am I supposed to say it? Do I say I love you?”

Nezumi heaved a long, exaggerated sigh. “Never mind,” he muttered. “It messes me up when I talk to you. Here,” he pushed a thick book into Shion’s hands, and stood up. “*Hamlet*. Read it.”

“I already have.”

“Then read it again. Give that crippled language ability of yours some good, hard training. Learn some words.”

“Was I off-the-mark that badly?”

Nezumi's words quickened.

"You're just fascinated by new and unusual things. You're like a scholar who's discovered a new planet, or a new kind of bacteria. You're just itching with curiosity because you've met someone who's different from all the people that used to surround you. That's it. You're not drawn to me, and you're not in love with me. You're just excited about the exotic animal you've discovered. Can't you even tell the difference?"

They were harsh words. They became sharp thorns that stabbed at Shion's eardrums.

"I don't trust you," Nezumi said.

Shion raised his face, and his gaze collided with Nezumi's. He had been biting his lip without thinking.

"I don't trust anything you say. You're someone who's been living in artificial abundance since you were born. And you're arrogant enough to be able to say you can throw away that fortune easily. —Shion," he said suddenly. "When you used to do that cleaning job at the park, you had to do that ritual every morning, didn't you?"

The ritual was always the first task in Shion's work day. He had to lay a palm on the image of the City Hall — or Moondrop, informally — that was displayed on monitor of the maintenance system, and pledge his allegiance.

"I hereon and ever pledge my unwavering allegiance to the City of No. 6."

"Our gratitude for your loyalty. Engage in your day's labour with sincerity and pride as a good citizen of the City."

That was it. Every morning, he had repeated the same task. It had been a sore discomfort for him. His youthful pride stung for having to repeat these banal and grandiose words, and for this ritual itself, which seemed foolish.

Nezumi gave a short laugh.

“You hated it, didn’t you.”

“Yeah.”

“Felt suffocated, didn’t you, being forced to declare your loyalty.”

“Yeah... now that you mention it.”

“But you put up with it,” Nezumi said. “Instead of retaliating, you recited this pledge every morning, not meaning a single word of it, and pretended it didn’t bother you. Let me tell you something, Shion: words aren’t things that you can toss around casually. You can’t let yourself be forced to say something, and just put up with it. But you don’t know that. So that’s why I’m not going to trust you.”

Nezumi’s hand suddenly extended toward him. His palm touched Shion’s cheek.

“Did that hurt?” he asked gently.

“Quite a bit.”

“—I don’t have any grudge against you. And I don’t hate you, either.”

“I know...” Shion answered quietly. “That much I can tell.”

“Shion.”

“Hm?”

“Feel like going outside?”

His fingers caressed Shion’s hair.

“You’re fully recovered, now, aren’t you? Feel like seeing for yourself the place you’ve decided to continue living in?”

Nezumi’s hand slowly drew away. Several strands of white hair clung to his long fingers. Shion’s hair still had some lustre despite being drained of its colour, and to certain eyes he figured it might look pretty. But he felt its beauty to be cruel. In a single night, the colour had faded from his hair, and he had been scarred with a red band that slithered like a serpent over his entire body. He had been seen by children, who

had shrieked at the sight of him. He couldn't forget the look in their eyes. They were filled with dismay and horror like the eyes of one who beheld a deformed monster. But he had to go outside. He wanted to see the world he was going to live in with his own eyes, hear the sounds with his own ears, smell with his nose, and feel it on his own skin. Then, maybe, he would speak to Nezumi about it again.

No matter what kind of place this is, I want to keep living here. Rather than being surrounded by falsities, and being forced to swallow banal words, I want to live here— even if it means I have to struggle—

"We can dye your hair, if it'll make you feel better at all," Nezumi said. "Black, brown, green— whatever colour you wish. What do you wanna do?"

"No, it's fine."

"You're going to keep it?"

"Yeah, I'll keep my hair like this. White hair isn't so bad. I figure it's better than being completely bald."

Nezumi lowered his face. His shoulders were trembling.

"You're really funny, you know that?" he said, his voice shaking from holding back a laugh. "Seriously. I mean, really."

"Am I?" said Shion dubiously. "No one's ever really told me I'm funny..."

"You're a natural comedian. You should toss the theory books and study comedy instead."

"I'll think about it."

"You should. Right— tomorrow, then, I'll show you around."

"Alright," Shion agreed.

"And there's one place you definitely need to go to."

"Latch Building," Shion answered for him.

Arnd LK-3000. Latch Bld. 3F. Not sure. -K

It was a memo from Karan, and it was a cryptic one— Shion didn't know where it pointed to, or who was going to be there.

"Did you find out where Latch Building is?"

"Nope," Nezumi replied. "We don't have any fancy numberings for our buildings here. But once upon a time this place used to be a decent town, and I was able to get a map from then. And there's a region that's marked LK-3000."

"You looked all of this up..." Shion murmured in awe.

"Just to kill some time."

"I didn't think you had time to kill. You always seem so busy—"

"Oh, and write a letter," Nezumi interrupted nonchalantly.

"Huh?"

"To your Mama. But keep it within 15 words. Just a simple note. The mouse here says he misses your mother's homemade bread."

"You'll deliver the letter for me?"

"More like a memo," he said brusquely. "Under 15 words. I can't guarantee it'll get there safely."

"Nezumi."

"What?"

"Thank you."

Nezumi shrank away from Shion and fixed him with an appalled stare.

"Please, can you not look at me like that? It gives me the willies. What'll happen tomorrow will happen tomorrow. I'm gonna take a shower. Oh, and before you write a letter to your mama, read the poor little guy a story. He's been waiting all this time."

Nezumi disappeared into the bathroom. Shion curled up in a chair, and opened the book he had been passed earlier. There was a faint

whiff of the smell of paper. He was drawn in instantly, and soon lost himself in its pages.

*If thou didst ever hold me in thy heart,
Absent thee from felicity awhile,
And in this harsh world draw thy breath in pain
To tell my story.*

Hamlet drew his last breath in the arms of his friend. Shion slowly closed the book. There was the sound of rain. He wondered why it always seemed to seep through the walls into this underground room. It seeped through and reverberated, like the soft sound of music.

And in this harsh world, draw thy breath in pain— maybe that's what living on in this world meant— to suffer in pain. And Nezumi knew this. It had been ingrained into his body. A mouse chirruped at his foot.

"Oh, sorry about that. Which one do you want me to read?"

The mouse climbed up onto his knee, and rubbed its front paws together.

"You want me to read this book to you?"

Cheep.

"You really like tragedies, don't you. Why don't you pick something more fun?"

He crossed his legs, with the mouse still perched on his knee.

"Read him the tragedy," Nezumi's voice spoke from behind him. He hadn't even noticed Nezumi coming out of the bathroom. He hadn't heard a sound or felt any presence.

"You have a good voice. This little guy loves to be read to. And he loves to listen to you read tragedies."

"Really?"

The mouse blinked its grape-coloured eyes at him. Shion guessed it was his way of saying yes.

“Okay, okay. Then from the top of Act Five—”

“Shh—” Nezumi’s damp hand pressed over Shion’s mouth. “I hear something.”

“Huh?”

Before Shion could ask what it was, it reached his own ears. The sound of footsteps clambering down the steps. The heavy door was being banged. Someone was knocking on the centre of the door, and its sound was frantic, though not altogether strong.

A child.

A child was knocking desperately on the door. Shion stood up, and made for the entrance.

“Not so fast.” Nezumi stopped him. Under his wet bangs, his grey eyes beheld the door warily.

“Don’t open the door yet.”

“Why not?”

“It’s dangerous. Don’t open the door without any defense.”

“It’s a child knocking. And it’s urgent. Something must have happened.”

“How can you be so sure? An armed soldier can knock on the bottom half of the door, no problem.”

Shion’s gaze travelled from Nezumi’s face to the door.

Help me.

He thought he heard a weak voice cry out in plea. He swallowed. He unlatched the door, and gripped the handle.

“Shion!”

He opened the door. A cold draft blew into the room. It was getting dark outside, and a chill wind was blowing.

A girl was standing in the gathering dark. Her eyes were filled with tears as she looked up at Shion. He had seen her before. She lived in the barracks in the hollow under the slope. She was the girl he had not been able to forget— the girl who had shrieked at Shion's whitened hair and red scar that snaked up his neck. For the first time, in this gaze, he had been beheld like a deformity. But now, her large eyes were brimming with tears, and contained no hint of terror. Instead, they were bright with frantic urgency.

"Help me— please— he's dying."

Shion swiftly took the girl by her hand, and began to clamber up the stairs. He hastily yelled over his shoulder.

"Nezumi, bring the emergency kit, and some blankets!"

Then he burst outside, into the wood of bare branches and fallen leaves.

2

THE PLACE OF THE GODS

*Then the goddess Hannahanna decided to use her last resort.
She gathered not several, but hundreds, thousands of bees, and said,
“You are small and nimble, and fly as swift as the light,
so you shall surely be able to find the god Telepinu. Now, go.”*

THE DISAPPEARANCE OF TELIPINU, HITTITE MYTH

THERE WAS a person collapsed at the foot of a spindly tree whose bark was whiter than the rest. He was a little boy, even smaller than the girl in size. He was writhing in pain. Shion took him in his arms and sat him up. Even in the settling dusk, he could tell that the boy was deathly pale. He was clawing at his throat, and his mouth was open, but his lips were bloodless.

Suffocation. He was choking from something stuck in his throat. There was no time to waste. Supporting the boy's belly with one arm, Shion thumped his back with the palm of his other hand.

“Spit it out. Come on,” he urged. Twice, then a third time, he kept hitting the boy's bony back. Four times, five times...

The boy wretched, and vomit spilled out of his mouth. There was a dark, round object mixed in with it. The boy twitched slightly.

“Water! Bring water!” Shion commanded Nezumi again. He lay the boy down, and brought his own cheek to the boy’s mouth. He could feel definite breathing. *He’s alright, he’s breathing.* He didn’t need to clear the boy’s airway, or give him artificial resuscitation. But his consciousness—

“Call his name.”

The girl responded quickly to Shion’s words. She bent over the boy, bringing her face close to his, and called his name.

“Rico, can you hear me? Rico.”

“Rico, can you breathe?” Shion called after her.

The boy’s chest swelled largely. His eyelids fluttered and opened. A tear spilled over and rolled down his cheek.

“—Sis—”

“Rico!” Shion gently restrained the girl as she tried to throw her arms around the boy. He slowly raised Rico’s upper body off the ground, and brought a cup of water to his mouth.

“Can you drink this?”

“Yeah.”

“Good boy. Drink it slowly. So your name is Rico, huh?”

“Yeah.”

“Rico, can you hear your sister’s voice and my voice clearly? Can you see us just fine?”

“Yeah— and the water tastes good.”

“You’re a good boy,” Shion enthused. “You’ve done a really great job. Does your stomach feel alright? Does your chest hurt at all?”

“My throat...”

“Hm?”

“My throat hurts...”

Rico had probably torn at his throat in pain, for it was covered in scratches which were beginning to bleed. Shion retrieved some gauze and rubbing alcohol from the emergency kit. They were four years old, but now, this was all they had.

“This is going to sting. Don’t cry.”

“I won’t.”

He swabbed the wounds, pressed a fresh piece of gauze to them, and wrapped Rico’s neck with a bandage. Shion could only give him the most basic of emergency procedures. This was the best he could do. If he had said anything along the lines of ‘to the hospital’, Nezumi would have laughed in his face. Shion knew very well that in this area, the West Block of No. 6, there was no such thing as a decent medical facility. From what Rico had vomited out, Shion picked out what appeared to have been blocking his airway.

“A nut?” It was small and round. “Why would this be—”

Rico hung his head. Nezumi folded his arms as he stood, and gave a short sigh.

“He was hungry.”

“Huh?”

“He was probably so hungry he couldn’t bear it anymore. That nut—if you grind it into flour, it’s— well, it’s edible. He was probably in the middle of gathering them when he got hungry. He got so hungry he decided to put one in his mouth, which was all good until he swallowed it by mistake— is my guess of what probably happened.”

“Rico’s always hungry,” the girl said. “Even if Mum gives him part of her bread, he’s still hungry.”

“It’s such a tiny piece of bread,” Rico protested. “One bite, and it’s all gone.” He dissolved into a fit of coughs. His voice was raspy, and his face was still pale. Shion wrapped his body in a blanket.

“Keep warm. If your neck still hurts, I’ll treat it for you. Come again anytime.”

“Take them home.”

Shion raised his face at Nezumi’s words.

“Me?”

“Yeah, you. You helped them, so finish your job and see them through. They live in the house down this slope, it’s not too far. Their mother is probably getting worried right about now.”

That meant he would have to show himself to an adult. Shion stood up. He didn’t know why, but he had started to shake.

“But I—”

“You’ll have to go out there one day anyway. If you’re getting scared now, you’ll never be able to walk the streets. —Well, not that it’s any of my business. But if we stay out here in the rain any longer, someone’s going to catch pneumonia.”

He had forgotten that it was raining. Shion finally noticed its coldness. It seeped right into his bones, and reminded him that winter was approaching.

“Well, I’m off. The prince can do as he pleases.” Nezumi turned his back to them and descended down the steps below. Rico sneezed. The girl extended her small hand and grasped Shion’s fingers.

“Thank you.”

“Huh?”

“Thanks for saving my little brother.”

“Oh— no, I— It’s not—” Shion stammered. “You don’t have to thank me. What’s your name?”

“Karan.”

“Karan? That’s the same name as my mother.”

“Really?”

“Yeah.”

The girl smiled. Shion could feel the warmth of the girl’s hand as she clasped his fingertips. He scooped Rico up, blankets and all.

“I’ll take you two home. Kalan¹, lead the way.”

* * *

There was steam rising out of the pot on the kerosene heater. Inside it was soup. As he stirred the broth of vegetables and meat, Nezumi gave a sigh. He flinched when he realized he had sighed without thinking. A few droplets of soup splashed out of the pot, and hissed as they hit the RDF heater.

He hated sighing. Sighing on purpose was a different matter— but this kind of sighing, the kind that escaped his lips without his knowing, irritated him.

“Never sigh in earnest. Never cry. You’ll be taken advantage of by demons.” He had been told that by an old woman, so far in her years that age seemed not to matter. “Sighing creates an opening, a vulnerability. If you want to stay live, keep your mouth shut. Never let anyone see your weak spot. Let your heart warm to no one. Never trust anyone but yourself.”

They were her dying words. She had been shot through the chest and was frothing bloodily at the mouth, but her words had rung clearly in his ears. Nezumi didn’t think of ever forgetting them. Even if he did, her voice would not let him. It clung tenaciously to his mind, and refused to let go.

But he had turned his back on it. He had let an unheeded sigh escape his lips without even realizing. *All thanks to him.* He *tsked* his tongue in frustration.

¹The spelling was changed to distinguish her from Shion’s mother.

Maybe it was a mistake to bring Shion here. He seriously thought so. Shion had opened the door without hesitation. He had thrown it open wide, without even checking what was on the other side, or concealing himself in shadow. If they had been unlucky, he would have lost his life. Even if the visitor had not been an armed soldier, it may as well have been an armed robber using a child as bait. Here in the West Block, it would not be an uncommon thing. But that was something Shion didn't know. He didn't know how to be suspicious or cautious, or to be afraid. It was the ignorance and recklessness of one who had grown up in safety and security.

He honestly felt that he had taken a dangerous and troublesome burden under his wing. No one had forced him to. He had born the burden of his own will, because he wanted to return the favour he owed. There was no way he could have let him die — Shion, who had saved his life, expecting nothing in return.

There was no way of returning a favour to the dead, and Nezumi didn't want to carry a debt that he would never be able to repay. That was why he rescued and brought Shion here. But now he thought it may have been careless for him to do so. Maybe he had brought with him a bigger risk than he had imagined. An oblivious and careless, dangerous and troublesome—

He threw a glance at the door.

But if Shion had not opened the door that time, Rico would not have been saved. It didn't take a lot of time for a choking young child to lose his life. Swift action and appropriate treatment — thanks to that, Nezumi hadn't had to see a small body with its face permanently contorted in pain. A life had been saved. It was the same as the stormy night four years before. That time, it was him— this time, it was Rico. Shion, both times, had taken them in recklessly and as a result, saved them.

Shion knew the world only through theorems and rationales. He was naive and hadn't even learned how to doubt the trustworthiness of others. He was naturally oblivious, he was clueless, idiotic, and didn't even know who Hamlet was. But Shion was also definitely above him in some ways. Not in knowledge or skill, but — but what?

"I'm drawn to you."

Was it the power to attempt at this embarrassing confession, and to believe that his sincere feelings would actually get across? Was it the power to lend a hand to a total stranger without thinking of the risk it reflected on himself?

He didn't know. All he knew was that Shion was, indeed, dangerous and troublesome. He was very—there were footsteps. Knocking. The door opened soon afterwards. Shion had come home.

"If you're gonna knock, wait for an answer before opening the door," Nezumi said curtly.

"Not like you would answer anyway, right?" replied Shion lightly. "But I noticed you left the door unlocked for me."

"Huh?"

"The lock. I thought you'd lock the door, but you kept it open."

He was right. He hadn't locked the door. How reckless of him.

"Look at me, I've fallen under your horrible influence," Nezumi said woefully.

"What's that? —Hey, look, I got some grapes as a thank-you gift."

The grapes were small and the whole bunch was rather pitiful.

"She offered me dried fish too, but I told her no thanks."

"Oh?" said Nezumi sardonically. "So even you felt bad about receiving handouts from the poor."

"No. It was because you don't like fish."

“Me? I’ll eat fish. I’m not fortunate enough to be picky about my food.”

“But you told me once you didn’t like it much.”

“What I said was that I can’t eat raw fish. Meaning, this place is way too unhygienic to even think about eating fish raw.”

Shion blinked, and put a hand to his hair.

“Oh. Oh well. —But I’m glad, though.”

“About what?”

“Kalan’s family— oh, Kalan is the girl’s name, by the way—”

“I know.”

“Oh, you knew? It’s the same name as my mother’s.”

“Your mother’s name isn’t any of my concern, but . . . So? Did it bring back memories of your Mama and bring you to tears? Poor thing.”

He had meant it as a sarcastic remark, but Shion shook his head gravely.

“No, that’s not it. There was another child there, a girl, younger than Rico. I think that fish was supposed to be their supper. One dried fish, for the three of them. It would have been alright not to accept that, right? But their mother insisted that I accept the grapes. She was really grateful. It kind of made me happy.”

“You really think so?”

“Huh?”

“If that kid had died, there would be more to eat for Kalan and the other girl. Even for Rico— wouldn’t you have thought it would be better for him to die rather than grow up in constant hunger? Maybe you haven’t actually done them a favour at all.”

Shion sat down in front of the heater. His white hair, leaning more on transparent, was tinged red with the colours of the flame. His youthful hair had lost its colour, but still retained its shine. *It’s beautiful*, Nezumi thought.

Shion's head of hair glimmered as it reflected the light of the things around it, and Nezumi extended his fingertips to touch it. His hair felt slightly coarse, but ran through Nezumi's fingers easily. It felt like ordinary hair, no more, no less.

"You told me to live," Shion said quietly, his face still turned to the flames. "Nezumi— you said there's meaning to being alive, and that's why I should live. That's what you said."

"I just said whoever lives wins."

"That's the same thing, isn't it?"

"How should I know?"

The dead could not speak. All they could do was lay there as a corpse, and return to the earth from which they came. They had no way to speak of the hatred, the cruelties, anguish, loathing or grief they went through. That was why he had to live. He would live, preserving everything in his memory, and pass it on.

No. 6.

It was like an artificial flower that left no seeds behind. It bloomed on the blood and corpses of a countless number. *I'll pull you right out of the ground one day. Then you'll have no choice but to hear the voices of the dead, their hatred, their hardship, their anguish, their loathing, as it wells up out of the very ground and soaks the earth. I'll make sure you hear, even if you plug your ears. Until then, I'll live and remember. To forget is not a choice.* His own self didn't allow him to.

"I got complimented." Shion looked up at Nezumi, and grinned.

"Complimented? For what?"

"My hair. Kalan's mother said it was nice. She said it was really unique, and really pretty."

Nezumi shrugged.

"Well, it's unique, for sure. There are tons of kids around here that

have white hair from malnutrition, but no one with a whole head of snowy hair like you.”

“She didn’t just say it was unique. She said it was pretty.”

“Are you *gushing* about how someone complimented your hair? What are you, a girl?”

“But— well, you know, it gives me a bit of confidence,” said Shion happily. “For when you show me around town tomorrow.”

“Who said I was going to show you around?”

“You said so.”

He did say so. He had said that he was going to show Shion around. Nezumi felt like a sullen child. He averted his gaze from Shion.

“I’m going to go about my own business. You go about yours.”

“Okay. I’ll mind my own business and tag along. Oh, and one more thing—”

“What now?”

“I promised Kalan and Rico I’d read to them when I have time. I found a lot of picture books in your stash, so—”

“You’re gonna read to them here?”

“If it’s sunny, I can take them outside.”

Nezumi came close to sighing again, but he caught himself in time to seal his lips and hold it in.

“Are you trying to make this place a kindergarten?”

“Are there that many children around here?”

“Oh yeah, tons. But this is my place. Don’t go around doing things without my permission, and don’t think you’re entitled to everything.”

His words turned crude. There was a stinging irritation within his chest. Being with Shion irritated him. He felt like his restraint would snap any minute. It wasn’t because Shion was being reckless or imposing, he admitted that Shion wasn’t— it was because he couldn’t see

through him. There was no way to predict what Shion was thinking or what he would do. His actions and words always seemed to hit Nezumi out of the blue. It was tiring.

Shion was setting plates out on the table. The soup was finished, and its gentle aroma filled the room.

"I wasn't thinking I was entitled to anything—it's just that, since Kalan, Rico and I are friends now—"

"Huh?"

"Friends," Shion repeated. "They're the first friends I've made since coming here. Well, not that I had many friends back in No. 6," he added as an afterthought. "I think Safu was the only one."

"She said she wanted to sleep with you. You don't call that 'friends'." He remembered the ends of her short hair that draped prettily on the back of her neck.

Shion, I want to have sex with you.

She had put her all into this confession, and Shion had not been able to handle it. *What a guy you've fallen for, huh*, he remarked in his mind to the girl he barely knew. For some reason, he was suddenly overcome with the urge to laugh.

"What?"

Shion cocked his head to the side. Two mice sitting atop a pile of books tilted their heads too, as if to imitate him. Nezumi burst out laughing. He squatted to the ground, and gave in fully to the wave of mirth that bubbled up inside him.

* * *

The rain let up before noon but the clouds still lingered, and the ground remained cold as dusk approached. Nezumi was walking briskly through the throng. Shion was doing his best to keep up

behind him. He was out of breath. He was jostled, bumped, and yelled at; he felt the gaze of countless curious eyes raining down on his head; the smell of a dozen things reached his nose, so mingled and melded into each other that he couldn't tell what they originally were; the muddy ground tripped up his feet; a sprawl of barracks and tents lined the road, and from them, thick smoke billowed rudely into the passerby; in the air, angry bellows, seductive coos, and merchants' cries clashed clamorously. He felt dizzy.

The older district of Lost Town, which was where he took up residence after being forced from Chronos, was also bustling and lively. But compared to what he was seeing now, it seemed like a tranquil getaway. In No. 6, there were designated roads and paths for both people and vehicles going in each direction, and as a fundamental rule, stopping suddenly or going the opposite way was prohibited. Everyone walked in the same direction, in the same orderly fashion. It was rare to ever bump into anyone, or be stopped by an acquaintance. Nothing occurred suddenly or unexpectedly. Everything was managed to prevent such things from occurring. No. 6 was that kind of place.

A roar of voices suddenly erupted close by. Shion was shoved violently aside. He lost his footing, and fell forward onto his knees in the mud. Several men thundered past him. Something fell from one of their arms, rolled, and came to a stop in front of Shion. It was an orange. "Thief!"

A man burst out of one of the shops in the barracks, holding a gun. He was towering, and very fat.

"Them thieves!" he roared. "Someone catch 'em!"

No one moved. Some smirked as they looked on, others showed no interest at all, others were shouting unintelligibly; and all the while, the so-called thieves were retreating further away into the crowd.

Shion's breath caught in his throat. The gigantic man was taking aim

with his gun. Passers-by who saw him squatted hastily to the ground to take cover.

Is he nuts? Shion couldn't imagine this man being in his right mind to open fire into this crowd of people. But the man's face was set in determination. The long muzzle of his outdated firearm was pointed straight before him. The fleeing men bumped into an old woman and pushed her aside as they continued running. She yammered something at them, then returned to hobbling down the centre of the road. She was oblivious to the gun that was pointed her way. The giant's thick finger wrapped around the trigger.

Shion threw himself at the man just before his hairy knuckle jerked to fire the gun. With as much strength as he could muster, he knocked the muzzle of the gun upwards.

He felt a heavy impact slam his hand, and a shot blasted in his eardrums. The muzzle of the gun spewed fire into the darkening sky. Shion staggered. His feet were swept from under him, and he was slammed to the ground. His breath died on his lips.

"The hell do you think yer doin'?"

The man towered over him with his gun raised, filling every inch of his vision. Shion rolled quickly to the side. The giant moved nimbly for his appearance, and Shion was met with a firm kick in the ribs.

Shion grunted in pain. He couldn't speak. His stomach lurched.

"One of their little friends, eh?" the giant snarled. "Little fucker, takin' a swipe at my merchandise."

The man's boot gave off a greasy, animal smell. And it was swinging straight toward his stomach again.

"I'm not one of them!" Shion screamed, barely dodging the blow. *I have to scream, or else he'll really kick me to death.* There was no hint of hesitation in the blows that showered down upon him.

"I'm not—I'm not one of them," Shion persisted.

“Shut up!” the giant bellowed. “Now those bastard thieves ’re gone. Thanks to yer gettin’ in the way.”

“If I didn’t intervene, someone could have been killed,” Shion protested. “Opening fire in a place like this — what if you’d hit someone?”

To his astonishment, the man started laughing. Laughter rose from the crowd that lined the streets as well.

“And so what if I did?” the man roared, emanating his beastly odour. “What’s that got to do with me, eh?” His expression suddenly darkened, and he roughly grabbed Shion by his hair. “You and yer strange mop o’ yers. I don’t like the looks o’ you.”

He was pulled to the ground forcefully. His scalp burned with pain, and it felt like it was being torn off. But even stronger than the aches on his body were the feelings of wrath and humiliation that seethed within him.

“Stop it!” Shion yelled.

Stop it. Let go of me. How dare you treat me like cattle.

Shion threw himself at the man again, and slammed his body into him as hard as he could. He felt his elbow dig firmly into the man’s swollen gut. The man let out a muffled groan and fell on his knees. The crowd had formed a ring around them. Clapping, whistling and raucous laughter erupted periodically.

“That’s the spirit, young’un. Give ’im what he deserves!”

“Kill ’im off, ol’ man! There’s no use wastin’ time here!”

No one tried to stop them. Everyone was enjoying the spectacle from a safe distance. Shion searched the jeering crowd for a pair of grey eyes. He couldn’t find them.

“You little—”

He heard a booming roar that sounded more animal than human. Then he felt a blow bludgeon his cheek. Sparks burst before his eyes,

and his vision went dark for a short instant. Something warm was filling his mouth. Unable to bear it, he spat it out. Saliva mixed with blood splattered and oozed over the dirt.

“Playin’ funny tricks!” The man’s face was flushed red, and he was shaking in rage. His eyes were bloodshot, and his veins were raised and throbbing over his skin like a crimson web. The murderous intent that radiated from him was unmistakable.

“Yer gonna pay for this,” he growled. The gun was aimed right between Shion’s eyes. Shion couldn’t close his gaping mouth. He felt like his heart was going to burst out of his chest. And still, no one stopped him. In this crowd of people that surrounded them, not a single one stepped in to stop the man. He felt nauseous. He couldn’t tell whether the muzzle before his eyes was real or just an illusion.

“Hey,” a deep voice punctuated the din. It belonged to a man who was roasting meat at the front of his store. Pieces of blackened meat covered the grill, which was billowing thick, sooty smoke. “Don’t be makin’ a mess in front of my store,” he said.

“I en’t makin’ a mess,” the man growled.

“You were ’bout to, you were. If you go blowin’ brains and blood all over the place, everyone’s gonna lose their appetites, they is. Take it somewhere else.”

The giant scoffed. “No one’s gonna have any appetite for yer half-rotten meat anyway.”

“Whassat?” The man shot back. “Rotten meat? You’s the one selling rotten fruits and vegetables, you’s sure one to talk.”

“Our produce is fresh.”

“You must be kiddin’ me! Even i’ this season, theys flies swarmin’ all over ’em. If they’s not rotten, theys must be right withered.”

“What? You little—”

The men lunged at each other. Shion raised himself off the ground and started running.

“Hey! Damnit, you come back ’ere!” The man bellowed angrily. Shion had no time to turn around to check. His body bristled in fear of being shot from behind at any second. He tripped.

“This way.”

He was grabbed by the arm.

“This way, quickly.”

He was dragged into a narrow alleyway between two buildings. Shion leaned back heavily against the wall, and drew several deep breaths.

“Doing alright there?”

He lifted his face. A woman was smiling at him. Her red painted lips floated up vividly in the dim gloom. The lips parted wide again.

“Oh, dear. You’ve cut your lip, it’s bleeding. Looks like you had a hard time back there. Poor thing.”

The strong smell of her perfume filled Shion’s nostrils.

“Thank you for helping me,” Shion said to her, after his breathing had returned somewhat back to normal. There was a few seconds of silence, after which the woman suddenly burst into laughter.

“I wonder how long it’s been since someone last thanked me,” she chuckled. “It feels like years. By the way, you’ve got interesting hair, sweetie.”

“Huh—? Oh... I’ve been through a lot of, er, things...”

“We’ve all been through a lot of things. And so have I, here—”

Despite the biting cold, the woman was clad only in a thin dress that bared her shoulders. She pulled her neckline down to show him, and a pair of voluptuous breasts appeared. Their whiteness stood out even more than her red lips. Shion’s eyes stung.

“Look, you see there’s a burn mark? A man did that to me with a hot metal rod, a long time ago. It was hell, I’m telling ya. But look, see, doesn’t it kind of look like a snake? Like a snake is slithering over my chest.”

I’ve got a snake too, and it’s coiled around my whole body.

He thought so, but he didn’t put into words. The woman continued giggling softly.

“Sweetie, don’t you have any experience with women?”

“Huh?”

“Shall I give you a lesson? My place is just up ahead. Why don’t you come over, and we can have a good time. How’s that sound?”

“What?” Shion repeated dumbly.

“I’m asking if you if you want to come over and have a good time.” Irritation crept into the woman’s voice. “I haven’t got anything to do until nighttime either. Don’t worry, it won’t cost too much. So why don’t we enjoy ourselves, hmm?”

The woman’s arms reached around Shion’s neck. He was pushed back against the wall. Her lips pressed firmly against his. The strong scent of her makeup washed over him. He felt faint. Her warm tongue glided in between his teeth and mingled with his own. Shion found himself reflexively pushing the woman away.

“What was that for?” she said indignantly.

“No, I— Well— this isn’t…”

“What’re you mumbling on about? I helped you, didn’t I? Being my customer is the least you can do.”

“Customer? But… I—”

“I’m not gonna force you if you don’t want to. But you still owe me money for the kiss.”

“What?” Shion asked incredulously.

The woman's lips twisted, and her voice turned sugary sweet.

"Now, don't be disagreeable," she purred. "You're a man, aren't you? Come on, let's take it easy. I'll make sure you have a good time, so come on over to my place, sweetie."

"N—No thanks, it's really..."

Her white arms came clinging onto him again. Shion was frozen rigid even more than when the gun had been pointed at him. He couldn't move.

"Would you mind?" a voice spoke. "That one belongs to me."

Nezumi was standing at the entrance of the alleyway. The woman furrowed her brow.

"What?"

"He's mine. Could I get him back?" Nezumi extended his hand as if to beckon Shion over. The woman drew her chin up and smiled thinly in realization.

"I see. No wonder I was getting such a slow reaction. Sweetie here isn't interested in women."

"What? Actually that's not true, I'm—"

Nezumi pressed a hand over Shion's mouth and smiled at the woman.

"That's right. He's so head-over-heels for me, even the most beautiful girl couldn't attract his attention right now."

The woman hunched her shoulders as if to say 'oh well'. She glanced at Shion. "Money," she said.

"I don't care which way sweetie swings, but I still need payment for that kiss. One silver coin."

Nezumi laughed softly.

"One whole silver for that kiss? That's pretty expensive."

"That's how much it's worth. If sweetie can't pay for it, you better pay up for him. You're his lover, aren't you? Footing the bill once

isn't gonna do any harm."

"I guess you're right. Yeah, sure. Could I get change, then?"

"Change?"

Nezumi leaned in toward the woman. He grabbed her arm as she tried to back away, and drew her close.

"What—"

The woman's lips, parted in mid-sentence, were met by Nezumi's. It happened right before Shion's eyes. The woman resisted for a moment, then was still. Only her bare and exposed throat contracted slightly as she swallowed. A dog was barking somewhere in the distance. A sewer rat scurried its way past Shion's feet and disappeared. Nezumi drew away from the woman.

"How was it?" he asked.

"Not bad," the woman replied. "But not enough to give you change."

"That's unfortunate," Nezumi said ruefully. "Then this here, for m'lady." Nezumi placed an orange in the woman's hand, and turned his back to her. He pulled Shion by the arm. "Right, let's get going." The woman called after them with her arms crossed.

"Sweet-cheeks, don't let yourself get too involved with that man. It's a waste, you know. Make sure you get a taste of what it's like to have fun with a girl."

They weaved back into the crowd. The bustle and mixture of smells that had agitated Shion only moments before were now a source of relief.

"Why?" he muttered to himself. Nezumi drew up by his side.

"Why what?"

"Why am I 'sweet-cheeks' when you're 'that man'?"

"Must be because I have more life experience."

"And she said I was slow," Shion grumbled.

“You are slow. And dense. Especially concerning women. I hope I didn’t ruin your first experience by walking in on you,” Nezumi snickered.

“Nezumi.”

“Hm?”

“How long were you watching for?”

“Probably sometime around when you started attacking the fat guy.” Shion stopped in his tracks. He was bumped into from behind, and yelled at angrily.

“Why didn’t you come help me?”

“I did. You were this close to being eaten alive by a witch. *Gobble-gobble*, head-first, too.”

“But before that, I was being held at gunpoint—”

“That’s your fucking mess,” Nezumi said scathingly. His grey eyes glittered harshly like the blade of a sharp knife. Nezumi’s smile always seemed to fade instantaneously.

“Let me tell you something, Shion. If you’re going to keep being naive and think that someone will always jump in to help you, you’ll never survive here. Depending on other people isn’t gonna keep you alive. You make sure you get that straight.”

Nezumi turned his face away and started walking faster. Shion could feel the heat rising in his cheeks. Nezumi was right, he was being naive. He had thought it was only natural that Nezumi would come to help him. Shion had been leaning on him all this time, an insolent burden that was dragging him down. Here he was, hoping to be treated equally, yet at the same time expecting to be defended as if it was something he was entitled to. Shion was overcome with shame. He trailed close behind Nezumi, who had his superfibre cloth wrapped around his shoulders like a cape.

"But you did manage to defend yourself back there," Nezumi said, slowing his gait slightly.

"Back there?"

"With the fat guy. You waited for the right chance to get away."

"Oh, that," Shion said. "No, I was just desperate that time. He looked like he was seriously about to shoot."

"He probably was. If you were unlucky, you probably would've had half your head blown off, and you'd be lying there on the street."

"I don't even want to imagine. It's giving me the chills."

He really was shaking. There was mud smeared over the knees of his pants, and the hem of his sweater. He tried to brush it off, and tripped over something.

"Whoa—!"

He fell forward, but managed to regain his balance in time to turn around. There were a pair of legs. Their feet were bare. The upper half of the body was lying face down, swallowed up by the darkness of the alleyway. *Is he sleeping? Here?*

"Um— hello? Can you hear me?" Shion called over to him. He was yanked from behind.

"Will you stop doing that?" Nezumi said in annoyance. "If we don't hurry up, it'll get dark in no time. Geez, do you have a thing for making detours?" Nezumi clicked his tongue.

"But this man— he's going to catch a cold if he sleeps out here like this."

"He isn't gonna get any colder than that. He's dead."

"*What?*"

A woman called over to them nearby from her clothing shop.

"Oy, are ya two acquaintances with this here? If you are, mind cleanin' it up? It's blockin' the way, makin' a mighty nuisance outta itself."

Nezumi shook his head slightly.

“Of course not. I’ve never even seen this old man before.”

“It’s a woman, an old beggar lady. Out of all places, she bloody had to snuff it right in front of my store, the git.”

“My deepest sympathies,” Nezumi said solemnly. “Make sure you get her cleaned up.”

“That’s enough o’ yer cheeky attitude, little bugger!” The woman bleated, swinging around a red piece of cloth. Her arm was as thick as Shion’s thigh. *I’d go flying if I got punched by that*, Shion thought to himself.

He was yanked along by Nezumi. The sight of those legs, like withered twigs, overlapped with another pair of legs, wrapped in a fine pair of trousers and wearing leather shoes. They were the legs that protruded from behind the bench, in a secluded corner of the Forest Park inside No. 6. It was the first dead body that Shion had born witness to, and the first victim that *it* had claimed.

“He wasn’t killed by it,” Nezumi smiled wanly, as if to read Shion’s thoughts. “That old man— or woman, was it? She wasn’t eaten by any parasite wasp. It was either hunger, or the cold — maybe a combination of both — that carted her off to heaven. There’s a whole season for that, and it’s coming soon.”

“Season for what?”

“Where people freeze to death. Old people, children, the infirm ... the weak ones die out first. It’s the season of Natural Selection.”

“Natural selection ...” Shion murmured the words. They were cold, like a frozen confection. But they were neither sweet nor delicious like one. They were just cold. The tip of his tongue felt numb.

“Shion, you said there would be lots of casualties in the Holy City when the parasite wasps become active again in the spring, right?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, here, people die every day, especially in the winter. Which one do you think is easier to go through, being devoured by a wasp, or starving and freezing to death?”

Shion had put a hand to his neck without thinking. There was a scar at the base of it, where the incision had been made. Underneath was *the thing*. It had failed in hatching, and was half-melted when it was found, but it had been struggling to eat its way out from this spot. The vicious pain, the suffering and despair from that time was still fresh in his mind. He never wanted to go through the same thing again. But he had no way of comparing this with the elderly woman’s death. He had no idea what it was like to starve or freeze.

“Nezumi, what’s going to happen to her?”

“Her?”

“That— body. It’s not just gonna get left there, is it?”

“Of course not. It might get cold out here, but bodies will still rot if they’re left out like that. Then wild dogs and crows will come to pick at them until it’s impossible to do anything, so they usually get cleaned up before then.”

“So there must be a communal cemetery, or something?”

“Cemetery? There’s no land here that we can put aside for dead people. The Disposers come. See, over there. The guys that are sitting there eating meat. See them?”

In the direction where Nezumi pointed, there was a ripped tent under which there were several burly men sitting, talking loudly and devouring meat glistening with fat. A scraggly, pitifully thin dog was lapping desperately at the juices that dripped from them onto the ground.

There was a strange vehicle parked beside the tent. It was a bicycle, strapped to a flat cargo bed on wheels. Sitting on top of it was a large basket.

“They’re the Disposers. In exchange for money, they get rid of dead bodies. It’s people like that old hag back there that eventually cough up the money to get it done. They don’t want a body lying around their store, but they’re too disgusted to pick it up and toss it onto someone else’s property, or they feel guilty about doing it. So they dismiss it as their unlucky day, and call up the Disposers to get rid of it. I hear it’s a pretty lucrative business. I guess it would be, since there are people that die all the time on the road who have no friends or relatives.”

“Do they bury the bodies properly?”

“They burn them. They gather them all in one place, and set them on fire. I guess you can call it some sort of cremation, if you want. They don’t get anything fancy like a requiem or prayer of repose, though, that’s for sure.”

Shion’s eyes met with a man who was in the midst of ripping a chunk of meat off the bone with his teeth. He grinned widely, and grease dripped from his sparse whiskers. Then he stood up, and started making his way toward them. He tossed the bone carelessly on the ground, and the scraggly dog pounced on it.

“Hey fellas, how’d you like to join us?”

His arm reached out, and before Shion could dodge it, he was grabbed roughly by his hair.

“So it’s real, huh. I thought it was a wig. Pretty interesting hair you got.”

“Stop it,” Shion yelled. “Let me go.”

“Hmm, not bad. I never seen this kinda hair myself. Kinda pretty, actually. You almost look like a doll of some sort, little fella.”

Vulgar laughter erupted from his group of companions sitting behind him. Shion turned to look beside him. There was no sign of Nezumi, who had been there moments before.

“Let go,” he repeated loudly.

“No need to make a ruckus, now. Why don’tcha join us for some drinks? We got meat too.”

“I said let go,” Shion said through clenched teeth.

The bulky man showed no signs of loosening his grip. Shion could feel the man’s breath on his cheek, putrid with the smell of alcohol and meat. He turned his face away.

Nezumi. He bit his lip hard, and resisted the urge to call out his name. He had to try to defend himself first, or no one would come to help him. Shion let his body relax.

“Fine.”

“Hm?”

“I give in. I’ll join you just for one drink.”

“That so? There’s a good fella. This way.”

The man’s arm relaxed just slightly. Shion lifted his leg, aimed at the man’s groin, and kicked as hard as he could.

Ngh. The man let out a muffled groan, and doubled over as he collapsed to the ground. Shion leapt over his curled back and broke into a sprint.

Running away is all I’ve been doing today. The fleeting remark crossed his mind, but soon disappeared. He tore through the street as fast as his legs would carry him. There were less people milling about, which made it easier for him to thread his way through. *No more alleyways for me,* he thought, and concentrated on keeping straight to the road. If he stopped, he felt like he would be grabbed by the collar from behind.

“—Agh!—”

His foot slipped, and his body floated up momentarily. Then he was slammed to the ground. The pain jolted through his body from head to toe.

“Whoa—” Now he was sliding downwards. He was on a slope of grey concrete, though now it felt like more of a steep slide. He hurtled downwards. Shion closed his eyes, and brought his arms over his head to protect it. The action made him lose his balance, and he tumbled forward in a somersault.

His vision went dark. Just as he was about to scream, the smell of moist dirt reached his nostrils. He was thrown out onto the ground. Clods of dirt flew into his mouth. Shion lay coughing for several moments, and then stretched out on his back. His heart was thudding frantically, and it was hard to breathe. Dull and sharp pains alternately throbbed all over his body.

The taste and sensation of dirt still remained in his mouth. He had never imagined that dirt could taste this sweet and fragrant.

He could see the stars: they were winking in the settling dusk. The sky was neither black nor blue, but closer to indigo, with a wash of purple—it was stunningly beautiful. He felt his soul getting sucked into its beauty. He had never thrown himself out on the ground like this to stare up at the sky. Had something as beautiful as this always existed above him?

He heard quiet footsteps padding toward him. A wistful whimper. A warm tongue slowly licked his forehead and his hair.

“You—”

It was the dog, the skeletal dog that had been hanging about the group of men. It lapped at his head persistently.

“Are you worrying about me?” As soon as the words were out of his mouth, Shion noticed something else. When he had been grabbed by the man, his hair had been smeared with grease and meat juices. The dog was licking that spot with enormous concentration.

“Okay, that’s enough, that’s enough,” Shion said. “I don’t want your slobber all over my hair instead.” Shion propped himself up off the

ground, and stood up carefully. He didn't feel any severe jabs of pain. It looked like he had managed not to sprain anything or break any bones. He let his gaze take in everything around him. He inhaled sharply.

"This—"

He was in the midst of a ruin.

3

SIN AND SANCTITY

Humans are shapeshifters; there's naught that's not in this world.

IHARA SAIKAKU, SAIKAKU'S TALES FROM VARIOUS PROVINCES

THE SLOPE that Shion had skidded down turned out to be an enormous pillar tipped over on its side. Upon closer inspection, he could see that the base was carved out with the figures of several women robed in thin, translucent cloth. Rusty metal foundations were all that remained of what probably used to be an arched ceiling, and several withered vines feebly clung to them. The wall had collapsed entirely, and chunks of stone in all sizes were scattered hither and thither.

If he had accidentally struck his head on one of those— Shion shuddered.

The scene before his eyes was something Shion was seeing for the first time. Naturally, there were no such dilapidated buildings to be found in No. 6. All buildings were built accordingly to their purpose, with efficiency and functionality prioritized above all. Remains such as these, which had drifted through time, exposed to the wind and rain, were synonymous to illusion, and were not a product of reality.

He drew a breath, and let his gaze wander about him again. The wind whipped about in a fierce dance. As if continuing its journey toward yet a more ruinous state, a portion of the wall made a dry, crackling sound as it crumbled right before Shion's eyes.

"Nezumi," he called. It wasn't a plea for help. He had just wanted to call his name. "You're there, aren't you? Come out already."

"You're getting sharper," said a voice somewhere from above. Shion looked up to see Nezumi sitting on a window ledge several metres up. Nothing remained of the window itself except for the frame. The rectangular void, which was bordered in black, looked like a yawning mouth on the face of the crumbling wall, opened wide to let out a scream.

Nezumi jumped down from his spot several metres up. He landed squarely on the soft dirt.

"You're light on your feet," Shion commented.

"I am most humbled by your gracious compliments, your Highness."

"Quite something," Shion quipped. "Not to mention how amazingly fast you seem to disappear when you get into a tight spot."

Nezumi shrugged his shoulders slightly, and gave a soft chuckle.

"You've even learned how to be sarcastic. Quite something, yourself. Grown up a bit, haven't you?"

"I must've gotten ten years' worth of experience from walking through that market."

Nezumi's hand waved languidly in front of Shion's face.

"So you nearly got mowed down by a gun, got seduced by a woman, tripped over a dead body, and got hit on by an old man. Well, I guess for a little boy like you, that counts for about ten years. But—"

"Hm?"

"You really *have* gotten better at running away," Nezumi said approvingly. "Way better than your last try with the fat guy."

"The Disposers, you mean?"

"Yup. It looked like that geezer was seriously into you. To be honest, I thought you'd be good as gone if you managed to get dragged inside."

"You disappeared awfully fast for that."

"I don't get involved in more trouble than I need to," Nezumi laughed silently. "But you did a good job of making a getaway. Let me tell you, though, those guys don't give up easily. And you stand out on your own as it is. I'd be careful if I were you."

"It is with utmost gratitude that I accept your words of advice, your Majesty."

"Oh dear, and your comebacks have gotten better too," Nezumi laughed out loud this time, but softly. The thin dog was sprawled out on the ground, wagging its tail from side to side. The squalor of the market felt like a dream. A silent stillness pervaded the place as if the mountains of debris were absorbing all the sound around them.

"Nezumi, where are we?"

"Take a guess."

"I don't have a clue— looks like it used to be a pretty big building..."

"It's a hotel. There used to be a hospital across from here. Beside that was a playhouse, I think— I don't know much about this place, either."

A hotel, a hospital, a playhouse...

"So this really used to be a decent town."

"I guess so. I mean I don't really know what a decent town is supposed to look like, but there probably weren't bodies everywhere, to say the least. At least back then."

"Back then?"

"Before No. 6 was established."

Shion wasn't surprised. He had expected as much. He closed his fingers lightly over his palm.

"I've learned about the history of No. 6, and how it came to be. It was one of the very first classes we took."

"Mm-hmm," Nezumi replied offhandedly.

"A series of large-scale wars erupted all over the world as the last century was coming to a close. It was before neither of us were born. As a result of the massive amount of bombs and biological weapons that were used, the land was utterly destroyed and the climate deteriorated severely. The majority of all landmasses, with just a few tiny exceptions, lost all ability to sustain human life. There were an enormous amount of casualties. The people that remained vowed never to war again, and in those regions that were spared destruction, they founded six utopian cities. And No. 6 was one of them."

"That's what you learned."

"Yeah."

"And you've always believed it to be true?"

"That's the truth that we were taught to believe."

"You remember what you said on the day we first met?" Nezumi said.

"You said you didn't think No. 6 was perfect."

"I did."

"Was that a lie?"

"No," Shion answered. "I honestly thought so. But before I met you, I didn't realize that was how I really felt. I met you— and that's when I finally knew."

He had met Nezumi, and realized. He had finally heard the sound of his own conscience creak as it strained against its shackles. He had always felt suffocated. In No. 6, he had everything. He had plenty of food, a warm bed, and full access to medical care at his fingertips. And

it didn't stop there— at the age of two, when he had been acknowledged as a top-ranking individual in his Examinations, he had acquired the privilege to live in the luxury neighbourhood of Chronos. All its residents were provided a first-class environment on many facets.

Before he had met Nezumi on that stormy night of his twelfth birthday, he had been surrounded by everything he could wish for, all of first-class quality. But that day, gazing at the wind and rain that rumbled out his window, what Shion had felt was a destructive impulse that seared him to the very core.

He had felt unbearably suppressed. Like a corralled animal that instinctively rams itself against the fence, Shion had wanted to be released from the invisible cage that trapped him. At the very bottom of the deepest part of Shion's subconscious, a voice had been resounding.

This is a facade.

Here, everything is given to you.

But there is nothing here.

You can't live here anymore.

So escape.

Break it.

Destroy it.

Destroy what?

Everything.

Everything?

When the voice within him had overlapped with Nezumi's words, Shion had finally understood. *I don't know the truth. I don't know anything.*

Nezumi's gaze slid away from Shion as he turned his back to him. Shion grabbed his arm.

"Nezumi, tell me."

Tell me the truth. Not a lie, or a haphazard excuse. Tell me its true form—of the Holy City, of No. 6.

His fingers were shaken off roughly.

"I'm not your nanny. If you want to know, then find out for yourself."

He was shaken off again. No matter how many times he tried to grasp at Nezumi, he was always pushed away. Rejected ruthlessly. But still, Shion kept extending his hand.

The dog was pressing its body against him. It was so thin its ribs jutted out, but it was still warm. Very warm. It had the warmth of something who was alive.

"Are you feeling sorry for me, by any chance?"

The dog twitched its drooping, light-brown ear. For a moment, it looked like it grinned at him. Then it lumbered ahead of him to Nezumi's side. Nezumi's hand slowly and gently petted the dog's head.

"So you're nice to dogs, huh."

"Dogs don't act like babies."

"But dogs can't sew."

"What?"

"Dogs can't suture a wound. I noticed the suturing kit was still in tact in the emergency case. If you ever get hurt again, I'll sew that wound right up for you."

“Why, thank you,” Nezumi said sarcastically. “Your offer is so great it’s sending chills down my back. That face came into my dreams for quite a while after that day, you know.”

“Did I look that great?”

“You were grinning. You had this look on your face like you were having the time of your life. Every time I dreamt about it I had nightmares.”

“Well, it was the first time in my life doing a suture. I remember being really excited. Say,” said Shion enthusiastically. “So did you take out the stitches yourself?”

“Of course. It was easier than making soup.”

“Did it leave a scar?”

“Yeah. But I won’t show you.”

Shion stuck out his lip.

“Don’t be stingy.”

Watch your feet, Nezumi interrupted loudly.

“The stairs start here. We’re going up.”

The sun was setting lower, and darkness was setting in thickly. A large part of the stairs had crumbled away like the wall, and what was left of it wound upwards in a wide clockwise curve. Here, the ceiling was still in tact. It looked like it had originally been painted white, and although most of it had peeled away, there were white flecks of paint still left over here and there. A chandelier was hanging over the stairwell, and to Shion’s surprise, it was relatively undamaged.

“So this place really was a hotel.”

“It still is.”

“Huh?”

“This place is still used as a hotel.”

“No way.”

They emerged at the top of the stairs and were greeted by a large, vacant chamber. It had probably been the lobby. The walls were set in glass from floor to ceiling. The panes in the top half had been shattered and strewn over the floor, but the bottom panes still remained unbroken. Ripped and faded drapes hung lifelessly over them. Vines that had probably intruded through the broken windows clung densely to the walls, criss-crossed like a network of capillaries. Leaves were falling from them, adding to the thick layer that had already carpeted the floor.

It was thanks to a dim light in the room that Shion had been able to decipher this much despite the settling darkness. It came from a candle that was burning on top of a stone table.

“Nezumi, do you smell something?”

“The candle burning, maybe?”

“No, it’s not wax. It smells— almost like some animal . . .”

Nezumi gave a laugh.

“You really have come a long way. Your nose has gotten sharper. Now let’s try working on your eyesight. Look.”

“Ah—”

A shadow moved in the darkness where the light could not reach. It was not a human. It had four legs, two pointed ears, and was growling menacingly.

“A dog,” he whispered.

It was a large dog, covered in short, dark-brown fur, with a fierce glint in its eye. Its throat was rumbling in a low growl. Shion took a step backwards.

“He’s not the only one,” Nezumi added.

There was a note of amusement in his voice— he was enjoying Shion’s reaction. Shion resisted the urge to turn and give Nezumi a glare. He had no attention to spare for that.

With the first dog in the lead, several dogs of all shapes, sizes, and colours were emerging from the darkness. They were far from what would be called pets. They were dirty, their eyes glinted viciously, and their teeth were bared.

“Is this a nest for wild dogs?”

“Might be. What do you wanna do? Run away? If you don’t decide soon, you’ll get your throat torn out.”

The dark-brown dog approached him warily. It wasn’t growling anymore. It silently but steadily drew up to him, without ever lowering its gaze.

Shion gazed back into the set of caramel eyes that were the same colour as its fur. Behind the savage light in its eyes, there resided something surprisingly gentle. Shion could feel its presence there.

Intellect?

Shion lowered himself into a kneel. The shattered glass crunched underneath his denim-clad knee. Nezumi fidgeted. Shion didn’t move. Crouched on the ground, he stared straight at the dog.

The dog stopped. It stood still in front of him. It opened its mouth, lolling its pink tongue, and licked the tip of Shion’s nose. Then it lay down on the spot, and gave a yawn. All the other dogs began moving about on their own. Some began to groom each other, others sprawled out on the floor; still others began sniffing at their surroundings, and none of them seemed to have any concern for Shion’s presence.

“I passed the interview,” Shion grinned as he looked up at Nezumi. Nezumi clicked his tongue, and turned away.

“Didn’t the wild dogs scare you at all?” he said sourly.

“They did. But wild dogs don’t light candles.”

Nezumi sniffed in derision. “You’ve never even seen a candle before.”

“I just did for the first time. It was brighter than I imagined it to be. Hey, Nezumi, does someone live here?”

Laughter rang out. It echoed off the ruins, and faded into the darkness. “Pleased to have ya, guest.”

It was a human voice, but he couldn’t see who it belonged to. The voice was echoing from so many directions that he couldn’t tell from whence it came. It ricocheted and overlapped in countless layers. Just listening to it made him feel dizzy.

“Stop shitting around.” Nezumi bent down. He picked up a piece of debris, and flung it straight into the darkness where the dogs had come from. It was sucked into the gloom, but he could hear a definite sound in the distance as it hit the floor.

“Watch it.” The focus of the voice settled to one point in the darkness. It was a young voice. A light flickered in the inky-black pool.

“That’s some violent way to greet someone, Nezumi. You’ve got no manners.”

“You could use some manners yourself, if that was what you call the proper way to welcome a guest.”

A figure was weaving through the dogs toward them with a candle-holder. Even by the candle’s flame, the person looked like he was thrown in shadow.

His waist-length hair, his eyes, his trousers that were ripped at the knees, and his baggy sweater were all black. He had tan skin.

Was he a boy? A girl?¹

Shion couldn’t make the distinction. The stranger’s pointed chin and round eyes reminded him of a small rodent. He was very small and thin, and reached only up to about Shion’s shoulders in height.

“He lives here,” Nezumi said. “I don’t know his real name. We just call him Inukashi.”

“Like— dog lender²?”

¹Japanese pronouns make no gender distinction; Shion assumes Inukashi is male.

²inukashi / 犬貸し, literally means *dog lender*

"That's the one," the stranger answered. "Lending dogs is my trade. Nice to meet ya, Shion." Inukashi grinned. Shion was taken by surprise.

"You know my name."

"I'm quick to catch onto things around here. As long as I have my dogs, getting any information about these parts is a piece of cake. I know your name, and I know that you kicked the Disposer guy in the nuts before you came running here. This guy told me everything."

The emaciated dog wagged its tail from its place beside Inukashi.

"You can speak with dogs?"

"I'll hold conversations with anyone, as long as they're not human. Whenever you want any information, feel free to come to me." Inukashi extended his hand with a smile. He was wearing a thick, silver ring. It matched well with his tan skin.

"Nice to meet you, too." Shion also extended his own hand.

It had been a while since he had shaken hands with someone. So far, his experiences had only consisted of running away, yelling, or rolling around. Inukashi's face was open and affectionate, and reminded him of a puppy.

A sharp pain ran through his palm.

"Agh!"

Shion withdrew his hand hastily. At the base of his index finger, there was a small wound about the size of a pinprick. Blood was already starting to well up from it. It ran down the palm of his hand in a single, red stream. He thought he felt the tips of his fingers go numb. Inukashi threw his head back and cackled.

"What was that for?" Shion said in disbelief.

"What was that for' he says!" Inukashi crowed. "Haha, what a surprise! You fell right into that handshake, and you're turning on *me*

and asking me 'what was that for'? Classic."

Inukashi showed his palm to Shion, and bent his fingers slightly. A tiny needle-tip poked out of the middle of the ring. When he straightened his fingers, it retracted again.

"It's been used as an assassination weapon for ages. Well, the proper way to use it would be to coat the needle-tip with poison. But I haven't done anything to these, so you can relax."

Shion pressed hard on the base of his finger. He licked his dry lips, and opened his mouth in question.

"Why would you do that?"

"Oh dear," said Inukashi exaggeratedly. "Now he's asking me, *why would you do that?*"

Inukashi's gaze moved to Nezumi, who stood by silently.

"Haven't you taught this guy *anything* about how to live here?"

"That's not my responsibility."

"You picked him up and brought him home, didn't you? If you're gonna pick up a stray, you gotta take care of him properly. He'll make himself useful one day."

"I'm not so sure about that."

Inukashi laughed again.

"If he doesn't, just eat him. Or is he—" Inukashi's gaze travelled to Shion's hair. "He's got interesting hair. Has he got issues, or what?"

Nezumi turned up the corner of his mouth and answered shortly.

"As many issues as the dogs you have. Too many to count."

"Uh-huh. So the rumours were true. You really are keeping a young boy as a pet." Inukashi's face turned serious as he stared at Shion from head to toe. It was a bold and insolent gaze. The thin dog suddenly raised itself off the floor, and barked once. Two furry brown balls came tumbling out of the darkness. They were puppies, probably

a month or two old. Their noses and tails were tipped with white. The skinny dog lay down again, showing its belly. Its teats drooped pitifully. The puppies eagerly latched themselves onto them. Their round bottoms wagged from side to side.

“Wow, puppies!” Shion exclaimed. He gently petted their backs so not to get in the way of their feeding. “Wow, Nezumi, look. They’re so soft. Why don’t you try petting them too?”

“No thanks.”

“But look, they’re puppies. So you’re a mom, huh. It must be tough for you, raising all these kids.”

Inukashi furrowed his brow and retreated half a step away from Shion.

“What’s up with this guy? What’s he doing having a serious conversation with a dog? Is he unbalanced or something?”

Nezumi pointed to his temple.

“He’s a little vacant up here. It comes naturally to him.”

“Comes naturally, huh? Why are you taking care of this weirdo?”

“Like I said, he’s got issues. And he might not look it, but he’s pretty good with his hands. He can even pull off a simple surgery.”

“I don’t care what he can do, I wouldn’t have any of it. He’d never be anything more than a dead weight.”

“Couldn’t have said it better myself,” replied Nezumi. “So have you looked up what I asked you to?”

“Of course. A job’s a job. Let’s go upstairs.” Inukashi took his candle holder in his other hand and disappeared back into the darkness. There were more stairs. Like the ones before, they wound upwards in a gentle curve. These ones weren’t crumbled as badly. The rubble was cleared with a space just wide enough for a person to walk through.

“Oh—” Shion murmured in surprise as they emerged at the top of the stairs.

A narrow hallway ran straight before them. There was a person curled up at the edge of the hall. Beside him were a pair of dogs. They had long white fur, and they were nestled closely against the person as if to protect him. Shion squinted his eyes, and he could make out several more of these groups of people and dogs curled up together.

“What are these people doing?”

Inukashi answered over his shoulder.

“They’re my customers.”

“Customers?”

“This place used to be a hotel, and it still is now. Rumour says this place used to be quite grand, but now it’s just somewhere people can bunk for a bit of money if they have nowhere to stay for the night. We have beds, too. If you can cough up the cash, I can get them ready for ya.”

“What about those dogs?”

“I rent them out for heating. It can get pretty cold at night, but it’s not so bad if you curl up with a dog or two like them. You won’t freeze to death, at least.”

“So that’s where ‘dog-lender’ comes from.”

“Dogs are useful for other things too. They’ll collect information, guard your property, or carry your stuff. They’ll do anything. They’re probably much more useful than a natural airhead like you.”

Nezumi clucked his tongue.

“That’s my line.”

At the very end of the hall was a wooden door. Beyond it was a small room, with a low ceiling and no windows. A round table stood in the centre of it. Inukashi placed the candle holder down, and spread an old map over the surface of the table.

"This map that Nezumi got his hands on is from around twenty years ago. This is my hotel here, and LK-3000 should be somewhere around here."

"Latch Building isn't marked on this map," Nezumi added. "I asked Inukashi to look into that."

He ran a finger lightly over the map. It was a casual gesture, but one of understated elegance. It was a movement calculated and honed to perfection, fully aware of watching eyes.

"What?" Nezumi tilted his head at Shion's gaze.

"No— I just thought that sometimes you move really elegantly."

"Huh?"

"Sometimes your gestures are really captivating. I couldn't help but stare."

Inukashi looked up at them, his gaze alternating between Nezumi and Shion's face.

"How can you say something like that in front of his face?" he asked in disbelief. "Nezumi, this guy really *is* naturally oblivious. How do you put up with him?"

"I manage somehow."

"Shion, haven't you heard what this guy does for a job?"

"No."

Inukashi thrust his open palm toward Shion.

"If you pay up, I can tell you. Selling information is another one of my trades."

"I don't have any money."

"What? You don't? Nezumi, you're taking care of a penniless bum?"

Inukashi's eyes narrowed. "So he has weird hair, he's an airhead, shakes hands without a second thought, and has no money— Nezumi, where did you bring him from?"

“Where do you think?”

“I’m asking the question here.”

“If you pay me, I can tell you.”

“Don’t mess around,” Inukashi snapped. “You’re the one who should be paying up.”

Nezumi took out a small leather pouch from his pocket.

“There you go.”

The contents of the pouch fell on top of the map. It was a small, grey mouse.

“It’s a mico-robot. It has audio and video recognition and recording sensors, and it’s mounted with a solar-powered micro-battery. One charge will make it last for thirty-six hours. It can move around freely to gather information. You’ll find plenty of use for the places your dogs can’t get into. You were telling me you wanted one, right?”

Inukashi nodded wordlessly. He moved his head up and down in an exaggerated way, much like how a small child would nod.

“Are you really going to give this to me?” he asked.

“Yeah. If your information is worth it.”

Nezumi put the mouse back into the pouch again, and clenched it lightly. Inukashi’s tone of voice sped up.

“Fine. I’ll jump right to the conclusion. Latch Building doesn’t exist.”

“Is that all you’ve got?”

“Of course not. It doesn’t exist, but there’s something that goes by that name.”

“Latch Building?”

“Latch Bill, and it’s the name of a newspaper. A long time ago, there used to be a newspaper company by that name, right behind this hotel. It went bankrupt and got torn down to be made into a parking lot

for this place. It happened before this map was made, which is why it doesn't exist."

"So Latch Bill 3F means—"

"If it means the 3rd floor of that newspaper company, then—"

"Then?"

"I have no idea," Inukashi said abruptly. "There's no way for me to know what could have been on the 3rd floor of a newspaper that went out of business twenty-something years ago. You should meet up directly with the guy who has ties to that place."

"There's someone with ties to it?"

"Yeah. I got the location of one guy who had ties to Latch Bill. And said guy also has interesting connections to No. 6. Listen carefully—" Nezumi leaned forward. Shion swallowed.

* * *

No. 6 was shrouded in the red glow of the sunset. Nothing was more exquisite than the sunset of late autumn. The man let out a satisfied sigh.

What beauty this was, what a tranquil scene. The Forest Park only days ago had been showing a vivid contrast between turning leaves and those that were still green, but now most of the trees had lost their leaves. It was a peaceful kind of beauty, of nature that was quietly preparing for the approaching winter.

He had gathered here the pinnacles of modern science; he had nature under his management, and the ultimate utopian city was nearing its completion. People were fortunate to be able to be born, raised, and live to an old age here. They were the chosen ones.

There was no such thing as misfortune here. Even the occasional hurricane that came upon them was an abundant source of natural

irrigation that watered the agricultural and farming pastures that spread from East to Southern Blocks.

All it needed was a little more. A little more, and the land of the gods would finally be complete. A utopia, where only the chosen ones would reside. It only needed a little more.

“You really must love the view from here.” A voice said behind him, with the hint of a laugh.

“Wouldn’t you agree that it’s excellent?”

The man that had laughed silently shook his head in an expression of refusal. He was wearing a white lab coat.

“I prefer the micro-universe. The world of bacteria, microbes, neurons, macrophages, viruses. When you get to something like viruses, you’re at the nanometre scale. You could only see them through an electron microscope. They’re very beautiful, you know. The really beautiful things are things you can’t see with the naked eye. There’s only so much that your eyes can show you as is.”

“That’s always been your mantra, hasn’t it. You’ve been saying that for as long as I can remember.”

“It’s my unchanging mantra.”

“And you also still drink strong coffee before and after supper.”

“That’s another unchanging habit of mine.”

The men looked at each other and chuckled quietly. They had known each other for decades. They knew well what part of the other had changed, and what remained the same.

“So what now? I think it’s about time.” The man raised his custom-made coffee cup. The coffee in it remained steaming and fragrant as if it had just been poured, thanks to the adjustment mechanism built into the cup. The man robed in the lab coat licked his bottom lip. It was his habit when he was immersed in thought.

“You’re talking about collecting more samples,” he said.

“Live ones.”

“Yes, we’ve already collected a few dead sample bodies. But we can’t say they’re nearly enough, though. We want a few more.”

“If you want, I can find ways to go about it. How many do you need?”

“I’ll report to you later with how many we want for each condition based on sex, age, and history of illness.”

“That would be great. So how about the live ones? Do you want me to go into collection preparation?”

“No, I need more time.”

“Why?”

“The data from the collected samples is still incomplete. We’re still running analyses and uploading it to the database. I want to flesh that out first.”

“It’s taking unusually long for you. How rare.”

“If we were able to do it publicly, things would go much more smoothly. But doing this much under wraps is going to take double the time. I want you to keep that in mind. Besides, we should have entered the live samples stage only after the dead sample database was complete. That was an unexpected occurrence— we have to investigate as to why that happened in this stage. It’ll all take time...”

“I know,” the man conceded. “I’m not rushing you. Make sure that everything gets carried out carefully, thoroughly, and perfectly. This is all connected to No. 6’s future roots. Yes— and this is the final piece.”

“The final piece to make this place a Holy City in the actual sense, hmm.” The lab coat chuckled. “Cheers to the Great Leader.” He raised his coffee cup lightly.

“And cheers to the Great Brain behind it all.” The man lifted his cup as well. There was a moment of silence. The man in the lab coat spoke with a slightly lowered voice.

“But is it really good to go?”

“What?”

“Collection of the living sample. I heard a certain Rat is with him.”

The man placed his coffee cup down, and wiped his lips with his fingers.

“It’s just one rat. It should barely be an obstacle at all.”

“If you could get him alive as well— I’m interested in him.”

“You want to cut him open?”

“An autopsy, hmm. That would be rather nice. I would like to investigate every corner of his body. But before that— we need more samples.”

The man in the lab coat suddenly stood up, and began soundlessly pacing on the thick carpet. He strode impatiently, taking large steps with his hands behind his back. It was a bad habit of his that he had since he was young. Following the movements of the tall lab-coated man with his gaze, the man reclined deeply into his desk chair.

“Yes that’s the main issue,” the lab coat continued. “The total number of samples is severely lacking. We need more, Fennec.” Fennec was a nickname that had been given to the man when he was young. A desert fox. It had the smallest body and largest ears of its kind. Its ears, which could reach up to fifteen centimetres long, was not only well-suited for releasing body heat effectively, but possessed keen hearing ability that could detect even a grasshopper hopping in the sand. He had also heard that, contrary to its cute appearance, it had a vicious personality.

It was not a nickname that he liked very much. He had not used it, nor been called by it for quite some time now. He had almost forgotten about it. But he didn’t feel the same repulsion toward it as he did in his younger days. He even felt somewhat fond about it now.

Fennec. The desert fox. Not bad.

“We don’t have enough living samples either. I’d want at least two, no, three more on hand. But that could be difficult...”

The man in the lab coat continued muttering to himself, and paced increasingly quickly. He was completely oblivious to everything else around him. He had probably not even realized that he had called the man Fennec. He had been like that since he was young. His research and experiments, his speculation, his satisfaction. It was only ever about him. He had never shown any interest toward things external to him. He showed no attachments to power, money or women. He had no need for faith, philosophy or morals in his life. A brain of rare intelligence and a vacant soul...

— *Which is why he’s useful all the more.*

The man trained his gaze on the pacing figure clad in the lab coat, and smiled.

— *You would have no use for a soul. If you did, it would only be to declare your loyalty to me.*

The lab coat stopped pacing.

“Fennec, let’s make another living sample. I want a female this time. It might be difficult. Yes, at this stage it will be very difficult... but that’s why we should prepare one ahead of time.”

“Let’s do it.”

“There’s a great risk of failure, however—”

“Failure and sacrifice are all things we must go through in order to gain progress. Don’t worry, we’ll be able to overcome it to hold the final piece in our hands.”

“I guess you’re right,” the lab coat agreed.

“Let’s have supper then, shall we? This probably won’t pique your interest much, but I’ve had it all prepared, and the main course will be lamb. I’ve also a remarkable wine to go with.”

“And coffee after the meal?”

“Of course. But I beg you, at least take off that lab coat while we eat.” The man lightly clapped the lab coat on the shoulder. Then he gave a sidelong glance at the scene out his window. Beyond the pane of thick, spotless glass, the stars were beginning to twinkle.

* * *

“We’re here.”

Nezumi’s feet stopped. They were standing in front of a three-storey building. At least, it resembled more of a building than the ruins that constituted the hotel, but in the sense that it was also falling apart, they were none too different.

The arched entranceway and the red brick walls had probably once carried an air of pomp, but were now strangled by vines, crumbled in places, and radiating an aura of dilapidation. Nezumi jerked his chin upwards.

“Someone’s home.”

There was a light in the third-floor centre window. From its brightness, it was most likely an electric lamp. That meant there was electricity running in this building.

They pushed the wooden doors open, and entered inside. There were no signs of people on the first or second floors. The stairs, which were also wooden, creaked loudly with each step they took.

If Inukashi’s tip was a good one, a former reporter from the Latch Bill newspaper was supposed to be living here.

They climbed up to the third floor. There was light spilling out from a crack of the open door into the wooden hallway, which was carpeted with a thick layer of dust. In the pool of light, there were several empty glass bottles. It was easy to tell what these bottles used to hold. Shion

didn't have to pick one up to check, for the strong smell of alcohol filled the air around them. In a darkened corner of the hallway, there were towering piles of bundled papers, and empty cans littered about it. Only the door from which the light was spilling was neither dirty nor broken, though it was very old. Shion raised his hand to knock, but Nezumi held him back.

"What's wrong?"

"No, it's just— the air is strange."

"Air? What do you—"

Before Shion could finish his sentence, he heard a yell from inside the room. It belonged to a man. There was the sound of furniture being knocked over. A high-pitched voice screaming angrily. He could hear the sound of glass being smashed.

"Sounds serious. What now, Shion?"

"What do you mean, what now?"

"It looks like they're busy at the moment. Should we come back another day?"

"As if."

"Thought so."

There was a loud noise again. A man's deep voice yelled out for help. Shion tried to burst into the room, but Nezumi restrained him and opened the door.

The room was well-lit by a large lamp. It was the brightest light Shion had seen since coming to the West Block. The light was illuminating clearly every corner of the room. By the window there was a large desk, and against the wall was a rather unimpressive textile sofa. The floor was covered, again, with bundles of paper and books that were piled up or scattered haphazardly. But these were all things he had noticed when he had taken a good look around the room much later on. What Shion saw immediately over Nezumi's shoulder were two

people entangled with each other. It was a man and a woman. The man was wearing pants, but his upper body was naked. The woman was clad all in black. Her hair, cut straight across at the shoulders, was also black. She was straddling the man. The hem of her slitted skirt had flipped up to reveal her thigh. She had well-endowed, curvy body. She had a round face, round nose and round eyes. Her face was tense. The woman swung her right hand up.

“Help!” The man yelled. Shion realized that there was a knife in the woman’s hand. Nezumi *tsked* his tongue shortly.

“You good-for-nothing!” The woman shouted. Nezumi moved at the same time. Soundlessly and in a flash, he was holding the woman’s wrist mid-swing. Without a word, he twisted it.

The knife clattered to the floor. Shion hastily picked it up. He spotted a red knife pouch in the corner of his vision. He grabbed it reflexively, and sheathed the blade. He felt relieved.

“What the hell are you doing?” The woman screeched shrilly. She had fallen backwards on her bottom from being dragged by Nezumi.

“I don’t think you should be swinging around a toy like this, Miss. It’s dangerous,” Nezumi said softly.

“Leave me alone. What’s any of this got to do with you? This good-for-nothing, shitbag of a womanizer deserves to die.”

The woman dissolved into tears on the floor. Still holding the knife, Shion looked down at her hunched back. He didn’t know what to do. There was nothing in Shion’s manual that told him how to deal with this kind of situation. Nezumi knelt down, and gently stroked her back as it shook with her sobs. He lowered his voice into a quiet murmur.

“Don’t cry. No— you *should* cry. Cry to your heart’s content. You’ll feel better that way. Go on, cry—”

It was like a lullaby. His whisper was deep and soothing, and soaked into Shion's soul like the sound of the rain that seeped into the basement room. He could see the woman's agitation subside as its gentleness and tranquility washed over her. But there was no gentleness or tranquility in Nezumi's gaze. After taking a quick glance around the room, his gaze stopped at the middle-aged man who was gasping, half-naked on the floor. Then his eyes flicked up to Shion, who was stock-still, rooted to the spot. Shion took a step forward.

"Um— are you Rikiga-san? The one who used to work for the Latch Bill newspaper?"

The man raised himself unsteadily and began to put his arms through a shirt that had been draped over the sofa. Though not exactly obese, he was rather fleshy around the shoulders and waist. There was a white scar that ran diagonally across under his right shoulder blade.

"Uh— have we gotten the wrong person?" Shion asked uncertainly. "We've come here today because we heard we could meet a Rikiga-san here—"

"You've got the right one."

It was the woman who had answered. Her face was a sopping mess of tears, sweat and snot, but she was not crying anymore.

"This good-for-nothing liar goes by that name. Once upon a time he was a newspaper reporter, but now this shitty excuse for a man is reduced to making shitty porno magazines to pay for his liquor habit."

"And who's the one who had a hysteric fit when she got dumped by said excuse for a man, huh?" retorted the man who had been called Rikiga.

"What're you talking about?" the woman shot back. "You're the one who said you wanted to get married!"

"And I'm telling you, issues have come up, and I can't get married to you anymore."

“What issues?”

“Well— ah, um— you see...”

“If you’re gonna try to trick me, at least take the time to think up a proper lie. I’m not one to be messed with.”

Sparked to anger by her own words, the woman’s wrath threatened to boil over again. She suddenly lunged at Shion, breathing fast.

“Give me my knife back!”

“No—I can’t do that—” Shion resisted. “Stop, please. It’s dangerous.”

“I said give the damn thing back. What ‘issues’, huh? Let’s hear your excuse. I can’t believe I’m being shitted like this. I’m gonna kill you.”

“Stop, watch it—”

Nezumi stood up. With one step, he strode to Rikiga’s side and put a hand on his shoulder.

“Father, is she going to be our new mother from now on?”

The woman froze. Her mouth gaped open, and her eyelid twitched.

“Father?”

Nezumi nodded with an affectionate smile.

“Yes. We’re his sons.”

“You— you had kids? I’ve never heard anything about that before.”

The woman’s voice turned hoarse. Rikiga blinked.

“Father and Mother separated a long time ago,” Nezumi explained.

“But Mother passed away just last month, and so we came back to live with Father. We’ve already heard before that Father has someone he loves. But he said he would give up getting married so that we could live together as a family again, the three of us. Right, Shion-niisan³?”

“Huh?”

“We came all the way here searching for Father, right?”

³A suffix used to refer to an older brother.

“What? Oh— yes, we have. We’re his sons. Nice to meet you.”

Rikiga cleared his throat a few times.

“—That’s how it is. They’re my sons. I’ve had to take them into my care now . . . raise these two on my own. Living will become much more difficult. I couldn’t put you through that, honey. I love you, I love you so much. But these kids need their father . . . I couldn’t burden you by asking you to be their mother. I had no choice but to ask you to break up with me.”

“So that was what came up . . .”

“Well— pretty much.”

The woman ran a hand through her hair, and sighed. “So that’s how it is.”

“That’s how it is.”

The woman ran a hand through her hair again, and picked up her coat and purse, which were lying on the floor. She looked at Shion, and drew her chin back slightly.

“You have strange hair. Is it a wig?”

“Oh, um— stuff happened . . .”

“More issues? Like father like son, you guys must love your issues. Oh well, fine. If that’s what’s going on, I’ll break up with you. As if I would want a middle-aged man with kids anyway.”

The woman gave an energetic wave of her hand.

“Good-bye, then. It was fun while it lasted.”

The door closed. Shion let the knife in his hand drop to the floor. His palms were sweaty from nerves.

Rikiga lifted the chair and placed it upright on the floor, and began to gather the pieces of broken glass. There had probably been some kind of drink in it, for its contents had made a stain on the carpet that

emitted such an overpowering smell of alcohol that it made Shion feel ill.

“Good god, she certainly let herself go,” grumbled Rikiga. “It was fun while it lasted, huh? Putting on a cool face at the last minute. Geez.” Rikiga looked alternately at Shion and Nezumi, and grinned.

“You saved me from the gallows. First, let me give you my thanks.”

He had strong, broad shoulders and considerable height. The bridge of his nose was high, and it suited his moustache well. His face was neither handsome nor ugly. It was a face that was both energetic with optimism and worn with hardship; it was a face of cunning, and steely, resilient willpower.

“Your acting could have been better, though. Especially for a star of the show like you, Eve.”

Nezumi scooped the knife off the floor and smiled thinly.

“You know about me?”

“I’m your fan. I went to see your show last week.”

“That’s nice to hear, but I didn’t appear in any shows last week.”

“Really? Well, anyway, we wanted to do a special feature in our magazine about you. We asked your manager to get an interview with you, but he turned us down.”

“He probably would, for a magazine like this.” Nezumi’s fingers flipped casually through the pages. The cover was a photo of a naked woman. On the whole, she was rather blurry. All the other pages were somewhat similar. Naked women, half-naked men. Lewdness and provocation overflowed in the flimsily-bound pages of the magazine.

“It’s the go-to for young people,” Rikiga said. “Teaches them everything from birth control to picking up women.”

“You should do a feature about the right way to dump a woman next, old man.”

Nezumi tossed the magazine aside. Rikiga raised his hands in an exaggerated gesture.

“Ouch Eve, that was pretty harsh. I thought you’d be more of a pansy.”

“Nice to hear that coming from someone who was pinned on the floor by a woman just a minute ago.”

“I was drunk, alright? And she suddenly just jumped at me— but I never would’ve guessed that she had a knife on her. Scary things, those women.”

Shion took half a step forward.

“Eve . . . is that your real name, Nezumi?”

“No way. It’s just for work.”

“Your work . . . so you’re a stage actor.”

“Nothing half as classy as that. Maybe a couple steps above this magazine.”

“But— oh,” Shion murmured in realization. “So that’s why you speak and move so gracefully.”

A spotlight shines on a dark stage, illuminating a single actor as he floats up out of the darkness. Captivating the eyes, ears, and souls of all who watch, his voice rings out— at times, with a soaring, elegant air; at times, with a pained tremor like a wind that whistles low to the ground.

Nezumi snorted.

“What’re you imagining, Shion? We’re talking about a playhouse here, in the West Block. People who’ve got a little spare cash to spend come out to forget their worries for a little while. We haven’t got any embroidered drop curtains, decent costumes, or stage props. It’s mostly impromptu song or dance. That’s it.”

“But it still makes people forget their worries, right?”

“Huh?”

Shion was gazing unblinkingly at Nezumi. In these past few hours, he had experienced almost as much as— no— perhaps even more than what he had seen and heard his entire life. Of course, this was still only just a glimpse. But he had caught a glimpse of how harsh and brutal it was just to live a day, an hour, even a moment, in this world. If these people, in their brief moment of respite, chose to go to this place of their own free will, and that was where Nezumi was, then he thought it was amazing. It neither filled their bellies, nor quenched their thirst. But people still yearned for this crude stage and the tales told on it, and immersed in them, they forgot their melancholy. They clapped, wept, laughed, and bustled with noise. There was no way of telling when death might come sweeping down upon them. But in this moment, they could still live and enjoy life. They could live and enjoy life all the more because of it.

“I think it’s amazing, Nezumi.”

Nezumi sighed, caught himself hastily, and grimaced.

“Knock it off. It’s not as rosy as you make it out to be. You’ve probably never even seen a stage.”

“You’re right— In No. 6, students weren’t allowed to watch plays.”

“I would’ve thought so. Especially for top-rankers like you, Mr. Elite. Everything you watched or read would be strictly limited— though you probably never even realized it was being withheld from you.”

“No. 6?”

Rikiga stopped mid-gesture as he was bringing a cigarette to his lips. “Hey, wait a minute. Are you saying this wig-boy is from No. 6? You gotta be kidding me.”

“This is no joke, old man. And he isn’t wearing a wig.”

“Then is it some kind of new hat? Is that what’s popular in fashion these days?”

“No, it’s my real hair,” Shion answered. “Just— a lot of things have happened due to— uh, issues.”

“Oh?” Rikiga said. “There’s nothing I love more than issues. If you’ve really tumbled out of No. 6, you must have issues like no other. I want to hear your story. And the reason behind that hair.”

Nezumi hoisted himself up on the desk, and let his legs dangle.

“Does it smell, old man?”

“What?”

“Your nose twitched. Did you sniff out an interesting scoop, or what?”

Rikiga clapped a hand to his nose. Nezumi continued laughing softly.

“It’s the same nose wild dogs make when they smell food. It twitched, then your nostrils flared.”

Rikiga’s brow furrowed, and an expression of clear distaste spread over his features.

“I’ve mentioned this before, Eve. I think I’ve had misconceptions about you. I thought you’d be more gentle and refined. I would never have imagined such a rude and brash kid. I’m disappointed, frankly.”

“I thought you were my fan?”

“You can count me out from now on. Good god, I don’t know what you enjoy so much about taunting adults like this.”

“Karan,” Nezumi spoke quietly. Rikiga froze. “Do you know a woman that goes by that name?”

Rikiga’s body, beginning to show the signs of middle-aged weight gain, teetered dangerously. His throat contracted as he swallowed.

“You know Karan...? Are you acquaintances with her?”

“She’s my mother.”

Rikiga appeared not to understand Shion’s words immediately. He sucked in a deep breath.

“Mother?”

"I'm— oh, my name is Shion. I'm Karan's son."

"Son... Karan's son, huh... who's the father?"

"I couldn't say."

"You couldn't— don't you know who he is? Is he deceased?"

"No— I've heard from my mother that they separated shortly after I was born. It's just been the two of us all my life. I've never met my father."

Nezumi continued to laugh.

"Are you telling me there's a possibility he might be *your* son?"

"No— that can't be— wait a minute, er, what was your name again?"

"Shion."

"Shion— aster, huh. Karan did like that flower a lot. Uh— Shion, will you hold on for a minute? I'll get you a drink— ah, I mean, a non-alcoholic one, of course... what would you like? I have everything. Oh yes, here— let's move somewhere more comfortable where we can talk."

Rikiga knocked the wall behind the sofa, and pressed his right hand on it. The wall soundlessly slid to the side.

"Wow," Nezumi whistled. "Fingerprint recognition? You've got fancy gimmicks on this place. Guess it's not as shabby as it looks."

Beyond the wall appeared a rather extravagant room. The floor was lined with a luxurious carpet, and there were leather chairs, a leather sofa, and a table. There was a fire burning in the fireplace set into the wall.

"Come in, this way. I'll pour some coffee. Are you hungry? I have some excellent pie."

Shion had forgotten that he was starving. His empty stomach ached.

"What kind of pie?" Nezumi said. "I prefer meat."

"You can shut up." Rikiga waved his hand irritably at Nezumi.

“You’re horrible, treating us so differently like that.”

Rikiga ignored him and disappeared into a small adjacent room. The aroma of coffee soon wafted over to them.

“Coffee and pie, huh. I don’t believe it.” Shion had barely tasted any such savoury foods since escaping from No. 6. Nezumi let his gaze wander about the room.

“You’re right. They’re luxury items, for sure. And seeing how this room is outfitted... it looks like Inukashi’s information was spot-on after all.”

“If that’s the case...” Shion said pensively. “No, that can’t be...”

“What can’t be?”

“Mother once told me that my father was fast and loose with money and women, and was one step away from becoming an alcoholic, a hopeless—”

“Good-for-nothing?”

“Yeah. A hopeless good-for-nothing... but she said he was really gentle, honest and straightforward.”

“What’s that supposed to mean? Is your Mama still attached to him?”

“I have no idea... but it fits his image, right?”

Nezumi threw a glance at the entrance to the small room, and pulled a face.

“I dunno the part about gentle, honest and straightforward, but he sure is fast and loose with women, and halfway there to being an alcoholic. Now that you mention it, I guess you guys look kind of similar around the eyes. Well, we don’t have DNA testing here, so there would be no way to know for sure. —Shion, you don’t look too well.”

“Ah, no... I’m probably just hungry...”

“Don’t worry. Just the idea of that being *my* father would make me feel ill too. I’d probably break out into a fever.”

"You've got a fever? Are you alright?" Rikiga set a tray down on the table. On it was coffee, pie, and a glass of whisky. Shion's mouth watered.

"Karan liked pie, too," Rikiga said reflectively. "She also liked bread and cakes."

"She still loves them," Shion replied. "She bakes bread for a living now."

"Baking, huh... mm-hmm. I see."

An idea sparked in Shion's mind.

"Do you remember about the cherry cake?"

"Cherry cake? I'm not too sure... what, do you want to eat cherry cake?"

"No, it's just... my mother told me once that the day I was born, my father came home with three boxes, each with a whole cherry cake inside. And the two of them ate it together."

Rikiga lifted the glass of amber liquid and squinted.

"Is that so... one of Karan's fond memories, huh? But unfortunately I have no recollection of that. I've never bought cherry cake or eaten it with Karan. I was never even a resident of No. 6. Shion, I'm not your father."

Nezumi swallowed his mouthful of pie and nudged Shion's shoulder.

"So he says. What a relief, huh, Shion?"

"What's that supposed to mean, Eve?"

"It means exactly what it means."

Shion fished out Karan's memo.

Arnd LK-3000. latch Bl. 3F. Not sure. -K

“We relied on this memo to get us here.”

Rikiga stared intently at Karan’s scribbled writing. Shion spoke.

“Shortly after I... escaped from No. 6, my mother sent this to me. She must have thought you were still here. I’m just wondering how you—”

‘Know my mother’ was what Shion planned to say afterwards, but his words caught in his throat. A tear had spilled from Rikiga’s eye.

“Karan... she hadn’t forgotten about me... she remembered me... her writing... still the same as I remember it...”

His bowed head and broad shoulders were trembling slightly. Nezumi nudged Shion on the shoulder again.

“Egh, will you look at that. This old man is a teary drunk. At this age too— talk about embarrassing, hah.”

“Shut up. What’s wrong with getting a little teary? You’re always wailing and yelling on the stage.”

“That’s all acting. What, are you saying yours is an act too, old man?”

Rikiga glared at Nezumi with watery eyes, and raise himself heavily. He extracted a folder from the back of a sturdy bookshelf. He drew a single photo from it and placed it in front of Shion.

“This is Karan and I.”

An image of his mother was smiling back at him, young, beautiful and wearing a sleeveless one-piece dress. Beside her stood Rikiga, much thinner and well-proportioned than now, even with a hint of boyishness in his features.

“It was taken decades ago, not long after we met each other. Karan was still a student, and she was interested in the columns I wrote, and came to visit me. The third floor of the company building was my workplace, and when I’d just gotten back from an interview, she was sitting there. It was a rainy day, and thundering outside, but she came all the way out here to see me...”

Rikiga sniffled. Shion and Nezumi looked at each other. Nezumi gave a long, exaggerated sigh.

“You used to be a reporter, didn’t you, old man? Can you summarize it a little more efficiently? So basically what you’re saying is that you and Shion’s Mama first met on the third floor of the Latch Bill company building, am I right?”

“That’s right. We got along great... I enjoyed spending time with Karan. I think it must’ve been love. Back in those days, No. 6 wasn’t as closed off as it is now. People were more or less free to come and go. I’d just started my career as a journalist, and one of the things I was sniffing out was about No. 6.”

“Sniffing out? So you had some suspicions about that city, huh, old man? You must’ve had a decent nose back then. Too bad it’s useless now.”

Rikiga fixed Nezumi with a glare again, and contorted his face in an odd half-grimace.

“Eve, I wasn’t kidding when I said I was your fan. When I first went to see you, you were standing centre-stage and reciting a poem. Arthur Rimbaud, I think it was... I was captivated by your appearance, and your voice.”

Nezumi licked the grease from the pie off his fingers, and crossed his legs.

*But, in truth, I have wept too much! Dawns are heartbreaking
Every moon is atrocious and every sun bitter
Acrid love has swollen me with intoxicating torpor
O let my keel burst! O let me go into the sea!*

“—Shion, know what this is?”

“A stanza from ‘The Drunken Boat’, if I’m not mistaken.”

Nezumi chuckled. “Racing up that learning curve, aren’t you? I can treat you to a little more fan service if you want, old man. How about it?”

“No thanks. But let me say this, you were brilliant on that stage. I almost can’t believe that it was the same person as this insolent brat that’s in front of me. So do me a favour and stop talking.”

“Don’t be mad,” Nezumi drawled. He uncrossed his legs, and his face turned serious. Expression vanished from his voice. It became flat and heavy. It was a voice that was startlingly different from moments before.

“In the beginning, six cities were founded, including No. 6, as model cities for the future. They were models created in the search for a way humankind could live comfortably in a land that was reduced to rubble, riddled with abnormal weather patterns mostly due to the carbon dioxide from massive consumption of fossil fuels during the wars. That was what it was, at first. The plan was that each city would take part in the research and development of things like safe energy that could be mass-produced to replace fossil fuels and nuclear power, and scientific technology that ranged from the nanometre to cosmic scales, in a way that was appropriate for the conditions of each city. This was in hopes that some day, everyone on this earth would be free of any threat to their life— whether it be war, catastrophe, or plague— and this first step toward a world of threat-free life, the cornerstone of hope, was No. 6. In all respects, this was the objective at first. Wasn’t it, old man?”

Rikiga drained the rest of his glass of whisky in one gulp. He coughed lightly.

“So I guess classics weren’t the only thing you could recite off by heart, Eve. Your manager told me he didn’t know your real name, age, or where you were born. He said you were a wanderer that just appeared

out of nowhere. But I'm not buying it— you're not just any travelling entertainer. What's your real identity?"

"Nose around my business afterwards. So during the time this picture was taken, No. 6 was still seen as the hope for all humankind, right? But you had doubts. A fine nose you must've had to smell something fishy there."

"When I became a journalist, No. 6 was already in the process of change," Rikiga said. "Research organizations were gathering all sorts of skilled labour, and their departments flourished; but on the other hand, release of information and free speech were becoming more and more restricted. I thought, is this really going to become a utopian city? I had my doubts. You and your smart mouth are right. Back then, I had a nose that could sniff out something that I couldn't see. While I was scrambling around, the barriers spread further and grew more secure, and going to and fro from outside parts became much more difficult. Soon, you couldn't even enter or exit without a permit from the city. It happened in no time. Since I was a journalist, they made sure I could never set foot in that place again. They stamped out the freedom of the press, just like that. Of course, that meant I couldn't see Karan anymore either. To tell you the truth, I think that hit me harder than not being able to do my work.

A decade and some later ... you get what you're seeing now. The surroundings of No. 6 became places whose sole purpose was to service the one, central city. Agricultural lands, cattle pastures, recreational forest— and this is their garbage can. Destitution, dispute, disease, violence— the rubbish that No. 6 spits out all ends up here. You two probably don't know this, but this town used to be a small, but much more decent place than it is now. At least, not a place that's been classified and shelved away with an impersonal label like the West Block. But they've turned this place into a garbage can. What's

this *hope* they're speaking of now? Some Holy City this is— they're doing the name a disgrace. It's more like a devil that releases toxins everywhere it goes."

"I guess humans and cities are similar, then," Nezumi remarked. "In time they forget the ambitions they set out with, and corrupt themselves to no end."

Nezumi drained the rest of his coffee, and threw a glance at the man who had just finished talking.

"What's that supposed to mean? Are you saying that I've been corrupted?"

"Can you say that you aren't?"

Shion let his eyes flit to Nezumi's profile. He felt that Nezumi was provoking Rikiga. Rikiga responded to that provocation. No— maybe he had just been lead into the skilful trap.

"You're criticizing me about how I've become a drunk, huh? How I've been reduced to making magazines full of naked pictures, drinking as much booze as I could bathe in, and to top it off, nearly getting killed by a woman."

"You sound bitter, old man. But using pretty words instead isn't gonna help you survive here."

"Everyone knows that."

"What I'm curious about is how decked-out this room is. A warm room, and good food. You can't get those things easily. I can't see all your income for this coming from those porno mags. Which means— you've got ahold of someone's purse strings. Am I right?"

Nezumi smiled. It was a haughty, but elegant smile, like of one passing divine judgment.

"I heard high officials from No. 6 come here secretly ever so often."

Rikiga's mouth made a chewing motion.

“Old man, I heard you take orders from these men and bring them the kind of women they want, like the middleman in a deal. I guess your connections from your journalist days ended up being pretty useful. And the enormous payment you get from these guys pays for this luxurious lifestyle. You suck up to the guys who are pretty much at the core of the city that you just called the Devil, and leech off the good parts while you live off women who have no choice but to sell their bodies to avoid cold and starvation. You don’t call that corruption?”

All expression vanished from Rikiga’s face. It had no light or shadow, and looked strangely flat. The flames from the fireplace were lighting the right half of his face.

“... Where did you hear about that?”

“From a dog.”

“Dog?”

“A dog told me he heard you and some man whispering under the stairs. Afterwards, the man got in his car and drove right through the special gates of the Access Control Office, and got into No. 6 without any difficulty. The kind of people that can go between No. 6 and the West Block freely are limited. Only High Officials who have a special identification card with them can. Everyone else would get destroyed at the gates.”

Shion gulped. He felt like he was watching a stage play. He could read nothing from the man’s face, which was coloured crimson by the flames. Suddenly, its mouth twisted.

“How would you like to join, then?”

“Join?”

“No. 6 is a boring place. You’re not allowed to have a disorderly lifestyle. Beggars and prostitutes aren’t allowed to exist. Everyone’s listless. So they come here to stretch their wings. They come, laugh

at the women who sell themselves for whatever meagre cash that'll take them. The men reconfirm that they're a specially privileged class, and take joy in that again. After their short moment of fun, they go back to their boring home. Those kind of people are the ones that keep coming back."

"So business is booming, huh? That's good for you."

"Thankfully, yes. But their demands seem to have no end. They give me different orders, every time. First they want a dark-skinned girl, next they want a young girl with a tattoo all down her back. It gets stressful sometimes."

Shion had his head bowed. It pained him to listen to Rikiga talking. No. 6 was a beautiful city on its surface. Now he was hesitant whether to call that real beauty, but nevertheless, it was orderly. Its nature and buildings maintained a delicate balance, neither one over-asserting itself, and all its people were gentle and polite. Behind all of that was the truth that he was hearing now. His eyes met with Karan's in the photograph.

Mom, the place where we lived, the place where you still live now, was just a monster wearing a mask of beauty. Mom...

"And you're inviting me to join you in head-hunting for women?"

It was Nezumi's dry, brittle voice. Rikiga laughed. It was vulgar and insulting to the ears.

"Never. That would be a waste of good labour that could be put to better use. I've actually been thinking about it ever since I first saw you on that stage. You could rake in as much money as you want. It should be a piece of cake for you to sweet-talk those bored stiff into showering you with money. What do you think? It'll pay way more than that shabby hut of a playhouse."

"Are you telling me to take customers? Has the alcohol gotten to your brain, old man?"

Rikiga sneered. “Don’t try to play cool with me. God knows where you’ve come from and where you’ve been— a wandering actor like you has probably had experience with it anyway. It’s no use pretending you’re an innocent—”

“Shut up!”

It was Shion who had yelled. He whipped the coffee cup and its contents at Rikiga. He leapt over the table, grabbed him by the shirt, which was soaked through, and leaned in with all his weight. Rikiga gave a short cry as he fell to the floor.

“That’s enough!” Shion yelled angrily. “How dare you say something so degrading! Apologize— apologize to him!”

Shion straddled Rikiga and shook him roughly. The back of Rikiga’s head banged against the floor repeatedly. Still holding him by the collar, Shion closed his hands around Rikiga’s throat.

“Can’t— breathe—” Rikiga gasped. “Shion, please— I really can’t—I’ll apologize... so stop—”

“Shut up! You shameless— shame on you—”

A pair of hands slid under his armpits, and he was dragged backwards.

“Shion, that’s good enough. Any more, and the old man’s gonna pass out.”

Rikiga curled up and coughed.

“That was a surprise,” Nezumi murmured, still holding Shion from behind. He really sounded stunned. “I never imagined you’d resort to violence. I guess even *you* let the blood get to your head sometimes, huh. Enough to go attacking people like that.”

“... First time in my life...” said Shion, slightly out of breath.

“I can tell. Your heart is going a mile a minute.”

Shion turned and impatiently brushed Nezumi’s hand away.

“Why aren’t you angry?”

“Angry? If I let a joke like that get to me every time, I’d be going mad all year round. I’m used to it. It’s no big deal.”

“Idiot!”

“Idiot? Shion, what’re you getting all worked up for?”

“You’re an idiot. What he said wasn’t a joke. Don’t say you’ve gotten used to it. Don’t—”

His eyes burned. A tear spilled before he could screw his eyes shut.

“Shion— come on, don’t cry. Why would you...—I can’t believe you’re crying,” Nezumi said exasperatedly.

“He... insulted you.”

“Huh?”

“He insulted you. He said horrible things— lumped you in with the filthy officials of No. 6. But you say it’s no big deal. You weren’t even angry about it... and that made me feel even more helpless and angry— so angry... I don’t even know what to do anymore...”

Nezumi opened his mouth to say something, then closed it again. He yanked the tablecloth and thrust the end of it toward Shion.

“This is all I’ve got, but you can wipe your face on it.”

“Okay.”

“Shion, the one who got insulted was me, and not you. Don’t cry for other people. Don’t get into fights for other people. Fight and cry only for yourself.”

“I don’t understand what you’re saying.”

“I guess you wouldn’t— sometimes it’s like we speak different languages. Look, there’s snot coming out of your nose. Wipe it, come on.”

“Mm-hmm.”

“I always find it impossible to understand you. Even if we spent our whole lives together, I probably still wouldn’t understand you. You’re

right in front of me, but at the same time, it's like you're far away. That's probably why—"

Rikiga rose to his feet behind Shion.

"I'm sorry for interrupting your moment, but I want to let you know that that tablecloth is silk. I had a hard time coming across that thing, so I'd appreciate if you didn't wipe your nose on it."

He peered into Shion's face.

"Your angry face looked just like Karan's. I felt like I was being scolded by Karan herself. Though with her, I've never been yelled at that violently."

Then he turned to Nezumi, and lowered his head in apology.

"I'm sorry. I went too far. I deserved to be punched. Looks like my morals have rotted right through."

"They haven't rotted. They're just pickled in alcohol, that's all."

Nezumi gave Shion a light push on the back.

"I think we can call it a day. Let's go home."

"Sure. But I have to clean up first."

Nezumi laughed.

"You really are a well-behaved little boy, aren't you?"

"Make fun of me all you want, but I'm still going to clean up."

Shion bent to retrieve the coffee cup. Nezumi also reached for the folders and plates scattered on the floor. His body stiffened. His breath was caught in his throat, and he was frozen.

"Nezumi, what's wrong?"

"This—"

Nezumi's fingertips were trembling slightly as they held a single photograph. It had probably fallen out of one of the folders. Rikiga narrowed his eyes.

"What's the matter? Oh, that."

There were several men and women in the picture, with Karan at the centre.

“It’s a photo from the last time I entered No. 6. It’s a picture of Karan and her friends.”

“This man . . .”

Nezumi pointed at the tall man standing at Karan’s side.

“That guy, huh,” said Rikiga absentmindedly. “Who was he again? I think he said he was in an institution for biological research— looks like a bright fellow, doesn’t he? I can’t remember much about him, though. He didn’t really stand out. Eve, you know this guy?”

“I might.”

“How do you know him?”

Nezumi drew a breath, and answered quietly.

“He’s my godfather⁴.”

⁴Godparent (名付け親) in Japanese can mean both *guardian* or the one who has named the child. Nezumi is using it in both senses.

4

THE ANGEL OF THE NETHERWORLD

*I love him, love him. He's a millstone round my neck —
he'll take me to the bottom with him. But I love this millstone of mine —
I can't live without it.*

CHEKHOV, *THE CHERRY ORCHARD*, ACT III

THE GIRL came just as Karan was about to close the blinds of the store.

“Ma’am, are there any muffins left?” She was an adorable child with a round face, probably not yet ten.

“We’re all out of cheese, but if you like raisin muffins, we’ve got one of those left.”

“I’ll have it, please.”

“Alright, Lili. Just a second.” Karan picked the leftover muffin off the tray, and put it in a bag with two doughnuts.

“The doughnuts are a little something extra.”

“Thank you, Ma’am.” Lili dropped a few copper coins into Karan’s hand. She had probably held them tightly in her hand her whole way

here, for although no blood coursed through the coins, they held the warmth of a human body.

Lili peeked inside the bag, and her face glowed as she observed aloud that there were two whole doughnuts inside.

“You’re one of my regular customers after all, Lili. Next time, I’ll bake some extra cheese muffins for you.”

“Ma’am, you won’t quit running this store, will you?” Lili raised her face from the bag, and questioned Karan with a sombre expression.

“I would never. Why would you think so?”

“Mama said that you might close your store. But I’m glad you’re not.” A relieved grin spread across her round face. Karan squatted down and wrapped her arms around the girl’s small frame.

“Thank you for worrying about me, Lili.”

Her soft body, her warm presence— she was so small, yet she provided Karan with definite encouragement.

“Mama and Papa were both worried,” Lili said. “They were saying, ‘what if we can’t eat the bread or cakes from your bakery again?’. Because you know, the cake shop in front of the station is bad-tasting, and expensive, and mean,” she said huffily.

“Are they?”

“Yeah. Because the other day, there was a huge white cake on display, and it was like a toy castle. And me and Ei— oh, do you know who Ei is?”

“No, I don’t.”

“He’s my friend. He’s really good at blowing bubbles. So Ei and me were looking at it together, because it was so pretty.”

“So you two were looking into the shop window?”

“Yeah. And the old man in the store started yelling at us. He said, don’t touch the glass with your dirty hands. We were just looking.

We weren't even touching the glass," Lili said indignantly.

"That's awful."

"So Ei yelled at him back, and said 'you stupid stingy old man!' and so I yelled at him too, and said 'you stupid bald old man!'. And then we both ran away."

Karan found herself bursting into laughter. It had been a while since she had laughed out loud. She kissed Lili on the cheek.

"I can't make anything as big as a castle, but for your birthday, Lili, I'll bake a nice, all-white cake for you."

"Really?"

"Really. Make sure you share with Ei, too."

"Thank you, Ma'am," said Lili happily. "I like cherry cake."

Cherry cake— Shion had liked it too.

Lili waved her hand, and walked out of the store. Karan watched her retreating back until it melted into the dusk, then lowered the blinds. She sank into a chair.

After Shion had left her, she found it hard to bear when evening set in each day. Evening trapped her in the deep disappointment that another day had passed without Shion coming home. The feeling turned into heavy exhaustion that made it feel troublesome to lift a single finger.

"Shion..."

At times a murmur, at times unvoiced; at times as if in conversation, at times coming close to screaming— she wondered how many times she called her son's name each day.

When she heard that the Security Bureau had taken Shion into custody on charges of civil disturbance and murder, she thought she would go insane.

"Please be aware that you will likely never meet with the suspect again."

The night that she had been given the news by a Security Bureau official, Karan had a premonition that her son would die. She knew more certainly than anyone that Shion would never take part in a murder. But a mother's desperate feelings would never get across to the Bureau— she knew that well too. In No. 6, where the crime rate was almost zero percent, there was no judicial system. Merely being arrested and taken into custody by the Security Bureau confirmed the suspect's guilty status. Pleading guilty or not guilty was not allowed, nor was raising a formal objection.

He has already been impounded into the Correctional Facility. Soon, as a first-class VC he will be sentenced for life; or under special law, be sentenced to death penalty. The Security Bureau official's words were neither exaggerated nor twisted in any way— they were the bare truth. They had always been. The next time this uniform would appear at her door would be after the sentence had been handed down to her son. At this moment, Karan experienced for herself what despair physically felt like. All sounds disappeared from around her, and all colours faded. She couldn't smell or feel anything. Darkness was the only thing she could see before her. It was an inky-black darkness that would never see the light of dawn. Was this bottomlessness what people called despair—?

I've lost everything.

Suddenly, a certain man's face crossed her mind. *If I beg him for help, could something be done?* But the crack of light that had shone into her heart soon flickered and vanished. *No— there's no time.* She didn't even know where that man was right now. She had no time to search him out and beg for her son's life.

Suddenly overcome with nausea, Karan vomited all the contents of her stomach. She broke out into a sweat. She half-crawled to the storage room, and collapsed on Shion's bed. Most of Shion's belongings had

been confiscated as evidence by the Security Bureau. *I can just die too, in a corner of this storage room. I'll close my eyes, and follow after him. Rather than live this brutal life, I can choose the peace of death that'll come after short suffering. I'm not strong enough to go on living alone in this darkness.*

“Cheep-cheep!”

She thought she heard something squeak at her ear as she lay there. It was probably just her imagination. It might not be my imagination. *But it doesn't matter, I'm already...*

Something bit her earlobe. A dull pain raced through it. She lifted her upper body. A small mouse scurried away into a corner of the storage room.

—*What was a mouse doing here?*

She swallowed. She touched her earlobe. A little blood came off on her finger. Lost Town may be in the older parts of town, but it was still rare for animals, excluding pets, to be running around. Even more so for mice—

“Nezumi.” Her heart thumped loudly.

Nezumi. Hadn't Shion murmured that word more than once? While he was drinking cocoa; while he gazed at the trees swaying in the wind; while he looked up at the evening sky, he had murmured that word. Ever since that day, when they had been evicted from Chronos and moved to Lost Town because of that incident— it was the day that Shion had undergone an investigation and received a stern warning for guarding a VC, regarded as a violent criminal in No. 6. Concealing and aiding in the escape of a VC normally classified as a serious crime, but with regards to his young age of twelve and his emotional state, he had been let off with only the removal of his special privileges.

Karan, for some reason, didn't feel much of an attachment to Chronos, nor did she find her life in Lost Town harsh. Though others may have

reprimanded Shion's actions for lacking common sense, she was able to believe that there was something in Shion's feelings and beliefs that lead him to do what he did. Although the city gave him preferred treatment as a gifted child because of his level of intellect, perhaps she had begun to realize somewhere inside that her son would take emotion over knowledge, and take a future that he could grasp of his own free will over a future that was already promised to him. That was why she chose not to question him much about that incident. But she had asked him once about Nezumi.

"So what's this Nezumi? Who is he?"

"Huh?"

"It's someone's name, isn't it?" She had thought so because of the tender way her son said the word. Nostalgically, lovingly, at times strained—it even carried a tone of longing. He would definitely not use that tone of voice to call a regular mouse or rat.

"Did you get your heart broken by that person?"

"Never. What're you saying, Mom?"

"Well, it sounded like that."

"No, it's not like that. You've got it all wrong."

It was then that Shion would become unusually agitated, blush crimson, and do things like drop his spoon. Yes, she remembered it now. Nezumi...

She stood up. Her heartbeat returned to normal, and her body felt lighter. Hope—though she didn't know why—flickered inside her. She could breathe, and the willpower to move on revived within her again.

A small mouse was curled up next to a box of flour. It made eye contact with Karan, and swung its face around in a wide circle. It spat a capsule out of its mouth. Then it disappeared into the back of the storage room. There was a memo inside the capsule.

*Shion is safe, worry not. Escaped to West Block.
Be wary of Bureau surveillance.
Any replies to this mouse. Brown brings news of safety,
black brings news of change or abnormal occurrence. —Mezumi*

The light that flickered in her became a roaring flame. She pressed a hand firmly to her mouth. She felt if she didn't, she would cry out in joy.

He's alive. My child is alive. I'll be able to see him again.

Karan breathed in, and furtively looked about her.

If the memo was true, and Shion had escaped alive to the West Block, then this house was probably under heavy surveillance by the Bureau. Pinhole cameras. Audio tapping. Wireless signal tapping. She would not be able to act recklessly.

She moved further into the storage room. Beside a crate of jam, she scribbled on a piece of wrapping paper. The word 'West Block' brought to mind a hazy figure. *What was his name again?* He worked for the Latch Bill... he was a good person. She remembered that much. *Perhaps he would— but—*

She had an endless amount of things she wanted to tell Shion.

Shion, stay alive. No matter what you do, stay alive. Your mother is fine. As long as you're alive, I'll be fine. So please, don't die.

But there was no use in spilling her heart out now.

"Cheep cheep!"

The small mouse appeared at her feet. It twitched its whiskers as if to urge her on. She couldn't stay in one spot like this for long—especially because she didn't know where the surveillance cameras would be located. She scribbled hastily, rolled the paper up, and tossed

it on the floor. In an instant, the small mouse picked it up in its mouth and disappeared.

If I follow it, will it lead me to Shion?

It was a fleeting thought. She waved it away, and took a step forward.

I'll wait here, until my child comes back to me. I'll stay here, and I'll wait. It's an easy thing to do. He's alive, and he's in the West Block. If he's alive, I can wait. Hope hasn't been cut off from me. I haven't lost yet.

I haven't lost? Who am I fighting with, anyway?

Karan smiled slightly to herself, lifted her face, and strode out of the storage room.

It had been almost a month since then. Just once, a small mouse appeared. It was brown, which meant that Shion was still safe. She felt relieved, but at the same time, distressed. Next time, a black mouse might appear. There was nothing ensuring Shion's safety.

She wanted to see him again. Lately, she had been having frequent dreams. In them, Shion was still young, and she would become afraid if they weren't clasping hands with each other. *I won't let this hand go.* But no matter how strongly she thought so, the little boy's hand would always slip from hers as he began running ahead of her.

"Shion, wait."

Don't go there. It's dangerous over there, there's a horrible danger—

"Shion!"

She would awake to her own scream. These sort of mornings had been continuing for some time. She had often moaned with dizziness, shortness of breath and headaches. But she still continued to bake, and continued to open her store for people like Lili.

Even after news of Shion's arrest and imprisonment had been broadcasted, the attitudes of the people around her hadn't changed.

The factory worker who always stopped by on his way to work to buy raisin bread and a sandwich for lunch— the college student who came once a week to buy a walnut cake— the housewife who came every morning to buy a freshly-baked loaf of bread— all rejoiced that Karan was still continuing her business.

“Whenever I eat your cakes, Madam, it fills me with a happy feeling. I don’t know why, but it just makes me feel happy.”

“Not being able to eat your raisin bread’ll take all the fun outta my day. It’s one of the things I look forward to, so don’t ya take it away from me, Karan-san.”

“You’re a baker, aren’t you? It’s your job to bake, no matter what happens. We’re all waiting, you know. Every morning, we all wait for the aroma of baking bread to waft into the streets.”

These, and so many other countless words had supported her. Although they were still far from strong, the words of others made her soul hold ground as it threatened to collapse from the distress of not being able to confirm her son’s well-being.

She had borrowed their shoulders to stand, clench her teeth, and continue to bake bread and cakes.

But evenings were still unbearable. If the people that passed her storefront on their way home were youths, it was unbearable all the more. It made her want to weep her heart out.

She sank into a chair, and covered her face with her hands.

“Cheep-cheep!”

She lifted her face. Under the glass display case, a small mouse was twitching the tip of its nose. It was brown.

“You came.”

The mouse looked around, then spat a capsule out of its mouth. She instinctively knew what would be inside the transparent capsule case.

Mom, I'm sorry. Alive and well.

The writing was slightly slanted, and distinctive in style. It was none other than Shion's hand.

Mom. The words became his voice as it echoed in her ears. Right then, at this moment, her son was living. He was alive as he wrote these words to his mother. He had written on this tiny piece of paper, a message just several words long. But it was enough to make Karan cry. She couldn't stop the tears that streamed down her face. She traced the words over and over again with her fingers.

Shion was probably in a dire situation. He may well be suffering in uncertainty. But he was not in utter dejection. His cramped but energetic handwriting expressed that.

Mom, I'm alright. I'm not unhappy. I really haven't despaired.

Karan wiped her tears on her apron. She vowed them to be her last. The next time she would cry would be when she was holding Shion again in her arms. Until that day, she would weep no more. Despair no more. *I'll bake bread every day, sell it, manage my money, clean my shop, put out some flowers, and go on living. I'm going to do my job.*

"Starting tomorrow, I'll put out a few more kinds of muffins. I know, I'll make it a Kids' Special day."

Karan nodded at her own words, and reached into the glass case to take out a round savoury roll. The bread, which was sprinkled with powdered cheese, was still fragrant and tasty even after it had gotten cold. With its affordable price to boot, it was a popular choice at her bakery. This one was the last of the batch that she had baked today.

"Thank you. Thank you so much, Mr. Mouse." She broke off a piece and tossed it in front of the little mouse. The dark brown mouse stared warily at the bread for a little while, sniffed it, and began to nibble at it cautiously.

“Is Nezumi your master? Will you tell him that I’m very, very grateful? And please tell him to come by one day to have a bite to eat. I’ll treat him to as much bread as he can eat. And plenty of bread for you too, of course.”

There was knocking at the door. It wasn’t rough-sounding; on the contrary, it was quiet and almost hesitant. But Karan’s heart shrank in fear.

Oh no. There was the possibility that this house was now a part of the Bureau’s surveillance net. She had been so preoccupied with Shion’s note that she had completely forgotten.

Is it the Security Bureau? Have they come to collect this letter—?

There was no complete security system here like in Chronos. There was no security alarm or camera, nor an auto-lock with a built-in recognition sensor. There was only a door paned with thin glass, blinds that covered them, and an outdated manual lock. One powerful man would be able to force his way in easily.

Karan crumpled the note into a ball in her hand. If worse came to worst, she was prepared to swallow it whole. The knocking still continued. She stood up slowly. She clenched her hand into a tight fist.

“Excuse me.” It was a young woman’s voice. “Excuse me . . . is anyone home—?”

The voice trailed off feebly. For an instant, the face of the college student who liked walnut cakes rose into her mind. But it wasn’t her. Karan pressed the button to open the blinds.

Beyond the glass panes of the door stood a slender girl. She was wearing a thigh-length grey coat that seemed to melt into the dusk. Karan remembered the face that looked up and smiled at her.

“Why, it’s Safu.” Karan hastily opened the door. The girl stepped into the store along with the evening breeze, and commented on the tasty

aroma. Then she bowed her head.

“Madam, it’s been a long time.”

“It has. How many years has it been now? You’ve grown so beautiful. I was so surprised.”

“I did used to be mistaken for a boy a lot,” Safu smiled, dimples showing in both her cheeks. Her smile was still the same as before. Like Shion, she had placed in the top rank for her intelligence in the city’s Children’s Examinations. She had been studying with him as a classmate in the Gifted class until the age of twelve. Karan remembered hearing that Safu had lost her parents at a young age, and was living with her grandmother.

After Karan and Shion had been banished from Chronos, Safu was the one classmate that continued to treat Shion as she had before. She had also come to this store once. That time, her face had still harboured some of its girlish innocence.

But the Safu now, who had unwound her light pink scarf, had silky skin and a gentle mouth. She showed hints of the beautiful woman she would eventually grow into.

“But hadn’t you gone away on exchange to another city? I remember hearing something like that from Shion,” Karan said.

“I’ve come back. My grandmother passed away. I received word not long after I arrived there, so I packed up and came right back.”

“Your grandmother? Oh, dear...”

This girl has lost the last of her blood relatives.

“Safu... I don’t know what to say. My heart goes out to you.”

This girl had also experienced the same despair. She had experienced the loneliness of standing by herself in neverending darkness. And she was so young.

“Is there anything I can do? Safu, is there any way I can help?”

"There is." Safu stood in front of Karan, and looked her straight in the eyes. She was not wrought with grief. She wasn't anguished, or spent in exhaustion. She had a resilient and defiant gaze. The kind of eyes that one could only have in her girlhood.

"I came here because I have a favour to ask you, Madam."

"What is it?"

"Please tell me where Shion is."

Karan drew a breath, and gazed back into Safu's eyes.

"Please, tell me," Safu persisted. "He's alive, isn't he? He's not incarcerated in the Correctional Facility. He's alive— where is he?"

Her tone of voice was anxious for an answer. Karan clenched her fist harder around the small scrap of crumpled paper.

"Safu, you know about Shion, then?"

"I only know what's been broadcasted by the Bureau. Which means I don't know anything. They're all lies, aren't they?"

"Safu."

"What they said about Shion planning indiscriminate murder from twisted hatred— that's a huge lie. Shion wasn't twisted, and he didn't harbour any grudges toward anyone."

Karan tugged the girl by her hand and led her into the storage room.

"It looks like this room doesn't have any surveillance cameras or recording devices. Though I'm not sure how safe it is—"

Safu's eyes sparkled.

"If you're being spied on, that means Shion hasn't been captured, right? He's escaped somewhere, hasn't he? He's been able to escape safely, and he's still out there alive— Madam, you're sure of it, aren't you?"

"Why would you say that?"

"Because you're so calm about it... Just one look at you, and I could tell. You looked thin and worn, but you hadn't given up completely.

It wasn't the face of a mother who's lost her son."

"I'm blown away, Safu. You'd make an excellent detective."

"Madam, Shion's alive, isn't he? He's doing well, right?"

Karan continued to hold Safu's gaze with her lips firmly shut.

Was there a possibility that Safu had been requested by the Bureau to come here to seek Shion's whereabouts? Karan thought for a moment. The answer was no. If the Bureau really intended to, there was no need to use Safu. It would be easy enough to extract information from Karan herself using a confession serum.

Was the Bureau actually pursuing her son in earnest?

The thought suddenly crossed her mind. All this time she had been too swayed by emotional exhaustion and confusion to even think about it, but if the Bureau were to actually pursue him with all their might, a mere young boy like him would not be difficult to put under arrest. Even if Shion had thrown his ID card away, tracking satellites would be able to confirm his location. As long as he didn't remain eternally underground, it was nearly impossible to escape the highly-refined tracking satellites.

"Madam."

Safu's hand grasped Karan's arm.

"Shion's outside of No. 6, isn't he?"

"Yes."

"I knew it... but it's only natural, isn't it? Within the city, surveillance would be in effect everywhere. It would be impossible to hide..."

"Safu, what's the image resolution of tracking satellites nowadays?"

"The newest ones would be under fifty centimetres. I heard it's possible to zoom in now by sending commands from the ground. Which means, it's possible to get an image of a person on ground-level with clarity."

The shrewd girl had guessed Karan's next thought. Safu swallowed, and continued talking.

"If they input Shion's data into the system, the satellites would start tracking him automatically. If he's above ground, it would be impossible for him not to be found."

"Then I wonder if he's gone underground. Or—"

Or has his appearance changed greatly from the recorded data— was that even possible?

"Madam . . . I think as long as Shion is outside the city, he'll be safe."

"Safe?" Karan repeated Safu's words in question. She didn't understand what Safu meant.

"I can't say it very well. It's just a hunch I have . . . we've never learned to put things like feelings and hunches into words. But after spending time outside the city, I've come to feel something . . ."

Safu's words became awkward and stumbling. She was desperately searching for words that described not theory, but something that resided within herself.

"Ah . . . I feel like this city is really closed— like it's shut itself in. Like it's just withdrawn completely into itself, solved everything within itself . . . and it's not interested or intrigued by anything outside of it."

"And you're talking about this city, here."

"Yes. That's how I feel. So if Shion is outside the city, I figure the Bureau would leave him alone, no matter if he's the suspect of a serious crime. If he were to come back to the city, though, they would probably arrest him immediately."

"That would mean Shion would never be able to come back, right?"

"As long as the city itself doesn't undergo some kind of change— I feel like that's how it would continue to be."

"That's such a cruel thing to say, Safu."

Safu shook her head, and grasped Karan's arm again.

"Madam, where is Shion?"

"In the West Block. That's all I know."

"West Block— is that so?" A breath escaped Safu's lips. For an instant, her gaze wandered in the air. Then she bowed her head deeply toward Karan.

"Thank you. I'm glad I was able to see you, Madam."

This time, Karan was the one to grab Safu's arm.

"Wait," she said. "What are you going to do, now that you've heard Shion's whereabouts?"

"I'm going to see him."

* * *

Karan was at a loss for words. She couldn't let go of the arm she was grasping. The slender sixteen-year-old girl stood silently before her.

"Safu... what on earth are you saying? Do you know what kind of place the West Block is?"

"I don't. I've only heard that it's a terrifying place. But I'm still going."

"But— but— you said so yourself just now. It might be possible to exit the city, but getting back in..."

"It doesn't matter to me," Safu said determinedly. "Even if I could never come back here again, I wouldn't regret it. If Shion is in the West Block, that's where I'm going."

"Safu."

"I want to see him. I want to see Shion." Safu's eyes welled up with tears. She bit down on her lip.

She's a strong girl, Karan thought. At this young age, she's already learned how to stop her tears.

Karan reached out and embraced the girl to her bosom.

“Thank you, Safu.”

“Madam...”

“You know, I always thought I was alone. I thought I had to carry this burden all by myself... but you were right there with me. You had a place in your heart for Shion too— thank you.”

“I... I love him,” Safu said, her voice trembling. “From the bottom of my heart, I’ve always, always, loved only him.”

“Mmhmm,” Karan murmured in assent.

“I don’t want to lose him. I want to be by his side.”

“I know.” She stroked Safu’s back.

In the distant past, I’d said the same thing once. I’d met a man I cared about more than anyone else, and I never wanted to lose him. I wished I could be by his side forever.

But they had separated. The only thing he left in her hands was her newborn baby. ‘Shion’ was a name that the man had given to his son. It was his last and only gift to her.

“Women can go on living without a man, you know.”

It had come out as a whisper. Perhaps Safu had not heard, for she raised her face and blinked at her as if in question. As she blinked, a single tear spilled over and rolled down her smooth cheek.

“Safu, can I ask you to believe in him?”

“Huh?”

“Believe in him. He’ll come home one day. Somehow, I just know he will. He’s not as weak as he looks.”

“I know that, very well.”

“So please, wait for him,” Karan implored. “Take some time to see how the situation unfolds. I don’t think it would be good for us to act rashly.”

Safu's shoulders raised and dropped as she took a deep breath.

"Madam, can I ask you one more thing?"

"Sure."

"Who's by his side right now?"

It was an unexpected question. Someone who was with Shion— unseen, but by his side nonetheless. Who was it?

"Is it Nezumi, I wonder?"

"Nezumi?"

"Yes, Nezumi. That's the only person I can imagine."

"I wonder if he's a very important person to Shion?" Safu asked.

"I think so. Maybe even as much as you and I are to him."

Safu smiled, and announced that she was going to go home.

"Wait, Safu," Karan said urgently. "Promise me you won't do anything rash. You'll wait until he comes home, won't you? Right?"

The girl's smile didn't fade. But the light in her eyes was defiant, and harboured a clear intention.

"I don't like to wait."

"Safu..."

"I've always been like this. I can't just sit still and do nothing while I wait. This morning, I went to do all the paperwork to get my exchange cancelled. I'm free now. So I'm going to go. I'm going to get to where Shion is, no matter what it takes."

Karan shook her head. She felt like no matter what she said, it would be of no use now. But she had to stop Safu. She couldn't let her make the foolish choice to walk right into the spider's web.

"Safu, I may be Shion's mother, but I don't know every single thing about him. There are probably more things I *don't* know. But— but you see, I know that surely he wouldn't want you to put yourself in danger just to see him. If something happened to you because of that,

then he would suffer for his whole life. This much, I know for sure. So please . . .”

Safu raised her chin. She pursed her lips firmly.

“This has nothing to do with how Shion feels.”

“Huh?”

“I’m doing this because I want to. I’m being selfish, I know. But I can’t just sit and wait for Shion in this state. I want to see him so badly. That’s why I’m going. That’s all there is to it . . . I’m not a mother, Madam—I can’t be strong like you. I can’t keep waiting out of faith. I don’t want to regret anything. If— if by some chance, he ends up never coming back . . . I’m going to be the one to suffer for my whole life. I don’t want that. I don’t want to lose him.”

“But Safu . . .” Karan said the same words again softly, in her heart.

But Safu, you know, women can go on living without a man. It’ll be painful, and it might feel like your limb has been torn away, but you’ll still be able to live on carrying that wound. Even with that burden, one day you’ll be able to laugh again. That’s why— please, don’t put your life on the line for any man. Please, live for your own sake.

How could she respond to this girl’s stubborn and fiercely devoted feelings? How could she convince her? Karan awkwardly but desperately struggled to find the right words. But already, Safu was turning her body away from her.

“Madam, I’m glad I was able to see you. Good-bye.”

No, Safu— never say words of farewell like that.

“Next time, come by before noon,” Karan called out. She willed her words to reach the back of the figure clad in grey.

“Before noon?”

“Yes. I bake bread from early morning right up to before noon. Earlier in the morning, I bake mostly rolls and loaves, but closer to noon I

bake sweet breads and cakes. I'm going to bake three kinds of muffins. Do come and have a bite. I have delicious black tea to go with it, too."

There was a moment of silence between the two.

"I know," Karan continued, "Safu, if you're willing, would you be able to help me with this shop? I'll teach you how to bake bread. I've been very lonely all this time. If you would come and work here, I would be so happy."

She knew she was being foolish. But what else could I have said? How else could I distract her heart from Shion? How can I protect her from danger?

"Thank you, Madam. I love muffins. I'll look forward to the day I can taste them."

The girl once more said her words of farewell, and stepped out into the nighttime streets. Karan silently watched her back disappear. Her arms and legs felt heavy. One sigh after another escaped her lips.

Why were girlhood loves so fluttering, anxious, and blindly devoted? Girls at this age couldn't even wait patiently with faith. Their feelings were so turbulent, so passionate with longing, and so painful.

I'd completely forgotten how it was to feel like that.

Karan sighed again.

It was after she had locked up and was about to turn off the lights that Karan noticed the baby-pink scarf. The forgotten scarf. She could almost feel Safu's agitation.

Yes, Safu was still wavering in her decision. If she had even a little bit of uncertainty, she may be able to stop her from going. It might not be too late after all.

Karan clutched the scarf in both hands, and opened the door of her shop.

* * *

She was about to exit the alleyway into the main street when she realized she had forgotten her scarf. It was a piece that was hand-knitted by her grandmother.

Right now, hand-knitted scarves and sweaters had come back into fashion because many people found the woolly texture pleasing on the skin. But back when Safu had been small, no one wore scarves in No. 6. Most people wore undergarments made of special fibre under their clothes, and all parts that touched the skin were kept at a level temperature. People didn't need to wear scarves, nor even a thin sweater or gloves.

Safu's grandmother knitted as a hobby, and she was always knitting sweaters and scarves for her granddaughter. Safu was often laughed at by classmates for them. Even though they were in the same Elite curriculum, the kids would find any small difference and mock or put others down because of it. The hand-knitted scarves and sweaters she wore became a target of ridicule.

"Wow, is that an artifact from the last century?"

"I've only seen that in a museum before."

No one understood what consideration for others was, or anything about people's souls, or people's dignity. It was because they had never learned about it. Everyone thought they were the chosen ones. The chosen ones were permitted to do anything. People belonged to classes: the chosen ones, and those who were not. Apart from an enormous amount of theoretical knowledge, in the classrooms which were outfitted with state-of-the-art equipment, that was all they had learned.

But Shion was different. He knew to treat others with as much respect as he treated himself. He put himself neither above nor below others. He was an oddity. That was how Safu had felt about him.

This person is different from the others.

She didn't remember when anymore, but he had once complimented a black sweater that Safu was wearing. The sweater had had a reddish-pink trim across the chest and around the mouth of the sleeves.

"It looks really nice on you."

Safu had been checking the day's class schedule on the EL display on her desk. She hesitated a little at being spoken to so suddenly.

"That sweater looks really nice. I can tell just by looking at it that it's really warm."

"Th— thank you."

"No worries. But now I've learned something new."

"Huh?"

"Black and pink go pretty well together. I had no idea they did."

It wasn't anything like a proper conversation. It was abrupt, and one-sided. But at that moment, in Safu's soul, the gentle-faced boy had risen and left an imprint.

What a strange person...

He was a strange person. He was different from the rest. So one day, he'll probably go a different way from the rest of us too. He'll probably leave, throwing away without a second thought everything we've clung onto, everything that we've been taught to prize most importantly.

She had had the feeling before.

So when Shion had passed the selection examinations for the High Institute's Gifted Curriculum, only to lose his privilege shortly afterwards to move away to Lost Town, Safu wasn't surprised. Her premonition had just come true. There was nothing to be surprised about. But she wanted to know why. She wanted to know the meaning behind the eyes Shion made ever so often.

What are you looking at? Who are you looking for?

Don't let your eyes wander so far away. Look at me. I'm right in front of you.

They were such simple words, but she could never bring herself to say them. They were such strong feelings, but they showed no sign of getting across. Communications devices were progressing in quality day by day, and card-type mobile phones, wearable computers and electronic paper all existed and were used in the real world— but all of them were useless to her. They served no function to communicate her soul to the one that stood beside her. It riddled her with anxiety. She was frustrated at herself for not knowing any words of confession, and at Shion for not even trying to sense her feelings. But even so, she had bared her soul just before departing on exchange. She was embarrassed at herself for being so direct, but it was the only way she could say it.

I want you. I've always wanted you.

Simple and direct words. It was the best confession she could muster. But it had been brushed away all too easily.

I always thought of you as a friend.

What an Oscar-award-winning answer. It was so ridiculous she had wanted to dissolve into peals of laughter. So funny, it was almost painful.

You numbskull, idiot, grow up a little, won't you?

She criticized him in her mind. But she had still been able to tell him what she wanted to say. That was good enough. Her load was one millstone lighter. *In two years, when I get back from my exchange, I'll start over again. I'll look at him face-to-face again, when I'll be two years more mature.* Her soul would remain unchanged. She still ached for him with longing.

But Shion for the most part, had not even been looking at Safu. His soul had been captured by something else, and he had forgotten about

her. For the first time, she had seen this calm and serene boy of few words being ruffled right before her eyes.

Shion's emotions had lost their equilibrium, and he had been in agitation.

She had tried to follow Shion's gaze, through the station, through the crowd of people, but she had not been able to see anything. Whoever it was that she couldn't see had probably been the person Shion had been searching for. And right now, that person was probably by his side. Although she had no evidence, she was certain it was true. It was no use wondering who that person might be. He was an unknown persona.

Is it Nezumi, I wonder? That was what Karan had said.

A mouse?

There was. There had been a mouse. Before they had parted at the station, a small mouse had climbed up onto Shion's shoulder.

"Nezumi." She tried saying it out loud. Only the image of a lab rat came to mind. The wind blew. She felt cold around the neck. *Should I go back to get my scarf?* Right as she was about to change direction, a dark shadow appeared before her.

"Are you Safu-san¹?" She was called by her name. A faint chill ran down her spine. These uniforms— they were law enforcement officers of the Security Bureau.

Why were Bureau officials—?

"Safu-san, am I right?" One of the men repeated his question. It was a question he already knew the answer to.

"Yes."

"May I see your ID card?" After confirming the card that Safu showed them, the officials looked at each other and nodded. Their tone of voice

¹An honorific suffix, here similar to *Miss*.

was courteous, but were not friendly in any way. It was mechanical, with no human warmth. Her chill got worse.

"If you don't mind, we'd like for you to come to the Security Bureau with us."

"What?"

By the time she had raised a small cry, she had already been flanked by officials on both sides and taken by the arms.

"Please get in the car."

"No, let me go!" She struggled. Their grip didn't loosen.

"Stop it! What are you taking me for? Tell me why," Safu demanded.

"Get the hell in there and you'll find out soon." Their words became rough. It looked like they intended to forcibly escort her. Safu let her body relax.

"Alright. Please, just don't use violence on me." She took a step forward.

"Ah—!"

She pretended to trip, and let her body fall forward. The men's hands loosened. She rammed herself into the man to her right. He staggered back a few steps. Safu swung her bag around, and whipped it at the other man. She sped through the space between them.

She had to get away. If she got captured, she would never be able to see Shion again.

What it meant to be forcibly escorted by the Security Bureau— she knew by instinct, not logic. *I'll never be able to see him again.*

She saw a shadow at the end of the alleyway. It was too far away to make out clearly, but she could see that it was holding something light-coloured in its hands.

Her baby-pink scarf.

"Madam."

Her feet stopped.

Madam, no. Don't come this way.

She tried to whirl around, but she was grabbed by the shoulder. Her wrist was wrenched and twisted behind her back. A shooting pain. Her mouth was covered as she opened it to scream.

Stop.

The men didn't speak a single word anymore. Silently, they proceeded to capture Safu. A feeling of terror raced through her whole body.

I'm scared. No. Help me. She struggled to get free. She heard the sound of her coat ripping. A button tore off and rolled onto the street.

Help me. No—help—

She felt a shock in her neck. Her body went numb, and she couldn't move as she wanted to.

"No... help me..." She was fading out of consciousness. The night scene before her blurred.

Shion.

Before she could murmur the name, Safu was dragged into the darkness.

* * *

Karan saw the shadowy figures tangled in a struggle. She heard a small cry. She instantly recognized it as Safu's voice. She hesitated for a moment, then broke into a run. But her legs didn't move as she willed them to, and she tripped and fell, and struck her knee hard on the pavement.

By the time Karan had gotten back up, the men were dragging Safu's limp body into a car. It was like a silent shadow play performed on an empty street. But what was unfolding before her under the evenly-spaced street lamps was none other than reality. The men were not

acting in a fiction— they were carrying out their assigned mission, without a single word.

Security Bureau.

Her breath caught in her throat. Curled up on the pavement, she was unable to move. It was not pain, but fear, that prevented her feet from stepping forward.

One of the men glanced this way. Or at least she thought he did. Her body shrank in horror. Karan was curled up outside of where the light shone, so in this darkness it would be difficult to see her. But with night-vision goggles, the time of day was of no concern. They could see into the darkness as if it were midday. They could probably see Karan crystal-clear.

She was terrified.

But the men swiftly got into the car. The black station wagon silently glided forward, and disappeared from Karan's sight within seconds. Karan lifted herself up and clenched the scarf in her hands.

“Safu.”

She said her name out loud, and the real terror of it finally set in. Her hands shook. She staggered home, and locked the door. The faint smell of bread soothed her a little.

Safu had been taken away by the Security Bureau. It had almost been like a kidnapping.

Why? Why did she have to get captured? Is it because of Shion? If it is, then why is it Safu, and not me? Why on earth—

She didn't know. She didn't know anything.

Cheep.

A small mouse poked its head out from under the glass case. It was holding a morsel of cheese bread in its paws.

“Nezumi.”

Would Nezumi be able to help her? Would he bring her salvation?
Would he take the hand she extended out to him?

Toward the small animal with grape-coloured eyes, Karan extended
her palm.

5

HIDDEN DANGER

*The first day or so we all pointed to our countries.
The third or fourth day we were pointing to our continents.
By the fifth day, we were aware of only one Earth.*

SULTAN BIN SALMAN AL-SAUD, ASTRONAUT

AFTER SHION had finished reading the picture book, Kalan gave a sigh of satisfaction.

“That was a good story.”

Rico blew out of his flared nostrils sullenly. He fiddled with the newly-changed bandages on his neck and complained.

“Well, *I* didn’t think it was good. Stories about rabbits are boring.”

“Then what kind of story do you want to hear, Rico?” Shion asked.

“Ummmm—” Rico paused for a moment of thought. “Oh, a story about bread. And— and one about soup and fried sweet potatoes.”

“You must be hungry, Rico.”

Kalan turned to Shion and nodded.

“He’s hungry all the time. Rico gets more hungry than anyone else.”

“Just a minute, then. I think I’ve got some soup...” Was there any soup left for him? A bowlful of soup that could sate Rico’s empty stomach for a short while—

Kalan stood up.

“No, thank you. It’s okay. We have to go home now.” She took her little brother by the hand and made for the door. She stopped, turned, and spoke in a small voice. “Thank you for reading to us.”

“You’re very welcome.”

“Can we come again tomorrow?”

“Of course.”

“Okay.” A smile spread across Kalan’s face, and she half-dragged Rico out the door. Nezumi stretched in the shadow of a pile of books.

“Stupid as always, aren’t you.”

“Stupid? Me?”

“They say the biggest idiots are the ones who don’t realize they’re idiots. I think there was a proverb like that.” Nezumi stood up, and draped the superfibre cloth around his neck. “You tried to give a handout to the kids. You tried to give them leftover soup.”

“Is that a stupid thing to do?”

“Those kids came here to be read to. They didn’t come to beg. If you can ensure that Rico will never starve again, that would be fine and dandy. But if you give him leftover soup on a whim one day, what’re you gonna do the next time he starves? You wouldn’t be able to take care of him all the time. If you’re going to be irresponsible and abandon him halfway, it would be better not to give him anything at all in the first place. Kalan has a better idea of how things work. That girl is bright and dignified. She knew to refuse your half-hearted and reckless charity.”

Shion sank into a chair. Nezumi’s words always inflicted him with pain. It felt like his skin was being torn from his very body. He could almost

hear the sound of his flesh being ripped from him. His foolishness, his arrogance, his heedlessness. His outward vanity stripped from him, he was left naked: superficial and pretentious— his real self. Nezumi strode in front of him and continued to speak while he pulled on a pair of gloves.

“There’s a second example of your stupidity. Wanna hear it?”

“Sure. Tell me.”

“You made a promise for tomorrow.”

“Is there something wrong with that?”

“There’s no guarantee that there’s gonna be a tomorrow.”

Shion took a deep breath.

“So you’re saying that I can’t be sure that I’ll be alive tomorrow to read a book to those children?”

“Yeah. See, you’re starting to pick up on things more quickly. You’re on the Bureau’s Wanted list, and you went wandering around outside yesterday. I wouldn’t be surprised if the tracking satellites have got you already. Maybe the guys who have nothing better to do over at the Security Bureau’s Law Enforcement division are heading over here right now. If they are, then you can forget having a read-aloud tomorrow. At best you’d be in a solitary cell in the Correctional Facility; at worst, you won’t even be able to speak, because you’ll be dead.”

Shion was gazing at Nezumi’s leather-gloved hands. Even when he was speaking crudely, his movements were still graceful. Shion wanted to imitate him if he could.

“What?” Nezumi said. “You’re spaced out again.”

“Oh... uh, sorry.”

“You really have no sense of danger, do you? I think even a newborn fawn would be more cautious than you.”

“Nezumi.”

“I don’t want to hear it,” he said abruptly. “I’m going to work.”

“Do the city authorities really intend to capture me?”

Nezumi stopped.

“This place is adjacent to No. 6,” Shion continued. “If they really set out to catch me, it wouldn’t be hard for them at all . . . no, not even just me. You’re a VC on the run too, aren’t you? And unlike me, you go walking around outside all the time. No. 6’s tracking satellites are able to keep detailed surveillance on one location from their stationary orbit.”

“Uh-huh, so?”

“So I’m wondering why. The authorities aren’t serious about trying to catch us. They certainly haven’t gotten desperate about it, to say the least.”

Nezumi shrugged his shoulders.

“Shion, in both good and bad ways, the city you were born in isn’t interested in things outside of it. For them, everything’s complete within those walls of special alloy. The West Block is their garbage can. Here, they throw away their waste, their pus. If you’re pus to them, they probably think the West Block is an appropriate place for you. They’ve squeezed the pus out of their tiny wound, and thrown it away in the garbage. They’re not going to come back looking for it.”

“So I’d be safe as long as I stayed here.”

“Who knows? It probably won’t go that well, but there’s a chance you will be. —You said you wanted to go on living here, didn’t you? Maybe your dream will come true.”

“Until spring, at least.”

He had a moratorium until spring. Once spring came, and the wasps entered their activity period, what would happen in the interior of

the Holy City? Would the parasite wasps sweep the city with their dread? He had to do something before it got warmer, before spring arrived. He had to come up with a plan before they passed the winter through.

"The man-eating wasps have finally shown themselves," said Nezumi airily. "You should just sit back and watch. It'll be an interesting stage, to see what happens to No. 6. Our wasp will be the star of the stage. A tragedy like no other— or a comedy like no other. I wonder which one it'll be?"

"Mother is still inside that city. I can't stand by and be a spectator."

"What, you're planning on going home?"

"Once, before spring comes. I'm going to see if I can make a blood serum by then."

"Using your own blood?"

"Yeah. It would be impossible to make a perfect one, of course, but it's worth giving it a try."

"Hey, you might be a genius, but what can you do without any beakers or syringes? You sure can't get them here."

"I'm going to try asking Rikiga-san. He might be able to get his hands on at least the bare minimum of equipment I'll need."

"The man won't do anything unless it's going to put money in his pocket," Nezumi said flatly. "You might be the son of a girl he used to love, but try to get him to do free labour, and he'll turn away as fast as anything."

"You think so?" Shion said dubiously. "—But we'll still need a serum. Yeah, I'll tell him if it goes well, he could make some money off of it. I'll convince him someh—"

Nezumi's foot moved. Shion, chair and all, went flying across the floor. A pile of books collapsed. The mice darted away.

“What was that for?” He tried to get up. Before Shion could move, Nezumi’s knee was on his chest, and his hand was holding his shoulder down.

“Shion.” Looking down into Shion’s face from above as he lay on his back, Nezumi moved his fingers from Shion’s shoulder to his throat. Through the leather of his gloves, Shion could feel the sensation of five fingers at his neck. They tightened their grip slowly.

“Aren’t you gonna resist?”

“No. It wouldn’t be any use. You’d agree,” Shion said calmly.

“Giving up pretty easily, huh? Don’t you care about your life?”

“Of course I do.”

“Or are you thinking that I’d never kill you?”

“Yeah.”

Nezumi smiled. His grey eyes, his thin lips, and well-shaped nose formed a beautiful but cruel and pitiless smile.

“Don’t think too highly of yourself,” he said softly. A knife appeared in Nezumi’s hand as if by magic. “I remember doing something like this four years ago too. I was holding you down like this on your bed.”

“I remember too,” Shion said. “That time, I was the one that went lunging at you. You dodged it like it was nothing, and then the next moment, you were pinning me down and I couldn’t even move.”

That stormy night. He remembered the wind howling outside his window. He remembered the sensation of Nezumi’s skinny body, feverish and hot. It had been four years since then.

It’s been four years, and I still have neither skill nor the heart to push this body aside.

“That time, I was holding a spoon. And I said— do you remember? — that if this was a knife, you’d be dead.”

“Yeah.”

“Wanna give it a try?” His fingers moved away from Shion’s throat. In their place, the blade of a knife was pushed under his chin. It was cold. Shion felt a prick of pain.

“I won’t let you make a blood serum,” Nezumi whispered. “I didn’t save you so you could go around doing something like that. Keep your nose out of things you have no business in. Stay holed up here until the time comes.”

“’Til the time comes? When’s that gonna be?”

“When I strike No. 6 with its fatal blow, that’s when.”

“When you strike No. 6...”

“Yeah. I’m going to choke its last breath out of it.”

The weight lifted off Shion’s chest. Nezumi put away his knife, and wiped the cruel smile off his face. He pulled a glove off, and stroked Shion under the chin with his bare finger. A small red smudge came off on his fingertip.

“This is your blood. Don’t even think of doing something foolish like making a serum. Put it to better use.”

“Nezumi.” Shion grabbed his wrist. “Why do you loathe No. 6 so much?”

There was no answer.

“What happened between you and No. 6? Why do you have so much hatred for it?”

Nezumi exhaled shortly. The muscles of his wrist flexed.

“Shion, do you still not understand what kind of place No. 6 is? It sucks the nutrients from the places around it, and while they grow lean, it only become more engorged. It’s a hideous—”

“Parasite City.”

“Yeah. So you do know what I’m talking about. Humankind is becoming more and more intent on expelling parasitic organisms.

What I'm doing is the same thing. I'm going to exterminate and wipe No. 6 off the face of the earth. Once that place is gone, the people here won't have to live in a garbage can anymore."

"But what I want to hear is your personal reason," Shion persisted.

"I don't have one."

"You're lying. You're the one who told me only to fight for myself."

Nezumi fell silent, and shrugged his shoulders.

"Is it revenge?"

Silence. Nezumi didn't even bother to shake Shion's wrist off, and gazed at him as they stood face-to-face.

"Do you want revenge on No. 6? If you do— then what happened?"

"I don't need to tell you."

"I want to hear it." Shion clenched his fingers around Nezumi's wrist.

"I want to know, Nezumi."

Suddenly, Nezumi started laughing. It sounded like a laugh that was genuinely full of mirth.

"Geez, you're like a brat throwing a tantrum. Alright, Shion."

"Mm-hmm?"

"If I tell you, would you co-operate with me?"

"Huh?"

"Would you aid me as I stab a knife into the heart of the city you were born and raised in? Would you help me bring destruction— not salvation— unto that city? I don't need any blood serum. If parasite wasps do exist, then I'll use them. I want to wreak havoc on No. 6 from the inside. I want to watch as the people that have always lived in safety fall into a panic, flee in confusion, and lead themselves to destruction. That's the kind of thing I have in mind. Will you aid me, Shion?"

Shion shook his head from side to side. He dropped his gaze from the pair of grey eyes.

"I can't do that."

Shion's fingers were shaken off.

"You're always like that," Nezumi spat. "You babble on about how you want to know, but you're never prepared to handle it. To know means to be prepared to know. Once you find out the truth, there's no going back. You can't ever go back to being the way you were, blissful and unconcerned. Why can't you understand that? —Shion, let me ask another question."

Nezumi squatted, and hooked a finger under Shion's chin.

"Me, or No. 6 — which one do you choose?"

Shion's breath caught in his throat. He knew he would be faced with this decision one day. He had felt it coming.

Which would he choose? If he chose one, he would lose the other. He didn't want to go back to No. 6. In that sense, he had no attachments whatsoever left for that city. But with people, it was different. His mother, and Safu, who was off in another city now, and the residents of Lost Town were all within those walls. Within those walls were familiar scenery and fond memories.

If Nezumi harboured hatred toward the entirety of No. 6, its people, scenery, memories and all, then he couldn't sympathize with that hatred.

Nezumi's fingers withdrew from his chin.

"You love No. 6, and I hate it. That's why— one day, we're going to be enemies."

It was a murmur. A murmur that stabbed at his heart.

"I have a feeling that we will," Nezumi said quietly.

He had said something similar before. That time, too, Shion had said that he wanted to know. He had wanted to know how Nezumi grew up. I want to know about you, he had said. And now he was receiving the same answer as he did that time. *We're going to be enemies.* But that time, there had still been laughter in Nezumi's eyes, and his voice had been light with jest. But now, it was heavy. A darkness hung over the statement, and its weighty reality sank deeper into Shion. It was Nezumi's honest answer.

Some day, we'll be enemies.

Nezumi rose to his feet, and looked up at the clock on the wall.

"Crap, I'm late," he said to himself. "The manager's probably pissed off." He turned his back to Shion. His voice and his eyes were wiped clean of any shadow of murderous intent. His grey eyes were bright, and his tone of voice was casual.

"Nezumi."

"Yes, yes," Nezumi said unconcernedly. "Mama is going to work now. Little lamb, you are in charge of the house while I'm gone. A scary wolf is going to come by, but whatever you do, you aren't allowed to open the door. Okay?"

"Don't underestimate me," Shion said quietly.

Nezumi's expression hardened. He drew his chin back a little, and knitted his brow.

"What did you just say?"

"I said, don't underestimate me too much."

"Are you offended because I called you a little lamb? Then why don't I give you the role of the Little Red Riding Hood? Cute and innocent Red Riding Hood. Oblivious to doubts and caution, she ends up being eaten by the wolf. A perfect role for you."

I'm not going be provoked. You can condescend me all you like. But I have something I need to tell you.

"Sometimes there are things I can see that you can't."

"I don't understand what you're saying," Nezumi said bluntly. "Oh wait, that's supposed to be your usual line, right?"

"You put everything into dichotomies," Shion continued, ignoring Nezumi's comment. "You either love or you hate. You're either friends or enemies. Outside the wall, or inside the wall. And you always say you can only ever choose one of them."

"Of course. If I stood there at the fork in the road wasting time trying to decide what to do, I'd wither away. That's what cowards and traitors do. You can't run away forever. Some day you'll have to choose one over the other."

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

"Third way?"

"Yeah."

"Shion, what you're saying is incomprehensible," Nezumi said irritably. "What 'third way'?"

"Instead of destroying No. 6, what if you made it disappear? Don't you ever think about that?"

Nezumi put a hand to his cheek, and took a deep breath. He was restraining himself from letting it show on his face, but Shion could tell he was agitated. Shion took a step forward.

"Tear the walls down. Get rid of them."

"You mean No. 6's barriers?"

"Yeah. Without its walls, No. 6 as a place will no longer exist. Everyone will be able to come and go freely. Take away the walls and gates. Then there will be nothing dividing No. 6 and the Blocks from each other, and—"

Nezumi burst out laughing. He bent over, holding his stomach. His hollow laughter echoed in the basement room. The mice huddled

together fearfully and curled up into balls, making them smaller yet.

“Is it that funny to you?” Shion said tensely.

“It’s hilarious. It’s so funny, it’s bringing me to tears. You’re not just a little airheaded, are you? Do you also have delusionary tendencies? What *third way*, huh? Those are just pretty words, an unrealistic fairy tale.”

“Nezumi, I was serious when I said—”

“I’ll have none of it.” There was not a remnant of a smile left in his face as Nezumi said those words. “We can’t have that place disappear so easily just yet. We have to let it keep being the way it is, let it dress itself up and eat a bellyful of good food, let it grow fat. I can just imagine how great it must feel to slice that belly open with one blow. I’m going to pull out all of its gorged innards and expose it to the light. I can’t wait. Yeah, spring is going to be great. I’m quite excited.”

Shion lifted his chin, and clenched both hands into fists at his sides.

“I don’t care if you laugh at me, I still think it can be done,” he said defiantly. “I want to believe that it’s possible.”

“You’re just looking for an escape route,” Nezumi shot back. “You’re looking for a way to avoid getting hurt. Say if you do get rid of the walls: you won’t get any kind of heaven. It’ll be hell. Tumult, disorder, fighting, looting— you don’t know how much these people have been oppressed until now. You don’t know how many people have been sacrificed so that city can be where it is. You don’t know, and that’s why you can spin fairy tales like that. Shion, it can’t be done. It’s not like mixing paint, you can’t mingle them together and make them one. Either one will have to destroy the other, that’s the only solution. That’s what fate has set out. Love and hatred, friends and enemies, those within and those outside the wall— and you and I. They can never be as one, and neither can we.”

“You don’t know until you try. For one thing...”

“For one thing?”

“—I know I wouldn’t become your enemy. Ever. No matter what happens, even if I’m killed, I would be on your side.”

“Just pretty words.”

“It’s my resolve.”

It was his will, and it was unwavering. In order to know, you had to try it first. He believed that human souls, when faced with a dilemma, would ultimately choose peace over war, songs and scriptures over weapons, and love over hatred. It wasn’t a fantasy. It was hope. *I still haven’t abandoned hope. I want to find a road that you can’t see, and point it out for you.*

Nezumi averted his gaze. He kicked the chair leg with the tip of his shoe.

“It pisses the hell out of me sometimes, when I’m with you. Your head’s full of naive and idealistic theories, and you talk as if you’re actually serious about them.”

“You wouldn’t listen if I wasn’t serious about it.”

“That’s enough,” said Nezumi curtly. “Just shut up.” He began working at setting upright the chair that he had kicked over, and lightly thumped the faded cushion seat. “An idealistic armchair theorist like you should just sit here all day long. Ignore the world outside, and mull over this and that all inside your head. Don’t talk to me anymore. Don’t make me any angrier than this.”

“Nezumi—” Shion began.

“I don’t want to hear it. Listening to you makes me sick. Sick and tired. Damn it, if I knew you were such a chatterbox, I would never have brought you here in the first place.”

“I’m not a chatterbox. I actually don’t like speaking to people much.”

“Then all the more reason for you to shut up.”

But I can't just shut up. I can't sit here, close myself off in my own world and sever myself from the world outside. I have to talk to you, listen to your story, and search for a way that we can go on living together.

I don't want to live like this anymore— plugging my ears, keeping my mouth shut, closing my eyes. Nezumi, you were the one that made me feel that way. Pry your hands away from your ears, you said, open your mouth, and will your eyes to see. Those were your words. And now you're telling me to shut up? You're telling me you don't want to hear it?

"Who's the coward now?" He muttered out loud without thinking. Nezumi's expression hardened.

"What did you say?"

Is this gonna end in a fight? The thought flitted in a corner of his mind. Then he decided he wouldn't mind if it did. Nezumi would probably easily wrestle him to the ground. Four years ago, and even now, this hadn't changed. Shion had no chance against him. But it wasn't about winning or losing.

He wanted to charge at Nezumi with his own body, his own flesh. He wouldn't mind if he were to be pushed to the ground, punched, or pinned so that he couldn't breathe. If even for a moment, he wanted to collide with Nezumi as equals.

But Nezumi averted his gaze again. He made for the door without even looking at Shion. But before Nezumi's hand closed around the doorknob, there came a muffled scratching sound from outside. Something was tearing at the door. A moment later, there was a bark. Nezumi and Shion looked at each other.

"Sounds like a dog."

Nezumi opened the door. A large, dark brown dog was sitting in the doorway, wagging its tail. It had a white parcel in its mouth.

"You're from Inukashi's—something happen to him?" Nezumi retrieved the package from the dog's mouth. It was a letter. Nezumi

read it, and the corners of his mouth relaxed.

“Shion, there’s a job request for you.”

Shion ran his eyes through the letter that was passed to him. It was nearly illegible. The paper itself was yellowed, old, and wet with dog saliva, and the handwriting meandered all over the place. But it thrilled Shion’s heart more than any other letter he had received.

hey shion, feel like working? Its a dog-washing job.
i need some help. If you wanna do it, follow this guy.
As long as hes with you, the Disposers wont do
anything funny. see ya
Oh PS: this guy said your made for dog-washing.

“What’s dog-washing?”

“It’s just how it reads. You wash dogs— the ones that Inukashi lends out for heating. They’re the big, quiet ones with long fur. There must be about twenty of them altogether. He gets customers sometimes that don’t pay because they complain the dogs are smelly or have fleas, so once a week on a sunny day he takes them out for a wash. So what are you gonna do?”

“I’ll go, of course,” Shion glowed. “He’s asking me if I want to come work. It’s my first job. I actually have a job now.”

“Will you stop gushing?” Nezumi said with a grimace. “Man, you really are easy to please, aren’t you?”

“Nezumi, should I take anything with me? Do you think I’ll need soap?”

“You probably won’t need anything. Just beware of men and women who might pull you into alleyways, I guess. If that dog is with you, I don’t think you need to worry. I’ll go with you partway.”

“Speaking of which, I do want to see your workplace one day. And see you on the stage.”

“Don’t get your hopes up.”

The dog barked.

“Thank you,” Shion told him. “Thanks to you, I’ve been able to get my hands on my first job. I’m all yours, take me there.”

The dog wagged its tail as Shion crouched down toward it, and licked him under the chin.

“You’re licking my wound for me? You’re a nice boy.”

“Dumbass, he only licked it because he smelled blood.”

“I don’t think so. He did it because he was concerned about me. But whatever the reason, he’s certainly nicer than you,” Shion said wryly.

“Don’t compare me with a mutt,” Nezumi said sullenly. He looked genuinely disgruntled. The way he stuck his lip out brought back a fleeting image of his face four years ago. It somehow made Shion want to laugh, and for some reason, made him feel nostalgic.

“What?” Nezumi said. “What’re you grinning about?”

“Nothing,” Shion said mildly. “Just noticing you’ve still got a childish part left in you. It made me kind of happy.”

“Huh?”

“Never mind. Alright, then,” he said briskly, “lead the way.” He petted the dog lightly on the back. Picking up the cue, the dog bounded up the stairs. Shion followed after it and exited the basement room.

The sun was bright in his eyes. *I see— a day like this would be perfect for washing dogs.* He tilted his face up to the sky and breathed in deeply.

* * *

It looked like Shion's figure was being sucked into the light. Whenever Nezumi crawled out of his dark hole, the light always stabbed at his eyes. He didn't like bright places. Places filled with light always turned easily into areas of danger. He knew this well from experience. He couldn't be like Shion and fully accept the light without hesitation. Friends and enemies. Outside the wall, and inside the wall. Love and hatred. Light and dark.

I told you, didn't I? They can never co-exist. I've told you so many times, and you still don't seem to get it.

He swallowed a sigh that was halfway up his throat. The lump sank deep down into his chest again.

As Nezumi was about to lock the door, a mouse came rubbing itself against his foot.

"You're back." He scooped it up in his hand. The mouse seemed exhausted. Its grape-coloured eyes were bleary.

"You've worked hard. Rest up." The mouse shook its head, and spat a capsule onto Nezumi's palm. There was a light blue piece of paper inside.

"A reply, huh." If it was, Shion would rejoice. Today must be a lucky day for letters.

Just for an instant, a blackness flitted across his heart. A black thing. It had no form—it was only dark. Uncertainty, a bad premonition. A dull pain throbbed in the back of his head.

His ability to smell impending danger or calamity was something he had had since birth. Thanks to this ability, he had been able to escape numerous times, in some instances by a mere hair. The contents of this capsule carried a bad smell. It smelled like the first step toward something that would chase him into destruction...

He opened the capsule. The paper was scribbled with what looked like Karan's handwriting.

*Safu was taken away by the Security Bureau
Help. -K*

The pain got worse. Nezumi screwed his eyes shut, and leaned heavily against the door.

Safu— it was that girl. Why was she— wasn't she an elite? Just like Shion... just like Shion... which means— she was taken in place of him? The second scapegoat? But he didn't know for what reason. Why do they need a sacrifice? Shion was framed as a murderer to cover up what the parasite wasp did. They should only need one perpetrator. So why— why did the authorities want another sacrifice? Why—

Either way, if that girl is the second sacrifice, she hasn't been taken to the Security Bureau. She's headed for the Correctional Facility. A mouse takes half a day to get back from No. 6. There's no more time. She's probably been imprisoned in the Correctional Facility already.

Why were they eliminating so easily a Gifted Curriculum student that they had measured, carefully selected, and spent considerable funds and time to raise?

Why? Why— what was going on? What are they hiding? What's about to happen?

Nezumi slowly brought himself upright.

He didn't know. It was a mystery. But now was not the time to be solving puzzles. He had an important decision to make.

What to do with this?

If he showed this scribbled note to Shion, he would probably head right for the Correctional Facility, without even knowing what kind of place it was. He would go, with the single intention of rescuing Safu. A sheltered simpleton of a little boy like him would never be able to let a friend's death go unheeded. If he could prevent it, it was

reason enough for him to go diving head-first into a nest of venomous snakes. He would willingly embark to his own death.

Or do I crush it?

It was very easy to do. This girl, Safu, had nothing to do with Nezumi. She was a stranger. It wasn't any of his business what should happen to her. He could leave things be, and it wouldn't matter. Nothing would change.

But if Shion died, something within him would change greatly. He didn't want to see Shion die. He would probably suffer. Not Shion, but he— Nezumi— would suffer, from having to live and stand before Shion's corpse. He would be experiencing the same suffering again, of being broiled alive in hellfire.

You've gotta be kidding me. I've had enough of this already.

He didn't want to lose him. He didn't want to experience the remorse of having been the one that lived.

I don't want to lose him? I would suffer?

He was clicking his tongue in frustration.

So this was what he had come to. He almost felt like curling up on the ground.

He had rescued Shion from the hands of the Security Bureau to return the debt that he owed him. That was it. He never wished to be attached to him. Shion wasn't the only one— he had never wished to be attached or to share his heart with any other person. Feelings for others were even more dangerous than the light. He was not to share a connection with anyone. Whether it be with a man or a woman, he was only to develop relationships that could be severed easily.

Never open your heart to anyone. Don't believe in anyone but yourself.

The last words of the old woman. He was turning against them again.

I don't want to lose him. I would suffer.

Nezumi carefully folded Karan's memo again and stuffed it inside the capsule.

He was used to loss, he was used to suffering. Wasn't he? Even if Shion did die, perhaps he wouldn't moan in agony over his gaping loss. Even if he did, perhaps it would only be for a short while.

He would be able to use his bed and shower freely. He wouldn't have to worry about making enough soup. He wouldn't be pelted incessantly with questions, or be spoken to. He would be released from having to look up halfway through a book to lend an ear to the other's words, and to give an answer while trying to restrain his irritation.

He would go back to his normal life. That was it. He should just pass the memo, capsule and all, to Shion, and then turn his back on him.

On a whim, Nezumi opened his door again.

Before him was his room, filled with books and sparse furniture. The basement chamber, surrounded by thick walls, was a nest that suited a rat like him well.

The room looked barren and dark, and larger than usual. Its coldness, darkness and vacant space seeped into his bones.

That was what being attached to someone meant. He would no longer be able to live alone anymore. It was one of many artfully-set traps that lurked at every corner of his life. And to this one, he had fallen victim.

Have I still got a chance?

"Nezumi, what's wrong?" Shion called from the top of the stairs, the entrance that led to ground-level. "The dog's pulling at me. Hurry and come on up." His shadowy figure floated up against the glare of noon.

Have I still got a chance? Shion, will I still be able to live without you? After some amount of suffering, would I be able to detach myself from

the trap you've become?

Would I be able to sever you?

"Nezumi?" The voice from above dropped apprehensively.

"Nothing— I'm coming." He closed the door. He heard the dog bark. There was light. The rustle of a breeze.

Nezumi wrapped the superfibre cloth around his neck again, and ascended the stairs step by step. He kept ascending to the ground above.

Volume III

This is why humans are troublesome. The more you involve yourself with them, the tighter the shackles become. It becomes harder to live only for yourself. Nezumi receives a memo from Karan reporting that Safu has been taken away by the Security Bureau. Although he keeps it under wraps, Shion finds out the truth and resolves to save her. The chance of success is infinitely close to zero — and the story breaks into full sprint!

What lies beyond the wall...

1

THE BEAUTIFUL ONES...

*Away, and mock the time with fairest show:
False face must hide what the false heart doth know.*

MACBETH, ACT I SCENE VII

THE SKY was blue and bright. The sun's rays, approaching noon, were gentle and warm. It was a temperate afternoon that made the frigidness of a few days ago seem like a dream.

Shion lifted his face, and narrowed his eyes as he looked up at the azure sky.

He thought it was beautiful.

The sky was beautiful. The blinding whiteness of the crumbled ruin as it reflected the sunlight was beautiful. The odd bubble that floated up as if by magic from the soapsuds was beautiful. The sheen on the fur of a freshly-washed dog was beautiful.

All the little things that surrounded him were beautiful. A lone bubble floated up again and drifted on the gentle breeze.

"Hey, stop slacking off," Inukashi's voice called over to him. "There are still tons of dogs left. Space out every other minute like that, and

the sun's gonna set before you're even halfway through."

As if in agreement with Inukashi's reprimand, a large white dog covered in suds gave a low growl.

"Oops, sorry."

Shion stuck his hands back into the suds and washed the dog thoroughly with his fingertips. The dog evidently found it very pleasing, for its eyes were closed and its mouth lolled half-open. Today was only Shion's second time at his dog-washing job, but already he had learned that dogs had many different facial expressions. They also varied in personality and tendency: some were lazy, others diligent; some high-strung, others laid-back; they could be mild, impatient, rambunctious— all of this was new to him.

The white dog that he was washing now was a female that was quite old. It was gentle and intelligent, and reminded him of the wise old woman that often appeared in tales.

"Shion, you're spending way too much time on each dog. How long is it taking you to wash just one?" Inukashi, with his long hair tied at the back and soapsuds on his nose, pulled a face at him.

"You lend these dogs out to serve as blankets, don't you?" Shion answered. "They need to be cleaned properly, then."

"A quick wash is good enough. The customers are all like dirty strays anyway, the bastards."

In a building mostly reduced to rubble, there was a part that still somewhat retained a semblance of the hotel that it used to be. Inukashi lent space there as overnight accommodation for those who had nowhere to stay. He lent out dogs in preparation for the coming winter. Boarders spent the night buried amongst several dogs, and by doing so were able to avoid freezing to death. Shion had been hired to wash these dogs.

"Inukashi, I don't think that's a nice thing to say about your customers."

"Huh? What'd you say?"

"It's not good to call your customers bastards, or call them dirty."

Inukashi rubbed his nose with the back of his hand, and gave a small sneeze.

"Are you my Mum or what, Shion?"

"No. I've been hired by you to wash your dogs."

"Then that makes me the employer and you the employee. And your job is to shut up and do what you're told."

Inukashi yanked the white dog out of Shion's hands, and began vigorously rinsing the dog by dumping water over it, which he had drawn from the stream.

At the back of the ruins, there ran a small, clear river. Not long after Shion had escaped from No. 6 to this West Block, he had nearly died from a parasite wasp that had planted itself in his body. Although he was unconscious most of the time from severe pain and high fever, he still remembered clearly the taste of the cold, delicious water that had slid down his throat numerous times.

When he had thanked Nezumi for giving him water and treating him, he had gotten a gruff answer that there was a decent spring nearby. Perhaps this stream originated from that spring.

"Inukashi, don't do that. All the soap is getting into the river." Shion hastily restrained Inukashi's hands. Soapsuds bobbed on the stream as they drifted away from them.

"So what?"

"Everyone drinks from this stream, don't they?"

"Well, yeah, of course. We don't have any fancy facilities that give you sanitized and temperature-controlled water at the push of a button.

Everyone draws water directly from the river or spring.”

“Then you can’t get it dirty. It’s bad for the people downstream.”

Inukashi stared into Shion’s face for a brief moment.

“And why should I care about the people downstream?”

“Well, I mean...” Shion faltered. “If you know that the people downstream are going to be drinking from here, you wouldn’t want to make it dirty for them. That’s normal, right?”

“Normal? By whose standards are we talking about, Shion? This is the West Block. You wouldn’t be able to survive here if you went around putting everyone else first.”

“Yeah, but there’s no need to go out of the way to make it dirty,” Shion protested. “We can do what we did yesterday, and put water in steel drums and wash the dogs there.”

“Yesterday we only had small dogs. FYI, Shion, we were supposed to get through all the dogs yesterday. You taking your sweet time is costing us. You understand that, right?”

“Yeah.”

“Not only are you horribly slow, the dogs we’re washing today are all big. And that’s not it— wait for it— *there are shitloads of them*. Are you getting the picture? If we drew a bath each and every single time, it would take forever.”

Then Inukashi stopped, and shrugged slightly.

“But if you wanna draw water from the river on your own, I’m not gonna get in your way.”

“Fine. I’ll do it.”

“It’s heavy labour, man.”

“I know.”

“By the way, I’m only paying you to wash the dogs. Carrying the water is something you’re doing entirely on your own.”

"I don't mind."

"Well then, get cracking. I'm gonna have lunch."

The white dog shook itself vigorously, and water droplets flew in all directions. Shion grabbed the pail that Inukashi had tossed at him, and drew a pailful of water from the river.

"Shion," Inukashi said abruptly.

"Hm?"

"Why?"

"Why what?"

"Why shouldn't I badmouth my customers? Why do I have to bother about the people downstream?"

Shion looked up into Inukashi's tan face as he sat perched atop a pile of rubble.

"Because we're the same."

"Same?"

"They're the same humans as us. So—"

Inukashi suddenly threw his head back and laughed. His voice rang out and was sucked into the bright blue sky. Several dogs began barking in agitation.

"Same humans, huh? Ha ha, you nearly bowled me over. I've never heard those words before in my life. Shion, is that honestly what you think?"

"Yeah, is there a problem?" Shion said stoutly.

Inukashi leapt down from the rubble and drew up to him. He had a small frame, and only reached up to around Shion's shoulders in height. His thin arms and legs protruded from his black clothes, and his skin was the shade of tanned leather.

"So my filthy customers, and the brats that come here to draw water are the same humans as us?"

“Yeah.”

“Are you and I the same humans?”

“Yeah.”

Inukashi lifted his arm and extended it upwards to the noon sun above.

“Are the people of No. 6 the same humans as us?”

Shion nodded slowly, and answered.

“Yeah.”

Inukashi’s smooth, tan skin glowed in the sunlight, and his long bangs cast a shadow over his forehead and eyes. Under its veil, the same tan-brown eyes blinked a few times at him.

“Shion, you’re gonna die.”

“Huh?”

“Is your head up in the clouds or something? If you keep believing in that fantasy of yours, you’ll never survive here.”

“Nezumi tells me the same thing,” Shion said. “That I’ve got my head up in the clouds.”

“The clouds wouldn’t be high enough, actually. Your head must be in space, or something. I don’t know what space is supposed to be like, but it’s really high up, right? And sometimes you burn up, just like that, before you even get there.”

“I’ve never been to space, but yeah, I guess it is really high up.”

Inukashi climbed nimbly up the ruins, and sat down with the blue sky at his back. He dangled his legs over the edge, and spoke quietly as if to himself.

“I wonder why Nezumi even puts up with you. He hates people that are all talk, and unrealistic.”

“Inukashi, are you close with Nezumi?”

“Close? What do you mean by close?”

Shion heaved the pail up the path of withered grass and rubble, and dumped the water into the steel drum.

"It means you know a lot about each other."

"Oh, if that's the case, then no. I know less than the tip of that guy's tail, and I wouldn't want to know." As he spoke, Inukashi pointed at the light brown puppy that was tumbling about at Shion's feet. Its tail was tipped with white.

"I thought you were friends, but I guess I was wrong..."

"Friends!" Inukashi exclaimed incredulously. "There's another word I don't hear often. Friends. Hah, ridiculous. Nezumi only comes here when he wants information that me or my dogs have collected. I give him information, and he gives me money. That's it, that's everything."

Inukashi fell silent. His gaze wandered, collided with Shion's, and slid away.

"It's not just information and money that you guys trade," Shion said. A statement, not a question.

"Uh— well, once in a while, he— sings for me."

"Sings?"

"He has a good voice. So I... I get him to sing. Sometimes when my dogs die— it's alright when you wake up and they're already dead, but— sometimes, they're sick or hurt, and don't die as easily, and they... they suffer. It hurts them so much, they whimper all night long. That's when I get him to sing. I don't know what the song's called. But it—I don't know how to describe it—I dunno, what would it be?" Inukashi murmured to himself.

"What does it sound like?"

"Huh?"

"Nezumi's song. Nezumi's voice. If you were to compare it to something, what would it be?"

Inukashi tilted his head to the side, and pondered in silence. Shion also silently continued carrying pailfuls of water. He made several trips between the river and the steel drum, and when more than half of it had been filled, Inukashi opened his mouth again.

“The wind, maybe . . . ?” he said hesitantly. “A wind that comes blowing from far away . . . yeah, his song steals away souls that are struggling because they can’t die. Just like how the wind scatters flower petals, his song cuts the soul away from the body. Any dog, no matter how much he’s suffering, closes his eyes and becomes quiet. You think he’s just settled down, but he’s actually not breathing. They all die quietly, like all their suffering was just a dream or something.” He paused. “It was like that with my Mum, too.”

“Your mother’s passed away?”

“Yeah. She got killed by a couple of brats that live downstream, the ones you said I shouldn’t make the water dirty for. She got rocks thrown at her, and was clubbed to death with an oak stick. But my Mum was at fault for that, too. She tried to steal their only supper. She snuck into their hut, and got caught holding their dried meat in her mouth. When she finally got away and managed to come back, both her front legs and ribs were broken, and she was bleeding from her mouth. There was nothing we could do.”

Having finished filling the drum with water, Shion wiped the sweat off his brow. He couldn’t understand Inukashi’s words.

“Inukashi, by front legs . . . you mean your mother’s, right?”

“Yeah. She’s a dog.”

“A dog?”

Shion could feel his jaw drop. Inukashi looked at him and gave a laugh. His voice was high and rang out clearly into the air.

“I was dumped here when I was still a baby,” he explained. “The old man that picked me up was a weirdo who lived here with his dogs, and

he raised me together with them. My Mum gave me milk. She licked me, and curled up with me to sleep. When it got cold, she huddled close to me and my siblings— her puppies— and kept us warm. She always used to say, you poor thing, you have no fur— but at least you're cool in the summer, and you don't get fleas. She'd tell me that over and over again, and lick me until I was clean."

"She must have been a great mother," Shion said softly. "Gentle and caring."

Inukashi blinked several times.

"You really think so, Shion?"

"I do. She cherished you. Since you didn't have fur, she protected you and made sure you didn't freeze."

"Yeah. Mum was always really nice. I still remember how her tongue felt. It was warm, and wet... funny, I can never seem to forget about it."

"It's a gift of memory."

"Huh?"

"It's a gift of memory from mother to son. Memories that your mother's left behind for you."

Inukashi stopped dangling his legs, and drew his chin back.

"I've never thought of it like that..." he said pensively. "A gift of memory, huh..."

Shion knelt at the river's edge and sipped a mouthful of water.

It was cold. It soaked through his entire body, and it was delicious.

Ah yes, it's this water.

It was the water that had quenched his exhausted body like an elixir after his battle with the parasite wasp. Not only his body— it was from the moment the water had slid down his throat and he had found

it delicious, that Shion's entire being was revived again. He believed it so.

This water was connected to what it meant to be alive. This coldness, this deliciousness. It was connected to the voice that called to him, telling him, *don't die, live, come crawling back up again.*

That was why he would remember it forever. There was no way he could forget it. Deep within Shion, this water and that voice had set its roots down, and would continue to thrive, never to wither. And at times, it would float to the surface of his conscious, and each time, it would whisper to him.

Don't die. Live. Come crawling back up again.

It was a gift of memory, indeed.

"I'll bring ya some lunch." Inukashi stood atop the rubble, and spoke in a tone that sounded more like a command. "You better be finished with that black one by the time I get back. I won't let you have it until you're finished."

"Wow, I even get lunch? That's nice of you."

"I don't just serve this to anyone, you know. It's a full-course meal. And by full I mean two: bread and dried fruit."

"That's more than enough."

Running a brush through the black dog's fur, Shion grinned at Inukashi. Months had passed since escaping to the West Block, and chronic hunger gnawed at Shion persistently. At times he wished he could eat his fill of dishes with plenty of meat, fish, and eggs, and he yearned for the bread and cakes that his mother Karan baked. But in contrast, things that he had never even acknowledged as food before— soup made with bits and ends of vegetables, and bread that was beginning to mould— made his mouth water, and satiated his appetite.

Being able to eat is enough.

Here, everyone was starving. They starved, froze, and passed away. Shion knew in his own way how precious the single slice of bread was that Inukashi was about to give him.

He looked up to the sky. The sun was bright. This light was also shining down on No. 6. His former workplace at the Forest Park, the high-end residential area of Chronos, Lost Town, where his mother lived, and here, West Block, were bathed in the same light. But things were so different. Too different.

Divided by a wall of special alloy, prosperity and poverty stood in opposition to each other. Life and death. Light and dark. At the same hour that an extravagant party was being hosted in the interior of No. 6, while people smacked their lips at the numerous elaborate and delectable dishes, in a corner of the West Block, an elderly person clad in rags would starve to death. While the boys and girls of No. 6 would crawl into their beds in their air-conditioned rooms, the children in the barracks of the West Block would huddle close to each other to avoid freezing to death.

It was the truth that Shion had seen with his eyes. There were far too few things which were like the sunlight, equally and amply distributed among all.

“Get working, then,” Inukashi spat, and disappeared in the shadows of the ruin.

* * *

All that remained of the entranceway, which had probably once been flanked by thick, wooden doors, were pairs of rusted hinges. Every time the wind blew in, their screeching noise assaulted the ears. Inukashi passed through that entrance to climb the stairs to the second floor. Some sort of architectural consideration had left this particular part

of the building, which used to be a hotel, withstanding against the elements. Durable though it was, plaster still peeled from the walls, and the hallways and ceilings were webbed with countless cracks.

Buildings too possessed a life. From the moment they were abandoned, buildings began to decay. They began to die. This hotel, which had become a ruin, continued crumbling and decaying still. It marched steadily toward destruction, neither loathing the heartlessness of its human owners, nor lamenting its fate.

Inukashi occasionally wondered what he would do once this building had completely collapsed into rubble.

The old man that had picked him up, given him dog's milk, and taught him speech and the written word was no longer here. He had wandered outside one snowy day, never to return again.

Snow? Was it snowing? Maybe it was thundering that day. Or it might have been a morning with chapped winds... either way, the old man disappeared. He vanished, without even leaving any words of farewell.

He wasn't lonely, because he had his dogs. From that day until now, he had lived here with them. He knew no other home. He also knew of no other human company. Nezumi was probably the same. He may have been to more places than Inukashi, but he probably lived alone, not knowing anyone else, nor ever having the need to know. Inukashi had assumed so, for no particular reason. He had no grounds for his argument, but he figured he wasn't entirely wrong. Inukashi had a sharp sense of smell. Nezumi always only carried the smell of loneliness. When that scent blurred, and Inukashi had begun to notice a mingled scent of another, Shion had appeared before him.

He was a weirdo. He was very strange. His hair was snowy-white, and he had a red scar. Though Inukashi wasn't sure, he'd heard that the raised scar covered Shion's whole body like a coiled snake. But in terms of appearance, there were tons more people who were weirder

than him. His appearance wasn't the only thing—Shion was also weird on the inside. He said not to dirty the water for the brats downstream. *He said the people inside the Holy City and people like us were the same. And he talked about the gift of memory. Not as any kind of joke or sarcasm, but in all seriousness.*

He was weird. Very weird. Why is Nezumi hanging around a weirdo like him?

Inukashi walked down the hall, and opened the door at the very end of it.

“Nezumi.”

Nezumi was sitting in a chair with his feet up on the table.

“Can't you even knock before entering the room?” Inukashi said irritably. “Someone didn't learn proper manners from Mama. Geez.” He then swung a blow as hard as he could toward the pair of long legs resting on the table. Nezumi sniffed lightly in derision, and took his legs off.

“I called out before coming in. That dog gave me permission to enter.” A dog with black patches on its fur was lying in a corner of the room. It cocked its head to the side, and gave a wide yawn.

“If you're here to pick up Shion, you're early. If he keeps going at this pace, he probably won't be done 'til evening.”

“Pick up? Never.”

“But he scuffled with the Disposers, din' he? Isn't it dangerous to let him walk by himself? I'll send him with a dog on the way home, either way.”

“That's good enough.”

“But the Disposers don't give up easily. That guy stands out, and if he gets caught, who knows what they might do to him.”

Nezumi's grey eyes sparkled, and a slight smile played on his lips.

“Does it matter to us what the Disposers do to Shion? What’s up, Inukashi? You’re being awfully nice. Not like you at all.”

Inukashi glared at Nezumi silently.

The small playhouse was one of the few entertainment facilities in the West Block. And as one who stood upon its stage, Nezumi made his audience pay— or rather, made them want to pay— out of what little money they had for a show that provided them no physical nourishment. It was Nezumi’s beautiful countenance and deep, clear voice that made them want to. His voice laid trapped and dying souls to rest, gently detaching them from the body. His appearance made it impossible to discern whether he was male or female, human or demon, God or the Devil. His audience, in a brief slice of the evening, could forget the day’s hardships and the next day’s sorrows, and let themselves be immersed and intoxicated by his voice.

Once the outside the shabby doors of the playhouse, reality waited for them— no money in their pockets; children crying for food at home— but despite that, the people’s faces were always filled with drunken contentment as they scattered hither and thither into the darkness.

It’s all an illusion. He’s just a big fraud.

Every time he met with Nezumi, Inukashi mentally spat these words from the pit of his stomach. Nezumi was like the beautiful mistress who manipulated men and milked them of all that they were worth. Inukashi had been through that experience once, too.

Mum was suffering so much, I didn’t know what else to do but to call him. I asked him to let my Mum’s soul go peacefully. That was still good. His song was impressive, and my Mum was released from suffering. But what he did before that— the sheer amount of money he demanded while my Mum lay there suffering— it was enough money for me to live a whole month without working. With other dogs, I would’ve given up. I would slit their throat, or smash their skull with my own hands, and let them

die a quick and easy death. But I couldn't do that to my Mum. I could never do that to her with my own hands. He knew that, and that's why he demanded that sum. After burying Mum in her grave, me and the dogs had to work for three days without any food. He's a fraud. He captures people's souls, clamps down on them, and shows them a fleeting dream. It might be vivid, but it's still fake. Dreams are dreams. You can't live on them.

Inukashi unlocked the cabinet and retrieved the bread and a bag of dried fruits.

"If you're not here to pick Shion up, what're you here for?"

"Can you treat me to some lunch? I'm starving."

"*You jest,*" Inukashi said in a mocking voice. "I don't have anything fitting for a star actor like you. But if you pay me one silver coin, I can give you bread, fruits, and water."

"One silver coin for mouldy bread, rock-hard dried fruits and water from the stream? That's stretching it, Inukashi."

"Way cheaper than how much it costs for your singing."

Nezumi chuckled softly.

"You still holding a grudge about that?"

"Damn right, I am."

"I sang for your dogs so many times after that. It might as well have been charity, for the amount I took as payment."

"That's what pisses me off even more. You took advantage of me. I got gypped out of all the money I had that time. I was this close to starving to death."

"Well, if that happens again, feel free to call me," Nezumi said amiably. "I'll sing you a song about food, and see you off."

"Just teeming with compassion, aren't you?" Inukashi retorted. He hunched his shoulders, and stood directly in front of Nezumi. He

posed his question once more.

“What do you want?”

Nezumi, still deeply seated in the chair, tossed a single coin onto the table. Inukashi’s eyes widened.

“Gold...” he whispered.

“It’s real. See for yourself.”

Inukashi pinched the shiny coin between his fingertips, and gazed at it.

“You’re right— it’s real. Yeah. It’s the real thing.”

“I want you to do a job for me,” Nezumi said in an expressionless voice.

“Job? A job that’s worth a whole gold coin?”

“That’s down payment. After the job is done, I’ll give you another gold coin.”

“Big spender, aren’t you? But I won’t take it.” Inukashi flung the coin out onto the table.

“You’re going to refuse a job worth two gold coins without even hearing about it?”

“I’m refusing it *because* it’s a job worth two gold coins. I can just smell the stench.”

“Stench?”

“The smell of danger. My nose is warning me— it’s saying, don’t go there, or else you’ll get killed. I don’t care how much money you’re gonna pile on. If I die, it’s all over. Either way, any job that involves a Rat and is worth two gold coins is like sticking my hand into a nest of poisonous snakes. I don’t wanna die just yet.”

“That’s why you get the money without dying— isn’t that what doing a job is all about? Avoiding danger isn’t gonna turn you a profit.”

"It depends on the level of danger. *All* your jobs are dangerous and tricky. This is two whole gold coins we're talking about here. If anyone else came to me with that deal, I'd have taken it in a split second. Damn it," Inukashi grumbled. "I feel ripped off already."

Nezumi stood up, and pocketed the gold coins.

"That's too bad. I guess it can't be helped."

"No hard feelings. Things are just too risky with you. To be honest, I don't even wanna have much to do with you."

"Then it's mutual," Nezumi said airily. "Fine. Let's not meddle with each other anymore. I'll never come to you with a job again. As for you, no matter how much you suffer, be sure you don't come to me about it."

Inukashi hastily grabbed Nezumi's arm as he turned his back. He had lunged so suddenly that he almost tripped over himself.

"W-Wait a minute, Nezumi. What do you mean, no matter how much I suffer?"

"I just told you. If you end up like your mother someday and you're suffering because you can't die, it won't have anything to do with me. You can call me, but I won't come."

"What're you going on about...?" Inukashi said shakily. "Me, going through a painful death? That would never happen... Besides, I'm younger than you, aren't I? I think so, at least."

Nezumi lazily brushed Inukashi's hand off.

"Inukashi, age doesn't matter in this place. You know that, don't you? Death can never be predicted. It just comes. And how many people here are lucky enough to die painlessly, huh? The majority suffer, suffer, and die writhing. Tomorrow, someone might stab a knife into your stomach. You might crack your skull open on a falling piece of debris. You might get bacteria into a wound, have it fester, and rot alive. You might come down with a serious illness. Can you guarantee

that none of that is going to happen to you? Huh, Inukashi? Can you say with certainty that you, above all people, will die without suffering?”

The pair of grey eyes bore into him. They had the lustre of fine cloth, and glowed dimly like the clouds when they shrouded the sun. His voice reverberated deep in his ears.

Inukashi sucked a breath in, and took a step backwards.

It was a trick. An illusion. *He's trying to suck me in.*

“Suffer all you may because you can't die. I won't get involved. Fine with you, right?”

Inukashi sank into a chair.

He knew death. He had seen it countless times. Not one of them could be called decent. That was why— that was why he wanted to stay alive. He felt like as long as he survived, he would be able to experience a more-or-less better death. Although much too insignificant to call it hope, Inukashi admitted feeling a sort of longing for peaceful death.

Damnit.

He gritted his teeth. Nezumi's lips curled thinly into a smile.

This is a threat. I can easily turn Nezumi down now. But after that, if I were to get into the same fix as Mum did— my bones broken, my insides crushed, blood spurting from my mouth— and I had to die that way... If there was nothing to ease my pain, numb it even just a little— if I had no choice but to moan and plead for someone to kill me, quickly, please, until death came to claim me— Just thinking about it sent a chill down his spine. He broke into a sweat.

“Sit down,” Inukashi uttered weakly. “I'll listen to what you have to say, first.”

Nezumi's gloved hand extended toward him and caressed his cheek.

“Good boy.”

“Fuck you.”

Inukashi glared at the face that still smiled wanly at him. “Lemme tell you something, Nezumi. Don’t think this shebang is gonna work every time.”

“Shebang? I only want you to do a job for me. A rude way to treat a customer, don’t you think, Inukashi?”

“Is this your idea of a decent customer? Taking advantage of someone’s weakness, threatening him, and then forcing a dangerous job on him? I think even fleas are a little nicer to the dogs they infest, compared to you.”

“Wouldn’t you say,” Nezumi said, “that the fault lies with that person for having a weakness that can be taken advantage of in the first place? In these parts, exposing your weakness can cost you your life. Not news to you, I hope?”

Nezumi once more gently stroked Inukashi’s cheek as he fell silent, and murmured sympathetically.

“You’re afraid of death. More than anything, you’re afraid of the suffering that leads up to it. You’d do anything to be spared from it. I know that, and I’m able to ease that pain for you, am I not? I don’t want to blackmail and wring things out of you. I’m taking the proper steps, paying you money in exchange for a job.”

“That’s enough!” Inukashi slammed the table with his fist. Two puppies that were playing under the table shot out from under it and fled.

“You fraud, you sophist, you third-rate actor! I hope you choke on rat poison and die.” Out of breath, Inukashi inhaled raggedly.

“Are you finished?” Nezumi said momentarily. His calm and unruffled tone further stirred Inukashi’s wrath. But it was no use getting irritated. Nezumi was right. He was at fault for exposing his weakness and leaving himself vulnerable. These were the rules of this land.

Inukashi sighed, and adjusted himself in his seat.

“Let’s hear what you have to say. I don’t have much time. Keep it short and sweet.”

Nezumi lowered himself into a seat as well. He was no longer smiling.

“I want information.”

“I figured as much,” Inukashi said simply. “Even *you* wouldn’t be foolish enough to come to me looking for groceries. So? Information about what?”

“The Correctional Facility.”

Inukashi almost fell over.

“Correctional Facility!” he exclaimed. “You mean the one the Security Bureau presides over?”

“Is there some other Correctional Facility that no one knows about?” Nezumi said sarcastically.

Inukashi ignored him.

“So you want information... what kind of information?”

“Any kind, no matter how unimportant.” Nezumi fished a white mouse out of his pocket. It was about the size of an adult thumb. Inukashi’s eyes narrowed.

“Is that a robot? It’s smaller than the one you gave me last time.”

Pulling off his gloves, Nezumi gently pressed the mouse’s head. Its back split open, and a yellow shimmer of light flickered momentarily before an image floated up into it.

“What’s this?”

“A hologram. The mechanism embedded in this mouse uses light to reproduce objects.”

“I know what a hologram is,” Inukashi said irritably. “It’s my first time actually seeing one, though,” he said as an afterthought. “But I’m asking about what’s displayed there. What is this? A blueprint?”

"It's a floor plan of the Correctional Facility's inner structure, but it's pretty outdated. The structure itself might not have changed, but their administrative system has probably been improved."

Inukashi scowled at him in a way that said, 'you must be kidding me'.
 "No can do. I don't care what kind of information you want, I won't be able to get it for you."

"Why?"

"Why? Don't ask me stupid questions. Do you know what kind of place that is? Of course you wouldn't," he said flatly, "I don't know either. No one knows, because there hasn't been a single person who came out of that place alive. —Not even dead bodies can make it out of there. Once they pass through the Special Gates, they disappear. They vanish off the face of the earth. That's the kind of place it is, right? That's what the rumours say."

Inukashi gulped, and shuddered. Nezumi echoed his words back to him expressionlessly.

"Rumours?"

"Rumours say—" Inukashi began hesitantly, "there's a huge incinerator in the basement, and all the prisoners get thrown in there. They get burned like garbage. And the ashes that come out of there are scattered on the farm fields of the South Block, instead of going to waste disposal. They say it's good for the soil. —Here, in this place."

Inukashi pointed at the bottom-most floor, presumably the basement, on the diagram that floated above the table, and shuddered again. It was a blank white space, and there was nothing written in it. This curiously empty space gave him an eerie feeling.

"There's no incinerator there," Nezumi muttered.

"What makes you so sure?" Inukashi said accusingly. "Have you seen it? How can you say that without even—"

Inukashi clipped his words halfway through and found himself staring at Nezumi.

“You know—?”

There was no answer.

“You know what it’s like inside the Correctional Facility? When—” Inukashi’s hand thrust into the light, and clenched into a fist. The image jittered and warped.

“When did you record this?” he demanded. “This is internal data.”

“Inukashi, I’m not paying you gold to answer *your* questions. I want whatever you can manage — find any latest information about the interior of the Correctional Facility, and add it to this data. Specifically, if I were to be picky, I’d want accurate information about the operations and security systems.”

“You stupid or something? Operations system? Only people in the highest classes have access to that, it’s top secret. Tough luck if I can even get my hands on it.”

“That’s why I’m not being picky. Gather whatever you can manage. Any information that has to do with the Correctional Facility, and I want it ASAP. I’ll leave you with this.”

Nezumi turned off the switch, and tossed the small projector mouse to Inukashi. Inukashi wrinkled his nose at it as if it were a rotting corpse.

“Should I use the mini-mouse I got from you last time?” he asked.

“No, that won’t work. The Correctional Facility is full of security sensors. Any robot, no matter how small, is gonna get blown up if it’s caught scurrying around without proper recognition.”

“Then use real mice,” Inukashi continued. “They’ll be able to get in much easier than dogs. A small living organism isn’t a problem for the sensor, is it?”

“Not so fast. Forget mice, even flies or cockroaches would be exterminated automatically. Lasers burn them up so that there’s nothing of them left. They don’t let a single fly intrude into that place. And that’s how it is.”

“Then what am I supposed to do?” Inukashi said in frustration. “How am I supposed to sneak in and gather information from some place that’s all computer-managed?”

“You don’t have to sneak in. You’re right — pretty much all of the Facility’s interior is managed to the tee. But there are still lots of areas that involve people, too. And information usually leaks through the mouths of people. If there’s anything computers can’t control, it’s a man’s tongue.”

Inukashi hunched his shoulders exaggeratedly. He was beginning to make out, though vaguely, what Nezumi was trying to get at. He didn’t want to see any more clearly if he could help it.

“Of course,” he agreed promptly. “You need people operating the computers and humanoid robots. The guards would have to be human, and officials from the Bureau would be coming in and out of there. And we can’t forget the prisoners, they’re human too, right? But apart from them, the only people that can come and go from the Correctional Facility are people inside No. 6. You need an IC card to get through the Special Gates. It’s impossible to create a fake No. 6 IC card. Which means no one from the West Block can get near that building unless they’re prisoners. Not that anyone would wanna get near it, anyway. So —” He was talking rather fast. “Well — if we jump to the conclusion, pretty much it’s impossible for us to interact with people inside the Correctional Facility because they’re residents of No. 6, and that makes it an impossible case, right? You should know better than anyone. Those guys live in a completely different world from us. It’s just *different*.”

“Inukashi.”

“What?”

“You’re talkative today.”

Inukashi dropped his gaze. He knew that lowering his eyes signalled defeat, but he had no energy to glare back at the pair of grey ones that stared at him. He knew already who would win and who would lose. Nezumi stood up and drew close to Inukashi, who was staring at the floor. He whispered in a voice raspy and low, but sensual — a woman’s voice.

“That’s how you always are. When you’ve got something to hide, you suddenly become more eloquent. And then I realize the truth that lies in your heart — that underneath that tongue of yours, flapping like a leaf in the wind, a furtive secret is curled up.”

His fingertips stroked Inukashi’s chin, slid up his jawline, and lightly pinched his earlobe. Inukashi shivered. The brief moment of ecstasy was followed quickly by a small, sharp pain. His earlobe had been yanked.

“Ow!” he said indignantly. “The hell was that for?”

“Don’t underestimate me, Inukashi.”

“What’re you talking about? I wasn’t—”

“Stop playing dumb. I know what you’re using your dogs for. That’s why I came here.”

Inukashi tsked loudly, and roughly shoved Nezumi’s hand away. Nezumi chuckled amusedly.

“You use your dogs to smuggle, don’t you? You’ve been transporting leftover food and garbage from the Correctional Facility into the West Block. For years now.”

“I am,” Inukashi answered defiantly. “So what? Transporting goods is also part of my trade. A rat like you has no business telling me what

to do.”

“The Correctional Facility has full waste disposal functions,” Nezumi continued. “They can dispose of everything inside that building. You just said that not even corpses can make it out of there. You’re right. They even dispose of dead bodies inside that place. Which means there shouldn’t even be a speck of dust escaping from there, much less leftover food. From that same Correctional Facility, you somehow manage to get periodical loads of leftover food, and sell it to the food stalls in the West Block. Makes good money, doesn’t it? Maybe even more than your hotel-running business?”

“Is it not to your liking that I’m operating in the black market?” Inukashi said scathingly. “You must be kidding me. Since when did you become a Bureau lackey, huh, Nezumi?”

“Machines don’t trade with black-market merchants. Once they are programmed with a set of rules, they’ll never break them. If anyone’s going to break the rules, it’s the humans. There’s someone in the interior of the Correctional Facility that’s selling you leftover food, isn’t there? No, not just food. He’s probably passing prisoner rations and other belongings your way too. Anyway, the fact is, you have a contact inside the Correctional Facility. Sniff out a lead from him. Lure the information out of him.”

Inukashi shook his head. The young man in front of him was trying to get him involved in more danger than he had expected. Inukashi broke out into a cold sweat.

“It’s impossible—” he muttered. “The guys I deal with are the lowest of the low. They pretty much do the cleaning and waste disposal right alongside the robots. There’s no way they would have any sort of useful information.”

“That’s exactly why you wanna ask them. The guys on the top tier are strictly overseen by the authorities. They can’t risk the danger of

letting any secrets slip. But management is lax with people in lower positions. And if their job is to clean the place, they've probably been everywhere inside the Facility. Who knows, they might have more information than you think. Your job is to sniff it out. Your nose is as good as a dog's, isn't it?"

Inukashi heaved a sigh, and vainly attempted at a last act of retaliation. "I need money. To get any information from them, I'd need money. Two gold coins isn't gonna cut it."

Nezumi nodded, and passed a small leather pouch to Inukashi. In it, there were a considerable number of gold coins.

"I only have this much right now." Nezumi suddenly squatted down and peered into Inukashi's eyes.

"Inukashi, work with me. I'm begging you."

Begging? Nezumi, are you begging me?

"If you take the job, I promise I'll always rush to your side if you're overcome with unbearable pain one day. No matter where you are, I'll deliver a song to your soul. I promise."

"Who's gonna count on a promise between a dog and a rat?"

No one could guarantee it. But yet — Nezumi *would* keep his promise. Almost instinctively, the feeling apprehended Inukashi's soul.

No matter where or how I died, if it was accompanied with suffering, he would always appear and put my soul to rest. He could be hard to understand as hell, but he would never break a promise.

Inukashi believed strongly in his own instincts. He extended his hand, and closed it around the leather pouch.

"I'll take the job."

"I owe you one." Nezumi breathed out shortly, and wound the superfibre cape around his shoulders. Then, he put a finger to his lips.

"I shouldn't need to tell you, but none of this—"

"I know. I won't let anyone get wind of the job. It's the cardinal rule for my work. I'll gather the information as quickly as I can, and contact you before anyone else can find out."

"I'm counting on you."

"Nezumi, I wanna ask you something."

"What?"

"What are you doing this for?"

Silence. It was impossible to read a single expression from Nezumi's face. Inukashi licked his bottom lip, and continued.

"With this much money, you could live the easy life for a pretty good while. I knew you were a star actor and making quite a bit of money, but even for that, this is a lot. Putting this much money forward, and threatening me—"

"I'm not threatening you. I only came to you with a job."

"Hmph—whatever. Then, going as far as to *request a job from me* — what makes you want to poke your nose into the Correctional Facility so badly? What's your reason?"

Nezumi didn't answer. He only made a slight half-smile. It was an artificial one, made for the stage.

"You don't need to know to do the job, do you, Inukashi?"

"Well, obviously," Inukashi said testily. "But diving into this kind of risky job without even knowing why is kinda harsh, man."

"Finding out why isn't gonna change how risky it is."

Tsk. This guy and his fondness of twisting arguments around — I'm no match for him when it comes to verbal arguments.

"Fine," he said finally. "That's enough from you. Get outta here already." Inukashi flapped his hand to shoo Nezumi away. He caught a whiff of soap. The image of a face crossed his mind. It was the face of

someone who was washing the dogs, covered in suds. The nonchalant question tumbled out of his mouth.

“Nezumi, this has nothing to do with Shion, does it?”

For a brief moment, the grey eyes wavered. Inukashi’s eyes didn’t miss their slight hesitation. The tip of his nose twitched. He could smell something.

“Shion?” Nezumi raised his shoulders slightly. “Where does Shion come into this? This has nothing to do with him.”

“Just now, you told me not to divulge information about this job to anyone else. Do you mean that I can’t tell Shion either?”

“Of course. There’s no need to involve people that have nothing to do with this.”

“Dear, dear, aren’t you the gentle one?” Inukashi mocked. “Who knows how many dangerous jobs you’ve shoved into my hands, but when it comes to Shion, *oh no, I can’t get him involved*. Hah, I see. I guess even you warm up to people if you’ve lived with them long enough. Is that white-headed weirdo of a little boy that precious to you?”

Nezumi vanished from before his eyes. Before he could even utter a cry, Inukashi’s body was being pushed up against the wall, and a set of fingers were digging into his throat.

“That’s enough smart-mouthing from you,” Nezumi hissed. “Any more, and I’ll make sure you can never speak again.”

“Let’s see you try,” Inukashi said boldly. “These guys won’t let you off for it.”

Several dogs which were sprawled on the floor got to their feet, snarling menacingly as they surrounded Nezumi. Just as one of them bared its teeth, a small grey shadow darted out of a corner of the room.

A strangled yelp.

The large dog that had bared its teeth raised its voice in pain. A small mouse was latched onto its neck. The dog writhed, violently shaking its head from side to side, but soon collapsed forepaws-first. Its four limbs convulsed. The other dogs retreated fearfully. Inukashi shoved Nezumi aside, and cried out in the same strangled way his dog did.

“My dog, my dog!” He lifted the dog’s body in his arms. A cold voice showered over his head.

“If you don’t want to end up like him, settle your other dogs down.”

“Nezumi, you fucking—”

Cheep-cheep.

The soft cry of a mouse. Inukashi lifted his face, and his breath caught in his throat. He looked about the room, and he was rooted to the spot. From the top of the cabinets, from underneath the table, from the shadow of the door, from various places in the room, countless small grey mice were staring silently at him. All their eyes were red, and glowed from deep within.

“Down,” Inukashi commanded hoarsely. The dogs did as they were told. They returned to their spots, and lay low on their stomachs.

“He’s not dead,” Nezumi said. “He’s just paralysed a little bit. Give him twenty, thirty minutes and he’ll be fine. He’s breathing properly, right?”

It was just as Nezumi had said. The dog’s breathing was laboured, but consistent. It was struggling to get to its feet, but it looked like it had no strength to. It gave a pitiful whimper.

“You’ll pay for doing this to my dog.” Just as Inukashi clenched his fist, the door flew open with a bang. Shion came bursting in.

“Inukashi!” Shion stood frozen, still holding the doorknob. His gaze slid from Inukashi, who was hugging his dog, to Nezumi.

“Nezumi, what are you doing here?”

“What are *you* doing here? You shouldn’t be abandoning your workplace like that.”

“Well, I heard a dog howling, and I thought I heard Inukashi’s voice too — I thought something had happened — Inukashi, what’s wrong with that dog?”

“He’s just paralysed,” Nezumi answered for him. A brown mouse poked its head out from Nezumi’s shoulder. It jumped down on the floor, and scurried up Shion’s body.

“Hamlet, did you come along too?” Shion said to it.

“Hamlet? What’re you talking about?”

“It’s his name. Because he likes to be read *Hamlet* out loud.”

Nezumi’s face contorted.

“Don’t go naming my mice without permission.”

“Well, you wouldn’t name them yourself,” said Shion, unfazed. “—He seems to like it a lot. Right, Hamlet?”

The mouse nodded its head up and down.

“Ridiculous,” Nezumi spat. “So if this guy’s Hamlet, what’s the other one? Othello? Macbeth?”

“Cravat.”

“Cravat? Was there a name like that in Shakespeare?”

“It’s the name of a fried pastry. The colour of his fur looks just like one. It means ‘tie’, because of the shape. The dough has powdered almonds in it, and you twist it into a tie-shape to fry—”

“I get it, that’s enough,” Nezumi interrupted. “You go dream of filling your belly with those cravats, or whatever, when you go to sleep tonight. I’m going home. Talking with you gives me a headache.”

“Are you sure it doesn’t have something to do with your nerves? You’re always irritated. Maybe you’re tired.”

“Whose fault is it that I’m irritated all the time? Besides, you—”

Feeling Inukashi's bewildered gaze on him, Nezumi shut his mouth. He re-wrapped his superfibre cloth, and strode out of the room without another word. Hamlet nudged Shion on the cheek and chirruped once before bounding after its master.

The grey mice that had been all over the room had mysteriously disappeared. Inukashi let a long breath escape his lips, and sank to the floor. The dog gave a low growl in his arms. Shion bent down on one knee and began inspecting the dog thoroughly.

"He looks like he's been paralysed with some sort of drug... but his heart's beating normally, and he's not vomiting. He should be fine."

"Really? He won't die?"

"He'll be fine. He's only mildly paralysed. We should give him clean water to drink. I'll go get some." Shion filled the pail that he had been using to carry water from the river, and brought it to the dog. The dog gulped the water down eagerly.

"See, it looks like the numbness is almost all gone. But this dog — how did he get paralysed?"

"Nezumi did it."

"Nezumi? To the dog? No way."

"Yes way," Inukashi said angrily. "He did it. That bastard paralysed my dog. He wouldn't hesitate to do something like that. He's ruthless, cunning, and cruel. I'd watch out if I were you. If you let his pretty face fool you into thinking he's going to be gentle and kind like your Mum, you're in for a nasty surprise."

"I don't think he's my mother, but I do think he's kind."

Inukashi made circles with his index finger in front of Shion's face.

"Idiot. That's what I'm talking about when I say he's fooled you. You're too naive to notice how heartless he is."

"Nezumi isn't heartless. He's saved my life more than once. If it weren't for him, I wouldn't have been able to survive."

“Nezumi, help a stranger? Without anything in return?”

“For nothing in return. On the contrary,” Shion said reflectively, “I think he’s brought a nuisance upon himself. It might sound weird coming from me, but I think I’m being quite a bit of a burden on him. After all, I don’t know anything about how to live here.”

Inukashi pursed his lips. He let his gaze hover over Shion’s profile as he washed the dog’s wound with water.

A nuisance? He was quite right. In these parts, someone who was as naive and gullible as he was, and was kind to everyone, was none other than a nuisance. And a nuisance often became the shackles that binded the hands and feet.

But Nezumi was living with this weirdo of a nuisance, looking for nothing in return. He wasn’t chasing Shion out of his nest — on the contrary, he was sheltering him there.

Why?

“Hey, Shion.”

“Hm?”

“Do you two always talk like that to each other?”

“Huh? Well — yeah, I guess. Why?”

“Because Nezumi’s usually not like that. He doesn’t let his emotions show.”

Shion cocked his head to the side quizzically, as if to say, ‘really?’. The dog licked the back of his hand. It was its way of expressing gratitude for treating the wound.

Inukashi wiggled his nose and grinned. He was onto a scent.

Shion and that job concerning the Correctional Facility were somehow connected. For this kid, Nezumi was willingly stepping into dangerous territory.

Inukashi had no proof. He wasn't sure of any clear reason for why Nezumi was doing this. But he had grasped Nezumi's weakness now, and that was certain. *My nose doesn't lie.*

Nezumi, so this oblivious weirdo is your weakness, your Achilles' heel, huh? Heh, then things should be interesting. You said so. Let anyone find out your weakness, and it could cost you your life. You're damn right. And I've got your lifeline in my hands right now. I'll make sure you get rewarded handsomely for what you did to me. You can count on that.

"I might be wrong, but..." Shion's voice reached his ears. He was petting the dog, which had gotten to its feet and was wagging its tail energetically, apparently fully recovered from paralysis.

"Huh? Did you say something?"

"This dog — is he related to you, by any chance?"

"Oh —" Inukashi paused. "Yeah, he is. He's the last one that my Mum gave birth to. She had him, and got beaten to death shortly afterwards." There was a lapse before he said, "How'd you know?"

"I just had a feeling," Shion said. "He has really intelligent and compassionate eyes. It kind of reminded me of what you said about your mother, so I wondered if I was right."

Shion's hand stroked the dog's neck. The dog's eyes drooped half-closed, and a quiet sigh escaped from its mouth. From its peaceful expression it was hard to imagine that the same dog had bared its teeth at Nezumi earlier.

"Shion, you didn't laugh."

"Huh? About what?"

"About my Mum. Usually when I talk to people about my Mum being a dog, they laugh, or make fun of me, or treat me like a freak... but you — you said my Mum was kind and loving. You're the only one who's listened to me without laughing or making fun of my Mum, apart from—"

Inukashi clipped his words, and swallowed hard. He had just noticed this fact. Simultaneously, he was overcome with a wave of agitation that threatened to suffocate him.

Shion, still on one knee, looked up at him with a concerned expression. Inukashi licked his dry lips, and slowly formed the rest of his words as if tracing the thread of his memory.

“You’re the only one — apart from Nezumi.”

2

TRANQUIL SCENES

*I am the one without hope, the word without echoes,
he who lost everything and he who had everything.
Last hawser, in you creaks my last longing.
In my barren land you are the final rose.*

NERUDA, TWENTY LOVE POEMS AND A SONG OF DESPAIR

IN NO. 6, those under forty years of age consisted the majority of the age demographic. It was a young city. Because of this, the odd elderly person she passed on the street stood out all the more sorely.

I'd do anything to avoid growing old.

She was sick of seeing obese, white-haired women; knobbly, wrinkly old men and the like.

The woman worked as a nurse in the Municipal Central Hospital, which was directly managed by the Health and Hygiene Bureau. She was currently in charge of the elderly wing. Despite the fact that she loathed them, she had to deal with the elderly every day.

Why do they bother even staying alive?

The woman swept a hand through her long, chestnut-brown hair which she prided herself upon. She couldn't bear the thought of this

hair turning white, and having wrinkles and spots appear on her face. *I'd rather die before I end up looking like that.*

She was serious. No. 6 had top-notch terminal care. Some said that no other city could compare.

Once the elderly reached a certain age and received a notification from the city, they were entitled to live in a place called the Twilight Cottage, regardless of their social class, sex, or personal history.

The Twilight Cottage was an ideal facility that the city had built so that the elderly could spend the rest of their lives in abundance and comfort. People said it was like heaven for them: medical facilities for palliative care were a given; all things that threatened to hurt them, whether it be pain, suffering, or distress, were removed. It was a facility under direct control of the city, and from the woman's workplace at the Central Hospital, a few elderly people would be escorted to Twilight Cottage each week. It was not disclosed what age or what criteria determined when people were sent to the Cottage. Though not many, there were still some elderly who died from illness or unfortunate accident even before obtaining the right to live in the Twilight Cottage. That was why the elderly unanimously rejoiced upon receiving news of residency.

It was the same with the woman whose application for residency had passed yesterday. She was ill with a disease that had been declared incurable even by No. 6's stellar medical technology.

"I'm so glad. Now I can spend the rest of my few years in peace. I give my gratitude to God and the city for their compassion."

The woman, who had said she was a strong believer in God, had clasped her hands at her breast, and had murmured words of prayer before leaving the hospital wing.

The Twilight Cottage. The woman didn't know where it was located. The city had also not disclosed its address. But the woman had no

interest whatsoever in the Twilight Cottage.

The woman hated elderly people. Her disgust was a side of the same coin of fear that she felt toward growing old herself. The woman was young and beautiful. She wanted to stay young and beautiful forever. Through her work, she had heard rumours that the city was focusing more than ever its medical research on understanding the mechanism of life. She had also heard that amongst that, the city was investing considerable funds in molecular research having to do with ageing.

If a drug to suppress ageing were to be developed — if she could stay like this, and never grow old — how splendid it would be. She wanted them to succeed soon, as soon as possible.

She was almost at the station. Her parents were waiting at home, in a little house in a town two stations away. A man and woman just entering their senior years, they were both harpy, neurotic, and pretentious. They still complained that their daughter had not been ranked highest by the city in any field. She didn't want to grow old like that.

The woman stepped into view of the reflective shop window. *I'm on my way home from work, so I guess it can't be helped that I look a little tired. But, still beautiful. My hair, my skin — still youthful, still beautiful.*

She would do some shopping before going home. In the shop window, she could see the lavish dresses, tasteful shoes, and practical pantsuits that lined the store. In this city, she could attain whatever she desired. Of course, they were limited to things within her financial range.

Excluding the small part of the population that wallowed piteously in Lost Town, city residents had no problem obtaining everything they needed, as long as they weren't after the most premium-class things. They could obtain clothes, food, and residence without difficulty.

It wasn't nearly as good as it was for Chronos residents, but it was much better than the people of Lost Town. She lived a relatively

comfortable life.

The woman was satisfied with her position. She wanted to enjoy more of her youth, her beauty, comfort, and the life that lay ahead of her.

Her feet stopped. A pair of shoes displayed in the window had caught her eye. They were light-pink pumps. Winter had just begun, but the spring collection was already being put out. The pink pumps glowed: there they were, earlier than any other store; faster than anyone else; ahead, ahead; forward, forward, they invited her.

The Holy Celebration was next week. It was a day that marked the founding of the city. Parties and celebratory events would be held all over town. The woman, too, was planning to attend two parties.

I'll buy these shoes. And I'll buy a light-peach dress to match. It'll look splendid on me, I just know it.

Just as a satisfied smile spread over her face, she was struck with a sudden dizziness. After her brief bout, the base of her neck grew hot.

What's wrong with me? — I feel tired — My body feels heavy.

Her legs felt weak. She felt nauseous.

I have to rest somewhere...

She entered an alleyway between two shops. There was supposed to be a clinic run by the Central Hospital through this alley.

I just have to get there...

Her neck was burning. She felt like there was something wriggling underneath her skin. She felt the unfamiliar and disturbing sensation of her body being wrung dry.

What—?

She staggered, and collapsed. Her purse flew open, and its contents scattered. The woman extended her hand to pick her things up, and screamed when she realized what she saw.

Spots — black spots, like senile plaque, and several of them, were appearing. Her skin rapidly lost moisture and began to crack.

This can't be—what—what's happening—?

The woman snatched her mirror, and peered into it. She shrieked again. But her voice was hoarse, and what came out was barely a whisper.

My face— my face—

Her face, which had been so beautiful moments before, was changing rapidly before her eyes. Wrinkles creased her skin, spots marred it, and her hair began falling out.

Something wriggled at the base of her neck. There was something living inside her body. The woman, seized by fear, realized that her body was being taken over by something else.

No, help me— Mom—Dad— save me—

The faces of her mother and father appeared before her eyes.

Mom, Dad...

Her fingers, extended in plea, grasped thin air. Unconsciousness overcame her.

* * *

Karan sat on the bench, and heaved a sigh, one of many she had heaved today. She knew sighing was useless. She could cry out, she could throw herself on the ground, but reality would not budge. It would not change. Then, at least, she would remain defiant. She would square her shoulders, hold her head high, and be unashamed.

That was what she thought, but shortly afterwards, a sigh would escape her lips.

I can't do anything. I'm powerless...

Karan tried opening both hands palm-up in her lap. The gentle rays of the winter sun shone down on her white palms. She felt another sigh about to come.

Karan had closed her small bakery in a corner of Lost Town today, and spent half of the day walking around. She had embarked to visit Safu, in her and her grandmother's house in the luxury neighbourhood of Chronos.

If residents were acknowledged by the city as being of highest rank in one of various fields, they were permitted to live in Chronos, regardless of sex, upbringing, or family structure. The city provided housing, as well as an ideal environment suited for the growth and development of each skill.

When her son Shion had been ranked top-level for intelligence in his Two-Year-Olds' Examinations, Karan had also been given a residence in Chronos. Comfortable living arrangements, and a lifetime of insurance — as an elite, thanks to her son, who would probably eventually work his way up to the upper echelons of No. 6, Karan was in a position that many envied and desired.

A position that many envied and desired — it was a life of comfort, free of the need to worry of tomorrow's sorrows; free whatsoever of hunger or violence; a life where indoor environment, security, hygiene, and physical conditions were all monitored.

Karan slowly clenched her hand. Her fingers, which were smooth and soft when she had lived in Chronos, had become rough and worn from her work in Lost Town, and her skin sometimes cracked and bled.

But until I lost Shion, I was happier than when I was at Chronos. Much happier.

Karan had never adjusted well to a life where every minute aspect was managed and checked upon, and had begun to feel a sort of terror

that her nerves were unravelling. That was why, when Shion had committed a taboo and engaged in the unbelievable act of sheltering an escaped convict, she had felt — more than surprise, more than despair — a sense of release, even. She even found herself enjoying it. Of course, she knew in her rational mind that it meant all of their special privileges would be revoked, as well as the right to live in Chronos, and that the path to Shion's future would be closed forever. But she had still enjoyed it.

She wanted to praise rather than reprimand the actions of her son, which were so foolish for one with such a level of intelligence. Shion had thrown away his life in Chronos so easily. Rather than his stable and insured life, he had chosen the road to protect one who had fled into his room one stormy night. It was a blunder, if anything. But he had not been wrong in committing it.

It meant that Shion had also not seen much meaning in life at Chronos. To him, it was something he could throw easily away. He had only discarded what was meaningless to him. And that was not wrong at all.

“Mom, I'm sorry.”

On their first night moving into Lost Town, twelve-year-old Shion had hung his head as he apologized to his mother.

“Sorry for what?”

“Because... Mom, you... you have to go out and work now.”

Shion's crime had been assisting in hiding and aiding the escape of a violent criminal, called a VC in No. 6. With regards to his age, he had been let off only with exile from Chronos. But in turn, he was forbidden to live anywhere other than the city's lowest-class residential area of Lost Town. Mother and son had slid from the crest of the mountaintop to valley-bottom in a mere night. First things first, they had to think of a means of living for the future.

"I'm sorry."

His drawn chin, which still carried a semblance of boyishness, trembled. Karan wrapped her arm around her son's shoulders in a firm embrace.

"What a stupid thing to say," she said softly. "You shouldn't be apologizing for something like that."

"But—"

"Shion, are you Mommy, or am I? I think you've got your roles mixed up," she scolded in mock sternness. "I'm a lot tougher than you might think. I bet you didn't know that, did you?"

"No."

"Then that's something you can look forward to. You'll see how tough your mommy can be, real soon. It'll blow you away."

In her arms, Shion gave a quiet laugh.

How many years had it been since she had last embraced her son like this? That day, in the dark, damp room that had once been storage for building materials, what Karan had felt was neither despair nor woe. It was the joy of her child's warmth in her arms, and the sense of fulfilment only motherhood could bring.

"What kind of person was he?"

"Huh?"

"The person you took under your wing. I was just wondering what he was like. I'm curious to know — but you wouldn't tell me, right?"

Shion's body shrank away from her as if he had been stung. His pout and his flushed cheeks struck her as so humorous that Karan couldn't help but smile.

"G'night," Shion mumbled, and with the expression still on his face, hastily trotted out of the room. Even after the rickety door had closed with a loud noise, Karan was still smiling.

She wondered what kind of boy he had been. What kind of boy had made Shion leave Chronos behind? What about this boy was Shion drawn to, and dazzled by?

She wanted to know, but Shion would probably never put it into words. Children learned to hide their feelings, or encountered something that made them, and that was how they grew up. Maybe she would never be able to draw her son close again like this, without hesitation.

Just as how a fully-fledged bird spreads its young wings to leave its nest, Karan knew that she would have to part with Shion someday. She was prepared. If she could see her son off as he took flight, she figured it would be a joyous thing as a mother. So starting tomorrow, she would pour herself into work.

True to her vow, for four years at Lost Town, Karan worked tirelessly. She started with baking bread and selling it out on the street; eventually, she outfitted a corner of their abode into a bakery, and increased the variety of her goods. Her affordable and tasty breads and cakes enjoyed popularity in Lost Town, where there were few such luxuries. The business grew, and supported their household of two.

Small children showed up to buy muffins, out of breath and with coins clasped tightly in their little fists. An elderly labourer came to buy a cake to give as a gift to his grandchildren. There were customers that came first thing in the morning to buy fresh loaves of bread.

Karan was satisfied with her life in Lost Town. It was not bravado; nor was she trying to fool herself. She hadn't a thread of attachment left for Chronos. She was working, and reaping its rewards. It was a life that they had built up with their own hands, with their feet firmly planted on the ground. She desired nothing more.

Karan was, in her own way, happy — until that day had come.

One day, Shion had simply disappeared. He had left in the morning for his workplace at the Forest Park Administration Office, never to

return home. This was far from the kind of parting she had steeled herself to face as a mother. This was no natural way to part — it was so irregular, so sudden, so cruel. She realized how naive and dreamy she had been in thinking that she would see her son off as he took flight from the parental nest.

He had been put under arrest as a suspect of a violent crime, and been incarcerated in the Correctional Facility.

When she had received word from the Security Bureau, Karan experienced the full extent of the ugliness of despair. Despair meant being spun into the folds of deepest darkness. The darkness slithered its way into her body, and numbed her hands and feet. How irresistible death had seemed then.

But there was someone who had given her hope to live. Nezumi. He had contacted her to let her know that Shion was alive and in the West Block. He had delivered Shion's short letter to her. How beautiful was the small light that had glittered in the midst of her dark despair.

Mom, I'm sorry. Alive and well.

The hasty scribble of just a few words had become a streak of light that tore through the darkness, and became the voice that whispered life into her ear.

Karan opened her store, and continued to bake bread. Until Shion came home, she would grit her teeth and wait. She would keep waiting. Nezumi had brought her the strength to do it. At times, she was still overwhelmed with anxiety and the urge to scream, but Karan's daily life was gradually regaining its stability. It was around this time that Safu had appeared at her door.

Safu, like Shion, had also been acknowledged as highest-ranking in intelligence. She was a girl whose large, black eyes stood out defined

on her face; and she had an honest gaze. Safu, with few words but a strong will, had spoke of her love for Shion, and had proclaimed that she was going to the West Block to see him.

“It doesn’t matter to me. Even if I could never come back here again, I wouldn’t regret it. If Shion is in the West Block, that’s where I’m going.”

“I want to see him. I want to see Shion.”

“I... I love him. From the bottom of my heart, I’ve always, always, loved only him.”

The sixteen-year-old girl had formed these words, fighting back her tears; and for their simplicity and awkwardness, they had touched Karan’s heart all the more. But moved as though she was, she could not let Safu go to the West Block. As Shion’s mother, and as grown adult, she had to stop her.

Safu left her store, and Karan had followed shortly afterwards. What she witnessed was the kidnapping of Safu by Security Bureau officials. It had already been three days since then.

“Safu...” At her wit’s end, Karan let another sigh escape her lips. She had not the faintest idea what she was to do next. She had passed a memo to the small messenger mouse. That was all she had done.

Would Nezumi save the girl as he did with Shion? If she was already imprisoned in the Correctional Facility, it seemed almost impossible to save her. If Shion found out, and set out to the Correctional Facility to save Safu, perhaps this time he would really be killed. *Maybe I’ve done something rash*— There was no way Nezumi would take such a risk to save a complete stranger. Her feelings shredded into little ribbons, and made her fingers tremble.

Karan had spent these past three days hardly sleeping or eating. She was physically and mentally exhausted, and yet was unable to stay still, and had come all the way here, close to where Safu used to live.

The luxury neighbourhood of Chronos.

Abundant greenery, and a tranquil environment. A fully-functioning security system. Various facilities, for medical care, entertainment, and shopping were provided in full, and residents could use them freely with only their ID card. Even within the Holy City of No. 6, Chronos was of a different class still, a residence beyond anyone's wildest dreams.

Although Karan had been a resident here only a few years ago, this time she was prevented from even entering the streets. As soon as she had stepped onto the cobblestone path that led into Chronos, the gates had closed.

We are very sorry. Due to concerns for safety, the area past this point is accessible to Chronos residents only. Thank you for your understanding. Further, anyone who passes the gates without a Entrance Permit for Special Residential Districts issued by the authorities is subject to removal from the premises and punishable by municipal law Article 203 Clause 42. I repeat — Due to concerns for safety...

A gentle female voice flowed forth. The surveillance camera attached to the chalk-white gates silently captured Karan as she stood with her feet rooted to the ground. If she remained unmoving here, the soft voice would turn into a shrill alarm, and Security Bureau officials would burst onto the scene. Karan had no choice but to turn her back on the gate, bite her lip, and go back the way she had come.

And now, in a corner of the Forest Park, she was sitting on a bench under a large tree that had lost all of its leaves. She sat, staring absently down at her hands.

“Shion... Safu...”

Why am I so powerless? I've been living for decades, I'm a parent, I'm an adult, and I can't even help two young people who are in the middle of a crisis. I've been alive for so long, and yet—

Karan lifted her face. An emotion quite different from dread or anxiety flitted across a corner of her heart. In the years that No. 6 shaped itself and began maturing as an independent city, Karan lived in its interior as a resident.

Six cities were founded in this world, building upon the numerous blunders that humankind had caused. It was a place free of war or hunger, and people could live here in peace and freedom. Here, the people could live from birth to death in safety, bliss, and tranquility. That was how it was supposed to be. She had never thought deeply about it. Everyone thought that as long as they stayed in No. 6, they would be promised a fulfilling life.

They thought — they had thought — they had been taught into thinking.

She clenched her fingers, and bit her lip harder.

This is all a lie. Everything— it's all just an appearance.

She whispered without putting it into words. Though it was on the verge of winter, she was starting to perspire.

They were divided into countless classes by their ID chips so that they weren't even free to travel inside the city. Her son had been taken forcibly into custody, and she was not permitted even to make a formal objection. She couldn't even confirm the safety of another resident who had been seized by the authorities. Where was freedom? Where was peace, safety, and a life of fulfilment? It was nowhere.

If that's true, then what have we been doing all this time? Why have we created a city like this? What have we done — where have we gone wrong?

"Excuse me—"

Karan was jolted abruptly back to reality by a voice.

"I'm sorry. Did I surprise you?" An elderly lady wearing a small, light-blue hat was smiling at her. It was a face she didn't know.

"Ah—oh no, it's nothing," Karan said hurriedly. "I'm sorry, I was just lost a little in thought... is there something—?"

"Would you mind if I sat down beside you?"

"Not at all— please."

The woman, still smiling, lowered herself into her seat beside Karan.

"What splendid weather it is, don't you think? So nice."

"Yes, it is." The weather was the last thing on her mind. For the past few days, she had felt nothing in the colour of the sky, the sound of the wind, or the sight of the trees.

"You must have thought me a rather rude old crone for suddenly speaking to you like that, I suppose?" the woman said mildly.

"No no, of course not. I was just a little surprised. I was thinking about something, and I hadn't noticed that you were standing there."

The madam pushed her round spectacles up her nose, and her face turned serious.

"You see, that's exactly why I decided to speak to you."

"I'm sorry?"

The woman was wearing a silver ring. Her fingers extended to clasp around Karan's hand.

"Please, I don't want you to be offended. I know very well that I'm being meddlesome." She hesitated. "But you had such a forlorn look on your face, I just couldn't go without doing something."

Oh, Karan said softly, her hands still clasped in the woman's.

"And that was why you took the time to speak to me?"

"Oh yes. There you were, on such a fine day, on such a splendid afternoon, looking as troubled as ever. You were sitting alone, limp on the bench, with your head bowed. There was no way I couldn't go without saying something."

The elderly woman tightened her fingers around Karan's hands, and wrapped them tenderly in her own hands.

"Why is a lady so young and beautiful as you, sitting with such a face? Has something happened?"

The pair of eyes behind the spectacles were soothing and gentle. Above their heads, the branches of a beech tree were swaying.

"Thank you for your concern. I've just been going through a bit of trouble..."

"Yes, I understand," the woman said sympathetically. "There was a time in my life, too, when I was burdened terribly with troubles." Her aged but dignified countenance clouded slightly. Karan's heart leapt for an instant.

Were there other people brooding like her? Were other people suffering like her? Had other people realized the city's contradictions as well?

"It was devastating, even though it happened decades ago. —I lost my son to an illness."

"My, an illness," murmured Karan.

"Yes, and he was only three. When he died, I still remember crying uncontrollably when I saw how small his coffin was. You would understand, wouldn't you, the feelings of a mother who's lost her son?"

Karan tried to nod, and drew her chin back just in time. Shion was still alive. *I haven't lost my son yet.*

"I can't quite say that I do understand—" she said slowly, "but you must have suffered so."

"Indeed, I did. Words couldn't describe what I went through. Many times, I thought how much better it would be if I were dead. But now, I'm glad I'm alive. I couldn't be happier, living in such a brilliant city, surrounded by my children and grandchildren."

The woman smiled, and cast her gaze around her.

“I would’ve wanted my son to experience growing up here. No— if medical care at No. 6 had been what it is now, I’m sure he wouldn’t have had to die.”

Karan softly drew her hand back. The elderly madam’s gaze wandered into the sky as she continued talking. Her lips were still turned up in a vague smile.

“I really do think this place is a utopia. You know, I say this to my grandchildren very often. I say, you must be grateful for being born here. They just look puzzled, of course — but that’s when I tell them about the West Block.”

“The West Block?” Karan’s heart quickened again, for an entirely different reason this time.

“Yes, the West Block. Do you know what sort of place it is?”

Karan leaned forward. She wanted to know. The West Block was where Shion was, and she wanted to know the details, what sort of place it was.

“I haven’t the faintest idea. Please tell me.”

The lady furrowed her brow, and shook her head.

“I don’t know much about it, myself. But my nephew works at the Access Control Office, and I hear stories from him sometimes. It’s a horrible place, I hear.”

Karan restrained her impatient heart, and murmured in assent. She wanted to encourage the madam to continue her story.

“The hygiene there is absolutely atrocious, and I hear the children have to drink contaminated water.”

“Contaminated...”

“Yes, isn’t it just horrid? I feel such pity for them, my heart aches. Compared to that, the children in this city couldn’t be happier. Wouldn’t you agree?”

“What? I mean— yes, but . . .”

“That’s why over there, they’re plagued with contagious diseases all the time, ones we could never imagine within No. 6. Crime is a daily occurrence, and safety is almost nonexistent. The residents of that Block are all uneducated, savage, and most will even kill a man without batting an eye if it means money for them. Just recently, I heard a group of violent men tried to force their way into the Control Office. Of course, since their security system was perfect, they were arrested before they even set foot inside. It’s frightening, really.”

The lady wrapped her arms around herself and shivered.

“My nephew told me the place is like a hell, the basest, worst possible environment. It must be ever so different from here. We must rejoice too, that we’re residents of No. 6 — not just our children. As for myself, I’m not afraid to tell my grandchildren how fortunate they are as No. 6 residents, compared to the West Block.”

The West Block. The basest, worst possible environment.

Karan closed her eyes. Shion’s handwriting floated up in her mind. It was a mere scribble, and only one line long. It was a slightly slanted, distinctive hand.

Mom, I'm sorry. Alive and well.

The letters were brimming with energy. It was writing that radiated youthful vigour for life. He was alive in the West Block. Ever so strongly, even now, he was continuing to live on.

“Is something the matter?”

She opened her eyes at the elderly lady’s words.

“Are you feeling ill? Shall I contact the Health and Hygiene Bureau?”

Karan slowly shook her head.

“I don’t think so.”

“Pardon me?”

“I don’t think the West Block is the basest, nor the worst.”

“Why, what—”

“And I don’t think—”

I don’t think this city is a utopia, either.

Just as she was about to say those words, there was a sound, a flurry of beating wings, and a black object came flying at her from above.

The elderly woman gave a small cry.

“Heavens, a crow!”

A crow with glossy black wings had alighted on the ground at Karan’s feet.

“How disturbing,” the woman said uneasily. “Were there ever any crows in the Forest Park?” She furrowed her brow.

“This is a natural environment after all. There are crows, though probably not many of them,” Karan replied. The crow took flight again. She thought it would fly away, but instead, it flapped its wings busily and alighted again, onto a man’s shoulder.

It was Karan who gave a cry of surprise this time. She had not noticed at all that there was somebody standing this close by. During her conversation with the elderly woman, there had been other passerby: an elderly man with his dog; a girl stooping to pick up a coloured leaf; a group of what looked to be students — but no one with a crow on their shoulder. When had he gotten so close? How long had he been there? It was a little unnerving.

The man was tall and wiry, and clad in a light-brown jacket, with trousers of the same colour. He had a full head of hair, but with streaks of grey that stood out. His moustache was also flecked with grey. Apart from the fact that he had a crow perched on his shoulder, he seemed like an ordinary middle-aged man. And he was a complete stranger.

But the man extended both his hands toward Karan with a smile on his face. He even called her name as he spoke.

"Karan, I missed you."

"Huh?"

Before she could give a decent answer, the man grabbed Karan by the arm, and drew her toward him. Karan's small stature nestled easily into the man's long arms as they encircled her. He was holding her so tight, she couldn't breathe.

"Forgive me," he pleaded. "It's all my fault. I'll never do anything that'll make you feel bad again. I promise. You'll be the only one I love for the rest of my life."

"Sorry, what—?" Karan stammered in alarm. "What are you doing?"

"I didn't realize how much I loved you until you were gone. Please, I'm begging you. Say you'll start over with me again, Karan."

Why, he's gone mad.

Her first thought was that he was out of his mind. But if someone was insane, they wouldn't be able to roam on city premises. Just as the thought crossed her mind, she noticed the man's heartbeat. They were so close to each other that she could feel his heart beating on her own chest. It was beating with a steady rhythm. The man was neither insane, nor nervous with excitement. He was very much coolly and calmly rattling off these clichéd lines.

"I don't believe this. I've had enough!" Karan thrust her arms in front of her, and pushed the man away. "I've had enough of your sweet-talking. I'm leaving you. I never want to see you again."

"Karan, I love you. I'm really, seriously, in love with you." The crow on the man's shoulder cawed shrilly, as if to mock them. The man cleared his throat awkwardly, and bowed his head to the elderly lady, who was staring at them with her mouth gaping open.

"I'm very sorry for having to show you such an ugly scene."

“Oh— ah, you don’t need to—” the woman said falteringly. “So, er, you two are—?”

“We’re lovers,” the man answered. “I was a fool, and I caused her a lot of pain. I just wanted to apologize to her, and start over again.”

“I see. Well, that’s...”

“We’ve got some important things to discuss, so if you’ll excuse us—”

The man grabbed Karan’s arm, and she was half-dragged away from the scene. The crow cawed loudly again. They took a back route behind the Park Office — Shion’s former workplace — and exited through the back of the park, the man uttering not a single word the whole way. Karan also remained silent as she was pulled along by the arm.

There was a white car parked at the curb. It was a rather old model, seldom seen on city streets anymore. The man opened the door, and spoke quite without any hesitation.

“Get in.”

“No, thank you.”

“Get in,” the man repeated. “I have something I want to talk to you about.” With a great swoosh of its wings, the crow swooped noisily from the man’s shoulder to the back seat of the car. Then, it looked at Karan and jerked its head, as if to invite her to follow.

“He looks like a smart bird,” Karan observed.

“He’s a little too smart for his own good.” The man’s long-suffering tone was telling of how much trouble the bird must have caused him. The crow opened its beak widely and made a cackling sound. It sounded like it was laughing. Karan, found herself laughing a little, too. Only after she finished laughing did she realize how she had gone these past few days without laughing, or even smiling at all.

Karan continued holding the crow’s gaze as she slid into the passenger seat. The electric-gasoline hybrid car glided forward soundlessly.

When they merged onto the highway, the man pressed the switch on auto-drive and took his hands off the steering wheel.

“Did you know? A new bylaw is being put into place, and we won’t be able to use gasoline starting as early as next year. Which means I won’t be able to drive this car anymore either.”

“I’ve heard that fossil fuels have nearly been depleted, except for coal,” said Karan. “I guess we wouldn’t have any other choice but to switch to another energy source.”

“Who did you hear that from?”

“Who—? Well, it’s been announced in the city’s energy policy—”

“Exactly. An announcement by the authorities. The mayor’s speech on his administrative policy, word-for-word.” The man twitched his moustache in a cynical smile. “No one questions it. Everyone accepts what the city announces as it is, and agrees to it without a thought. God, everyone in this damn city is so obedient and naive. Doubting their superiors is the last thing on their minds. They probably can’t even imagine doing that, or want to. Having suspicions takes energy. It’s easier just to sit back and say, yes yes, I agree, to everything.”

Karan threw a sidelong glance at the man’s face.

Then are you saying that you have suspicions? Instead of nodding obediently, are you saying you’re stopping to question it?

She resisted the urge to ask him. It wasn’t wise to say such reckless things to someone she barely knew. She had to be cautious, like a cowering herbivore.

Karan drew herself up, and tried to change the direction of the conversation.

“May I ask you a question?”

“Fire away.”

“Who are you, and how do you know my name? What made you go so far as to stage that half-baked act to pull me out here?”

“Half-baked is a little harsh, no?” said the man wryly. “I thought I pulled it off quite well. You played along nicely, too. That’s Best Actress Award material.”

“Why, thank you,” Karan said pleasantly. “The role of romantic heroine isn’t one I get to play often at this age.”

“Well, I don’t see why not. You’re young and beautiful enough, quite, quite. You could play any heroine you wanted, Karan.”

“Where did you learn my name?”

“From my niece.”

“Niece?”

“Says she’s a fan of yours,” said the man. “Or I should probably say, a fan of your muffins.”

A small, round face floated up in Karan’s mind — the girl who always came to the store with coins clenched in her fist.

“Ma’am, you won’t close this bakery, would you?” — The girl who had shown sincere concern for Karan. She, along with the words and gazes of encouragement from others, had supported her in her dark days after Shion had been taken into custody by the Security Bureau.

“Lili.”

“That’s the one,” the man affirmed. “Lovable Lili. She’s my younger sister’s daughter. Says she likes your cheese muffins a hundred times more than ol’ Uncle here. She told me last time I saw her.”

“Oh, dear.”

“I was ticked off, so I was going to put in my own two-cents about these muffins of yours, and took a bite out of one to taste...” The man’s mouth made a chewing motion. He poked the tip of his tongue out, and licked his lips.

“They were good, weren’t they?”

"They were. I hate to admit it, but they were delicious. Guess it can't be helped that Lili would like them more than some old uncle who only pops by once in a while."

"Well," said Karan, "at least now I know that you're Lili's uncle, and that you learned my name from that adorable niece of yours."

"Thanks for understanding. Did you think I was someone suspicious, by any chance?"

"I still do. What was that act back there? Did you want to pull me away from that respectable madam that badly?"

"You bet. She was dangerous."

"Dangerous?"

The car turned slowly. It was going into Lost Town. It seemed safe to believe that this man intended to take her home.

The old car went back along the same path she had taken this morning, deep in thought. She had taken a day off from the bakery today. Was Lili disappointed?

"You were a hair away from voicing your dissatisfaction toward the city. Am I right?"

I don't think this city is a utopia.

Indeed, she had been about to voice those words. But she had been interrupted at that very moment by the sound of the crow's beating wings.

"That was dangerous?"

"There's a possibility it might've been. What would you have done if that lady decided you were trouble?"

"Trouble? What do you mean?"

"What I'm saying is, she would've gone to the authorities and told them that the women sitting on the park bench has a dissatisfaction with the city."

“You mean she would secretly turn me in?”

“Finding it hard to believe?”

“Of course,” Karan blurted. “That’s nonsense. That madam was concerned about me. She spoke to me out of kindness.”

“Exactly, because you looked so depressed. In this utopia, in No. 6, everyone has to be happy. Even seriously ill or injured people have almost all of their pain removed by leading-edge medical technology. People who are troubled, or who contemplate, or who lose themselves in thought — those kinds of people don’t exist. They aren’t *allowed* to exist.”

“That’s not—” Karan protested. “I mean, there are always people on the bench who seem to be lost in thought.”

The man shook his head, and tapped a corner of the small monitor on the dashboard that was displaying road information. Small digits expressing the time popped up on the screen.

“Do you remember how long you were sitting on that bench for?”

Karan gazed at the numbers, and shook her head. She had forgotten completely about the time. She had sat on that bench, contemplating, wrestling with her thoughts, and unable to find an answer. She had lost the will to stand up and keep walking.

“Your time limit is thirty minutes,” the man muttered.

“Huh?”

“Citizens are allowed to space out for thirty minutes, at the most. If they’re thinking deeply or losing themselves in thought for longer than that, the flags come up and someone’ll jump in to check.”

“So you’re saying — that madam approached me to investigate, because I was brooding for such a long time?”

“I couldn’t say,” the man answered. “All I know is that there was a possibility. Maybe she was just a little old woman who thought

she was being kind and generous — the kind that won't mind doing something nice, as long as it's not too much trouble for them."

"What a horrible way to put it."

"It's the truth. This city is teeming with those kind of self-proclaimed good Samaritans. There are so many of them, it gets pretty hard to distinguish the ones that are actually good. Still, if that madam was one of those, it wouldn't be a problem. But what if she was a snitch? That would've been a close call for you, wouldn't it?"

Karan didn't answer him. She didn't want to be suspicious of the elderly madam. She wanted to believe that the woman had been a kind soul who had spoken to her, a stranger, out of genuine concern. She had had such gentle eyes, smiling behind her spectacles—

Karan drew a sharp breath.

"Those glasses..."

"You've finally noticed? They were a little big and clunky for a sophisticated madam like her, don't you think? Maybe they were built in with a microphone and recording device."

Karan closed her eyes, and let out a long breath.

Thirty minutes was her time limit. She was not allowed any more.

To contemplate deeply; to wrestle with one's thoughts; to immerse oneself in the realm of one's mind; and from there, to find one's own answer — it was all prohibited.

The same question welled up inside her breast again.

What have we been doing all this time? Why have we created a city like this? Where have we gone wrong?

She swallowed her sigh. She felt exhausted, and felt as if the mental will to retaliate, and the strength to become angry, had all withered within her.

"I've probably been tracked by the authorities all this time," she said quietly. "They must have been keeping me under surveillance, and not only because I was lost in thought. I *am* the mother of a convicted murderer, after all."

"There'll be none of that," the man said sharply. "No putting yourself down." His tone was that of a father scolding his daughter. "Do you really think your son is a criminal, like the authorities have told you?" Karan lifted her gaze off the floor, and shook her head. She had not believed for an instant that her son had murdered someone.

"This is also something I heard from Lili," continued the man. "She says your son — name's Shion, right? — says he's really nice. When she'd break her toys, he'd always fix them for her. Says she likes him a lot more than Uncle here, though not as much as your muffins. She was wondering if he had a girlfriend."

"*Was* she? Oh, dear," Karan said, with a hint of a smile in her voice.

"Cheeky, huh? Acting older than her age. But for all it's worth, she can't seem to realize how attractive her own uncle can be. Don't know how my sister raised her, for her to turn out like that."

"And if I ask Lili, would I be able to find out what name this attractive uncle of hers goes by, and what he does?"

The man laughed at Karan's words, and tapped the panel lightly again.

"God knows what might happen if you asked Lili. She'd probably tell you that Uncle Yoming is a weird man who wanders by the house once in a while, eats 'til he's full, and scoots out of the place."

"Yoming. That's your name."

"Yeah. And this is my job."

The panel filled with images of bread, cakes and other light fare, followed by caloric content and nutritional information, price, and name of the stores that served them.

"I run an electronic newsfeed for all sorts of entertainment in the areas, all of them except Chronos. Which isn't much, I mean, apart from dining and seasonal events, which is mostly what I do. Since the city oversees all the plays, concerts and print publishing, there's not much we can write about other than food and drink. The Food Bureau's out of the question, no way I could get inside that place — so it's just stuff like where to eat good cakes, or good places to have lunch, or things like that. I do the best I can. It's actually quite popular. I mean, after all, in Lost Town, there's not much to do for fun other than eat or drink, so everyone's eager for information."

"Then by any chance, are you—"

"Right on," the man said energetically. "I want to run a feature on your bakery's breads and cakes, with a spotlight on the muffins. Will you let me interview you?"

"Are you sure you want to write about my shop?" Karan said worriedly. "Won't the authorities turn their eye on you too?"

"I don't care if the authorities turn their eye on me, or want to trip me up, what-have-you. I can't let those delicious muffins go without any publicity." He paused. "Though Lili probably wouldn't be too happy if a crowd of customers came and cleaned out your muffins. *Uncle, you never do anything right*, she'd probably say."

"Never," smiled Karan. "—But my bakery's been on the news before, with my son's incident, and all. People from Lost Town might still come — but what about people from other areas?"

Yoming shrugged his shoulders, and erased the image on the touch-panel screen.

"Karan, the people of this city aren't very good at remembering things." His voice was hoarse, and hard to catch.

"They forget everything at the blink of an eye. No matter how serious an incident. Gone. What's more, they don't even see the possibility

that there might be something underneath the surface. Remembering, doubting, contemplating. It's hard for them to do. But they don't even have to do it — the day still goes on, and peacefully, too. It's a terrifying place, this."

Yoming's words sounded so much like an open criticism of the present condition that Karan found herself straightening in her seat. If this conversation reached outside ears, that would be more terrifying than anything. As if perceiving Karan's agitation, Yoming relaxed his face in a smile and waved his hand nonchalantly.

"Don't worry. This car is equipped with an anti-tapping device. But who knows, maybe all the new cars rolling out next year will have tapping devices built right into them."

"Yoming, why are you so critical of the city? How can you be so certain that this is a frightening place?"

After a brief silence, Yoming tapped the touch-screen three times.

The image of a young, delicate-faced woman appeared. A baby was sleeping in her arms, bundled in a white blanket. The woman's smile was filled with the bliss of motherhood. Her chestnut hair, cropped in a short bob, framed her alert and energetic face, and her gentle smile was memorable.

"My wife. That's our son in her arms. This picture is from a long time ago."

"Did something happen to your—?"

"Same as with your son, she left the house one day and never came back. The only thing that's different from your case is that she disappeared along with our son, and that she was filed away as a missing person." Karan's breath caught in her throat. Yoming's calm and levelled way of speaking made the fact even more shocking.

It's the same as Shion— there's someone who's been through the same thing—

“She was a school teacher,” Yoming said quietly. “She taught art and music to kids like Lili. Said no other job could suit her better. She always told the kids to cherish what they felt in their hearts. Whether it be for drawing a picture, or writing a song, she said the most important thing was to look straight at your feeling and emotions, and express them truthfully.”

“That’s beautiful,” Karan breathed. “I don’t think I’ve heard such touching words in a long time.”

“Yeah. She was an admirable woman, touched a lot of people. She had firm beliefs, and taught her children based on those. But she started getting more and more stern warnings and directions from the Education Bureau... they told her to teach the kids strictly by the book. The book that they’d published, of course. Naturally, she resisted— and she got fired from her workplace. She got her license revoked too, because they deemed her as unfit for teaching. I think during that time, there were quite a few teachers like her who were removed from their jobs. You didn’t know, did you?”

“I had no idea— I can’t even remember...”

“No need to be ashamed. It’s natural you shouldn’t know,” Yoming said grimly. “It didn’t make the news. The authorities were already starting to manipulate information by that time. There you had the seeds of a system that would eventually prevent anything inconvenient from being publicized as tangible information.”

The car was already entering Lost Town. This district was always the least-maintained and the last to be updated in its facilities, and was an area of haphazard mish-mash. Amidst its restless buzz, Karan found herself sighing a breath of relief.

“She was planning to build a school for children, with other exiled teachers — she was trying to teach in a place where the authorities would have less influence. She’d left for a meeting to discuss plans for

the school that day — and she never came back.”

Yoming clenched his fist, and pounded the steering wheel. The crow cried plaintively in the back seat.

“I’ll never forget,” he said through clenched teeth. “No matter what happens, I’ll never forget. I’ll keep it alive in my memory. It was cloudy that morning, and it looked like it would rain any minute. I’d gone to the dentist because my toothache was getting unbearable. I was off work that day, so I should have been the one babysitting our son at home. But she took him with her so I wouldn’t have to. She put him on a stroller with a blue hood, and she was wearing a beige jacket. There were small embroidered flowers on the chest. We promised that if my toothache settled down in the afternoon, and it didn’t rain, we’d go out to the Forest Park to take a walk. At the door, we kissed and said goodbye. I kissed my son on the cheek, too. He laughed, and kicked his feet. He was wearing tiny little white socks. There were flowery patterns sewn on them too. They were purple violets. I still remember. I still haven’t forgotten a single thing. I could never forget.”

“Yoming...”

The car stopped.

You have arrived at your destination, announced the car navigator. They were in front of Karan’s bakery.

“I’m sorry, I got a little worked up,” Yoming said. “Rude of me, since we’ve only just met.”

“No—” Karan said softly. “Thank you for bringing me home.”

She paused uncertainly. She questioned herself whether it would be alright to tell him about Safu. She was unable to decide whether she could completely trust the man in front of her.

“Ma’am!”

Someone rammed full-speed into Karan's waist as she got out of the car.

"My, Lili."

"Ma'am, why did you take a day off today? Are you sick?"

Yoming called over from inside the car.

"Lili, she's fine. Madam here just had some errands to run. She'll bake muffins for you tomorrow, I'm sure."

Lili blinked, and her mouth gaped open.

"Hey, is that you, Uncle Yoming? Did you come to eat dinner again? Why do you always come when we're having chicken and mushrooms?"

"See, this is what I get. Horrible, isn't it?" Yoming smiled wryly, and leaned forward to peer into Karan's face. "If you can, open your bakery again tomorrow. And keep on at it. You've got a job to do, Karan."

"Of course."

"Never despair. You can't give up, no matter what. It's only when you despair and decide that there's nothing you can do, that you really lose. It might seem easier to just give up—"

Karan placed a hand on top of Lili's head, and shook her head firmly.

"No, I won't give up. I have my responsibilities."

"Responsibilities?"

"Yes. I'm a grown adult, and I've been living alongside this city for a long time. I've done my best to live respectably, but if the result of that is what this city has become — then we've made a huge mistake somewhere along the way. I'm not sure where we've made it — but I know I've got to take responsibility for it. We can't let children like Lili suffer because of a crime that's not their own, right?"

“Shh—!” Yoming lifted a warning finger. A young woman on a bicycle sped past the car. “I understand how you feel, but don’t say those kind of things out loud here. You don’t know who might be listening.”

Lili giggled, and pulled at Karan’s skirt.

“Uncle Yo’s always being cautious. He’s a scaredy-cat, even though he’s a grown-up.”

“When you grow up, Lili, you’ll start to understand what the really scary things are.”

“Well, I think Mommy is the scariest when she’s angry,” Lili said matter-of-factly. “She’s really scary, you know. Daddy says he’s scared of Mommy the most, too.”

“Ah, that’s right, of course,” Yoming replied gravely. “I agree, your Mommy can be very scary.”

Karan burst out laughing. Lili’s mother would often scold her children in a booming voice that was hard to imagine coming from her slender frame.

“Lili, Yoming, and Mr. Crow, too — if you have time to spare, how would you like to stop by for a bit? I wouldn’t be able to serve you muffins, but I could whip up some pancakes.”

“Really? Yay!” Lili clasped Karan’s hand tightly. Her hands were soft. Karan’s heart swelled with an outpouring of love.

I can’t let this little girl go through what Shion and Safu did. And I must save those two, somehow. Yes — we have a responsibility to fulfill.

Her eyes met with Yoming’s. They stared back at her, the colour of crow’s feathers. Karan nodded, and unlocked the door.

“Lili, come in. You too, Yoming. I still have things to speak to you about.”

Just then, a small black spot flitted across her vision. She heard the buzz of wings.

“What’s wrong?” Yoming followed Karan’s gaze and glanced around as he got out of the car.

“There was an insect — I thought I saw a bee flying around.”

“Bee? It might be warm still, but I don’t think they should be active anymore.”

“I guess you’re right.”

It was winter. There was no way bees would be flying around. Even if there were, it was probably a single insect that had wandered out into the air, drawn by the sunlight and warmth. But she could not shake the foreboding feeling in her heart.

“Ma’am?”

Lili stared up at her from below as she stood still in the doorway.

“Oh, sorry about that. Come on in.”

My nerves are just on-edge. I must be tired. Karan reassured herself, and opened the door. She stepped inside, and shook her head violently, as if brushing away the buzzing sound that had lodged itself in her ears.

3

LAND'S END

*Humans were born from the eye of Ra.
Ra was the creator of heaven, earth, and all things.
Since he was the Sun, and also the ruler of the gods,
it was decided that he would become the first King on earth.*

THE BEGINNING OF HEAVEN AND EARTH, EGYPTIAN MYTH

IT WAS blurry. Everything was veiled in a haze, and vague.

But I have to wake up...

Safu struggled to open her eyes. She bit her lip as hard as she could. There was a slight pain. She could feel her sensations returning.

Safu realized that she was bound to a stretcher. A white door opened, and she was carted inside. In her blurry vision, she could not make out what was there. She felt her body gliding sideways.

“Ah, are we awake?” It was a man’s voice. “No need to be, though. Let’s give you an anaesthetic, shall we? Then you can sleep again in peace.”

“Where... am I...?”

“Care to take a guess?”

What's wrong with me? What happened—? I visited Shion's house, and then—

There was a man in a Security Bureau uniform.

'Are you Safu-san?'

The shock in her neck. The numbness that had spread through her body.

Safu almost shrieked in terror. Her lips parted, but no sound came out. Her voice was stuck at the back of her throat.

"Correc... tional... Facility..."

High-pitched laughter rang out. The man was laughing.

"Do you fancy the Correctional Facility? It seems you've taken a liking to it. I know, once this surgery is over, you can live in your own special suite until you die. I'll have it all arranged."

Surgery?

"Surg..."

"Yes. You're lying on a surgical table." The man's voice was still filled with mirth. A white glare filled her vision. Safu took it to be the light of a surgical lamp. She was pierced with horror — stronger than the horror that had seized her when she had been apprehended by the Security Bureau.

A tear spilled from her eye.

"There's nothing to cry about. There will be no pain, or discomfort. Good night, now."

Shion. Shion. Shion.

He'll save me. He'll rescue me, and get me out of here — Shion.

* * *

“Shion.”

His name was called. Shion stopped his feet. His guard, a large dog, gave a low growl.

“Rikiga-san.”

Rikiga was exiting a shabby restaurant through its rickety glass door. Shabby as it was, it was one of the more decent establishments in the West Block's bazaar. Most establishments of these sort were clusters of barrels and crates placed outside to sit on, and the dishes were all of an unidentifiable origin. The stench of strong spirits and some mysterious stew wafted out from these stands out into the street, and Shion often found himself pinching his nose. But even so, starving children and old beggars milled about the shops, some wandering in hopes of receiving food, others staring fixedly at the adults bringing their food to their mouths. A shop owner raised his voice angrily, splashing water outside his storefront, and chased the people away as if they were stray dogs or cats.

And in front of these starving people, those who had been able to get their hands on the day's sustenance sank their teeth into their food, dripped grease over their mouths, and licked their fingers.

To have money, and to have power.

To have food meant to fulfil these conditions.

Shion had learned this from these few days here. But he still could not get used to it. He couldn't bear to look at the scene before him. He couldn't help but avert his gaze, and look at the ground.

“If it makes you feel better, then give them a handout. But only if you can fill the belly of every single person there,” Nezumi had said. For Shion at the present, it was an impossible task.

“What can you do with your half-hearted sympathy? You might be able to save a handful of kids from starvation, for a short time. But that just means you're creating two new types of people— those who are

starving, and those who aren't. Let me tell you something interesting, Shion. It's more excruciating for people who've filled their belly once to starve, than for people who have never been full at all. Nothing is more harsh than starvation after satiation. These kids here have never eaten until they're full. They don't know what it's like to be satisfied. That's why they can put up with it. Understand? There's nothing you can do here, absolutely nothing."

Nezumi had spat those words, and strode out of the room. But before that, he had stopped abruptly before the door, and turned around. A brown dog was sprawled off to the side.

"So Inukashi's lent this dog to you as your bodyguard, huh? And I hear your wages were a little more flush than usual. Looks like you've become his favourite."

"He says he'll let me continue working for him. He asked me to clean the guest rooms and take care of the dogs."

"And you took the job?"

"Of course," Shion replied enthusiastically. "I was so happy, I thanked him over and over again."

Nezumi sneered.

"Will you look at that. Mr. No. 6 Elite is rejoicing over a housecleaning and dogkeeping job. It should be interesting to see how much lower you're going to stoop."

"I don't think I'm stooping," Shion said promptly. "You'd agree, wouldn't you? You don't think this is stooping at all."

Nezumi's shapely face contorted slightly. He hunched his shoulders.

"Oh yeah, Shion. You got paid by Inukashi today, didn't you? Go out and buy some dried meat and bread."

"At the market?"

"You don't know any other place to buy food, do you?" Nezumi said sarcastically.

“Well—yeah, but...”

“Dried meat and bread. Inspect it carefully when they give it to you. Space out like you usually do, and you’ll be stuck with a mouldy brick of a loaf. And haggle. Haggle like no tomorrow. I’m off.”

The door closed, and his footsteps faded into the distance.

He would have to buy dried meat and bread in front of those children. Nezumi had told him to.

Dried meat, and bread.

Shion’s stomach growled insistently. His mouth watered. He had had only the slice of bread and fruits that Inukashi had given him at noon. He was terribly hungry. He had not eaten any meat, nor soft bread, for days.

His stomach growled, his mouth watered.

He wanted to eat. He wanted to sate his empty stomach.

Shion sighed, and pulled his hat further down over his head.

What can you do with your half-hearted sympathy?

He recalled Nezumi’s words again and again.

You’re right. I can’t do anything. I’m just pretending to pity those kids to boost my self-respect. The truth is that I’m about to buy meat and bread, right in front of those children, to satisfy my own hunger. That’s my true form — that’s the kind of person I am. Nezumi, is that what you meant?

There were a few coins in his pocket. It was his day’s payment that he had received from Inukashi.

“Part of that is a thank-you for treating my brother. I can’t always pay you this much.” Inukashi had said this rather curtly, but Shion was grateful for his kindness. It may have been quite a large amount for a day’s worth of work. But even so, it was enough to cover only a few strips of dried meat and two or three loaves of mouldy bread. There was almost no food left in their room, otherwise buried in books. He

wouldn't be able to live off Nezumi's goodwill forever. He had to secure a means of providing for himself, however little it was.

Shion pushed the door open, and stepped outside. The dog slowly got to its feet, and trailed after him. When Shion set foot into the market street, it drew up to Shion's side and kept pace with him closely. He was trained well. It was apparent that Inukashi had quite a hand with his dogs. Shion smiled sheepishly as he caught himself, yet again, being surprised or impressed like with so many other things since coming to the West Block.

It was already dusk. Darkness was setting in, and the cooing and bellowing of voices echoed even more loudly in the air. Under ripped tents, and in front of barracks, people sold and bought things, ate, and drank. As soon as the warmth of the afternoon slipped beneath the horizon, the ground beneath them grew colder by the minute. Business was probably booming at Inukashi's hotel. For those who had nowhere warm to sleep, it was going to be an unpleasant night. Bare-breasted women called out from the darkness of the alleyways, and old women clad in rags huddled on the ground in the same darkness. Children trotted about, nimbly threading through the crowd, and being yelled at occasionally. And still people bought and sold, ate, and drank.

Don't know what waits for me tomorrow.

But at least I've lived through today.

So I'll eat. So I'll drink. Here, it's everything we've got.

All the things I've said, can't enjoy 'em once I'm dead

So I'm alive an' enjoyin' 'em today.

That's everything. Here, it's everything. My everything.

Someone was singing off-key. Shion paused, and tilted an ear to the voice. He hugged the parcel of dried meat and bread that he had just

bought close to his chest. This clamour that seemed to rush at him and overwhelm him — this clamour, this jumble of noises that seemed to burst out of the ground itself —

It was all connected to those who had a strong attachment to life, and the energy that they radiated. Here, everyone clung fast to life. They greedily latched onto survival. Because nothing insured a tomorrow for them, these people lived with even more desperation. This energy, this clamour. It was something that didn't exist, wasn't allowed to exist, in No. 6.

What feelings did Nezumi have as he walked through these streets?

“Brother.”

A feeble voice called out to him. He turned to see a thin child robed in faded cloth. He had long, matted hair, and a dirty face. Shion couldn't tell whether it was a boy or a girl.

“Spare some bread for me,” the child pleaded weakly, in a voice that was barely a whisper. “I haven't eaten for three days. Please, just a morsel.”

The child's countenance reminded him of a little girl he got along with back in Lost Town. Her name was Lili.

“A morsel...”

A pair of tiny hands stretched toward him. Almost without a thought, Shion was putting his hand into his parcel. As soon as he pulled out a round roll, an impact slammed into his back. He had been shoved. He staggered. As Shion lost his balance, a pair of small hands snatched the parcel from Shion's arms. At the same time, he was shoved violently in the back once more, and he fell to his knees.

“Run!”

The child shouted energetically, almost unrecognizable from the whisper moments before. Several children yelled after him as they stormed

past Shion. The dog leapt forward swiftly and silently. He attacked the child who had stolen the parcel. Screams rose from the group.

Still hugging the package of dried meat and bread in both hands, the child crumpled to the ground. A few strips of meat and a piece of bread fell out and scattered on the ground. The dog pinned the child down with its legs, and bared its teeth.

“Stop it! Heel!” Shion had shouted without thinking. The dog obeyed, closed its mouth, and looked up at Shion reproachfully. The child didn’t miss his chance. He sprang up, and broke into a sprint with the package in his arms. He moved with the swiftness and agility of a wild animal. In moments, his small back had disappeared into the throng. The other children had also melted into the crowd, out of sight.

“Amazing...”

Shion couldn’t help but murmur at their cunning ways. Admittedly, he was impressed. He soon realized that this was no time to be impressed, and stooped to gather what was left of his meat and bread. What would Nezumi say, after seeing it reduced to almost one-third of its original amount? Would he say nothing, and shrug his shoulders? Would he sneer?

Shion shrugged off his coat and wrapped the bread and meat with it. He would share this with Nezumi for dinner tonight. Those children would probably do the same. They would share it amongst themselves, and each have a tiny morsel of food for dinner. Naive, and meaningless sympathy. He knew Nezumi would criticize him scathingly, but Shion was still a little relieved.

At least tonight, those children would have food. Right now, he had no power to free them from starvation. He couldn’t do anything. But if his meat and bread would stave off their empty stomachs even for a short time— wasn’t that at least a little meaningful? It was acceptable enough to give up because he was powerless to do anything. It was

acceptable, but it was arrogant. *Wouldn't you think so, Nezumi?*

"Oy, you there, fella."

From a stall selling roasted kebabs, the female shopkeeper called over to him in her raspy voice. "Will ya stop standin' in front o' my store all dazed-like? Being a nuisance, you is. Disruptin' business!"

"Oh, I'm sorry," Shion bowed his head hastily in apology, but the shop mistress was already busy dealing with other customers to notice him. Here, no one looked out for other strangers. They simply weren't interested. Whether there be robbery on the street, or a beggar dying, or a fight breaking out, no one cared. It all blended into the scenery of daily occurrences.

"Well, let's go home, then," Shion called over to the dog, and noticed its jaws snapping as it was chewing something.

"Hey, wait a minute, don't tell me you're—"

The dog gulped the meat in its mouth, and looked up at him with a flash of a grin.

"When did you manage to pick that meat up? A lot quicker than me, huh."

The dog lolled its pink tongue, licked its chops, and began trotting briskly ahead of him. Shion was amused, though he wasn't sure why. He had been following the dog for some time when he was stopped by Rikiga. Outwardly, Rikiga's job was publishing lewd adult magazines. But behind the scenes, he acted as a middleman for prostitutes, and that was his livelihood. Among his patrons there were said to be higher officials of No. 6 as well. In the words of Nezumi, it was from these kinds of people that Rikiga cunningly weaselled great amounts money.

But he was also the man that Shion's mother Karan told him to go to for help. According to Rikiga, a long time ago before No. 6 and the West Block was been divided with a wall of special alloy, he had met

and fallen in love with Karan. But it was only he who had fallen in love, and Karan had merely shown agreement toward the articles that Rikiga had written as a journalist at that time.

“He’s the prime example of a corrupted man.” These were also Nezu-mi’s words, but Shion found he liked the somewhat aloof and fearless aura of the man who had once loved his mother. This man wasn’t completely corrupted. He still had journalism in his bones. That was what Shion felt.

Rikiga’s face was beet-red from drunkenness, and even his eyes were bloodshot. It looked like he had been drinking quite a bit.

“Rikiga-san, it’s bad for your health if you don’t lay off the alcohol a little.”

“You’re so kind, Shion. I feel like Karan’s the one reprimanding me. She was just saying to me the other day, *‘Please, Rikiga, mind your health.’*”

“The other day? My mother?”

“In my dream. Ever since seeing you, Karan’s started appearing in my dreams. And every single time I see her, she scolds me. Don’t drink, don’t be reckless, don’t lose sight of what your job should really be—” A flush that was not from alcohol rose in Rikiga’s cheeks. He turned his face away as if to avoid Shion’s gaze.

“Well, a dream’s just a dream. Karan’s moved on, gotten herself an admirable son like you. I’m sure she’s changed from when she was younger — in appearance, and heart too.”

“She’s aged,” Shion conceded. “And she’s gotten a little plump. —But if she were to see you again, Rikiga-san, I’m sure she’d say the same thing she said to you in your dream. That’s the kind of person she is.” Rikiga opened his mouth to say something, and then pursed his lips. “All that about Karan— it’s— it’s alright. To tell you the truth, it’s a bit painful remembering...” he trailed off before abruptly changing

the subject. "So are you alone today?"

"I'm with the dog."

"The one that's glaring at me suspiciously right now? You wouldn't wanna bite me, mutt. Just so you know, my meat is soaked in booze, and it's running in my veins. Sink your teeth into this, and you'll go belly-up from alcohol poisoning."

The dog glanced up at the drunken man, twitched its nose disdainfully, and scowled. Shion looked down and chuckled to himself.

"What's his problem?" Rikiga grumbled at the dog. "So, no one else with you today apart from the dog?"

"Are you talking about Nezumi?"

"Yeah. That sarcastic smart-aleck of an actor. Geez, I don't think I've met anyone as foul-mouthed as he is."

"But you were his fan, right?"

"I just didn't know his true identity, that's all. I mean, Eve is quite enthralling onstage. I never would have guessed that he'd be such an impolite asshole. The kid goes around saying whatever he wants, whenever he wants. Hard to imagine how a beautiful face like that can be so brash and brutal. Unbelievable, I tell ya."

"Nezumi only speaks the truth."

No matter how harsh or ruthless his words were, they never carried any lies. That was why they became blades and spears that pierced Shion's chest, and left a pain that he could not forget. It was a pain that he would never have known if he had not met Nezumi. Every time the countless pangs stirred restlessly deep in his chest, Shion felt something in himself changing little by little. A part crumbled away, while another part rebuilt itself; and yet another part would be born anew. Each word from Nezumi, and the pain that accompanied it led Shion to change, and kept urging him forward. Shion could vividly feel himself being changed and shaped by the force of another.

"You know, Shion. If it gets too unbearable, you can stay over with me," Rikiga said as they walked side-by-side. His breath hit Shion's cheek, and reeked of alcohol.

"Unbearable? What do you mean?"

"No, I understand," Rikiga said abruptly. "You don't have to hide it. I can't imagine how it *wouldn't* be unbearable living with Eve. I'm guessing your living conditions are less-than-standard. Are you getting enough to eat? Now, I think this highly unlikely, but if in some nasty turn of events, you get influenced by Eve and your personality gets as twisted as his— hm," he grunted to himself. "Indeed. There's no way I can let that happen to Karan's son. Come live at my place. I'll give you enough to eat, and give you a warm bed to sleep in."

"No, that's alright. I'm fine."

"But Karan sent word to come to me for help, right?"

"Yes, but I don't want to be a burden on you, Rikiga-san," Shion insisted. "I'm fine. I've managed until now, and I'll keep managing. And I actually enjoy being around Nezumi."

"There's no way you'd enjoy being around an ass like him. You don't have to put on a brave face. You're having a hard time, aren't you? Look, you're not even wearing a sweater. You poor kid."

"Oh, no, I'm just using my sweater to wrap my meat and bread—"

But Rikiga wasn't listening to Shion's answer. He was glancing at his surroundings, and nodding fervently to himself.

"I know a good store. Let's go there." He yanked Shion by the arm, and walked into a shop that was lined with an enormous quantity of clothes. It looked like a used-clothing shop, and there were garments even hanging from the ceiling. The clothes ranged from well-worn to almost new.

"G'day." A woman almost as large as the shopkeeper from the kebab stand materialized out of the shadows of a mountain of clothes. As

soon as she noticed that Rikiga was her customer, she pasted a bright business smile onto her face.

“Whah, Mr. Rikiga. Nice to see you again,” she drawled. “If you’re looking for a dress to give to someone, we’ve got some very good ones, we do. One of these would leave her pleased as punch, yessir.”

“No, I’m not looking for women’s clothes today,” replied Rikiga. “Can you find something warm that would look nice on this boy here?”

The woman’s eyes narrowed, and her gaze raked Shion from head to toe.

“Whah, what an *adorable* gentleman we have heah,” she said appreciatively. “And mah, what bee-yootiful hair. Is it fashionable with young people these days?”

Shion pulled his wool hat further down over his eyes. His glossy white hair stood out, even in the dim darkness of the shop. When the parasite wasp had hatched inside him, as the price for his survival or some sort of side-effect, Shion’s hair had been drained of its colour in a single night, and a red scar had appeared on his skin, snaking its way up from his leg to his neck. He could hide his scar with clothing, but with his hair, it wasn’t so easy. His snowy hair and youthful face were an unusual combination, and drew stares wherever he went. In the West Block, it wasn’t particularly out-of-place for young people to be balding or have greying hair from malnutrition. There were many children that had salt-and-pepper hair which would otherwise be more common to those entering their senior years. But those like Shion, whose every strand of hair was pure white and shiny, was a rarity.

“It’s more transparent than white, I’d say. I think it looks way prettier than before, to tell you the truth.” Even Nezumi had said so, while touching his hair with his fingertips.

“Is he your boy? Highly unlikely, Ah’d say,” the women remarked, her artificial smile still plastered to her face as she gazed at Shion. He

felt like he was being sized up. It was a little uncomfortable.

“Rikiga-san, um, I really don’t need any winter clothes, can we just—”

“Nonsense,” Rikiga interrupted. “Winters here are harsh. You’ve got barely enough flesh on those bones to get you through. You need some good, warm clothes to keep the cold out. Well?” he said impatiently to the shopkeeper. “Are you going to put out some clothes or not? If you’re not, I’ll take my business elsewhere.”

Under Rikiga’s glare, the woman sprang hastily into motion.

“Whah, of course Ah will. We’ve actually just gotten a shipment in. Just a momen’ now.” The woman heaved an armload of clothes from behind a dirty curtain.

“There y’ go. Choose any one you like. They’re all *excellent* qualitatay.”

Shion had his doubts about whether they were of *excellent qualitatay* or not, but there was certainly a variety of garments. There were overcoats, half-coats, sweaters, heavy shawls, and sports jackets of every size, material, and colour, all heaped high.

“Guess you just have to look in the right place,” Shion muttered to himself. Here was a wealth of clothing, where just down the road there were people clad in rags, shivering in the cold. Even in a severely impoverished place like the West Block, there was still a stark divide between the poor and privileged.

“Shion, you don’t need to be modest. Pick anything that catches your eye.”

“But Rikiga-san, there’s no reason for you to be so good to me—”

“Don’t worry about it. You’re Karan’s son— and to me, that sort of feels like you’re my son too. Think of it as a kind of treat from your dad.”

Shion blinked, and gazed into Rikiga’s flushed face. It looked like his drinking had done away with some of his inhibitions; what he was saying now was probably close to how he truly felt. Perhaps Rikiga

had lived alone all this time in the West Block, with no family. And now, he was trying to re-enact the sort of family life he never had, with the son of a woman he had once loved. Freedom and loneliness. He had the cunning it took to succeed in the underground business with No. 6 officials as his patrons; but he had the frailty of one who had wearied of living too long in solitude.

Humans were complex. They housed in themselves both resilience and frailty; ying and yang; light and shadow; sacred and sinful. Here was the true form of a human that Shion would never have been able to map from the vast sea of knowledge he had acquired in No. 6.

What he knew of the human body — of roughly 32,000 genes; approximately 100,000 different kinds of proteins; 300 million base sequences of DNA; its neurons; collagen fibres; macrophages; the layered structure of muscles; the volume of blood in circulation — he didn't think any of it a waste. He didn't think so at all. But *understanding* a human being was an entirely different dimension. It was impossible to grasp any of the complexity or true form of a living being from systematic knowledge or information that could be converted to numbers.

It was something that Shion had learned from his days of living with Nezumi on this land.

"Well, in that case, I guess I'll choose freely."

"That's more like it," Rikiga said jovially. "Which one do you want? Find anything you like?"

Shion pulled out a dark, heavy coat.

"I'll take this one. It looks warm."

"Are you sure you want something that dull? Alright, then pick a flashy sweater. You're young, you'd look better in bright colours."

"No, really—" Shion protested, "I don't need so much."

"Nonsense. The coat by itself isn't going to keep you warm enough."

“Ah’d say so too mahself, sir,” the woman chimed in. “Our sweaters are *very* warm, see. Whah don’t you trah some on?”

The woman confidently yanked a sweater out of the pile. The mountain of clothes collapsed, and spilled in an avalanche over the floor.

“Oh, mah. *Well*. Ah *do* apologize—”

Rikiga clicked his tongue in annoyance.

“*What* are you doing?” he said irritably. “Now we can’t even choose from this mess. Ridiculous, huh, Shion.” He paused. “Shion — what’s wrong?”

Although Rikiga had spoken right beside him, his words did not reach Shion’s ears. His gaze was glued to what had appeared underneath the scattered garments. All sound and colour disappeared from around him, and only that thing rose up into his vision.

It was a grey half-coat.

The soft colour, with a hint of blue; its premium quality obvious to the touch; the large buttons on the cuffs of the sleeves — he had seen them before.

“This is—” His hand trembled as he grasped the coat. There was a rip in the shoulder that had been sewn up crudely with black thread. There was also a button missing, which looked like it had been torn off. His hands shook violently. He wanted them to stop, but they would not.

“That one capture your fancy? Ah, but this is ladies’ coat, see. The very best qualitaty, of course — but maht be just a *little* snug on you, sir. Ah don’t think it would fit. The last coat, the black one, that would look much—”

“Where did you—”

“Ah beg your pardon?”

“I’m asking you where you got this from!” He was yelling. He had no

intention of intimidating the woman, but she raised her eyebrows in surprise, and took a step backwards.

"This coat— where— where did you get it?"

"Shion!"

Rikiga clamped a hand on Shion's shoulder from behind. "What's wrong? What are you getting all worked up for? What's wrong with the coat?"

Shion swallowed hard, and clenched the coat in his hands.

"This belongs to Safu."

"Safu? Who's that?"

"My friend. My... very precious..."

"Friend? You mean, from when you were still inside the city?"

"Yes."

"Are you sure it's not a mistake? There must be dozens of coats that look like this."

Shion gritted his teeth in hopes of stopping the trembling in his fingers, and shook his head from side to side.

It was no mistake. This was Safu's coat. It had been a gift from her only blood relative, her grandmother, and even for a boy like Shion, he could tell that it was an elegant and becoming piece that complimented Safu's well-defined face.

"Your Grandma must really know you well, Safu. She always chooses things that look the best on you," he had said.

"Yeah, I guess so. I mean, she's raised me all my life, after all. Hey, Shion— if you were to give me a coat, what kind would you give me?"

"What? I'm sorry, but my wages are never gonna be able to get you a coat as nice as that one."

"I'm just saying, 'what if'? I want to know what you would choose."

"Hmm, tough question."

“Well, think hard. Solving difficult questions is your thing, isn’t it?”

Last year, they had walked down a winter path holding this kind of conversation. The rays of the winter sun had streamed through the bare branches and shone down on Safu, making her coat glow dimly. That was the first time he had thought his childhood friend looked beautiful. The wintry sun, the warm smile, the grey coat. It was Safu’s. He was sure of it.

Why— what was this doing here? Why, why, why...

“Why?” Shion pressed urgently. “Where, and how did you get this coat? Tell me, please. Now.”

“Shion, calm down.” Rikiga stepped out in front of Shion, and blocked the woman’s way. “So, what route did you ship this in through? Did it find its way here from No. 6, or—”

The woman’s face had long been wiped clean of its plastic smile. Instead, it was filled with bold and disdainful suspicion.

“Whah, I *never*. Here Ah am, bein’ polite for *you*, Mr. Rikiga, and what do Ah get in return? Is it any of your business where Ah get mah things? Or what is it— plannin’ to find all the faults you can with mah goods, and get them for cheap, Ah suppose? This is no joking matter, no, this *is* not. Ah’m not laughing one bit.”

“What the hell would I be doing wanting to make you laugh?” Rikiga snapped. “I can assure you the chances of that is slimmer than a hair on my head. Why aren’t you talking? What are you being so cautious for? It’s that risky, is it, wherever you’re getting these shipped from?”

The woman opened her wide mouth and let forth a stream of indignant complaints.

“Tha’s *quite* enough. Ah’ll have you know Ah run a *decent* business ’round these parts. If you’ve got somethin’ to complain about, you can show yourself the door. Git out, Ah say. Go home!”

Before she could finish, Rikiga had twisted her arm behind her back, and pinned her down on the counter.

“What the hell are you doin’? You dirty littl’ bastard!”

“If you don’t want your arm broken, you better spit it out,” Rikiga said darkly. “How did you get this coat?”

“Ah got it from the waste disposal plant in No. 6. Picked it up ’cause it was floatin’ in the sewage. Thas’ all, mercy, Jesus!” She winced in pain.

“There was sewage coming out of that place? I don’t think I’ve heard anything about that.”

“Thas’ whah Ah’m sayin’, it was a long time ago — does it matter, really? They threw ’t away ’cause it was garbage, Ah’m free to do whatever Ah want with it. It’s nobody’s business, ’specially not yours.”

“You’re lying!” Shion yelled. “That’s a lie! This coat was important to Safu. She would never throw it away!”

“What’s the noise about?” A door at the back of the store opened, and a man walked in. He was a giant — at least two metres tall in height. It looked like he weighed at least a hundred kilograms. His head was completely bald, and his face was strangely twisted. Despite the season, he was only clad in a short-sleeved T-shirt. Tattoos of a scorpion and skull decorated his thick arms.

“You’re back, and just in tahm. Will you kick these two out of here?” The woman smiled contemptuously while still being pinned by Rikiga. “Ah’ll have you know that mah husband’s got mighty strong muscles in them arms. Could sure break a neck or two ’fore breakfast. Ah’d git outta here if Ah were you, ’fore you end up dead.”

Rikiga let go of the woman, and shrugged his shoulders casually.

“Well?” said the woman impatiently. “What’re you dawdling for? Beat ’em ’til they can barely stand, go on.”

The man remained silent. Then, without uttering a single word, he bowed his head low.

“Long time no see, Conk,” Rikiga said momentarily. “Didn’t know you settled down. So you’re the hubby of a clothes-dealer now, huh?”
 “Got married a month ago,” the man mumbled.

“Well, well. Congratulations. Will you be kind and ask your beautiful wife where she got this coat? She’s got a lot of spunk, this madam of yours. Having a hard time getting the truth out of her.”

The man whom Rikiga called Conk stared intently at the coat in Shion’s hands, and turned to the woman.

“Tell Rikiga-san the truth.”

“Whah, whas’ gotten in to you all of a sudden? What do you have to listen to them for?”

“Rikiga-san was good to me a long time ago. Hurry up. Say it.”

Under Conk’s threatening gaze, the woman’s face twisted into a scowl. Still scowling, she turned her face away huffily.

“Ah jus’ bought it off some middleman. Ah dunno where *he* maht’ve gotten it.”

Rikiga clicked his tongue.

“Liar. There’s no way you wouldn’t know where your merchandise came from.”

“Ah don’t know what Ah don’t know,” the woman said stubbornly.
 “No way Ah would.”

Rikiga posed another question while restraining Conk, who had taken a step forward with a clenched fist.

“Then tell me who that middleman is,” he said. “I’ll be able to figure out the rest.”

The woman didn’t answer. Rikiga extracted a few bills from his breast pocket, placed them in the woman’s hand, and closed her fingers

around them.

"You were talking to yourself, and you let the middleman's name slip. We just happened to overhear. We'll keep it that way. I won't cause you trouble."

The woman glanced at the bills in her hand, and with her face still turned aside, mumbled an answer.

"It's the dogkeeper. That weird squirt who uses his dogs to do business."

The dog curled up at Shion's feet pricked its ears. Rikiga gave a low growl.

"Inukashi, huh. Then it must've come from the Correctional Facility."

"Correctional Facility?" Shion echoed in disbelief.

"Yeah," said Rikiga. "I heard the kid passes prisoner's belongings along to the underground market."

Shion's heart stopped. Or at least, it felt like it did. He couldn't breathe. There was a dull ringing in his ears.

Correctional Facility, prisoners, Correctional Facility, prisoners, Correctional Facility...

"Then Safu... she's inside the Correctional Facility?"

"Most likely," Rikiga answered heavily. "And she probably hasn't been invited cordially as a guest, either. She's probably been taken into custody— treated as a prisoner, no doubt."

Shion burst out of the store with the grey coat in his arms.

He had to see Inukashi immediately. He had to learn the truth from him.

"Shion!"

Behind him, Rikiga's yell scattered on the wind and dispersed fruitlessly into the air.



The man was walking strangely, and he had been doing so for some time. He stumbled on unsteady feet as if he were drunk.

Twelve-year-old Juse tilted his head in bewilderment as he dismounted from his bicycle. Off to the left, he could see the apartment building where he and his family lived. He was in a corner of a park, one of many that dotted the residential area. Although it wasn't as large as the Forest Park, it was nevertheless a peaceful alcove abundant in greenery. Juse pushed his bicycle along — a crossroad bike he had gotten for this twelfth birthday from his father — and followed the man with his gaze. He couldn't help but be concerned; he couldn't just leave the man there. His mother was always lamenting this habit of his. 'Don't get involved in other people's business,' she would say. 'You seem to want to stick your nose into everything, Juse. I wonder if you've gotten it from your grandfather.' But if he *had* gotten it from his grandfather, for Juse it would have been the best thing he could ask for. He always thought so in his heart.

Juse loved his grandfather. When Juse was still young, his grandfather, who had once been a sailor, would always sit Juse on his lap and tell him stories. He spoke of the sea, which Juse had never seen before; of great white whales that were as big as mountains; lands that were suspended year-round in snow and ice; flocks of tens of thousands of butterflies that streamed across the sky in one large flowing mass; giants that lived above the clouds; mysterious creatures that lived deep beneath the sea; faeries; magic; ancient wars of the gods — his mother hated it, but there was a time in Juse's life when he became completely engrossed in the stories that his grandfather would tell him.

He grew up, and not long after he began attending an institution selected by the Education Bureau, he received a formal reprimand

from the instructor that he had delusional tendencies. He was told that this was a concern for his future. His mother broke down in tears, and his father reeled from the blow. Juse was streamed into the Special Program and received special instruction for a full year. It was mandated to him, and he was not given a choice. All the old books he had borrowed from the shelves of his grandfather were disposed of. And a few months later, his grandfather disappeared altogether. He had been taken to the Twilight Cottage. Juse always heard from people how it was the greatest happiness any elderly person could ask for, but he himself cried in bed for many nights from the loneliness of never being able to see his grandfather again. And on nights where he cried himself to sleep, he always dreamt of the stories his grandfather used to tell him.

A year later, Juse had stopped talking about great white whales, or faeries with transparent wings. The adults sighed breaths of relief. But in the depths of the boy's soul, the stories remained secretly alive, and breathed within him. He would never be able to wash them away. Perhaps that was why he found himself still concerned about other people, even now. He couldn't help but wonder, *what does this person do? What's he feeling right now?* But he had also acquired the sense not to say it out loud.

"Oh—!" Juse cried out softly. The man had collapsed at the foot of a beech tree. The man groaned in pain. Juse left his crossroad bike and trotted to the man's side. He thought he saw something black fly away from the man, who was lying face down. Juse didn't have the time to check. The man's body had begun convulsing, but soon lay still.

"Um— sir—"

Juse called out to him hesitantly. He peered into the man's face. The next moment, Juse was screaming.

4

A LIE OF TRUTH, A TRUTH OF FICTION

The King's ears are donkey's ears.

Great furry donkey's ears.

Moving, twitching donkey's ears.

KING MIDAS' DONKEY EARS, GREEK MYTH

N_{EZUMI} WALKED slowly along the night path. Here, night and darkness were synonymous with each other. After all natural light had faded, what was left was a world of darkness. Everything became painted black.

Sometimes, a barrack would let a thin strip of light seep out of one of its cracks, while barely keeping the wind and rain out. But the lights were often extinguished not long after, and a frigid chill would reign over the night, piercing through the darkness, the silence, and people's clothes to reach their warm bodies underneath.

Even the white puffs of breath that escaped his lips faded into the darkness. He turned his face up to the heavens. Countless stars were winking in the clear night sky.

Tomorrow morning would probably be even colder than usual. And outside, more people would freeze to death. A cruel fate to meet under a starry sky. Even with a star-filled sky, no one called these winter nights beautiful — not on this land.

Nezumi stopped his feet, and gazed at the glittering city in the distance. The city of light loomed in the darkness — the Holy City of No. 6. The entire city glowed golden, and reminded him of the myth of King Midas, who turned everything he touched into gold.

In the freezing darkness, Nezumi smiled wanly.

King Midas would acquire the golden touch, but in exchange for it he would no longer be able to bring meat nor bread to his lips, and would even turn his beloved daughter into a golden statue. He would then finally realize his greed and his folly, and beg the gods for forgiveness.

No. 6, what will you do? You, the city that looks down on us in our darkness, and glitters in all its deception and artifice, will you too grovel on the ground one day and beg for forgiveness? But there will be no gods to grant you mercy. Clad in that golden robe of yours, you'll crumble, burn to ashes, and perish. I'll live until the moment the curtains fall on your finale. I'll keep living, and see the end with my own eyes.

Nezumi re-wrapped his superfibre cloth around himself, and began to walk. A little mouse, one that Shion had named Hamlet, poked its head out of the folds and chirruped softly.

Yes, he was going to live. Just as he had all the way up until now, he was going to keep living, even if he had to crawl the earth on all fours. He would shroud himself from any danger, sharpen his fangs, polish his claws, and keep living until the moment that he would sink his teeth into the other's throat, and tear it apart.

He would survive, keep living. He would.

Nezumi put a hand to the back pocket of his pants. Inside it was Karan's memo.

*Safu was taken away by the Security Bureau.
Help. -K*

He had not shown Shion yet. What was he to do with it? Nezumi was suspended in his decision. He stood at a crossroads, unable to throw the memo away, nor to pass it to Shion and turn his back on him, saying it was none of his own business.

To be indecisive, to waver, and to be agitated — he knew how dangerous these were to him, almost painfully aware. Right or left; up or down; fight or flight; abandon or protect — the split second it took to make the decision was the difference between life and death. He had never once made the wrong choice. That was how he had survived up until now.

This memo is dangerous. Then, all he had to do was throw it away. Along with the indecision that would no doubt endanger his life, it was for the best to entomb it all in darkness.

He knew the correct answer. But why wasn't he complying with it? Why was he taking the trouble, even paying a large sum of money, to have information collected about the Correctional Facility? *What the hell am I doing?*

His feet stopped.

Nezumi stood still, and trained his eyes onto the darkness. He was on a slope sparsely populated with trees, a couple dozen metres away from his underground abode.

"Who's there?" he spoke quietly. There was a dry rustling above him, perhaps from a gust of wind that whistled through the bare branches. But even more discreetly, there was a movement in the dark, the faint sound of a step on the leaves.

"A little slow to notice, aren't ya?" There was a short bark of a laugh. "Not like you, not like you at all. What were you daydreaming about?"

“Inukashi.”

Inukashi’s black hair and tan skin were convenient for blending into the darkness. But it was careless of him not to have noticed his presence until he had come this close. He was not himself today.

“Good thing it was only me. Who knows how many lives you’d need if you were that dazed around anyone else, Eve.” Inukashi called Nezumi by his stage name, and gave another short laugh.

“Things aren’t much safer with you around,” Nezumi retorted. “Especially if you’re gonna be waiting at night to ambush me on the road.” He took half a step backwards. “What do you want, Inukashi? I find it hardly likely you’ve been able to get the information this quickly.” Inukashi’s tone of voice changed, and all sarcasm vanished from his speech.

“We’ve got an emergency.”

“Emergency?”

“Just now — well, more like awhile ago — Shion came to see me.”

“Did he?” A jolt of unease raced through him, almost painfully.

“And not about his dog-washing job, either. He shoved a grey coat in my face, and asked me if I got it from the Correctional Facility.”

“Grey coat, huh... women’s?”

“Yeah. It was ripped at the shoulder, but it was a fine piece of clothing. It came from a used-clothes dealer I sold stuff to. Stuff I got smuggled out of the Correctional Facility.”

It must belong to that girl— Safu. Nezumi turned aside, and drew a breath.

“So?”

“So?” Inukashi echoed incredulously. “You tell me. What’s the script for this act, huh, Nezumi? Shion says this coat belongs to his friend. Which means his little friend is being kept prisoner in the Correctional

Facility. And earlier today, you gave me money to gather information about the Correctional Facility. Don't tell me those aren't related — even a dog wouldn't fall for that lie. Are you planning to help Shion's little friend out, is that what you're doing?"

Nezumi had no way to answer. He could neither affirm nor reject what Inukashi had said.

"Of course not," Inukashi answered for him. "There's no way someone like *you* would throw his life away to help a complete stranger."

"What makes you think I'm gonna die in the process?"

On the other end of the darkness, Inukashi sucked in a deep breath.

"Are you half-asleep? This is the Correctional Facility we're talking about. By some lucky fluke, you might be able to sneak in. But there's no way you'd make it out alive. Nezumi, don't get any funny ideas."

"Goodness gracious, are you *worried* about me? I'm shocked."

"I could care less about you," Inukashi snapped. "Whether one rat dies or not isn't gonna make a difference. But what're you gonna do about Shion, huh? Now he knows where his little friend's been taken. Being the oblivious little boy he is, he probably thinks the Correctional Facility is just some cushy Centre for Discipline, or whatever. He probably figures all he has to do is hand in a Visitation Form to see his little friend. If you don't stop him, the kid's gonna go. He's gonna go and — he's gonna get himself killed."

Inukashi fell silent, the darkness of the night seemed to deepen. Even the wind was still — the tree branches ceased to make even a faint rustle.

"Is this what you've waited all this time to tell me?" Nezumi said presently. "I ache to imagine what pains I must have put you through." Nezumi stepped forward, and grabbed Inukashi by the shoulder before he could slip away. As long as he had bearings on the other's presence, he could more than easily predict all of his movements.

"It doesn't matter what Shion plans to do," Nezumi said quietly. "He's not one of us, and it's none of our business."

"Then why the hell are you sniffing around behind his back?" Inukashi replied accusingly. "Why do you need to gather information about the Correctional Facility in secret?"

Nezumi stiffened his fingers and dug them harder into Inukashi's thin, bony shoulder. Inukashi cried out in pain. Nezumi bent to bring his lips near the other's ear.

"Don't stick your nose in things you have no business in," he whispered. "You do the job you've been paid to do, and nothing else."

He let his hand go. Inukashi's small body swayed unsteadily.

"I only told Shion where the coat came from," he said. "I haven't told him anything about what you've come to me for."

"Of course you haven't."

"Nezumi, Shion's gonna go alone," Inukashi said levelly. He feebly shook the arm that was now numb all the way to his fingertips. "He thinks you don't know anything about it. And he's gonna go alone, without telling anyone. He's not gonna get you involved. You know that, right?"

"What makes you so sure? Are you Shion's Papa or something?"

"I don't have to be his Papa to know. You should know even better than me what kind of person he is. That's why you're scuttling around in secret, aren't you?"

"Shut up!" Nezumi had raised his voice in a snarl. His emotions whipped about turbulently; his breathing came out irregular. Inukashi showed almost no reaction.

"If he's so precious to you that you don't wanna lose him," Inukashi said steadily, "protect him to the very end. And do whatever it takes to protect him, you idiot, no matter how humiliating it is. You think

you can save face, huh? Keep it all hidden, and take care of it all on your own? Stop fooling yourself.”

“Inukashi!”

Inukashi sprang back a split second before Nezumi took a step forward. Crouched on one knee, Inukashi laughed softly.

“You lose, Nezumi.”

“What?”

“You’ve gotten yourself something you need to protect — you lose. Those are the rules in these parts. Better get to know them.”

Nezumi kicked off the ground, and rounded in on Inukashi from the front. He snared the other boy as he tried to get away, and pushed him to the ground.

“What’d you say about losing?” he said fiercely. “That’s enough bullshit from you.”

“I’m not bullshitting. Nezumi, if this was you a while ago, you wouldn’t have let yourself be provoked so easily. You wouldn’t be walking around at night lost in thought, either.”

Let go, Inukashi said in an eerily calm voice. He got up, and heaved a sigh.

“Still don’t realize, Nezumi?”

“Huh?”

A sharp whistle tore through the air. While he whistled, Inukashi took several steps backwards.

In the darkness from all directions, countless small red dots of flame glinted as they emerged. It didn’t take Nezumi long to realize that they were dogs’ eyes. Before he knew it, he was surrounded by a pack of them. Not one of them raised so much as a growl as they formed a ring and advanced on him.

“Those ones are trained guard-dogs. You’re not gonna get the same deal you did in the afternoon.” Inukashi’s voice was further away now. “You stepped right into that ring without even realizing it. Definitely not a mistake you’d normally make, Nezumi. But there’s your weakness. Forget Shion — look at you, you can’t even protect yourself.”

After a moment of silence, a short command sliced the air.

“Get him!”

The dogs sprang up. Dozens of lithe and deadly bodies flew over Nezumi’s head and came down upon him from above as he sat crouched on the ground. He sprang to his feet, and aimed a kick straight upwards. A yelp.

One dog broke the silence with its voice, and crumpled to the ground. Before Nezumi could catch his breath, another one kicked off the ground. It sank its teeth into Nezumi’s arm, which he had wrapped with his superfibre cloth just in time. Nezumi swung his entire arm around and battered the dog to the ground. He rose, and regained his posture with a tree at his back.

“Inukashi, if you’re gonna keep up this stupid game, I’m not gonna go easy on you either.” Nezumi drew his knife from its leather sheath. He caught his breath, and counted the little red flames.

Four more.

“So you don’t care if your precious dogs get their throats slit, huh?” he called out.

Inukashi’s voice answered from the same spot as before.

“Let’s see you try. That was just a warm-up. They’re not gonna be all polite this time and come at you one by one. This time, they’re coming all at once.”

Even before Inukashi had finished his sentence, Nezumi was lunging in the direction of his voice. At the same time, a searing pain tore

across his shoulder.

“Out of the way!” He rammed the butt of the knife between the dog’s eyes. Along with the sound of tearing fabric, the black dog went rolling across the ground behind him.

“Inukashi!” Nezumi yanked Inukashi by his long hair, and dragged him down. He pinned him to the ground, and pressed the knife to his tan throat.

“Back your dogs down, or else—”

Inukashi laughed shortly.

“Or else what? You gonna kill me?”

“If you wish it so,” Nezumi said coolly.

“You think you can kill me, when you haven’t even managed to kill a single dog?”

This time, it was Nezumi who gave a soft laugh.

“But I don’t have a spare knife today.”

“What?”

“Dog’s blood dulls the blade. I saved it and kept it clean for you.”

Inukashi’s body twitched.

“Hey, cut that out, you jerk,” he said nervously. “You try and kill me — my dogs’ll jump you all at once. They’ll tear you to pieces.”

“Oh, I don’t know about that. You’re their boss, right? I’ve heard before that dogs lose their will to fight if their boss gets defeated.”

“Th—That’s not true— hey, really, cut it out. It’s dangerous.”

“Back your dogs down.”

“Fine.” Inukashi snapped his fingers. The dogs spun on their heels at once, and disappeared into the darkness.

“I see. You’ve trained them well.”

“Thanks for the compliment,” Inukashi said sullenly. “Funny how it doesn’t seem to make me feel any better. So are you gonna get your

heavy ass off me or not? A love scene with you isn't exactly something I've been itching to do lately."

"Don't worry," Nezumi said pleasantly, "it's the last thing I'd want to be doing either. I wouldn't even do it if I got paid to on-stage."

After he had freed Inukashi and put away his knife, Nezumi posed his question anew.

"What was all that for?"

Inukashi clucked his tongue while he brushed the leaves off his clothes.

"I took it upon myself to give you a private lesson."

"What?"

"The fact is, you're not as strong as you think. I just thought I'd teach you that. You've got skill, though. Not many people can get that far against me and my dogs."

"Why, thanks for the compliment. Funny how it's not making me feel better."

"But you're not any superhuman or monster," Inukashi continued.

"You're just a human. And a man can only do so much by himself."

There was a dull pain in Nezumi's shoulder. Blood flowed in streams down his arm.

A fleeting thought crossed Nezumi's mind. This was the same spot where he had gotten the bullet wound which Shion had treated four years ago.

"Nezumi!"

He could hear Shion's voice calling him. The light of a lamp bobbed nearer.

"Looks like the little lad has come to fetch you himself," Inukashi snickered quietly. "Well, let me excuse myself then—" Then, somewhat rushed, he added, "Nezumi, there's something weird going on inside No. 6."

“Weird?”

“I don’t know the details. I’ve heard that there’s some weird disease going around, but I don’t know for sure. I’m gonna look into it. And I’m going to be getting information about the inside of the Correctional Facility soon. It looks like things are starting to get busy for them too. It’s gonna get pretty interesting, I can smell it — my dog’s nose is telling me. So—”

“So?”

“So count me in — I’m gonna help you out.”

Inukashi’s hand reached out, and clapped Nezumi firmly on the shoulder. A vicious pain shot through him. Nezumi groaned, and fell to his knees with a hand pressed to his shoulder.

“See ya. I’ll be in touch soon.” Inukashi melted into the inky darkness faster than his dogs had disappeared. As he faded, Shion’s footsteps approached nearer.

“Nezumi, did something happen?”

Shion held the lamp up to Nezumi as he got to his feet. His eyes widened in alarm.

“What happened to you? You’re bleeding!”

“I got attacked by a dog.”

“A dog? Why?”

“It was just some mongrel. I guess it thought I was a cute little bunny rabbit. What are *you* doing here?”

Hamlet poked its head out from Shion’s sweater pocket.

“He came to get me,” Shion said. “I thought something might’ve happened to you.”

“So you came to help. With one lamp.”

“Yeah.” Shion brought the lamp closer to Nezumi’s wound, and furrowed his brow.

“We have to get this treated. Let’s go home. Can you walk?”

“Of course.”

Shion’s slipped a hand under Nezumi’s armpit, as if to support him. Nezumi brushed him away, and began to walk ahead. His shoulder throbbed painfully. But he wasn’t about to cling onto the hand that was extended to him. If he learned to lean on someone, he would never be able to walk on his own again. The helping hand was always fickle, and disappeared just as suddenly as it was offered. That was how things were.

Once they returned to their underground room, Shion sprang into action, briskly taking the appropriate steps. He checked the wound, cleaned, and disinfected it.

“You gonna sew it up again?”

“The wound isn’t that bad this time, unfortunately,” Shion said, in a rare rueful grin as he closed the emergency kit. “Freaked out a bit, didn’t you, Nezumi? Thought you’d go through the same thing as four years ago?”

“‘A bit’ is an overstatement. With you, I feel like I’d end up with stitches for a bug bite.”

“How rude,” Shion smiled. “I still think the treatment I gave you four years ago was the appropriate thing to do.”

Four years ago, on that stormy night — yes, on the night he had first met Shion — No. 6 had been in the midst of a hurricane. He still remembered, ever so vividly, the window flung open as if to invite him in; twelve-year-old Shion as he poked his face out; ‘You’re hurt, aren’t you? I’ll treat your wound’ — words that he had never expected; the satisfied smile that had spread over Shion’s face the moment he had completed the suture; the sweetness of the cocoa; the delicious taste of the cherry cake; the comfort of the bed; the sound of quiet, slumbering breaths right beside him as he awoke the next morning —

he couldn't forget any of it, no matter how hard he tried. Even when he tried to discard it, he could never quite bring himself to.

Each and every miraculous occurrence of that night still remained with him as tangible sensations, never fading in the least over the four years until now.

Did people call them memories? A mental record? Or did they call it fate?

It was easy enough to laugh at people, calling them indulgent and weak, when they accepted others unconditionally and tried to save them. Indeed, as a result of taking Nezumi in, Shion had lost almost all of his privileges and fortune.

How much easier things would have been if he was able to dismiss Shion with a condescending laugh, this naive boy, this petri-dish elite who had grown up oblivious to society. But it was too bitter to laugh at and be done with. It was too vivid to forget. And to throw away, it was much too heavy.

"Shion."

"Hm?"

"Do you really think so?"

Shion's hands stopped in the middle of winding a bandage.

"Four years ago. Do you really think it was the appropriate thing to do?"

"Well, we were in pretty limited surroundings," Shion said slowly.

"Back then, though, that would have been the most I could do. Now, maybe I would be able to sew it up a bit better." The long fingers of his deft-looking hands moved as nimbly as they looked, winding the bandage tightly and neatly.

"Not just about my injury. About the whole night."

After he had knotted the ends of the bandage with care, Shion studied Nezumi's eyes.

“Your life turned 180 degrees that night. Can you still say, even now, that what you did wasn’t a mistake?”

“Yeah.” His answer was so prompt, Nezumi was caught off-guard.

“You don’t regret it?”

“No.”

“Not even a bit?”

“No.”

“Why?”

“Nezumi, I don’t really understand what you’re trying to ask. But I’ve done a little thinking myself since moving to Lost Town. I wondered, if I were to go back in time, and return to that night four years ago — if I were to return to before I met you, what would I do?”

Shion smiled sheepishly, and pushed the emergency kit to the back of the shelf.

“I thought about it, over and over again. And every time, there was only one answer. No matter how many times I’d return to that night, I’d do the same thing again. I’d open the window, and wait for you.”

“Even if you knew that your own ruin would be waiting beyond it?”

“But there wasn’t any ruin,” Shion replied softly. “I don’t think my being here like this has ruined me at all. Right, Cravat?”

The small brown mouse nodded from its perch atop a stack of books.

“That one’s Hamlet, isn’t it?”

“Hamlet’s sleeping on the bed.”

“Oh. Right. — Geez, you had to go giving them stupid names, now it’s more confusing than before.”

“The poor guys deserve names, it’s the least you can do. Both of them are smart and courageous. Like Hamlet today, when he let me know that you were in danger.”

“Well, he went to the wrong person. Even if you showed up, you wouldn’t be much help. It was alright this time because I’d already chased the dogs away, but if I hadn’t, you’d probably be the one sitting there with a gaping wound.”

“Yeah, well — I guess you’re right about that one.”

Nezumi stood up, and grabbed Shion by the arm.

“Never do something like that again, you hear me? Whatever happens, don’t flatter yourself and think you can be any help to me.”

Shion stared back at him with unblinking eyes. Nezumi lifted his chin, and clenched his jaw.

“You’re powerless, you remember that. You don’t have the skill or the mentality it takes to fight. You’re like a chick that’s fallen out of its nest. You’d just chirp-chirp-chirp until you’re eaten by a fox. So do yourself a favour, and don’t go walking into danger’s path. Don’t do it, ever. Use your head. Put your so-called gifted brain into motion, full-throttle, and use your judgment to assess the situation. Geez, I don’t know what the hell you were thinking, running out into the darkness without even carrying a weapon.”

“I wasn’t.”

“What?”

“I wasn’t thinking at all, of the situation, or of danger. I was already running before I could stop to think.”

“That’s why I’m saying, Shion, next time, don’t ever do something as foolish or reckless.”

“Then what should I do?”

“Don’t do anything. There’s nothing you could do anyway. Pull a blanket over your head or something, and stay quiet.”

Shion dropped his gaze, and shook his head.

"I can't do that," he said quietly. "I can't stay there and sit still when I know you're in trouble. I would've burst outside either way."

"You'd just be a hindrance."

"That's harsh," Shion said softly.

"It's the truth."

"Nezumi — you're right," he relented. "I'm useless. I don't know how to fight, and I would never be able to bring myself to hurt anyone."

"Yeah, and as a soldier, that would put you in the lowest rank. No — actually, you'd be a write-off. So don't even think about fighting. You don't have the mental leverage to be worrying about other people. You can't even protect yourself. So don't do anything. I'm begging you, just don't go near any dangerous places."

What the hell am I saying?

Nezumi clenched his jaw again.

What was he saying? What was he doing, getting serious about this? Was he that bent on stopping Shion?

Shion's gonna go alone.

Inukashi's low voice echoed in his ears.

Yes, Shion would probably go alone. *He'd set out to a place with less than one in a million chances of returning alive, and he'd go alone, without begging for my help, without even telling me. He would go silently, not knowing anything about fighting, not knowing the pain of shedding blood or the chilling horrors of murderous intent. The useless, big-headed, oblivious idiot.*

"But it's not about reasoning," Shion said quietly, puncturing the silence.

"Huh? Did you say something?"

"It's not about reasoning, Nezumi. I know very well in my head that even if I were to show up, I wouldn't be of any help to you — I

wouldn't be able to save you. I know."

"Good for you. The grey matter in your head is about the only thing you can boast about, anyway. And if your head knows, then take its advice."

"No."

Shion pursed his lips firmly, his expression defiant. It was the face of one whose willpower ran strong and deep. It was Nezumi's first time seeing Shion with a face like this.

"It's not about reasoning!" Shion said heatedly. "Back there, when Hamlet came to call me, I was scared. I thought something had happened to you. I thought you were going to die. Are you telling me I should've just stopped and calculated in my head? Figured that it wouldn't do any good if I went anyway, and just sat still? I could never do that. How could I? How could I be cool and calm and think about whether I have or don't have the strength, whether I can or can't help you? How could anyone? Idiot!"

It was his second time being called an idiot by Shion. Both times, Nezumi wasn't able to predict Shion's explosion of anger. The first time, Nezumi had told Shion, 'Don't cry for other people. Don't get into fights for other people. Fight and cry only for yourself.' Shion had said that he didn't understand. It was true, he hadn't understood. For this time, again, Shion had burst out into the darkness for a stranger. Casting aside the reason which warned him of the risks, he had gone running into the darkness. It was dangerous. Very dangerous. Nezumi had been prepared for Shion to become shackles that bound his ankles. But there was also the opposite. There was a possibility that he himself would become the fetters that bound Shion's wrists.

This is why—

Nezumi averted his gaze from the boy in front of him.

This is why humans are troublesome. The more you involve yourself with

them, the tighter the shackles become. They hinder free movement. It becomes harder to live only for yourself. Maybe we should never have met. Maybe one day, Shion, you'd come to think so.

Shion's shoulders rose and fell as he took a deep breath. He stuck his lip out in a disgruntled manner.

"Nezumi, why aren't you saying anything?"

"No reason."

"Go on and laugh if you want to. You probably just think it's all gibberish from someone who doesn't know a thing about the world, right? Fine. Laugh to your heart's content. Go on, laugh."

"Wait a minute, Shion," Nezumi said hastily, "it's not like I'm mocking you. I just, well... I'm just saying it's dangerous to jump into danger like that, without thinking about—"

"I know that!" Shion said hotly. "But I couldn't help it, alright, I was worried sick. Or am I not even allowed to worry about you? Don't I even have the right to be worried?"

"The right? Shion, you're not making sense."

"You're the one making me talk like this!"

Shion's fist pounded the bookcase. A mound of books collapsed. Cravat gave an alarmed screech, and skittered into the folds of Nezumi's clothes.

Shion blinked, and his cheeks flushed. He bent to pick up the books, and mumbled an apology in a subdued voice.

"I'm sorry, I just — I didn't mean to yell."

"I don't mind," Nezumi said lightly. "I must say it was quite alluring to see you all worked up like that. Something I'd like to be treated to again once in a while."

"It seems like I'm always worked up when I'm with you," Shion sighed.

"I'm surprised at how emotional I can get sometimes."

"You've always been an emotional person. You always choose feeling over reason, and you're not ashamed to be truthful to your emotions. Four years ago, it was the same. Even when you were a candidate for the elite echelons of No. 6, you still obeyed your emotions and took me in."

"Yeah... obeyed my emotions..." he said pensively. "I guess you're right."

Shion stacked the books neatly, and exhaled.

"But you know, Nezumi, I really don't regret it. I'm still glad that I didn't turn my back on my feelings that night."

"I know."

"Huh?"

"I know you don't regret a single bit of what you did. I just asked on a whim. I guess I was probably bored, or something."

He brought a hand to his shoulder. The bandages, which were old and worn, and would have lost all elasticity by now, wrapped themselves tightly around his shoulder and arm joint, and showed no signs of loosening.

"I wouldn't have been able to dress my wound this well," Nezumi said reflectively. "You might not be able to fight, but you can probably treat people. Everyone has something. And probably—"

"Probably?"

"No, never mind. Say, I'm hungry, aren't you?"

Shion gazed at Nezumi, and gave a gentle smile.

"There's bread and meat on the table. Some stuff happened, and there's only a little bit left, but it should be enough for dinner."

"What about you?"

"I'm going to sleep. Your wound is probably gonna keep you up tonight, so you can have the bed to yourself. I'll sleep on the floor."

“How kind of you.”

“Nezumi.”

“Hm?”

“If I hadn’t met you, I probably would never have realized what kind of person I was, huh?”

“Why’re you bringing this up now?”

Shion drew nearer to Nezumi as he sat in his chair, and looked him straight in the eye.

“I would have grown up into a mild, rational, obedient adult, without even knowing there were so many emotions inside of me. I would never have known what it was like to cry, or get angry, or feel resistance toward something. I met you, and I realized how much abundance I had. And I’m proud that I know now.”

Shion clipped his words, and hesitantly lowered his eyes.

“I’m glad I met you.”

It came out as a whisper that he could barely catch. Shion bent down, his eyes still lowered. His lips brushed lightly against Nezumi’s.

A book fell somewhere with a soft *whump*.

As Shion lifted his face again, Nezumi spoke.

“Not a thank-you kiss, is it?”

“It’s a good-night kiss.”

“Good-night, huh.”

“I’m going to be shearing the dogs tomorrow,” Shion said. “There are a whole lot of them with long fur. Inukashi just leaves them, so their fur gets all tangled and they’re starting to get skin inflammation.”

“I just got bitten by a dog, alright? I don’t care if they have short fur or long fur, I don’t even want to hear about dogs right now.”

Shion laughed out loud, and gave a casual wave of his hand.

“Good night, then.”

“Yeah. Sweet dreams.”

“You too.”

Shion disappeared into the shadows of the books. Cravat crawled out from Nezumi’s clothes and scampered after him, perhaps intending to sleep with him too.

“Good-night kiss, huh.”

Nezumi traced his lips with his fingers, and slumped back in his chair.

“Some liar you are.”

His gnawing hunger, exhaustion, and throbbing pain ebbed away. In its place, something welled up from deep within. Sadness, loneliness — it wasn’t quite either. What was it? A hot bead rolled down his cheek. It took him a while to understand that they were tears. He had long forgotten what it was like to cry.

It tasted salty, like over-salted soup.

Nezumi propped his knees up and put his head down on them. Slowly, he swallowed the tears that seeped into his mouth.

5

IN FALSITY'S COMPANY

*In days of old, the Buddha
was but a mortal;
in the end, we ourselves
will be buddhas too.
How grievous that distinctions
must separate those
who are alike in sharing
the Buddha-nature!*

TALES OF HEIKE: GIU

SHION SLOWLY raised himself off the floor.

Only a few dying embers remained in the heater, and the room was freezing cold. Cravat, who had been curled up against Shion's body, raised his head and chirruped softly.

"Shh—" Shion drew his blanket around the little mouse. "Here, you sleep in this. Just *please* don't make any noise, okay?"

Shion had gotten so used to this room that he could find his way even in the dark. He padded stealthily to the door. He unlatched it, and

before opening it, he turned back again. He listened carefully. There was not a noise.

It looked like the pain from Nezumi's wound hadn't kept him from sleeping. *I guess a wound that small wouldn't be enough to keep him awake.* There were so many things he still needed to tell Nezumi. The joy of meeting him, the gratitude for everything he had done for him, and the profound respect he had for him — Shion had not been able to get any of these adequately across.

I'm glad I met you.

That was all I was able to say.

Shion inhaled the air of the room deeply, just once, before quietly opening the door.

* * *

The lamp flashed, signalling a call from a direct extension to City Hall. The man lifted his face from the research documents he had been perusing, and lightly clucked his tongue in irritation. The document, which had been printed decades ago on paper, was very intriguing, and he wished to read a little further. But the lamp was flashing red, signalling an emergency situation. The man clucked his tongue again, and put the documents away in a folder.

When he pressed the switch, the familiar face of a man appeared on-screen. He was a man who used to be called Fennec.

Fennec — the desert fox. Who was it that had first started calling him that?

“What’s the matter, Fennec?”

“We have an emergency. Two samples have been brought into the Central Hospital.”

“Something the matter with that?”

"Both of them aren't registered as representative samples in the data."

"What?"

"They're different from the samples you've requested from us. Things are happening on their own, outside of our control."

"Perhaps it's too early to conclude that they're samples. Couldn't something else be the cause?"

Fennec shook his head. The screen promptly changed to another image. An audio clip read out the two bodies' personal information. Name, age, address, occupation, history of illness, physical measurements, citizenship number...

A man and a woman. Two bodies. Both their faces were contorted in suffering, and were aged and shrivelled. If it weren't for their facial expressions, their cause of death would easily have passed as old age. But the documented age of one of them was in the twenties, the other in his late thirties.

"You're right, *they* must have done it," the man muttered. The screen flickered again, and Fennec's scowl was displayed largely. The man exhaled quietly.

"... What could this all mean?"

"I think *I* would like to know that!" Fennec raised his voice, and his ears twitched indignantly. Ah, yes. This was a habit of his. Since he was young, he had always had the habit of twitching his ears when his emotions were agitated. That was why he was called Fennec. A fennec fox was a small fox with the longest ears of its kind, reaching up to fifteen centimetres.

"But how could something unexpected like this happen?" Fennec continued. "I don't believe it. What's going on?"

"Something must have gone wrong somewhere," the man answered.

"But it's insignificant. It's nothing you should be worried about."

Fennec's throat contracted as he swallowed at the man's words.

“Are you sure?”

“Of course.”

“You have the highest responsibility in this project, you know.”

“Not officially,” the man added. “Well, but then again, nothing about this project has been publicized officially.”

“But if this succeeds, then No. 6’s City Project will finally be perfect and complete. Right?”

“Yes.”

“Then even minor slip-ups can’t be permitted.”

“I know. I’ll launch an investigation immediately looking into the cause. I want you to send the bodies over to the Special Autopsies Room, Section V.”

“I’ve already got it underway.”

“Then I’ll get to work straightaway.”

“Please do. I’ll be waiting for the report.”

“Roger.”

“Oh, yes,” Fennec added. “Once this mess has quieted down somewhat, I’m planning another clean-up.”

“Clean-up? That’s something I haven’t heard in a long time. Say, it’s almost the Holy Celebration, isn’t it?”

“Yes, the same reverent day is coming again. If you need any for your experiments, I can arrange for as many as you need. What say you?”

“I am most humbled by the kind considerations of His Excellency.”

“None of that embellished formality, if you will.”

“But you’ll eventually become the absolute ruler of this land,” the man said. “The one and only King. I’d have to start calling you Your Highness.”

“And what would you have me call you?”

"I'll stay as I am. If I'm still provided with the same top-notch research facilities and environment as I am now, then I have nothing more to ask."

"Sparse in your wants as always, I see. Then I trust you'll have the work done."

The screen silently went blank. The man let his gaze flit over the documents he had only partially read. Unfortunately, it looked like he would not be able to read through the rest of it today.

They were documents concerning a species of ants called *Eciton burchelli*, which inhabited Central and South America. These ants, which formed colonies numbering up to 500,000, did not live in one static place, but instead repeated cycles of temporary encampment and migration until their life was spent. There was only one queen ant that reigned over the colony of 500,000. But the queen's sole purpose in the colony was to lay eggs, and she was not necessarily in control of its members. Warrior ants and worker ants, large and small, all moved accordingly to their instinct, and as a result, the colony functioned seamlessly as if they were governed by a great common intellect.

Ants, and bees too, had created the ideal social system.

There was no way that humans could not do what insects already did. Each would obediently fill his role. Without thinking, without being interrupted by suspicions, they would take to their task. Brains were unnecessary. Souls were of no use.

A colony of 500,000, and a single one to reign over all.

You say I'm sparse in my wants, do you? You're right, Fennec, I desire nothing. I have no need for desire. I never have to suffer from being dominated by my desires, like you do.

The man smiled discreetly, and pushed the button for the elevator leading directly to the Special Autopsies Room.



A frost had fallen. The frozen grass underneath his shoes made crunching sounds as he trod over them. When the sun rose, the frost would sparkle white, and the barren expanse would be enveloped in light for a fleeting instant. But it was too early — the sun had yet to rise for a while longer. Shion stopped in his tracks, and lifted his face to the northern sky. He wanted to reach the Correctional Facility before dawn. He had no idea what he would do once he arrived. But he had to go. It was all he could think about. Why had Safu been impounded in the Correctional Facility, when she was supposed to be abroad? Was it in connection with him? If it was, then would Karan's safety also be compromised? Uncertainty and fretful misgivings coursed through his body, blocked his airway, and pressed against his heart. He didn't want to lose anyone, neither his mother, Safu, nor Nezumi. He would do anything to protect them. But he was frustrated at himself for not being able to come up with how he would do so.

Even now, as he was walking, Safu was probably alone and frightened. He had to do something. He had to save her and get her out. But what was he to do? How could he—

Cheep-cheep.

A soft cry. His feet stopped. His eyes, which had gotten used to the darkness, trained on a small rodent poking its face out from the grass. "Cravat?"

He scooped up the tiny mouse in his hands.

"Did you follow me out here? Go home, you shouldn't be—" He realized as soon as he had said it out loud, that this mouse was not Cravat. It wasn't Hamlet, either. It wasn't even alive. This mouse carried no sign of the warmth that living animals did.

"This is— a robot—?"

"He's the navigator." There was a voice behind him. He didn't have to turn around to know who the voice belonged to. Shion took a few measured breaths, and slowly turned his body around.

Nezumi was also approaching him slowly. He plucked the miniscule robot from Shion's hands, and tossed it into a pouch.

"It's a simple navigator robot with three-dimensional mapping functions. It was warning you because you were going in the wrong direction."

"The wrong direction—"

"Weren't you going to Inukashi's place? You were gonna give those long-haired dogs a trim because their skin was getting inflamed, weren't you? Leaving awfully early, huh? How diligent of you. But this isn't the way."

Shion inhaled the frigid air of dawn yet to come.

"This has nothing to do with you," he said bitingly. "It's none of your business what I do, or where I go. I'm sick and tired of you trying to act like my guardian. I'm not a helpless baby. Just leave me alone. You know what," he said, "it's enough. If you still think of four years ago as a debt, then let me tell you now, it's paid back. You've given more than enough already. From now on, I'm going to be free. I'm going to do as I please, without being strapped down by you. That's my decision, so don't get in my way."

He ran out of breath, and lapsed into silence. It was too dark to see the expression on Nezumi's face. His shadowy figure shifted slightly, and he could hear a soft applause.

"That's quite some recitation for an amateur. Maybe you do have a talent for acting after all. Certainly better than yesterday's kiss, at least."

"Nezumi, what—"

He thought he saw Nezumi's right hand swing upwards, and then a hard blow struck his cheek. Shion staggered, and fell backwards. The taste of blood spread inside his mouth.

"—what was—!"

"Get yourself up if you have the time to be asking questions. The next one's coming."

The tip of Nezumi's boot swung straight toward him. Shion instinctively rolled to the side.

"Don't just stop there. Keep moving, keep the flow."

A kick landed firmly in Shion's ribs. His breath caught in his throat. He blindly grasped at a handful of pebbles that littered the grassy patch.

"Don't close your eyes. Don't look away from your opponent's attacks. Move!"

Shion twisted around to whip the pebbles at Nezumi, and at the same time, kicked off the ground and tried to ram into him with his shoulder. His feet were swept from under him, and he was slammed to the ground. This time, he could not get up again. He could see the stars. The stars that scattered across the sky yet untouched by dawn twinkled almost frightfully bright.

He was grabbed by the arm, and pulled up off the ground.

"Shion, this is punishment."

"Punishment for what?"

"You lied to me."

"Well—"

"You'll admit that, won't you?"

"Yeah... I guess."

"Your second crime. You belittled me."

"I never did that."

"Lying to someone means you're belittling him. Did you think I would fall for your lame excuse? If that's not an insult to me, I don't know what the hell is."

"It was my best attempt," Shion protested feebly.

"Well, you'd make a horrible politician or writer, seeing how you can't even conceive a realistic lie."

"Was it that bad?"

"Atrocious. But this is what pisses me off the most, Shion—"

"Yeah?"

"That you must've figured I was some brat who couldn't tell one kind of kiss from the other. What good-night kiss, huh? Bullshit."

Nezumi knelt in front of Shion, and gripped his collar tightly.

"You hear me? Never give me a farewell kiss again. Ever."

"I'm sorry."

"And never lie to me again."

"I won't."

"Swear it."

"I swear."

The hand released him. Nezumi settled into a sitting position, and looked up at the heavens.

"I've heard there are strange things happening inside No. 6."

"Strange?"

"I don't know the details, but Inukashi is gathering information for me. If we do it well, maybe we can use old man Rikiga and get some information through his customers, too. And it looks like stuff is going on in the Correctional Facility as well. There's commotion happening both inside and outside of No. 6 at the same time. A little weird, don't you think?"

"Correctional Facility? Nezumi, are you saying—"

“Your important friend, or whatever — you called her your best friend, right? — I’ve known about her for a while.”

He handed Karan’s memo to Shion. Shion’s fingers began to tremble after he had read the note.

“Your Mama is safe for now. I’m not so sure about your bestie. But don’t panic. Right now, we have to gather all the information we can and set down a plan. Inukashi says he’ll help. This is all preparation so that we can infiltrate the Correctional Facility as soon as possible. Understand? We’re not going in there to get killed. We’re going in there to save her. Be calm.”

Shion nodded.

“So I’ve finally dragged you into the mess, too.”

“It’s not your fault. Inukashi says he smells something, and frankly, I have my own suspicions too. Why would they need to imprison a precious member of their elite? There’s a chance that it might have to do with the wasp incidents.”

“The parasite wasps, huh... but they’re not active this time of year.”

“That’s why something must’ve happened, something unexpected. And if it has, then it might be worth risking the danger. Whatever the case, whenever Inukashi gets into contact with me is when we make our next move. Until then, we have to gather our own information and start making preparations.”

Nezumi stood up, and spoke in a beautiful voice that rang out crystalline.

“Cheer up. Things will work out. We’ll make them work out.”

“Thanks. You’ve saved me again.”

“Things are just getting started.”

Shion stood up as well, and called the name of the boy who stood beside him.

“Nezumi.”

“Hm?”

“Mind if I—”

“Huh? What?”

As Nezumi turned to peer inquisitively at him, Shion slapped him across the face as hard as he could. Nezumi, of course, didn't so much as stagger — but he was certainly startled. After drawing a breath, he yelled,

“—the hell was that for?”

“It's punishment.”

“Punishment?”

“You hid things from me. You didn't even mention a word to me about this memo.”

“What would telling you do, anyway? I couldn't have you wandering off by yourself like you did tonight. I did you a favour and looked out for you. Or what, are you saying I don't have the right to be worried about — wait, I've heard this line somewhere before.”

“Worrying about me and hiding things from me are two completely different issues. It's not like I want to be sheltered by you. I don't want to coast along living the easy life, always being protected by you. I want—”

Shion softly clenched his fingers around his palm, on which he could still feel the sensation of Nezumi's cheek.

“I want to be equals with you.”

Nezumi hunched his shoulders, and lifted his right hand in a pledge.

“I admit my mistake. I won't do it again.”

“Do you swear it?”

“I swear herewith upon my battered cheek.”

In the distance, a cock was crowing. Even in this darkness, it could sense the coming of dawn, and heralded it loudly and shrilly. In moments, the eastern skies would lighten, and the light of the sun would wipe the darkness away. The first day of their battle was about to begin.

* * *

Safu was trying to wake up. She could feel her consciousness gradually beginning to return. But her physical sensations were still murky.

Where am I?

What am I doing here?

Am I dreaming?

I have to remember.

Remember what?

My very precious person.

Precious person.

“Safu.”

She could hear a voice very close by, a man’s voice.

No.

It’s not this voice.

The voice I’m waiting for

isn’t this voice.

“How are you feeling? I daresay you must be feeling a little different from what you’re used to? But you’ll get used to it in no time. I hope you like this special suite. It’s the best you could ask for, and it’s especially for you, Safu.”

I don’t like this voice.

Don’t call my name.

Don’t call my name

with that voice.

“Safu, you are quite beautiful. Even more than I imagined. Beautiful, indeed. I’m very satisfied.”

I don’t like this voice, and

I don’t like this smell.

It smells like — blood.

The smell of blood.

“I’m rather busy today. I’ll come again, Safu. You should relax and rest a little as well.”

The footsteps faded away, and so did the stench of blood. She was relieved.

But why

Why is everything so

hazy?

But I

From the margins of her consciousness, which was not completely recovered yet, a flash of a figure emerged vividly.

Those eyes, those nails, that mouth, the faraway gaze, the energetic smile, or that clouded expression, the long fingers — and oh, she could hear his voice.

“I always thought of you as a friend.”

He was always such a child. He had never even realized her feelings for him. But there he was, desperately searching and yearning for someone else. She had loved that childish, but intent soul of his. She had loved him like she could love no other. Even now—

She was fading out of consciousness. The darkness gently draped over her.

I’ll never see you again...

Shion.

* * *

Shion spent the majority of the day taking care of the dogs. There had been no sign of Inukashi in the morning, so Shion had had to prepare food for and groom ten some-odd dogs all by himself. He had barely any time to rest, but he didn't feel the labour to be onerous. On the contrary, he was actually grateful for it. Immersed in his work, he could forget his agitation, even for a short while.

Don't rush, and wait patiently. Act calmly.

Nezumi's words were certainly persuasive, and he had no choice but to nod his head, but still he couldn't help his agitation. He could not remain calm.

Even while I'm going about this now, Safu is...

Every time the thought crossed his mind, his emotions would be thrown into disarray, he would panic, and he would bite his lip until it bled.

A dog whined forlornly. It was one from a litter of puppies that had been born at the start of fall. Shion realized he had been staring off into space in the middle of making their meal.

"Oh, sorry."

He hastily scooped the stewed leftovers into their food bowls. The puppies fiercely wagged their identical tails as they dipped their faces into the food. In the kind of circumstances where even humans starved to death, Inukashi managed to provide for his dogs with enough so that they did not starve.

The leftover food was shipped into the ruins in the middle of the night, and was sorted into food for humans, which would be shipped to the market, and the rest, which was used for dog feed. Shion finally knew where it came from now. Inukashi was probably tracing this route. Nezumi, too, had disappeared in an early part of the morning.

What could he do?

The more he thought about it, the more he came face-to-face with his own powerlessness. It agitated him. He could not stay calm. And he would bite his lip again, and try to endure.

There was a warm sensation on the back of his hand. He looked down to see a puppy intently licking his hand. Cravat poked his head out from the breast-pocket of his sweater, and ducked back inside again. He wanted to show Safu this puppy, and this little mouse. He wanted to let her touch them, and let her feel the warmth of their little tongues and bodies.

Safu was dear to him. She was precious to him. But it was different from the amorous sense — it was more serene, more deeply connected. He loved her like family, like a close friend. Whatever kind of love it was made no change to the fact that he cared about her.

He closed his eyes. He called her name.

Safu.

* * *

“You want me to co-operate with you?” Rikiga made a clearly distasteful expression.

“Yeah,” Nezumi answered. “I want you to glean information from your customers.” Nezumi seated himself snugly into the chair, and put his feet up on the table.

“Information? You mean about the Holy City?”

“Yeah.”

“What’s in it for me?”

“Enormous riches.”

Rikiga stood up, and strode over to Nezumi. They were in a room of the building Rikiga used as his workplace. It was a room littered with

magazines and empty bottles, and it reeked of alcohol. Looking down at Nezumi, Rikiga twisted his mouth in a scowl.

"Some long legs you've got, huh. Showing off?"

"What an honour to be complimented by you. These are the money-makers, I gotta keep them in shape."

Rikiga's hand rapped sharply on the pair of legs flung out onto the table.

"Get your feet off my table. It's obvious what kind of upbringing *you've* had," he said scornfully. "Don't even know your basic manners, do you?"

"I use my manners with people who deserve them."

"Not to mention your filthy language," Rikiga continued. "And this favour you're asking for, is this some kind of act? Are you practicing for some new part you've got?"

"It's a real issue."

"A real issue, huh. Enormous riches, you say? Ridiculous."

Nezumi glanced at Rikiga's face, and flashed a faint smile.

"What's wrong?" he said. "This is about making a fortune — you love this kind of stuff. Not feeling up for it?"

"What makes you think I'm gonna believe what some third-rate, fraud of an actor tells me?"

"Then who would you listen to? Shion?"

Rikiga's gaze wavered.

"Shion? Does Shion have something to do with this?"

"He has a lot to do with it."

"Did you get him involved, Eve?"

"No. Shion sowed the seeds, they're just growing in my yard."

"What do you mean?"

"If you agree to help me, I'll tell you."

“Spit it out.”

“First, I want you to show me your customers’ stats. When’s the next time a high official from No. 6 is gonna come to have a good time? I want to know his name, and position.”

Rikiga exhaled shortly, and folded his arms.

“Eve, how old are you?”

“Younger than you, old man.”

“You must be young enough to be my son. I’ve been meaning to say this for a while, but a brat like you has no right to look down on adults like this. You’re bound to serve the consequences.”

With his eye still trained on Nezumi, Rikiga called out, “Conk,” in a loud voice. The door to the next room opened, and a large man walked in.

“He’s my new bodyguard,” Rikiga said. “Just got him hired. He used to be a wrestler, and people used to bet on the matches. He’s nearly killed several people with his bare hands. On the ring, and off the ring too.”

The man silently gazed down at Nezumi. He was so large, he made the dirty room seem a size smaller just by walking in.

“Conk, I want you to give this little prince here a proper welcome. You don’t have to kill him. Just enough so that he’d never be able to make another smart comeback again.”

“Huh?” Conk stuttered. “Uh—”

“Don’t ‘uh’ me, I’m telling you to teach this kid what a punch from a real adult is like,” Rikiga said irritably.

Conk licked his lips, and took a step forward. And another step. Nezumi stood up. Rikiga smiled contemptuously.

“This is the punishment you deserve, Eve. The full extent of it.”

Conk’s feet stopped.

“Eve — is it really you, Eve?”

Nezumi smiled, and proffered his hand in a delicate gesture. His sensual smile made even Rikiga blink.

“So your name is Conk? Pleased to meet you, Conk. Thank you for always coming to see me on stage. I would never have dreamt that I’d be able to meet you here. I’m so happy.”

“Oh — Eve, me too.”

Conk blushed crimson, and gently clasped the hand that was offered to him.

“I’ve always been a fan of yours —

I’ve seen almost all of your performances—”

“I know. You stood out, so I always knew whenever you came to my shows. You’d even send me gifts sometimes. I’ve always wanted to thank you directly.”

“Really? You — you could really tell when — when I—”

“Of course. And last time, you even cried. I was watching you from on-stage, too, you know.”

“Watching? You were watching me?”

“Watching you.”

“Eve — I don’t know how to say — I —”

“You’re overwhelmed?”

“Yeah, overwhelmed. With happiness. I’ve never been so happy. I feel like I’m floating on air.”

“Thank you, Conk,” Nezumi said pleasantly. “And I hate to disturb you, but I’d like to have a nice, long talk with Rikiga-san. Would you be so kind and pour me a cup of coffee?”

“Of course. Anything to eat?”

“That would be nice. Do you have meat pie, by any chance?”

“Yeah. I’ll bring it rightaway.”

Conk disappeared into the next room with amazing swiftness for his stature. Rikiga shook his head.

"Coffee and pie, huh? That stuff is all mine, you know," Rikiga grumbled.

"Don't complain, or he'd probably punch you. You said so yourself. Ex-wrestler. Nearly killed several people. Right?"

"I can see why his wife kicked him out of the house," Rikiga said bitterly. "He's completely useless when you need him the most."

"He's a good guy. Probably makes excellent coffee."

Rikiga clucked his tongue three times.

"That's quite something, Eve. Not only can you handle a knife, can you also use sex appeal to your advantage too?"

"Both make good weapons."

"Then use that weapon you've got."

Nezumi lowered himself into a chair and crossed his legs.

"Eve, you're no rat," Rikiga continued. "You're a cunning white demon fox, great at manipulating people. Now, I don't know how many tails¹ you've got, but I've got a man who likes that kind of thing. He's an elite, works at the Central Administration Bureau. He's my best customer."

"Does that mean you're co-operating with me?" Nezumi's face was sombre. Rikiga's face was also grave.

"I've also heard that there's been commotion recently inside No. 6."

"News reaches you quick, huh. I'm impressed."

"Don't try to flatter me with things you don't mean. Staying on top of the news is what keeps my business running. But really," he said bemusedly. "This is the first time I've heard about anything out-of-line coming from that place. And that's how many decades since the Holy

¹The number of tails a demon has signifies how powerful it is.

City came to be? It's probably about time things started fraying at the seams. And if that's the case, then I want to know more. I'm still concerned about these things, Eve. And if Shion's involved — then I don't want to turn a blind eye."

"Is he precious to you?"

"He reminds me of Karan. And unlike you, he's truthful and kind. He's a good kid. Karan raised him well. She probably showered him with love."

"What's wrong, old man?"

"What?"

"Why so solemn? You sick or something?"

"Leave me alone," Rikiga snapped. "When I'm with Shion, I just feel at peace. I'm not sure why — but anyway, I'll show you my customers' data files. Once that's done, let's hear your story. I'm not sure if it'll amount to 'enormous riches', but it might be of some interest to me."

"That's what you're really after, isn't it?"

"Say what you will."

The aroma of coffee wafted over to him.

Nezumi thought about Shion.

Showered with love — he probably very well had been. His recklessness, his liberality, his straightforwardness, his wide acceptance, were probably all tokens of the ample amount of love he had been given. Shion had probably never experienced what it was like to grovel for love. That was fortunate of him. But love could sometimes be reversed into its opposite. Love could attract hatred, and bear the banner for destruction.

Hopefully, the love that had raised Shion, the love that resided within Shion, would not become the chains that bound him, nor the hand that led him to death—

Nezumi deeply inhaled the fragrant smell, barely managing to prevent a sigh from escaping his lips.

Inukashi trudged along the path, cocking his head ever so often in perplexity.

He didn't know how to sort through the information he had gathered. It was like sorting through ore, separating the gems from the rocks. From the reams of information, he had to select those that mattered, build the parts into a structure, and draw a conclusion. He wasn't very good at these processes.

Oh well. They'll figure the rest out. My job is just to dump all the ore out in front of them. But I can't help thinking—

He stopped his feet on a whim, and craned his neck. In the distance, he could see the fortress walls of No. 6. The special alloy reflected the light of winter. Inukashi had never thought about that land deeply. It was just an entirely different world, glittering in the distance. That was it. His only concern had been to survive the day's deprivation, and managing not to starve. He had never linked his ordeal with the shining Holy City. But Nezumi was different. He was constantly occupied with No. 6 itself.

Why did he insist on concerning himself? What bound him to it?

Love and hatred were no different in that they were both entrapments. There was a gust of wind. It was chilly. Sometime tomorrow, the weather would probably change.

Inukashi curled up, and gave a small sneeze.

He'd been taken ahold of, he knew it. He'd been taken ahold of firmly by Nezumi's persistent intentions, and Shion's resolution.

No, that's not it. Half of it is me sticking my own foot in.

It wasn't because he had been threatened by Nezumi, or because he felt pity for Shion. He had stepped in on his own will.

But why?

He questioned himself, but did not receive an answer.

Why? Why have I—

He craned his neck again to survey the Holy City.

Over there, the Holy City of No. 6 glitters, and over here is where we spend our daily lives. The amount of leftovers that No. 6 spits out in a single day is enough to easily satisfy the hunger of all the people here. Just leftovers. Half-eaten food, for god's sakes.

Gluttony and starvation, extravagance and poverty, rejoicing of life and fear of death, arrogance and debasement—

Would he be able to change it?

Inukashi walked briskly in the wind. His hair rippled and streamed out behind him.

Would he be able to change the reality he had resigned himself to, the days he had struggled to survive, his life which had long been stripped of any dignity as a human being?

Ridiculous. It's just a fairy tale. Besides, what can we do now that— But Nezumi had, and so had Shion. Nezumi and Shion believed. They believed that they would be able to change things with their own power.

Inukashi couldn't bring himself to laugh at them for it. The thought, the possibility, had crossed his mind.

This is bad.

One misstep, and he probably wouldn't live to see spring.

This is bad. This is very bad.

But he was lighthearted. He felt so buoyant he felt like breaking out into song.

As he whistled a light tune, the wind hitting his body, Inukashi found himself breaking into a run.

* * *

Shion finished neatly combing the last dog, and sank down on the spot. He had to admit that he was exhausted. The whole day today he had devoted to taking care of the dogs. He felt like he'd become a dog himself. It was already dusk.

The puppies nudged at him playfully.

"Alright, alright. Come along, then, all your fleas should be gone now." He had just scooped one of them up when Cravat gave a squeak from his pocket. Shion lifted his face.

Nezumi was standing right in front of him. He had not realized it. He had felt no presence at all. But of course, by this time, it was no surprise to him either.

Shion put the puppy down, and stood up without a word. Nezumi, also silent, jerked his chin. He began walking straight toward the ruins.

"Nezumi — you got word from Inukashi?"

"The two of them are waiting for us."

"Two?"

They climbed the crumbling stairs, and opened the door at the end of the hall. On top of the small, round table, a candle was burning. Inukashi and Rikiga were seated.

"They've graciously offered their help. Let's be thankful, Shion."

"Graciously?" Inukashi scoffed, and gave an exaggerated sigh. "I don't think you call getting threatened, bribed, or tricked into doing something is 'gracious', Nezumi."

Shion took a step forward, and bowed his head deeply. He had no words to say. He felt like no words would be able to express how grateful he felt.

"Thank you — all of you." This typical statement was all he could say.

“Shion, no need to be serious about it,” Nezumi quipped. “They’ve all got ulterior motives. They’re only here because they were attracted to the sweet scent of personal profit.”

“Eve, one of these days, that cheeky tongue of yours is gonna rot and fall off. That much I’m sure of.” Rikiga had a bottle of whisky in his right hand, one that he had evidently brought along with him. He took a swig, and swallowed it slowly.

Nezumi indicated with his gaze for Shion to sit, and then lowered himself into a chair as well. Inukashi was the one who stood up.

“Can I start, Nezumi?”

“Yeah. Go ahead.”

Shion made a tight fist in his lap. *I’ve gotten all these people involved. I’m the one that did it. I can’t let myself forget that.*

A hand suddenly reached over to him. It was Nezumi’s. It gently pried Shion’s fist open, finger by finger, gently, as if toying with it.

“We’re just getting started. Tense up like that, and you won’t last.”

With his gaze fixed on the fluttering flame of the candle, Nezumi spoke as if to himself. There was probably a draft coming in from somewhere, for the flame kept flickering. It was already completely dark outside. A long day was coming to a close. No, things were just starting. They were starting right here.

“This week, the number of prisoners escorted into the Correctional Facility was three. Among them...” Inukashi trailed off while staring at the candle, then resumed. The darkness edged in on them. The flame flickered. “Among them, there were no women. There were no escorts from within the city. All three of them were men from the West Block.”

Nezumi questioned him in a low voice.

“Are you sure about that?”

"Yeah. I heard it directly from the guy who's in charge of preparing the prisoner's clothes. There were three of them recorded in the Prisoner Registration data. They tried to break into the Access Control Office to steal money. They were either hungry enough to do it, or they were funny in the head. Either way, there were no women."

"That can't be!" Shion sprang up from his seat.

There was no way that could be. But at the same time, his heart softened just for an instant. What if Safu was actually safe? *Maybe that coat was just my mistake, and it didn't belong to Safu. Maybe—*

"If that's true, then things are gonna be complicated." Nezumi furrowed his brow. His voice was cold, like the draft that made the flame flicker.

"Complicated?"

"It means that she's probably not a legitimate prisoner. I know it's weird to call a prisoner legitimate, but if she's not registered as one in the Correctional Facility, then— Shion, it means she doesn't even exist as a prisoner. She's been erased."

"Erased..."

"The moment your friend got captured by the Security Bureau, all of her data as a citizen would have been erased. In normal circumstances, it would've just been forwarded to the Correctional Facility's main computer, and been filed as prisoner data. Then, once inside the Facility, all her personal information would be re-collected and added to, along with photos from all sides, height, weight, fingerprint, vocal signature, iris, and her finger vein. Only after these procedures do prisoners really become prisoners. It wouldn't matter so much for thieves from the West Block, but if their subject is a former citizen of No. 6, then they would definitely be thorough about these things. But this time, it wasn't done at all. Why? So as not to leave any trace that your friend ever existed."

“Hey, Nezumi.” Rikiga noisily placed his bottle on the table. “Can’t you go about things a bit more delicately? All this talk about erasing and leaving traces... it’s almost like you’re saying the girl... uh, Safu, was it? You make it sound like this Safu girl has already been murdered.”

“I think you’re more lacking in delicacy than me, old man.”

Shion swallowed hard while he listened to the two speak. He didn’t feel well. He felt like he was in a nasty bout of drunkenness. But now wasn’t the time to slump over the table and go to sleep.

Safu...

“Safu was an outstanding human resource,” Shion said evenly. “The city has spent a lot of money and time on her raising her from childhood. They’ve been raising her to have a future career in the upper echelons of the city. Why would they erase her? It would be a huge loss to the city, too, if they did.”

His own voice sounded like a stranger’s to his ears. It was a hoarse and irritating voice.

“Yeah, that’s the problem,” Nezumi agreed. “Why were they so willing to wipe out an elite they’ve kept domesticated with all this time and money? It’s not likely she’s gone and done something idiotic, like you did when you were twelve.”

Inukashi’s nose twitched.

“What idiotic thing? Does it have something to do with why Shion got kicked out of No. 6?”

“It does. But that’s not relevant right now. Shion.”

“Yeah...”

“What’s your friend’s family structure?”

“Safu didn’t have any parents. I think the only relative she had was her grandmother. She said she’d been raised by her.”

"Just her grandmother, huh. Which means if Grandma dies, then Bestie is left without relatives."

"Yeah..."

Shion lifted his face, and his gaze met with a pair of grey eyes. He could finally understand what Nezumi was trying to get at.

"Even if Safu disappears, there would be no relatives to make a big deal about it. And not only that—"

"What else?"

"Safu was supposed to be living in another city for two years on exchange. Even if she went missing from No. 6, no one would find it strange."

"That probably about sums it up, then. She's an elite, has no relatives, and wouldn't raise suspicions if she went missing for a long time. Your best friend filled those requirements. That's why she was apprehended and imprisoned in the Correctional Facility. Not as a prisoner, but—"

"Not as a prisoner— then what for?"

"I don't know." Nezumi shook his head. Inukashi leaned forward.

"Hey, does that have something to do with the rumours? The one about the weird disease going around inside No. 6."

"Do you have the details on that?"

"No," Inukashi said promptly. "It's not that easy to get information about what's going on inside that city, you know. This might be more of a job for Mr. Alcoholic."

Rikiga drained the rest of the contents of his bottle, and glared at Inukashi with bloodshot eyes.

"I don't think Doggy-boy has any right to call me an alcoholic. As for inside information about the city, I can't get it rightaway. Earliest would be the day after tomorrow. But I'm warning you, Eve, just because you have all the information you need, it doesn't mean things

are going to go well. How do you plan on infiltrating the Correctional Facility?”

There was no answer. Rikiga hunched his shoulders.

“What’re you gonna do? Attack the Access Control Office like those three lunatics, and get arrested on purpose?”

“Can’t do that,” Nezumi said brusquely. “All my personal information is recorded on their main computer.”

“Oh? So it was true that you’d once been in the Correctional Facility. Ah, so there is a way to get out of that place alive, huh. What a surprise. Give me an autograph, will you, I’ll hang it on my wall. Of course, with your real name.”

Nezumi ignored Rikiga’s joke. The flame flickered violently. The wind had probably gotten stronger.

“Inukashi — how about the security system?”

“I couldn’t get anything too specific. I’ve got the main points down. And there seems to be a new facility that’s been built underground.”

“New facility? For what?”

“I dunno. Even the custodians aren’t allowed to go in there. Supposedly there’s an elevator that leads directly to the top floor, but it also has an elaborate physical recognition system that only a fraction of people can log into.”

“Top-secret and confidential, huh... and this facility is located in the Correctional Facility, and not the Moondrop. I see.”

Nezumi lapsed into his thoughts. Shion fixed his gaze on Nezumi’s profile.

“Nezumi.”

“What?”

“Getting arrested would be the easiest and most surefire way, right?”

"In a sense. But once you get inside like that, there'd be no room for free movement at all."

"Is it impossible to rescue Safu? Isn't there even a single percent of possibility that we can save her?"

Nezumi gazed at Shion with a mixture of cold indifference and pity.

"You're in the same boat as me," he said. "They've got all your personal information on file. Say we get arrested and they scan through your data. It wouldn't even take them a second to match you up with the first-class criminal on the run. If fortunes work in your favour, you'd be sent to a solitary cell. If they don't, you'd be executed on the spot."

Rikiga erupted into a fit of coughs. Inukashi drew his chair back with a large screech.

"First-class criminal on the run? This dense boy here? Wait a minute, Nezumi. I haven't heard a word of this."

"Because I haven't told you."

Ignoring Inukashi and Rikiga's rapt gaze, Shion persisted with Nezumi. There had to be something. Somewhere, there had to be a possibility. Even if it was slimmer than one percent, thinner than a spider's thread, he had to grasp it and draw it toward him. Despair was not permissible.

"If we get arrested as prisoners, does everyone get searched immediately? Isn't there any way to avoid the data-matching in the time between getting imprisoned until we get Safu out?"

"No," Nezumi answered. "As soon as we get arrested, they'd pull up all our personal information, and scan it through their files. They won't let a single mole go unnoticed. And then we'd get implanted with a V-Chip. Prisoners are bound and placed under surveillance for the whole time. We won't even get a second of free movement."

"No exceptions?"

"No exceptions. Not a single—"

Nezumi abruptly swallowed his words. His face froze.

“Nezumi?”

At his sudden silence, Shion, Inukashi, and Rikiga held their breaths and unconsciously trained their ears. A voice spilled out into the silence.

“There is.”

“Huh?”

“There’s just one exception.”

Shion widened his eyes, and stared intently at Nezumi’s candlelit profile. Nezumi’s lips moved.

“The Hunt.” His voice was raspy, and very low.

Inukashi’s body tensed in his chair. Rikiga dropped his gaze from Nezumi, and gripped his liquor bottle.

“Hunt? What’s that?” Shion looked around at the other three faces. There was no answer from any of them. The darkness in the room thickened. Inukashi sighed.

Nighttime was approaching.

No. 6, glittering golden, would reign over the night. In a corner of the West Block, in a room carved out amongst the ruins, at the very bottom of the deep of the night, the four of them silently sat surrounding a flickering flame.

There was the sound of the wind. It moaned as if it called to someone, as if in yearning. And the night enveloped it all.

The wind whistled. The flame flickered, and went out as if it had spent the last of its energy. Nezumi’s whisper echoed in the darkness. It was no longer hoarse.

“The Hunt — that’s the only exception.”

Volume IV

How would he enter the Correctional Facility? What was waiting for him inside? He would resort to anything to seek it out, and find a way to infiltrate it. It would be the only way he could save Safu. Nezumi, Inukashi, and Rikiga are moved by Shion's passion and determination. But the army has begun to attack people indiscriminately. The Hunt, it was called. But for what purpose—?

We're coming back alive. Don't forget that...

1

CURTAIN UP

*Howl, howl, howl! O, you are men of stones!
Had I your tongues and eyes, I'd use them so
That heaven's vault should crack! She's gone fore ever.*

KING LEAR, ACT V SCENE III

BYOND THE gate was a world of darkness.

It was freezing. The man shivered, and flipped the collar of his jacket up. His coat was woven of the finest cashmere, and it was lightweight and warm. It was also equipped with an automatic sensor that registered the temperature of the body and outside air to adjust the temperature inside the coat accordingly. The sensor itself was smaller, lighter, and slimmer than a postage stamp.

He could feel the biting coldness of the air on his partially-exposed face, but the rest of his body was enveloped comfortably in the warmth of his coat. So when the man shivered, it was not because of the cold.

It was the darkness. It was too dark.

No. 6, where the man lived, was a city of light. It sparkled and brimmed with it, regardless of whether it was day or night. Light

wasn't the only thing he had access to freely: thanks to leaps in biotechnology, a steady supply of food was always available, independent of seasonal or weather conditions, and he had access to any manner of foodstuffs. It was the same with energy supply. As long as they were inside the city, people were able to lead an abundant, secure and hygienic life. Apart from them, there were five other city-states in the world, but no other place had an environment as perfect as theirs. This was the reason behind No. 6's second name of the Holy City.

The man held an important position in the governing body of the Holy City. Inside the Central Administration Bureau, he held what was equivalent to the third most powerful spot. He was an elite of the elites. His son, who was turning three this year, had also scored highest in intelligence in the past Children's Examinations. The man was already receiving childrearing instruction through a Special Curriculum. If no problems arose — no problems would arise, naturally, because in no way would anything unpredictable happen inside the Holy City — then his son, as an elite as well, would be able to acquire a life which lacked nothing. It was promised to him.

The man couldn't stop shivering. How dark it was. How foreboding it was. He had no idea that nighttime could bring such fathomless darkness. He had had no idea, until he had stepped into this West Block.

What the hell is he doing?

The man who was supposed to be there to fetch him, wasn't. He was usually waiting for him in the cover of darkness, but tonight, there was no sign of him at all.

Has something happened?

Maybe something has come up.

If so... then it isn't very good.

The man exhaled in the darkness.

It was best not to dawdle here any longer. He must pass back through the gates, and return to the Holy City. He must.

His reason commanded him to return, to turn on his heel, and go back into comfort and light. But the man could not move.

Just a little longer. I'll wait for five more minutes.

It was a lingering attachment. It was his attachment for the few hours of pleasure and decadence that he was about to enjoy. This attachment, for the few hours he spent fooling around with women in the West Block, weighed his feet down and prevented him from walking away. How enticing it was to spend the hours in a drunken stupor, in the company of women with hair and eyes in every colour. It was almost a year now since he had first been irresistibly drawn into this enticement. There was no way out of it.

The City's management was getting stricter. General citizens were restricted, naturally; but even the upper echelons, which had had considerable freedom, were being imposed with limitations. Travel between the city and the West Block was one of the things which limits had been placed upon.

All travel between other Blocks were prohibited unless with a clear reason and an application to do so.

When the man had seen that section of the city's notice, he remembered giving a small sigh. The Central Administration Bureau was a department that singularly managed all of the city's information. All personal files of the citizens were naturally gathered here as well. Each citizen's name, sex, birth date, family structure, intelligence index, physical characteristics, physical measurements, history of illness, curriculum vitae, were all contained here. The daily actions of each and every individual were recorded without fail and internalized as data by the Central Administration Bureau, through the numerous surveillance cameras and sensors placed throughout the city, as well as

the data-collection chips embedded in their ID cards. This system was already well-established.

Thorough management and centralization of data — and whether for better or for worse, this man was near the heart of the system. He used his position to his advantage to overwrite his personal records numerous times. He had rewritten his file to say he had never entered the West Block. He had destroyed his records.

It was a crime, he was well aware. He was nervous of what would happen to him if this was exposed, and at the same time, he was confident that he would never be found out. He drowned himself in euphoric ecstasy. At the same time, he wanted to protect his secure life and cowered at its destruction. And underneath was the confident reassurance that he was an irreplaceable member of the elite core, and that he would not be persecuted so easily. Many emotions jostled inside the man.

But in the end, he had given into his desires and passed through the gates again tonight.

He's late, a little too late... The man chewed his lip lightly. *I should probably give up for tonight.*

Nothing was more dangerous than standing still like this for a prolonged time, wrapped in the darkness of the West Block. As the man turned to go back the way he had come, a low voice called his name. “Fura-sama¹.” That was the man’s name. The low voice carried over to him in the darkness. “I apologize for keeping you waiting.”

Fura furrowed his brow, and hunched his shoulders slightly.

“Is it you, Rikiga?”

“Yes. I’ve come to fetch you.”

“You’re late.”

¹An honorific suffix, similar to *Mr.*, but more polite.

"I'm terribly sorry. There was a slight delay."

"Delay? What happened?"

He could sense the darkness shift slightly as Rikiga shook his head.

"Nothing to worry yourself about. No trouble for you in the slightest sense, Fura-sama... actually — ah — you could say I was delayed for the purpose of your further enjoyment—"

"Which is to say?"

He could hear a vulgar laugh.

"It's taken me a bit of time to prepare a woman to your liking." The vulgar laugh continued, and the darkness coiled slimily. "But rest assured, it shall more than make up for the time I've kept you waiting. I'm most certain you'll be satisfied."

"Is she that good?"

"Exquisite specimen."

He swallowed. If he could, he would have raised his own vulgar chuckle like Rikiga, but he restrained himself.

His position was like the heavens in relation to Rikiga as the lowly earth. a resident of the West Block. He could not bring himself down to that level.

For Fura, although the West Block was place that provided him with lewd and luscious pleasures, those who lived there — Rikiga, or the women — were not the same humans as he. He saw them as insects, perhaps. No, that was too harsh — they were rather close to cattle. Humans and cattle, the dominator and dominated. No. 6's surrounding regions existed to serve the city — that was what he had been taught since childhood.

"—Shall we go, then?" Rikiga began to walk. Silently, he followed behind.

* * *

The outdated gasoline automobile was uncomfortable to ride, and bumped and jerked ever so often. The road itself was full of potholes. Once in a while, the car teetered dangerously. When Fura had first begun frequenting the West Block, he had more than once raised his voice in complaint, but now, he thought nothing of it. As one who was used to the immaculately-paved roads of No. 6 and hybrid cars fully equipped with shock-absorption, the sudden bumps and sways were new and refreshing. And more than anything, it tickled his heart with the anticipation for things to come.

“So?”

Fura leaned forward in the back seat and questioned him.

“What kind of girl is she?”

“I daresay she’s a perfect match for your tastes. I’m sure you’ll like her.”

“The last girl wasn’t so great.”

“I know. But this girl, she’s exactly as you like them, Fura-sama. Small frame, slender — and very young.”

“Young, huh.”

“Yes. Of course, this being the place it is, we’re not sure of her real age, but she’s very young, for certain. So she — hasn’t had experience with men yet.”

“Are you sure?”

“Absolutely. And not only that, it looks like she has the blood of the southern lands in her veins. She has that sort of appearance.”

“Ah.”

“We’ve many women with ripe bodies, but it’s a little difficult to find the younger ones. I could never send you a scrawny, dirty brat to service you, Fura-sama, nor would I be able to just pluck one off the street. And besides — to give this kind of job to a girl so young, and

with no experience, it is quite — well, it certainly doesn't bode well with my conscience, to say the least."

Liar. Fura retorted in his head. *For money, you'd do anything. Conscience, you say? Don't make me laugh.*

Although he was no doubt deaf to Fura's words, Rikiga let a dry chuckle escape his lips.

The car stopped. Inky-black darkness still surrounded them outside.

"This is—?" It was different from the usual place Rikiga prepared.

"It's a hotel."

"Hotel?"

"A long time ago, this used to be quite a fashionable one." Rikiga got out of the car, and lit a lamp. "The girl and her family have made this place their home. The girl said she'd only take customers if it was in her room, and she wouldn't have it any other way — she's still a child, she's probably afraid of going to strange places."

"But—"

"It's nothing to worry about. We've had her family removed temporarily. Tonight, you and the girl are the only ones here, Fura-sama. —Ah, no, that would be wrong. She also has her dogs."

"What?"

"Dogs. The girl's father runs a business that deals with dogs. There are swarms of them here."

Fura couldn't imagine what kind of business would deal with dogs. A pet shop was certainly out of the question. Were the dogs skinned and sold as meat?

"If you'll follow me, then. I would advise you to watch your feet." Rikiga swung the lamp over. Fura glanced at his profile, and carefully put his foot forward.

He did not trust this man, Rikiga. He had not a thread of trust for him. But Fura knew for certain that he was a regular and highly valued customer for Rikiga. There was no way a man like him, who loved, prized, and trusted money above all, would harm his best source of income. In that sense, Fura had never felt any apprehension toward the man that was now walking a few steps before him.

This building that Rikiga had said was once a fashionable hotel, was now half-crumbled and mostly ruin. Countless pieces of rubble littered the ground, and there were puddles everywhere. The floor was slippery, but whether it was because the flooring was rotting, or because moss was growing on it, he didn't know. He was unsteady on his leather-shoed feet. The wind nipped at his cheeks. They ascended the stairs. He smelled a faint, strange odour. It was an odour he had never smelled inside No. 6, and he had no idea what it could be. They crossed a bare, spacious area that looked like it had been a lobby, and ascended further still.

“Oh—”

He spoke without thinking. His feet were rooted to the spot. It was what looked like a narrow hallway that stretched straight before him. At least, it looked like it ran straight into the darkness, but he had no idea what was beyond the darkness that shrouded it; Fura's eyesight, unused to darkness, could not make it out.

Lit by the dim light of the lamp, he could see shadowy figures hunched over here and there.

“Dogs?”

“Yes.”

“Why are there so many? For what purpose...?”

“Ah, well, there are many reasons, but nothing to do with high officials of No. 6 like yourself,” Rikiga said. “It's nothing to be concerned

about. These dogs are quiet, they won't bite or attack you. — Alright, here we are. The girl is inside this room."

Just as Rikiga had said, the dogs remained curled up on the ground, perfectly still, without growling or baring their teeth.

"Right here, this way. After you," Rikiga ushered him in.

There was a shabby wooden door before him. Perhaps it was the lamplight that did it — the aged door looked warm and gentle to his eyes. It was like a prim old madam. There she was, sitting in a pool of sunlight, beautiful, with snowy hair. She had knitting needles in her hands, and a white ball of yarn in her lap—

Fura turned aside, and cleared his throat a few times. He had long hidden this bad habit of his to lapse into daydreams. If any of the higher officials at the Central Administration Bureau found out that he had this tendency, it would mean dire consequences for him.

In No. 6, imagining, weaving stories, speaking of dreams, and daydreaming were frowned upon and avoided like the plague. There were no official rules or prohibiting laws, but among common citizens, it was the object of ridicule and contempt; in central organizations, it was seen as inappropriate, and a valid reason for job termination. You would be removed.

The door opened. Its silver knob was manually-operated, of course, and the door screeched stubbornly as it opened inwards.

It was a low-ceilinged room, and it was dark. The only lighting came from Rikiga's lamp and a single candle in a stand on the table. It wasn't too cold, probably owing to the fact that there were no windows. But the muffled howling of the wind still echoed in the room. Various whistlings and moanings overlapped in layers like a symphony, tangled with each other, and reached his ears. He wondered how this place had been built.

The only pieces of furniture in the room were the table that held the

candle, a rather shabby partition, and a similarly pitiful bed in a corner of the room. A figure was sitting on the edge of it with a blanket over his head, curled up as if to shrink into himself.

Rikiga was right, she was small. The legs that protruded from the blanket were pitifully thin. But they were shapely. They were slender from the knee-down, and if they had a little more flesh on them, they would probably have been a beautiful set of legs, indeed.

“How is she?” Rikiga whispered at his ear. “A gem, wouldn’t you agree, Fura-sama?”

“Maybe. I can’t tell yet.”

Fura lowered himself onto the bed, and slid a hand around the small body wrapped in the blanket. He could feel her trembling slightly.

“Are you afraid? —Don’t worry, there’s no need to be.” He took off his coat, and drew her closer, blanket and all. He could feel the trembling becoming more violent in his hands. The blanket fell away from her head, and her hair, black as night, and delicate neck exposed itself to Fura’s eyes. Since she had her face turned away in defiance, her neck showed even more. Fura could tell even in this darkness that the skin was smooth and supple. And it was tan-coloured.

I see. This one may be a gem after all.

He brushed the long hair aside and let his lips travel up her neck. There was a faint smell. It was the same scent as what he had encountered on the stairs. It was the smell of a dog, a beast. But instead of diminishing Fura’s desire, the smell spurred it on even more. It was a smell he wouldn’t have gotten in No. 6 even if he had wanted to, because of its perfect hygiene. This body was thoroughly soaked in this scent, and it excited him.

“Well, then,” Rikiga said, “I guess I’ll excuse myself. Enjoy.” Rikiga made for the exit with an absent smile on his face. Fura stopped his

hand, which had been in the middle of stroking the girl's thin leg. For the first time, a suspicion flitted in his breast.

"Wait," he commanded shortly, to the man who had his back turned to him. Rikiga swung around lethargically.

"Something the matter?"

"Don't you find it strange?"

"Strange? What, may I ask?"

"Why haven't you asked for my payment first?"

Rikiga's face tensed. Then, after a while, he muttered *ah, yes, payment*, to himself.

"You always ask me to pay beforehand. Why haven't you brought it up tonight?"

"Oh, yes, of course. I'd forgotten."

"Forgotten? You? About money?"

The suspicion grew inside him. This man? Forget about money? He, who was more greedy and miserly than anyone, forget — he found it hard to believe.

His doubt and suspicion grew into unease. Things were different from usual. Why? Why—

The small body leapt up out of Fura's arms. The blanket slid to the floor.

"Cut this shit out, you bastard," he snarled. "I've had enough of this. You must be fucking kidding me." Fura gaped open-mouthed at the boy who had whipped his hair around and was baring his teeth, pelting him with profanities.

"Rikiga, who's this?"

"He is who he is, sir."

"You told me you'd prepared a young girl."

“Young girls, young boys, it doesn’t make much of a difference. I thought perhaps you had those kind of preferences hidden somewhere within, Fura-sama, and you just hadn’t realized.”

The black-haired youth bared his teeth even more. He was almost like a wild dog.

“You can stop making shit up, alcoholic old man,” he growled. “Why didn’t you follow the plan? I’m gonna turn all three of you into mince-meat and throw you to the dogs. You’re paying for this, bastards.”

Plan? Three of you? What was he talking about?

Fura gathered his coat, and stood up. He put his arms through the sleeves and glanced around the room. The four corners were dark, and the darkness was eerie.

Either way, it was dangerous to remain here.

“Where to?” Rikiga stood in front of the door, barring him with a wan smile.

“I’m going home. Get out of the way!”

“Please, please, do calm down,” Rikiga said silkily. “It isn’t like you to be so uncouth, Fura-sama.”

“Out of the way, or else—” Fura clenched his hand around the small handgun in his pocket. It was an electric gun, not very effective as a killing weapon, but enough to defend himself. He pulled it out and aimed it between Rikiga’s eyes. If he was going to retaliate any further, he would shoot without batting an eyelash. It may be for self-defense, but a gun was still a gun. Any unarmed human, if shot between the eyes, would die. But he didn’t mind. These people didn’t even qualify as humans anyway.

“But the fun’s just getting started, you’d be missing out if you went home.”

The voice came from behind him. At the same time, his mouth was covered, and his wrist was gripped tightly. The gun slipped through

his fingers. He was only being held at the mouth and hand from behind, but his whole body was trapped. He could not move at all. A cold breath caressed his earlobe. A whisper flowed into his ear.

“Why don’t you hang out with us a little longer? We’d give you such a good time, you’d melt on the spot.” It was a tender voice, and not clouded at all. It was sweet, clear, and beautiful. Fura couldn’t tell whether it was a man’s voice or woman’s voice. Perhaps, if he obeyed this inviting voice, he *would* be able to melt in ecstasy. It was a thought that lasted a mere blink of an eye.

His feet were swept from under him, and he was slammed to the floor. His breath caught in his throat, and he faded out of consciousness.

* * *

“Nezumi!” Inukashi yelled, stomping on the blanket. “This isn’t what you promised. What the hell were you doing?”

“Hush, stop barking.” Nezumi rummaged through the coat of the man he had just tied up, and extracted a leather pouch out of one of its pockets. “Take a cue from your dogs, Inukashi. Lie down and shut up.”

“Stop shitting me,” Inukashi snarled. “Why didn’t you come out sooner?”

“I forgot my line, so I was re-reading my script,” Nezumi replied mildly. “Sorry about that.”

“You must be kidding me. Fucking. Kidding. Me. You half-assed fraud, you third-rate actor. You’re more cunning than a fox, and more shameless than a pig. I’m never gonna trust you again. I hope you get bitten by fleas, and get all the blood sucked out of you so you wither and die.”

“Stop yapping already, will you? It’s not even something to get that angry about. Alright, I was two, three minutes late coming out. That’s it.”

“And in those two, three minutes I got licked on the neck and molested on my leg.”

Nezumi flashed a gentle, wry smile, like one of a mother directed toward her whining child.

“Inukashi, it’s the benefit of the experience. You’ve just had the precious experience of getting your neck licked by a high official of No. 6. You can store it away as a good memory.”

Inukashi’s clenched fist trembled. His black eyes glittered in his tan face.

“Besides,” he said, “why me? Why couldn’t you have done it instead?”

“Why do I have to do it?”

“Because you’d make the perfect prostitute. You lure men in, and make them completely weak and helplessly infatuated. A liar, a wanton, with a nasty personality to boot. You wouldn’t even have to put on an act.”

It was then that Shion finally spoke to Inukashi. Until now, he had been watching everything unfold in a daze, unable to keep up.

“Inukashi, that’s going too far. Don’t say any more.”

“Same goes for you, Shion,” Inukashi turned on him next. “Why didn’t you come rushing out the moment that man sat on the bed? That was how we planned it, right?”

“Yeah, but—” He was right. In their briefing before the event, they had agreed to wait until Fura, the high official from the Central Administration Bureau, had been brought in by Rikiga. When he sat on the bed, they were to burst out from behind the partition and apprehend him. That was the plan, and Shion had intended to act on it.

But Nezumi had stopped him. He had grabbed him by the shoulder as if to say, “don’t burst out yet.” The bed was creaking unpleasantly. The man had inched closer to Inukashi. Shion could almost feel Inukashi’s panic as if it were his own. But Nezumi still did not move. He remained crouched in the darkness, so silent that not even his breathing could be heard.

“I’m going home. Get out of the way!”

The man’s hand drew something out of his pocket. And in the same soundless way, Nezumi’s body glided forward. Shion was not able to sense Nezumi’s movements at all. Although he had been squatting right beside him, he had not even been able to sense the air around him move as he shifted.

“Why don’t you hang out with us a little longer? We’d give you such a good time, you’d melt on the spot.”

Once he heard Nezumi’s voice pierce through the multitude of layered wind-whistles, Shion finally stepped out from behind the partition and stood beside Inukashi. By this time, the man was already groaning quietly on the floor.

Inukashi clicked his teeth, with his nose wrinkled in a menacing scowl.

“‘Yeah but’? ‘Yeah but’ what, huh? Is taking care of dogs all you’re good for? You useless, airheaded idiot!”

Shion couldn’t talk back. He was well aware of how unskilled and useless he was, once he had been cornered. Nothing was quite as painful as an insult that hit the mark with its grain of truth.

Nezumi bent down and picked the handgun off the floor. He moved it around on his palm as if to check its weight.

“It’s a self-defense gun, latest model. It’s pretty small, but if you got hit point-blank, it would be fatal. I just thought it’d be more trouble if we risked letting him swing this thing around.”

“And that’s why you decided to take your sweet time, and wait until this pervert took out his gun.”

“It reduces the risk of danger.”

“Risk? Why, isn’t that just splendid,” Inukashi said sarcastically. “While I was dealing with this perverted bastard over here, you two were busily discussing the *risks*. Guess great minds are just different from us, huh? I almost want to ask you to give a special lecture to my dogs, next time.”

“Don’t be sarcastic. Here, look.”

Nezumi turned the leather pouch upside-down, and shook it lightly. Five golden coins spilled out onto the table.

“Five golds, huh. Loaded himself down quite a bit for just one night of fun, didn’t he, old man.”

“Actually, not really,” Rikiga opened his mouth. His voice was heavy and hoarse, a startling difference from his earlier cavalier tone.

“I told him I had a woman that was unusual, different from the prostitutes he usually has. I had to charge him considerably more than usual, or else he’d be suspicious. He’s a cautious one.”

“I see.”

Nezumi plucked a gold coin up.

“Here, Inukashi. Your share.”

The coin was tossed into the air, bounced off Inukashi’s fingers as he snatched at it, and fell on the floor at Shion’s feet. Shion picked it up and handed it to Inukashi. His tan fingers were trembling.

“Inukashi?”

His lips were pursed, and he looked like he was about to cry at any minute. Shion had never seen this expression on him before. His shoulders and arms were shaking slightly as well.

He must’ve been really scared.

Inukashi, who had several dozen dogs at his command, lived in ruins, and with fierceness and strength survived each day, was not able to restrain his shaking body. Shion tried to imagine just how much fear and humiliation he had gone through.

Shion didn't know how old Inukashi was. Inukashi himself probably didn't know either. Most of the West Block's residents were not certain of their age, parents, birthplace, nor whether they had a life to live tomorrow. But he could imagine that Inukashi was very young, much younger than himself at sixteen years. He knew that Inukashi engaged in fraudulent activities, theft, and even extortion without batting an eyelash. Inukashi was seldom bothered by being railed at or having insults hurled his way. But he had not been able to bear playing the bait in this farce, staged on the bed in a dimly-lit room.

He was still that young.

Inukashi's angry bellows and profanities were but the other side of the fear he really felt.

"I'm sorry," Shion found himself saying softly. "I've done a horrible thing to you. I'm really, really sorry, Inukashi."

Inukashi's brown eyes blinked. Their rims were red. His lips moved soundlessly. Shion placed a hand on his bony shoulder. He didn't think the gesture was nearly enough to soothe the other boy's anger or confusion. He knew he would not be forgiven. But he had remembered one thing. When he was still young, his mother Karan would often put a hand on his shoulder like this. He had remembered the comforting warmth that soaked into his body from that gentle hand, wordlessly placed. That was all.

Inukashi didn't resist. He shifted a little, and pressed his forehead against Shion's arm.

"Bastards... I hate you all."

"Mm-hmm," Shion murmured.

“I hated... hated it, so much...”

“I know.”

“I tried so hard not to scream — scream for you guys, ask why you weren’t coming out... I tried as—as hard as I could, you know.”

Sorry, Shion murmured again, and gripped his shoulder firmly.

Hub?

Agitation raced through him. He had felt in his fingertips, a softness of the flesh he had not expected at all. The shoulder was thin and bony, but soft. It was not hard, taut and bulging with muscle, but soft and rounded in a curve.

It reminded him of Safu’s shoulders in the few times they had touched his own.

Could it be — but how —

At almost the same time that Shion gazed at Inukashi, Inukashi detached himself from Shion’s arm, and Nezumi tossed another gold coin. This time, Inukashi’s hand securely snatched it.

“Bonus allowance.”

“How nice. Most *honourable* of you, Nezumi.”

“You haven’t done the work for free. You agreed to be the bait in exchange for money.”

“No need to tell me, I already know.”

“Then don’t go yammering on about it now. Two gold coins for less than ten minutes of work. Can’t find a job like this just anywhere.”

“I told you, I know!” Inukashi repeated loudly. “But you can count me out of any future roles like this. You can step in for me, or this airheaded young master here.”

“There won’t be a next time.”

Nezumi shoved the rest of the three gold coins in Rikiga’s direction.

“The rest is for the old man’s taking.”

“How about you guys?”

“Don’t need it.”

“Modest in your desires, aren’t you?”

“You can say that.”

“Or are you saying that because money’s gonna be useless from here on anyway?”

“Probably will be.”

“I see...”

Nezumi’s grey eyes studied Rikiga’s alcohol-flushed face.

“What’s wrong?” he said. “Why the grave face?”

Rikiga didn’t answer.

“Gold coins, old man. Your favourite. Why aren’t you accepting them? Not like they’re smeared with poison, at least I don’t think so.”

“Probably not smeared with poison. We’ve got something much more troublesome.”

The brown liquid sloshed around in his glass. The sharp smell of alcohol drifted into the air and assaulted the nose. Rikiga took another swig of the cheap liquor, and coughed weakly.

“It’s money we’ve stolen from a high official of the Holy City, tricking him and tying him up. Get our hands on that, and it could cost us our lives.”

Nezumi laughed softly.

“You’re starting to get scared *now*?”

“I am,” Rikiga nodded promptly. He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. “We’re already knee-deep, but I’m starting to get scared. We’ve really done it, now we’ve — we’ve really turned No. 6 against us.”

“They’ve always been against us. That city has always been an enemy to us. Are you saying you haven’t realized, or have you just pretended not to? Which one is it, old man?”

Rikiga drained the last of his liquor in one swig, and sighed deeply. The candle flame flickered, and their four shadows, half-blended in darkness, also shifted slightly.

“Eve.” Rikiga called Nezumi by his stage name. The alcohol seemed to be working on him, for his speech was beginning to slur.

“—Aren’t you afraid to die?”

“Die? Well, that question just came out of nowhere, didn’t it.”

“You’re turning the whole Holy City against you. You don’t possibly think you can brazenly keep living? You’re not that naive.”

“Old man.” Nezumi’s hand stroked the tabletop. The gold coins disappeared like magic. “Sorry, but I have no intention of bracing myself for death. The ones who live are the ones who win. *They’re* the ones that are going to perish. We’re gonna be the ones that survive. Are we not?”

“Are you serious about that?”

“Of course.”

“You’re mad. You’ve gone mad, and you’re living in your delusions, Eve. There’s no chance of us winning. Not even a fraction of possibility.”

“You may be right.”

“It’s completely unfounded. Everything you’re saying and trying to do, completely unfounded. Babblings of a madman. It’s one percent. 0.01. You’re willing to bet on this tiny fraction?”

“It’s a tiny fraction, but it’s not zero. Which means you don’t know until you try.”

“Eve!”

“Your hand.”

“Huh?”

“Prithee lend me your hand, your Majesty.” Nezumi forcibly grabbed Rikiga’s wrist and turned his palm upwards. He placed his own hand on top. Three gold coins appeared.

“Your share, old man. Don’t forget to claim it.”

The empty liquor bottle slid out of Rikiga’s hand, and smashed messily on the floor. Drops of liquor flew in all directions, and stained the floor.

“Be more like Inukashi, and accept it humbly. We’re in motion now. We can’t turn back. *None of us.*”

“None of us, huh...” Rikiga looked down at the gold coins in his hand, and his mouth twisted. “Accomplices to the very end, you might say.”

“Right. Important *partners*. We each have our own role, and the curtain’s long risen. You better not be thinking of ducking out now, old man, because it’s way too late for that.”

“What if I said I surrender my role? Would you kill me?”

“If you wish.”

“Knowing you, you’d probably execute the kill beautifully,” Rikiga said bitterly. “What, would you slit my throat with a knife? Give me a stab through the heart?”

“Don’t give me too much credit. It’s harder to wield a knife than an amateur might think, you know.” Nezumi turned to Rikiga and smiled. Rikiga drew his chin back, and grew stone-faced.

“My hand might slip and miss the fatal spot. It happens every now and then. Pretty gruesome for the victim, huh? He has to writhe around and suffer because he can’t die quickly. Gruesome, indeed. I’d hate to see one of my precious friends die that way.”

Rikiga made a low strangled noise in his throat, and dropped the gold coins into his pocket. Then, he spat out one word.

“Devil.”

Inukashi sniffed dismissively from his spot beside Shion.

“We’ve always known what a devil he is. No use throwing a fit about it now.”

No.

Shion balled his hand into a fist.

Nezumi was no devil. He knew this more certainly than anyone else. Again and again, his life had been saved, and been rescued from pressing danger. He had clung to the hand that was extended to him, and it had pulled him up. His life was not the only thing that had been saved — his soul, in the form that it was meant to be — had also been saved. He believed so.

Nezumi had pulled Shion up to the heights, and taught him how to gaze at the world from there. In contrast to a world circled by fortress walls, isolated and complacent, he had shown him a world which expanded to limitless horizons, where many forms of human life jostled in one place, where lifestyles, values, gods, and justice were never the same for everyone. If he had not met Nezumi, he would have continued living without knowing a thing about it, and gone on to grow old. He would have lived peacefully in the Holy City of No. 6, privileged with artificial vivacity and abundance, never casting a single thought to the world outside the wall.

Look.

Nezumi had told him. *Crawl out of your artificial world, and come over here.* He had told him to see with his own eyes. To think for himself. *Think. Think with your own head what’s right, what’s meaningful, what you want, what you believe — not the values, morals, and justice that have been fed to you, imposed upon you.*

He had been told countless times. At times passionately, at times coldly, with his voice, his gaze, and his actions, Nezumi had told him again and again.

Since meeting Nezumi, he had thought about all these things. His feelings, his desires, his thoughts, his sensations, his hopes, his beliefs, what he desired to believe. There were many things he could still not grasp, but to wrestle with his thoughts, and to keep pondering, had revived Shion's soul and pumped living blood back into it.

That was what living meant.

To make one's soul one's own. Not to hand it over to anyone else. Not to be dominated. Not to fall into submission.

This was what it was to live.

Nezumi had taught him this. He had injected new blood into his soul. And—

And Shion himself was the one who had gotten everyone involved. It wasn't Nezumi. Shion had gotten the other three involved, solely for the purpose of rescuing Safu, who had been apprehended by the Security Bureau and imprisoned in the Correctional Facility. He had dragged them into a dangerous battle, where the chances of winning were less than one in a hundred, as Rikiga had said.

"What's up, Shion? You look kinda scary — not like yourself," Inukashi cocked his head in a puzzled way. Shion shook his head.

"That's not it."

"Huh?"

"That's not it, Inukashi. Rikiga-san, too. All this, it's all my—"

His eyes met with Nezumi's. Or, rather, it was more like his eyes had been pulled at and forced to meet the other's strong gaze. Nezumi's lustrous, dark grey eyes always glittered with energy, and were beautiful. But despite that, they never showed any hint of emotion. They

had not changed at all from when Shion had first met him. They were still the same as the pair of eyes he had peered into once, pushed up against the wall with a set of cold fingers at his throat. Nezumi slowly dropped his gaze, and murmured as if in song.

"I am the spirit that denies. Yes, I am all things which you call Sin, Destruction, or Evil."

"What's that?" Inukashi twitched his nose. "Shion, what the hell is this deranged actor saying?"

"Mephistopheles."

"Huh? What's that? Is it edible?"

"He appears in the book *Faust*. He's — a demon."

"So a devil is just reciting a devil's lines. Perfectly fitting."

"No, like I said, Nezumi isn't—"

The man suddenly groaned. His bound body gave a twitch.

"Looks like our guest has awakened from his slumber." Nezumi extracted his leather gloves, and flapped them nonchalantly. A faint smile played on his lips.

"Let us begin Act One Scene Two, then, shall we?"

Rikiga looked up at the ceiling, and exhaled. Inukashi gave an exaggerated shrug of his shoulders. He glanced at Shion.

"Shion," he said.

"Hm?"

"He *is* the devil."

"Huh?"

"He's the devil, and you're the one who doesn't know the real deal. At least, that's what I think."

2

ACT ONE SCENE TWO

No, you've got it all wrong.

We flee

because we want to live.

TEZUKA OSAMU, *GRAND DOLLS*

THE SIGHTS of the wind grew louder. High-pitched and somewhat plaintive, it whistled through the ruins. The man awoke to hear the sound of the wind around him. He hadn't lost much of his composure. Bound and sitting on the floor, he let his gaze roam around the room. "What's going on?" He questioned hoarsely. No one answered. "What is going on, Rikiga? You understand what you're doing, don't you?" "Unfortunately, I do." Rikiga gave a sigh, one of several he had already heaved that day. "I understand it so well, it makes me sick to the stomach. I never asked for this, anyway."

"Let me go." The man twisted in his bonds. But he realized that the more he struggled, the more the ropes dug into his body, and he soon quieted down. He let his gaze wander about again, and cleared his throat. He remained unruffled.

“What are you after?” he said calmly. “Money? Surely you don’t think you’ll be let off easily for doing something like this?”

“Our point is not to be let off at all.” Nezumi knelt down in front of the man. The man widened his eyes in surprise, and murmured appreciatively.

“You’re a beauty.” A smile spread across the man’s face. “Rikiga, this one’s a much finer gem.”

“If it pleases you to have me,” Nezumi said, hooking a leather-gloved finger on the man’s chin, “then you can have me to your heart’s content. But it’ll be expensive. Five gold coins isn’t nearly gonna cut it.”

“Hmph,” the man sneered. “So it *is* money you’re after. How much do you want?”

“I don’t want money.”

The contemptuous smile vanished from the man’s face. He tried to draw his chin back, but Nezumi’s fingers held fast and didn’t let him.

“If it’s not money—then what?”

“Information.”

“What?”

“Information,” Nezumi repeated. “I’m going to have you spit out every piece of information you have, right here.”

“What preposterous—”

“And after that, I’ll give you plenty of my company. I think it’s a good deal, don’t you?”

“Don’t make me laugh,” the man retorted. “Mere West Block residents, having the audacity to ask for *information*? And what will filth like you do with information about the Holy City, hm? What use would it be to you? You ought to go back to crawling around in the dirt where you belong.”

There was a slap. Nezumi's right hand had struck a fierce blow across the man's cheek. The man fell to the floor on his side. Nezumi yanked him upright by his hair, and sharply slapped the other cheek. Once more. Twice. The man never so much as raised a groan, and only crumpled to the floor each time.

Shion stood frozen and staring with his breath caught in his throat. Lit in the glow of the candle, Nezumi's profile had no expression. Blank-faced, as if wearing a mask, he continued to abuse the man.

"Nezumi—" His body shook.

Please. No more. Stop—

As Shion took a step forward, a tan arm barred him.

"Inukashi."

"Shut up and watch, little boy," Inukashi hissed quietly, licking his lips with the tip of his tongue. "The fun's just getting started. Don't get in the way."

"But this—this is too much."

"Shion, remember what you said before?"

"Huh? What?"

"You said to me once that Nezumi was kind. I think it was in this room, actually. Have you forgotten?"

"I remember."

A quiet chuckle escaped Inukashi's lips.

"It's just getting started, Shion. Make sure you get a good look at exactly how *kind* your dearest Little Mouse is."

There was a cut on the side of the man's mouth. It looked like he had cut the inside of it too; a mix of saliva and blood oozed from his lips.

"Stop it—please—" the man moaned. Nezumi's hand stopped.

"Feel like speaking truthfully now?"

"I... don't know... anything..."

“A high official of the Central Administration Bureau like yourself, know nothing, sir? That doesn’t even make a good joke.”

“All information is managed and processed by computers... there isn’t... much that I know...”

Shion thought that he had a point. Even if he was a high official, it didn’t mean he would have access to all internal information about No. 6. The more classified the information, the more barriers there would be, so that only a select handful of people would know its entirety. Only a select handful—

Who were they? he wondered. It was a question he had never considered up until now. In No. 6’s City Hall, inside the oval-shaped dome of the Moondrop, a certain man reigned.

The mayor?

He was a figure who was at the centre of the citizens’ overwhelming support and admiration for building up the prosperity of No. 6. Apart from the first one, all mayoral elections had been without any other competitors.

Could it be him?

The image of the mayor’s face on television rose in his mind. It was wearing a gentle smile. He had seen it in no other expression. He had not been able to. The more steps the city took toward prosperity, the less he began to see the mayor’s unmediated face in public. And at the same time, enormous support and political power were beginning to concentrate around this one man. The mayor, as he spoke to the citizens through the media, was always a mild-mannered gentleman, full of intellect and compassion.

“I don’t like him.”

Shion’s mother Karan had said so once, and turned off the television soon afterwards. Shion was not yet ten, but he nevertheless remembered being surprised at the harsh tone of his mother’s voice, and

the fact that she had spat out those words about the mayor, whom everyone else praised.

“Why don’t you like him?”

“I don’t like his ears. They’re so vulgar.”

“His ears?”

“They twitch. Like some kind of beast that’s after his prey.”

Was the mayor twitching his ears as he was being broadcast? Shion had tilted his head, perplexed. Then Karan’s face had grown serious, and she had said, *that’s a secret*. By that time, there had been a generally discouraging air throughout the city towards people who criticized the mayor, and it was best to keep criticisms to yourself. It had been nearly ten years since then, and the mayor was still sitting at his post of highest power in No. 6, while Shion was here, outside the wall.

“Answer my question.” Nezumi’s low voice reached his ears as if crawling stealthily across the ground. “This new facility that’s been built inside the Correctional Facility—what is it? What’s it for?”

The man shook his head.

“I don’t know.”

“Then which Bureau is it under?”

“I don’t know.”

“A few days ago, a young woman—an elite candidate—was taken into custody by the Security Bureau. She’s been imprisoned in the Correctional Facility, but that’s as far as we know. Does her case have something to do with that new facility?”

“I don’t... know...”

“I’ve heard that lately there have been patients sprouting up inside the city with an unidentifiable illness. Is that true? What are the symptoms? How many patients are there?”

There was no answer. Nezumi straightened up, and shrugged slightly.

"You don't have much of a vocabulary for a high official. Didn't you have to be a little smoother than that to pick up girls?"

"Untie me."

The inside of the man's mouth was probably swelling, for his voice came out strangely muffled. "Untie me, and let me go. If you do, I'll forget about this incident. I'll do you a favour and pretend it never happened."

"Why, thank you. A judgment of clemency. I'm so grateful—Inukashi," he said abruptly.

"Uh?" Inukashi answered lazily.

"Keep him still."

"A'ight." Inukashi quickly stepped in behind the man, and held his shoulders and arms down. Nezumi unsheathed his knife.

"What are you doing?" the man cried frantically. His forehead was moist with sweat.

"Quiet down. I'm just granting your wish."

The white blade flashed in the hazy light. The knife, clean of any ornament or decoration, was eerily beautiful. The ropes fell away. Nezumi, with an almost languid air, took the man's hand in his own. He held it by the wrist, and peered into the man's face. The man stayed frozen and unmoving, although he had long been freed. Perhaps he was not able to move. The pair of grey eyes had arrested and trapped him in his spot.

Leather-gloved fingertips stroked the man's palm.

"I figured a high official of No. 6 like you would only need a little pain before he started bawling and spilling the beans. Looks like I underestimated you by a lot."

Nezumi traced the man's hand, finger by finger, and gave a small sigh. It was almost almost like a loving caress.

“You’ve got guts. It’s quite something. Let me give you a reward.”

A shard of glass was placed on the man’s hand. It was a piece from the shattered liquor bottle.

“And one more.”

The pointed end of the shard shone dully.

“What—what are you doing—?” The man shook his head, his voice and body quaking uncontrollably. “Stop—stop it, please—”

“Why? The reward’s all ready for you. Take it.”

Nezumi’s hands cupped around the man’s, and closed it firmly.

The wind grew still. For a brief moment, a bloodcurdling scream rang out in the silent room. Rikiga’s face contorted as he averted his gaze. Inukashi also closed his eyes, and bit his lip while he held the man down.

“Answer me!” Nezumi commanded, still clenching the man’s hand closed. “Answer everything I’ve asked you, or else I’ll make sure you can never use any of your five fingers again.”

“Nezumi!” No sooner had Shion yelled his name than he found himself springing forward. He rammed himself into Nezumi. Bloodstained shards of glass fell out of the man’s hand onto the floor.

“Stop—stop, please.” Nezumi showed neither surprise nor anger, and remained expressionless as if he had expected Shion to act this way all along. The only thing he did was to click his tongue lightly in irritation.

“Don’t get in my way.”

“You can’t. You can’t do this. This... this is torture.”

“What other way do I have? If I bow my head and say *will you please*, is this guy gonna tell me everything?”

“Well—but—but this isn’t right. I don’t want you to do something like this.”

“Shion, get over yourself and your indulgent thoughts, or else we’re never gonna get anywhere. We aren’t playing house. This is a war.”

Shion knew. He knew very well. He was aware of the hardships that awaited him in the future. But—

“But—it’s not right. Torture isn’t right. Don’t do it.”

“Why not?”

“He’s a human. We can’t make him suffer.”

Nezumi snorted. He turned aside, and laughed silently with his mouth closed. The man was sobbing pitifully, his hand bloody and shaking. *Poor guy*, Inukashi muttered under his breath. Nezumi nudged the man’s thigh with the tip of his boot, and looked Shion straight in the eye.

“You heard what he said. Us West Block people are filth to guys like him. Like bugs that scuttle across the ground. He’s probably never even thought of us as humans, with blood running through our veins, and emotions like everyone else. Whether we bleed, or starve to death—or writhe in pain, it has nothing to do with him. That’s what he thinks. So why do we have to treat him like a human? If we’re insects to them, then these guys aren’t even—”

“I don’t want to see it!” Shion found himself yelling, more loudly than his last outburst. He yelled to block out Nezumi’s voice.

“Huh?”

“I don’t want to see it. I don’t want to see you harm someone like this.” He felt nauseous. At himself. A thick, black self-hatred coiled within his body. *Don’t want to see? Then drop your gaze. You’re always like this. You’ve always averted your eyes from everything you don’t want to see, and pretended you didn’t notice. For whose sake is Nezumi exercising this brutality? Isn’t it all for you? Didn’t you force him to do this? Haven’t you burdened Nezumi with a sin that should have been your own—and now you’re crying saintly things? They’re just pretty words, Shion. Everything*

you say and do, just a pretty facade. You never dirty your own hands, never bear a wound on your soul, never get hurt, and yet, you mustn't hurt others, you say, brandishing justice.

This self-righteousness, this arrogance, this falseness, superficiality, your unsightly and hideous nature.

It's all you.

None other than his own voice was speaking to him. Shion felt nauseous. The hatred slithered and twisted inside him.

But he didn't want to see it. Despite everything, he didn't want to see it. He could be certain of that much.

"I don't—want to see you like that." Nezumi, I don't want to see you cold and ruthless. Because it's a lie. Everything you've taught me has always led to rebirth and creation. You told me to live, and you told me to think. You taught me to love another, to understand another, to seek a connection, to yearn—and yes, everything you've taught me is the bare opposite of ruthlessness. I don't want to see you as someone you're not.

"Eve." Rikiga swayed and stepped forward. "Shion's right. Leave it at that. Fura's grown up as an elite since he was a kid. He probably has no resistance at all against pain. Put him through any more, and who knows, you might finish him off with a cardiac arrest."

Nezumi shrugged. Expressionless eyes flitted between the wailing man and Shion. Without another word, he withdrew a step. Then, he slowly pulled off his bloodstained gloves.

I'll step down and leave the spot free for you. Do as you would, until you're satisfied.

Shion knelt down on the blood-spattered floor. He spoke to the man. "Fura-san. I want you to listen to me. The girl that was apprehended by the Security Bureau is my very precious friend. I'm willing to do anything it takes to save her. And to do that, I need information from you."

"It hurts... it hurts... so much blood..."

"If you speak to us, then I'll treat your wound."

"Please, stop the blood," Fura implored. "Stop the pain. Hurry!" The man offered his palm. He thrust it out, with tears streaming down his face. There were bleeding cuts in various places, but the wounds themselves were not that deep. As long as they didn't get infected, they were surely of no threat to his life.

"A couple licks from a dog, and it'd be gone in a night," Inukashi cackled, showing his teeth.

"Rikiga-san, can you bring me some clean water and alcohol?" said Shion.

"Don't have much to disinfect with except my booze."

"That's fine."

"And the water—I can just draw it from the stream?"

"Yes."

"Alright, I'll bring some." Rikiga sighed in relief, and left the room. His footsteps were light, as if he couldn't wait to get out of the place. Shion renewed his composure, and turned back to the man's exhausted face.

"I'll treat you, so talk to me. I don't have time. I want you to answer me truthfully."

"Oh—" the man whimpered. "Fine—hurry, just make the pain stop—please, quick—"

"What's the facility that's been newly built inside the Correctional Facility?"

"I—I really don't know."

"So even someone of your rank doesn't know—does that mean it's top-secret information for the city? As classified as it gets?"

“Yeah—there’s a project team that’s directly beneath the mayor, and everything happens between them... we have no involvement in it... we aren’t allowed.”

“You aren’t allowed to be involved. But you know that some project or other exists, am I right?”

“The city’s—invested a lot of money into it,” the man stammered. “It was declared in the budget on the pamphlet we got at the assembly... and...”

“Was it a problem at the assembly?” Shion asked. If it was, then naturally, a question would be raised from the assembly, and the mayor would have no choice but to give an answer. For what reason was this enormous budget set aside? What was this project for? If there had been a diet member who had raised the issue—

“Of course not,” the man’s mouth twisted in derision. “There’s no way anyone could object or question a project proposed by the mayor himself. The budget was simply printed in the document—until seeing this, we hadn’t known about it... and by that time, it was already—”

“The facility had already been built in the Correctional Facility.”

“Yes.”

“Anything about the project team members?”

“I don’t know... I don’t know names... even how many there are. No one... should know.”

Inukashi whistled.

“That’s amazing. No one knows anything about it, there’s no explanation, and yet just because it’s the mayor’s project, he gets free reign with the funds. And no one complains? Yeesh, I’m so jealous, I could topple over from envy. Wish I could get a piece of that.” True to his word, Inukashi promptly hugged his knees and flopped backwards on the bed.

Rikiga entered, carrying a pail of water. The stream that ran by the ruins apparently traced back to a natural spring in the wood, and it was constantly brimming with clear, cold water. Come spring, clusters of little blush-pink flowers would line the edges of the river—a girl called Kalan, who went by the same name as his mother, had told Shion.

The clear water lapped inside the worn pail.

“We’re going to clean the wound. Put your hand in the water—Inukashi, do we have clean cloth?”

“Clean? Not a word I have a close relationship with. This is the West Block, you know. The cleanest thing here is probably a dog’s tongue.”

Rikiga silently handed him a roll of gauze. It was a little old and yellowed, but nevertheless unused. It was a luxury item in the West Block.

“I figured something like this would happen,” Rikiga said. “So I had some ready. I don’t have anything fancy like antiseptic, though. Use this, if it’ll do.”

A small liquor bottle was tossed into Shion’s lap. There was a colourless liquid inside.

“Gin, from my precious stash.”

“Thank you.” Shion dipped the man’s hand in water. Streams of blood ribboned and swayed in the water like crimson seaweed.

“This will sting a bit.” Shion pressed a piece of gauze soaked in gin against the wound. The man grunted in pain, but didn’t struggle. Shion wrapped the gauze around his hand, and knotted it tightly.

“You haven’t cut any nerves or tendons. If you re-dress the wound properly later, it shouldn’t pose a huge problem.”

“It still... hurts...” the man protested feebly.

“We don’t have painkillers here. You’ll have to bear with it.”

The man’s gaze beheld Shion steadily for the first time.

“—How old are you?”

“Sixteen.”

“How did your hair turn like that?”

“Oh, this—” Shion brought a hand to his hair, now almost entirely drained of its colour. He had been so busy trying to live each day in the West Block, and these past days he had thought of nothing except Safu. It had been a long time since he had bothered to think about his hair colour. He had forgotten about it. His hair still held its shine, and Nezumi had said that some would perhaps find it beautiful. But Shion’s white hair was still a mismatch for his young age of sixteen, and seemed to appear odd to some people.

“There’s a slew of reasons behind this. I didn’t bleach it on purpose,” Shion explained.

“You’re not a resident of this place, are you?”

“No.”

“Where did you come from?”

“From within the wall.”

“From within the city? Impossible!”

“I was living in No. 6 until recently.”

“What’s a city resident doing here?”

“That—well, there are a lot of reasons for that, too.”

Shion had moved from inside the wall to outside of it. In numbers, it was not a considerable distance. But if he were to explain why he had crossed the border between two distinctly separate worlds, to be where he was now—he felt like no amount of words would be enough.

“What did you used to do inside?”

“I did cleaning duties at a park. I was a student as well—that was my main occupation.”

“Hey, hey,” Inukashi butted in. “That’s enough. What’re you doing answering *his* questions? Isn’t it supposed to be the other way around?”

“Oh yeah.”

“How can you be so slow?” Inukashi said exasperatedly. “Buck up a little, I’m begging ya. You’re making me start to feel bad for you, man.”

“Uh—right, okay. Sorry.”

“Apologizing to me isn’t gonna help. Geez, talk about unfit for interrogation. It’s like trying to teach a mole how to swim. My dogs would probably do a better job.”

Inukashi raked a hand through his black hair, scratched impatiently, and gave an exaggerated sigh. Shion turned red. Inukashi was right—he’d never even known how to interrogate someone, and he couldn’t see himself doing it well. Still kneeling, he looked up at Nezumi.

In a dim patch of darkness out of light’s reach, Nezumi was leaning back against the wall with his arms folded. His expression was indiscernible.

Shion knew there was simply no time to be complaining that he would rather not, or that he couldn’t do it. He bit his lip.

“Fura-san, so basically you’re saying that you don’t know anything about the Correctional Facility.”

“Yes.”

“Then what do you think it is?”

“Huh?”

“Why do you personally think those facilities are there?”

“Why do I personally—”

“Yes. I want to know from your personal perspective—what sort of thing would the mayor build that he would keep in secret, and not let anyone else interfere with?”

“Th-There’s no way I would know. I don’t have any information—I don’t have any files or resources.”

“Then just make a prediction. Imagine what it would be, even.”

Imagine. The man enunciated the word slowly. He let it roll off his tongue cautiously, like tasting a fruit that he had never seen before.

“Imagine . . .”

The stench of alcohol and blood mingled together in the air. The wind renewed its forceful gusts, and whistled high-pitched and forlorn.

The man’s bloodless lips moved.

“I reckon—the Health and Hygiene Bureau might have something to do with it.”

“Health and Hygiene Bureau? Not the Security Bureau?”

The Bureau of Health and Hygiene singly managed the city’s hygiene and the health of its citizens. It presided over all hospitals and health clinics in the city. This Bureau administered the Children’s Examinations to select elites at an early stage, and also ran the yearly physical assessments that were mandatory for every citizen. It was an important bureau, but from Shion’s knowledge, it didn’t have a close connection with the core of the city as much as the Security and Central Administration Bureau did. Since his former workplace at the Park Administration Office had been a distant branch of the Health and Hygiene Bureau, he had a little knowledge about the Bureau’s activities from the information that trickled in.

The Correctional Facility and the Health and Hygiene Bureau—two organizations that seemed to be most disconnected with each other in fact turned out to be closely entangled.

“Fura-san, why do you think so?”

“It’s just what I imagine. You told me I could.”

“Yes, I did.”

“Just my imagination. But...”

“But?”

“At the Municipal Hospital—” The man broke off, and swallowed hard. He wasn’t keeping Shion hanging on purpose—he was hesitating. He was hesitating whether he could talk about something like this.

Shion waited. He waited for the man to speak to him, to put into words what was in his heart. He could do nothing but wait. So he waited. That was his way.

The man lifted his gauze-wrapped hand and wiped his mouth with the back of it. His lips had swollen and turned a reddish-purple colour.

“A few months ago, there was a transfer of posts at the Municipal Hospital. Doctors—all highest-ranking in work ethic and skill—a few of them, along with some nurses, were transferred out. I don’t know where they were transferred to.”

“You don’t know?”

“It’s not recorded anywhere. All data of the citizens are collected at the Central Administration Bureau. Every action taken in the day is recorded without fail to the database. Anything as big as a workplace transfer, even more so for doctors and nurses that work for the Municipal Hospital, would be recorded strictly and with detail.”

“But it was missing.”

“Right. It wasn’t there. I thought it was strange. I thought—but that was all I did.”

“Did you look into it?”

“I didn’t even think about it. Even if I wanted to, it would be impossible. And if I slipped and somehow ended up with confidential information, I would be in huge trouble.”

I can’t believe you’ve asked me such a stupid question, the man seemed to say, as he turned his face aside.

The Health and Hygiene Bureau; talented and skilled doctors and nurses; the Correctional Facility—an idea flared in Shion’s mind.

“I’ve heard that there have been strange incidents inside No. 6. Do you think it has anything to do with the Correctional Facility?”

“What?”

“There have been people struck ill. Am I right?”

“You’ve done your research,” the man observed. “Where did you get that information?”

Rikiga swayed, and exhaled a stench of liquor.

“You’re not my only customer who comes from No. 6,” he said, “though none of them are the kind of big-shot you are. The lackeys give me their own kind of information. Like when they’re giving bedtime stories to the girls they’ve slept with—just spills out.”

“You call that information? They’re probably just rumours.”

“Rumours usually happen to be closer to the truth than what public organizations shove in your face. But speaking of which—” Rikiga knitted his brow, and narrowed his eyes.

“These days the authorities seem to be getting stricter on their regulations. It’s almost over the top. Apart from big-shots in your rank, it’s becoming harder and harder for the lower ranks to sneak their way out here. I’ve even heard that soon, it’s just going to be banned outright. Poof, there goes half of my business.”

“And look what you’ve done to your best customer,” Inukashi chimed in. “Forget half of your business, you’re going completely bankrupt, old man,” he cackled. Rikiga glared at him, and tsked his tongue irritably.

“Either way, it’s all over. For me, and for you.”

Inukashi retracted his laugh and fell silent.

"If someone fell ill, they'd naturally be taken to the Municipal Hospital, right?" Shion continued. "But what happens to them afterwards?"

"I don't know."

"It's not a contagious illness, is it?"

"There's been no public announcement from the city. Besides, there would be no way a contagious illness could spread in No. 6."

"True."

Shion lowered his eyes, and looked at his own hands. They were scarred, the skin was rough, and on the whole, they had become rather bony. They had lost all their softness and smoothness that they had when he was inside the city, but he thought his hands now showed more strength. They were hands that were alive and trying to get a firm grasp on things. On these hands, stains would spread, fingers would bend out of shape, and they would age at the blink of an eye. He could still clearly visualize how Yamase had died.

"The patients wouldn't have survived—I'm thinking it would have been an unnatural death. They would age rapidly until they finally died—maybe that's how—"

The man drew his chin back, and narrowed his eyes suspiciously.

"What are you talking about?"

Shion stared at the man, and then slid his gaze to Nezumi. The darkness was spreading, growing thicker, and trying to shroud the boy who stood as still as a statue.

This man did not know. He really didn't know a thing, about the parasite wasps, or the queer incidents, or the grisly deaths. Even someone like him, in the post of a high official, did not know a single thing.

"Samples," the man suddenly muttered.

"Samples?"

“Sample Collection Status—I remember there being a section like that in the Health and Hygiene Bureau’s data.”

“Samples of what?”

“I don’t know. I just know it said something about their collection status—you needed a special password to access it. The only thing I know is that this and the mayor’s project . . .”

“Are connected.”

“I imagine they are.”

Sample. What a cold, desolate word. Shion felt a chill.

Safu. He cast his thoughts to her, and his chill got worse.

“Shion,” Nezumi called. The darkness shifted. “That’s about it. We can’t get anything else out of this guy.” His words also had a cold, desolate ring. The man perceived their coldness and stiffened.

“Are you going to—k-kill me?”

“Of course.” Nezumi’s boot stepped over the blood splatters, now beginning to congeal.

“I’ve told you everything I know. I talked. This isn’t what we promised.”

“We didn’t promise anything. Promises or agreements don’t exist between people like you and I.”

“Stop, please—I don’t want to die!”

“Nezumi, that’s enough.” Shion stood between him and the man.

“There’s no need to scare him like that. You’ve done enough. We have to take him back and drop him off somewhere near the gates. Rikiga-san—”

“Yeah, I know. I gotcha. I’ll bring the car around.”

“He’s our enemy.” The unsheathed knife spun around in Nezumi’s hand. “Are we just gonna let him slip through our hands like that?”

“It’s not necessary at this point. We don’t need to kill him.”

Heb. Lending the upper-half of his body to the darkness, Nezumi gave a quiet laugh.

“And when would you say it *is* necessary? Do you think this guy will go back to No. 6 and keep quiet about us?”

“Yeah.”

Shion lifted his chin, and looked straight through the darkness. He aligned his gaze with the pair of grey eyes at the other end. *Have you noticed, Nezumi? No matter how dark or blindingly bright it is, I'm never led astray—my eyes always find yours.*

“He won’t tell anyone. If he did, he would be threatening his own life. Just think—a high official of the Central Administration Bureau, entering a prohibited area like the West Block for no apparent objective, with no official permission. What would happen if people found out? He’s more than aware of the risks. There’s no way he would give us away. You should know this already.”

“How the hell should I know?” Nezumi stepped soundlessly forward. “There’s no guarantee that this guy won’t slip and mention a . . . certain group in the West Block sniffing around about the Correctional Facility.”

“He won’t talk.”

“Shion.” Nezumi’s voice lowered slightly. “I’m gonna ask you again. Do you plan on letting him go home alive?”

“Yeah.”

An arm stretched towards him. In less than a blink of an eye, Shion was trapped in Nezumi’s embrace. Nezumi’s arms were thin, and certainly didn’t seem to be that strong at a glance—but it only took a single arm for him to arrest Shion’s movements completely. Shion felt an icy sensation at his neck—the blade of a knife.

“I’ve had enough of your half-assed justice and fake goodwill,” Nezumi said quietly. “It makes me sick. I’ve been meaning to tell you this,

Shion—you won't survive unless you tear off that self-righteous, artificial mask. I could care less if you went off to die by yourself, but don't get the rest of us involved. We don't have time to be fooling around trying to decide if it's 'necessary' to do something or not. Enemies are enemies. We kill or get killed. That's all there is to it."

The blade slid along his neck. Shion felt a small, sharp pain. His eyes were transfixed to Nezumi. For just a brief moment, a sweet thrill stirred in the core of his body. To take one in his arms, and slit his throat—

An embrace of death.

This was, indeed, the feat of a devil.

Nezumi withdrew. When Shion brought a hand to his neck, and felt it pulsing with heat. His palm was smeared with blood. With his gaze still on Nezumi, Shion clenched his fingers.

"Rikiga-san, the car."

"Huh?"

"If you could take him home by car, please."

"Oh—right, yeah."

Shion turned to the man, and gave him a smile.

"I'm sorry we've done such horrible things to you. But it was the only way we had."

"Shion..." The man blinked several times as he studied Shion's face. "I remember there was a first-degree criminal by that name. He was a fallen elite who'd gone insane. He poisoned his co-worker, then fled to the West Block—is that you?"

"Been blown out of proportion pretty badly, hasn't it?" Shion couldn't help but give a wry smile. Karan's face rose into his mind. He thought of the hardships she must be facing, living in a society where rumours of her son constantly flooded her ears—her son, the murderer. His

heart ached. But no matter how much it did, there was nothing he could do. He could do nothing other than say, *Mom, I'm sorry*. But Nezumi had delivered his plea for forgiveness to his mother. He had passed on his one-line note. Those scribbled words had pulled Karan a step out of the depths of her despair. It was all thanks to Nezumi. For now, he knew that Karan was not exposed to any danger. So he would suppress the pain in his heart, and forget about his mother. He would not think of her. He would think only of Safu.

Instead of scattering his heart hither and thither, he would carefully select where to put it, and discard all other thoughts. He needed the power to do it, or else he would not survive. Shion had acquired this power long before he realized he had.

The man slowly shook his head.

"I don't believe it." He jerked his chin at Shion. "Your face is totally different from the first-degree criminal I saw on the screen. It's like you two are different people."

"Well, my hair colour's changed. And I've lost a bit of weight, I think."

"No, that's not what I mean—ah, well, I guess you can say the shape of your face, your facial features are the same... but it's different. Your demeanour is totally different. He had really deranged eyes. He looked aggressive—even my co-worker was saying he looked like he would kill someone. And he was right. His eyes weren't so—gentle like yours. You two are totally different. Total strangers."

"It's more than easy to modify someone's face," Rikiga said, through a mouthful of the remainder of his gin. "And not just his face. If the authorities wish it, they can conjure or twist around any information to their advantage. Hardly something you should be surprised about, Fura-san. Isn't it part of your job to manipulate information at the authorities' beck and call?"

"Rather rude of you, Rikiga."

“Because it’s the truth.” Rikiga shook the last droplet onto his tongue, and sighed deeply. “And that just makes it all the more difficult to bear. Is there such a thing as real truth in No. 6?”

“I’ve never taken part in such lowly activities like manipulating information. I’ve only handled its management and release.”

“And have you ever doubted where the information was coming from?”

“What?”

“All you’ve been doing is receiving information from the city, and passing it along to the media. You’ve never doubted the truth of that information, have you?”

“Of course not. How could I ever doubt—”

Rikiga’s thick hand rested on Shion’s shoulder.

“This kid that’s here in front of you, and the criminal with deranged eyes. That gap is the gap between false information and the truth.”

The man opened his trembling lips to say something, and made a guttural noise in his throat. Though the room had no heat, beads of sweat were forming on his forehead. After a silence that lasted for almost a minute, the man’s lips finally stopped trembling as he called out Shion’s name.

“Shion.”

“Yes.”

“You said you wanted information about the Correctional Facility.”

“Yes.”

“And you said it was to help a friend.”

“Yes. The Security Bureau suddenly put her under arrest, and sent her to the Correctional Facility.”

“Her name?”

“Safu. She was supposed to be on exchange abroad, as an elite candidate.”

“Do you know her citizenship number?”

“Citizenship number...”

They had eaten together the day before Safu was to fly out on her exchange. On their way to the station, they had been stopped by a law enforcement officer from the Security Bureau, and asked to display their ID cards. The number that Safu had recited was it. He closed his eyes, and shuffled through his memory. Although he was no computer, he had considerable ability to memorize and accumulate information, to sort and apply it. This skill had been developed and polished from a young age. For him, it was not difficult to instantly recall a series of letters and numbers, even if it had only been uttered once.

“It’s SSC-000124GJ.”

“SSC-000124GJ,” the man repeated twice. “I don’t know any incident of a citizen by that number being apprehended by the Security Bureau.”

“The incident has happened, in secret. You just don’t know about it.”

“And you all are planning to save her?”

“Yes.”

“You’re going to help a criminal break out of the Correctional Facility,” the man said in disbelief. “—You’re not serious?”

“Safu isn’t a criminal. She hasn’t committed any crime. If anyone has, it’s whoever captured her.”

Inukashi yawned widely.

“Hey, you know, this is great and all, but would anyone mind if I excused myself and went to bed? I gotta get up early tomorrow morning to take care of the dogs.”

“You’re right,” Rikiga agreed. “If we keep him too late, even Mr. Big-Shot’s ID card wouldn’t be enough to get him back through the gates. Shall we go, Fura-sama?”

The man ignored Rikiga, and remained stiff and unmoving. A bead of sweat rolled down his face, mingled with blood, and dripped from the tip of his chin. Just as the droplet hit the back of his hand, the man whispered faintly.

“I have the latest.”

“Huh?”

“I have the latest. But the portion where the new facility has been built is still blank.”

Shion widened his eyes in disbelief, and knelt on both knees in front of the man. His voice was hoarse from excitement.

“You’re going to tell us about the inside of the Correctional Facility?”

The man remained silent. He wiped his streaming sweat, and nodded. Inukashi slipped forth. He fished out a white mouse-shaped robot, and held its small head firmly. The robot split open at its back, and a beam of reddish-yellow light fanned out upwards. An image appeared in it. The man’s Adam’s apple bobbed as he swallowed.

“A hologram, huh.”

“That’s what they call it. I don’t know much myself. The red circles are where the security devices are, according to what I’ve gathered. So, how is it? No mistakes, are there, old man?”

Inukashi peered into the man’s face, twitching the tip of his nose. The man continued staring at the floorplan of the Correctional Facility as if glued to it.

“Electronic pen?” Nezumi offered a silver pen to him.

“No. I’ll use my own.” The extracted a pen from his inner coat pocket, and inserted the tip of it into the light. The gauze on the back of his hand was beginning to bleed through; the expression on his face was tense, and his fingertips were shaking—but nevertheless, the pen swept smoothly through the air, drawing countless complicated lines onto the diagram.

“Whoa—awesome,” Inukashi raised his voice amazement. Rikiga was looking down at the man with a pitying gaze.

The pen slipped from the man’s hand and fell onto the floor.

“This . . . is about all I know.”

The number of security devices had grown to three times more than what Inukashi had originally put down. In contrast, the number of cells housing prisoners had shrunk to two-thirds. Automatic barriers were placed in the hallways at intervals, perhaps to prevent prisoners from escaping, or intruders from entering the premises. Once activated, they would come down and trap any runaway or intruder. Or rather, they would dispose of them.

Shion swallowed hard. Judging by the layout of the electrical circuits, it looked like the barriers were made to release high-voltage current. Once the walls blocked the intruder and cut him off from any means of escape, the chamber would instantly become an electric chair. The hallway would become an execution ground.

“It’s like a citadel.” Shion exhaled.

“It’s a place of holocaust.” Nezumi picked the pen up, and put it back in the man’s pocket. “Eventually it’ll become a brilliant monument of genocide.”

“Genocide—” Shion repeated. “How many people have been killed here?”

Nezumi slowly shook his head.

“Shion, it’s not ‘have been’. It’s not a thing of the past yet. People are still being killed right now. The cells have decreased, but it’s not because there are less prisoners. There are just less of them that are being put into the cells. You understand what I’m saying, right?”

“Yeah.”

They would dispose of prisoners before they even got to their cells. They would simply be discarded, like garbage.

Rikiga gave a short groan, and put a hand to his mouth. Sweat glistened on his pale face.

“Stop that,” he said. “It’s making me feel ill.”

“You must be kidding me,” Inukashi said indignantly. “Don’t even think about throwing up in my room.” He swung his thin arms around wildly.

“I have a question.” Nezumi, still on one knee, pointed at the hologram. “Why do you know so much? How can you remember the inside of the Correctional Facility in such detail?”

“I had a look at it just recently—there was a section in the top-secret files about the Correctional Facility. I skimmed through the ones about the interior layout.”

“And what exactly are these top-secret files about the Correctional Facility?”

“Well—”

“It can’t be the mayor’s project. It has to be top-secret information that’s still accessible to high officials of your rank—what is it?”

The man gritted his teeth. The cut inside his mouth seemed to bother him, and he gave a scowl.

“Is it about the Hunt?”

As soon as Nezumi said the word, both Inukashi and Rikiga looked at each other, then looked away. Shion felt uneasy. No one had given him a satisfactory explanation of what “The Hunt” was supposed to be. The man remained silent as his vacant gaze wandered in space.

“Is there going to be a Hunt soon?”

“It’s called a Clean-up.”

“Clean-up? Oh, right. That’s what you guys call manhunting. Cleaning up garbage, right? So when is it?”

“I don’t know. No set date has been decided yet. But it will probably be before the Holy Celebration.”

Holy Celebration. This was something Shion was familiar with. On this day, all of No. 6 would be full of festivities celebrating the birth of the city. Fireworks would be launched, and the city flag—a golden oval symbolizing the Moondrop, set on a white background—would be hung everywhere. Citizens would celebrate their fortuitous privilege of being a resident of the Holy City, and would shower ‘our mighty No. 6’ with praise. A year ago, Shion had been in the midst of the clamour. He could still remember it clearly. He had been on his way home to Lost Town when a slightly aged gentleman had stopped him. The man had reprimanded him, and asked him why he wasn’t waving the city flag and celebrating the Holy Day. And it wasn’t just that man. In the mere space of an hour’s walk from the Central Station to his home, he had been met with the same kind of indignant rhetorical question from several people—among them a young woman, an elderly person, and a middle-aged matron. The matron who approached him last had even pushed a flag forcefully into his hands, saying, “Fulfil your responsibilities as a citizen. Come on, wave your flag.” Shion remembered his discomfort, the displeasure, and his unease at the mass of waving flags, and the voices of the crowd chanting “our almighty City”. The Holy Celebration was that kind of day.

Nezumi flashed a crooked smile.

“So they’re gonna do some major housecleaning before the big day.”

“The population in the West Block has grown too large. These days, it’s been burgeoning with displaced people. Violent crimes are increasing, like the ambush at the Access Control Office that happened the other day. It’s about high time for . . . for a clean-up.”

“And exactly how many *other* places are left on this earth where people can still live safely? If people see a place that looks more suitable to

live, they'll try to move there. Is that a crime?"

"We allow certain numbers, up to a degree."

"Up to a degree? Hah," Nezumi laughed shortly, "you mean until they start becoming a threat to No. 6."

"Yes. If frustration builds, and the starving people of the West Block decide to start a riot, it's just more trouble for us. We're helping to alleviate overcrowding by doing this, you know. It should be good news to you."

"Well, well. How considerate of you." Nezumi hunched his shoulders exaggeratedly. Shion gripped Nezumi's shoulder firmly.

"Nezumi, you're not telling me the Hunt is—"

"The Hunt is what?"

"No way—how can it..." Shion trailed off, then began again. "Tell me. What's going to happen here before the Holy Celebration?"

"Think for yourself!" Shion's hand was roughly shaken off. Nezumi's voice was like a slap in the face.

"I'm not your personal tutor. If you think everyone will just hand you your answers, you're wrong. Use your own head. Imagine." Nezumi sucked in a breath, and softened his tone.

"I reckon your flimsy imagination would be no match for reality, though." He dusted his hands off, and stood up.

"I'm going home," the man muttered, and raised himself unsteadily to his feet as well. "I'm going home. Let me go."

"Fura-san, thank you for everything." The words of gratitude were out of Shion's mouth before he knew it. His thoughts were tangled, and his heart was still distraught from hearing the conversation between Nezumi and the man. But he was still grateful for what Fura had given them. A man who had been living as an elite all his life had purposely committed a treasonous act towards the city. Shion could understand the sort of pressure and fear that Fura was feeling right now.

"I know it's odd to say thanks after everything we've done to you, but I'm grateful. Really, thank you very much."

The man stopped in front of the door, and turned around.

"And you?"

"Huh?"

"Aren't you going back?"

Unable to comprehend the sudden question, Shion focused his eyes on the man's swollen lips instead.

"Do you mean to No. 6?"

"Yes. You're not considering going back to the city at all?"

"I'm not."

"You're going to stay here."

"Yes."

"Why? Don't you feel homesick for the Holy City? Don't you want to go back?"

"I do miss some people. There are people I'd like to meet again. But I have no intention of going home."

"Why not?"

"Because it's not a place where I ought to return. And because I've realized that, I guess."

The man put a hand on the doorknob, and opened the door.

"You're a... a fool."

"Am I? I don't think so."

"You're a fool."

The man left the room. Rikiga followed after him. The door closed, and the candle flickered from the breeze. The three that were left in the room looked down at the diagram the man had left behind.

"I just remembered something." Inukashi sat down on the bed. "An old tale my Mum used to tell me. About the northern wind and the sun. Know about it?"

"Yeah," Shion answered. "It was in one of Nezumi's books. It was a picture book. It's the one where the wind and the sun compete to see who could get a journeyman's coat off first, right?"

"Yeah yeah, that one. No matter how much the wind blows and blows at the journeyman, the guy only holds onto his coat tighter so it doesn't get blown away. But as soon as the sun shines down on him, he takes it off because he's hot."

"Inukashi, what're you getting at?" Nezumi knitted his eyebrows in displeasure.

"I just thought it was like the two of you. Too bad, Nezumi. Shion was able to get the coat off much more easily."

"Say what you will," Nezumi said dismissively. "—Shion."

"Hm?"

"Do you think we can trust this floorplan?"

"Yeah."

"You're being naive."

"You think he went out of his way to write in fake information?"

"What if he had? Maybe you just think you've gotten his coat off successfully, but he's actually just wearing armour underneath."

"He didn't have a reason to lie. He would have known that we'd let him go home, even if he hadn't told us anything. But he took the trouble to give us top-secret information."

"Maybe he's set a trap for us."

"You think so? You honestly think so?"

"I'm just saying there's the possibility and the risk. But knowing that doesn't do anything for us. What he's left us is the best information

we have. We don't have the method or the time to figure out if it's real or not."

"So you're saying we have no choice but to believe it."

"Unfortunately."

Inukashi sprawled out on the bed and barked out a laugh. "Look at him, trying to act cool. *Unfortunately* my ass! You know, Shion, Professor Nezumi here is actually impressed that the guy gave away top-secret information so easily. He didn't even imagine you'd do so well. He sees you in a new light now—he's just not showing it. Stubborn boy," Inukashi sighed in mock exasperation. "If he's impressed, he should just admit that he is."

"Inukashi!" Nezumi said angrily.

"Don't get mad at me. It's the truth." Inukashi's face turned serious, and he glanced at Nezumi and Shion while he lay on his stomach.

"But what're you gonna do now, Nezumi? You serious about using the Hunt to get into the Correctional Facility?"

"Yeah. And lucky for us, it looks like a Hunt is scheduled to happen soon."

"Lucky, huh," Inukashi echoed. "Just to tell you, I'm opting out of this. I don't want anything to do with something this risky, and I don't have any obligation to be involved."

"Your chance to shine is just coming up," Nezumi said. "I've got work for you to do outside of the Facility. The alcoholic said so too: we're in this together until the end. There's no way you can take your two gold coins and run. You know that, don't you, Inukashi? More than anyone else."

Inukashi stuck his lip out, and pulled his face into a scowl. Nezumi cast a hand over the hologram, and called Shion's name.

"Shion."

"Hm?"

“Memorize this entire floorplan. We won’t be able to take any micro-robots into the Correctional Facility. Any machine that’s not equipped with a recognizable chip will be destroyed, no matter how small. Take one wrong step, and whoever’s holding the machine will probably be blown up along with it. And we won’t have the time to pull out a map and check our bearings every time we get lost.”

“You want everything from this?”

“Everything. Commit it to memory perfectly. I want every sensor location, security system layout, and the location of every garbage bin memorized, without any errors. Even a tiny incongruity can cost us our life.”

“Alright.”

Nezumi tossed the micro-robot to Shion.

“We don’t have much time. Commit everything to memory perfectly—that’s your assignment.”

“That’s a more difficult assignment than anything I’ve gotten before.”

“How confident do you feel?”

“Confident.”

Hub. Nezumi blinked and gave a huff. It seemed like he had not expected Shion’s definite answer.

“I guess I should have known you’d be good at doing brain-work, huh?”

“It’s not a question of whether I’m good at it or not. It doesn’t matter whether I can or can’t—it’s something I have to do.”

Lives depended upon it. Safu’s, Nezumi’s, his own; Inukashi’s and Rikiga’s irreplaceable lives depended upon it.

He clenched his hand around the white micro-robot. Even if he squeezed hard enough to crush it, the man-made machine never screeched in alarm like Hamlet or Cravat, nor did it feel warm and soft in

his hand like them. It was merely stiff and cold. Nezumi's lips relaxed into a smile. He chuckled softly.

"Looks like you've learned to grasp the situation a little, at least."

"You trained me."

Nezumi pursed his lips.

"—Stay close to me," he muttered.

"Huh?"

"The Hunt is coming soon. Stay close to me, and don't wander off. Wherever you go, keep in sight of me. If we lose sight of each other in the middle of the Hunt, we'll probably never see each other again. Your chances of living will go down drastically, to say the least."

"Got it," Shion said heavily.

"I think the chances are low enough without you losing sight of him," Inukashi's whole body shook as he laughed. The rusty bed-springs creaked and made an irritating noise. "When people get captured during the Hunt, they get thrown into the Correctional Facility where most of them die or go insane. It'd be a miracle if you could live through it and manage to come back out. It'd be as miraculous as the sun splitting in two."

"You can make miracles happen more easily than you think, Inukashi. Hasn't your mom told you?" Nezumi threw the superfibre cloth around his shoulders, and headed for the door. Inukashi called after him.

"Nezumi, there's more."

"More? More what?"

"Mum didn't say anything about miracles, but she told me this after the story of the wind and the sun. 'No wind or sun can take our hides off us,' she said. 'You may not have a coat of fur, but don't you ever give in to the wind or sun.' And then she licked me all over."

“Admirable mother you’ve got.”

“She’s the best.” Inukashi leapt off the bed, and glided to Nezumi’s side. “I’ve been raised by my Mum. I still remember how her fur used to feel, her scent, and what she told me. I remember, and that’s why—”

“What?”

“That’s why I’m going to survive. I’m going to keep on living here with my dogs. Even if you guys die, even if you never come back out of the Correctional Facility again, I’ll still keep living. I’m going to live, and tell the rest of the dogs about my Mum.”

“A fine vow. Your deceased mother would probably be overjoyed to hear that.” Nezumi’s hand stretched forth to stroke Inukashi’s tan cheek.

“Good night, my boy. May God bless you with sweet dreams to give you strength for tomorrow,” he said gently, in a woman’s voice. Before Inukashi could open his mouth, Nezumi had disappeared out the door. Inukashi spoke to the darkness.

“Just watch me—I’ll live through it without you all.”

“We’ll all live through it,” Shion said quietly. Death was not in their plan. They would act, think, and fight to live. To survive—together.

“Oh, I forgot to say something.” Nezumi’s breezy voice echoed from the darkness. “Inukashi, if you want a good-night kiss, I suggest you get one from Shion. He would give you a very adroit and passionate kiss, indeed.”

“Nezumi!” Shion said indignantly.

Nezumi’s laughter faded into the distance. It became one with the sound of the wind, and was sucked into the darkness.

3

BLACKOUT

*Did you come to me
because I dropped off to sleep,
tormented by love?
If I had known I dreamed,
I would not have awakened.*

ONO NO KOMACHI

“**Y**OU SHOULD write a letter,” Nezumi said, without looking up from his book.

“A letter—to my mother?”

“If you have other pen pals, them too.”

“Will you deliver them?”

“He will.” A small mouse was perched on Nezumi’s knee, cleaning its whiskers.

“Thank you, Hamlet.”

“You don’t need to thank him. Every time he goes to see your Mama, he gets to stuff himself with tasty bread. So he’s in a good mood.”

Shion scribbled a few words on a torn slip of paper. A score of letters. Just a single line. What feelings would he instill in them?

He finished writing, and stuffed the slip into a capsule. Hamlet took it in its mouth, and gave its tail a smart flick. Nezumi closed his book with a snap. It was a beautiful book bound in blue, with white flower petals scattered across the cover. Shion decided to ask him about it.

“What were you reading?”

“An ancient story from a country far, far away, at the ends of the earth. A very ancient tale.”

“A myth?”

“A tale about humans.” Nezumi stood up, and slid the book back into the shelf. The room filled with books was warm, thanks to the old heater. It wasn’t like when he was living in the luxury neighbourhood of Chronos in No. 6, where he was protected by the atmosphere control system, and was able to live in just the right temperature and humidity regardless of the season, hour of the day, or the weather outside. There was no hope of that kind of environment here, but he found the uneven heat of this room much more comfortable than something controlled by machines. If he was cold, he would don a blanket and draw closer to the heater. If he was hot, he would back away, and shed his overcoat. That was all there was to it. And he had not even known. He had learned, here, in this room.

“Say—” Shion began, as he poured himself a cup of hot water that was boiling on top of the heater. “Does it get hot here in the summer?”

Nezumi turned towards him from the bookcase, and narrowed his eyes.

“What about the summer?”

“Well, I mean—I figure since it’s underground it would be pretty cool, and since the books aren’t mouldy, it probably doesn’t get that humid either... but I was just wondering if it’s comfortable.”

“It’s alright. Better than Inukashi’s hotel.”

“But what should we do with the heater?”

“Huh?”

“In the winter we can just use it like this, but it probably wouldn’t do in the summer, would it? But how else would we cook our food? We won’t be able to boil water, either.” He handed a cup of hot water to Nezumi. It was the only kind of drink available here.

“Are you telling me you’re worrying about food for the summer *now*?”

“I’m not worried, I was just wondering how—oh! You must cook outside. Get a fire going, and cook the food there.”

“Well—that’s one way to do it.”

“Ahh, I see,” Shion hummed in a satisfied way. “Oh, but it must be a hassle if it rains.”

“Shion.” Nezumi lifted his cup slightly. Shion could see a pair of dark grey eyes looking at him through the rising steam.

“Are you planning to stay here in the summer, too? I mean, do you really think you can?”

“As long as you don’t kick me out.”

“I’m not that pitiless. You can stay here as long as you like.”

“Thanks. I’m relieved.”

“Summer, huh,” Nezumi said pensively. “Wonder what it would be like. I’ve never thought that far ahead. —Wonder if you’ll still be here.”

“I’m planning on it.”

“Alive, you mean? Or would you be a handful of bones in an urn or something?”

“No bones. I wouldn’t wanna be buried in the ground, either.” *I want to experience summer as a living being by your side. I want to live here, in this room, buried in thousands of books. I want to feel the sweat streaming down my body, and the sun’s burning rays pricking at my skin.*

“Nezumi, I want to see summer here.”

“Alive?”

“Alive.”

“A modest wish. But it’ll be hard to grant.” Nezumi leaned back on the bookcase, and abruptly changed the subject. “Shion, do you think the commotion inside the city has something to do with the parasite wasps?”

Shion seated himself on the floor, and raised one knee. A mouse scurried up on top of it. It was a third mouse, which Shion had named Tsukiyo¹ from the dark colour of its fur.

“Yeah, I do. I’m not quoting Fura-san, but I find it hard to believe that an unknown disease would suddenly begin spreading inside No. 6.”

“Really? It might be due to a new virus. Transmission via emergent virus. Not impossible, is it?”

In 1980, the World Health Organization announced the complete eradication of the smallpox virus. Ironically, in the following years, a continuous stream of viruses unknown to humankind began to make their appearance.

Ebola, HIV, the Sin Nombre, Nipah, Lassa, Hantan—to refer to such viruses that cropped up continually, people used the blanket term “emergent viruses”.

Shion shook his head in disagreement.

“I don’t think it’s a virus.”

“Why not?”

“Emergent viruses were originally naturally occurring parasites to animals living in the tropical forests. Viruses probably only began emerging from the sealed depths of the jungle because of deforestation—that’s how humankind came in contact with them. So what I’m saying is that the viruses didn’t come walking in themselves; it was a result

¹tsukiyo / ツキヨ, Japanese for *moonlit night*

of mankind stepping into their territory. But No. 6 is different. It's closed off, isolated. It runs its walls all around, and doesn't mingle with other realms. They manage and inspect every little thing that comes through the gates, right down to the nanometre scale. I don't think it's possible for a virus to enter from outside."

"Awfully confident when it comes to these kinds of topics, aren't you?" Nezumi said sourly. "But there are guys like that womanizer who come to the West Block in secret. He could've picked up the virus here. That's possible, isn't it?"

"Then there should be patients cropping up in the West Block as well. Given the population density here, there should be double, triple the number—all people who've suddenly collapsed, showing symptoms no one's ever seen before. If such a situation actually arose, all the gates would be closed. No one would be able to go into or out of the city."

"So you're sticking with the parasite wasp theory."

"Nezumi, I've seen it with my own eyes. Yamase-san collapsed, aged, and died right in front of me. And afterwards, a wasp appeared out of his—the base of his neck—his body. It was an unnatural death. I can't think of any other cause. What's happening inside the city right now has to have something to do with the parasite wasps."

"But where did those wasps come from? How can an insect that's several centimetres long enter the Holy City that can weed out viruses only electron microscopes can catch? They're not normal wasps. They plant themselves in people's bodies and kill their host. They're skilled hitmen—or hitwasps, I should probably say."

Nezumi fell silent. He cupped the warm mug in both hands, and looked Shion in the eye.

"Shion—are you thinking of the same thing I am?"

"Probably."

“Say it.”

His throat was dry. So dry, it hurt. Shion sipped a mouthful of hot water, and swallowed it slowly.

“The wasps didn’t come from outside.”

He took another mouthful of water.

“They were inside No. 6 all along.”

Nezumi also brought his cup to his lips. Perhaps his throat was dry as well.

“You said something similar before—that maybe it originated in the Forest Park. You said the admin system somehow overlooked the monster when it was born.”

“Yeah,” Shion agreed. “I mean, seeing how there were already two casualties in that park, including Yamase-san, I figured—but that sounds way too unreal...”

“So you’re saying regular wasps that were living in the city suddenly turned into man-eating ones. Is that what they call ‘mutation’?”

“But it’s a type of mutation that’s never been seen before. But the fact that they’re still active in this cold—it’s impossible in the natural world.”

It was impossible in the natural world. Then maybe—

“No way,” Shion muttered to himself. “How could that—”

Thunk. There was a dull noise. A cup grazed Shion’s arm as it fell, bounced off a book, and rolled on the floor.

“Huh?”

In a corner of his vision, Shion could see Nezumi falling forward. He gradually crumpled to his knees, as if in slow motion.

“Nezumi!” Shion sprang forward to catch the falling body in his arms.

“Nezumi! Hang in there!”

Nezumi was heavy and completely limp. He was unable to keep his own body standing. Shion couldn't believe it. His mind went blank—he couldn't think of anything. He couldn't make a rational decision. He couldn't take appropriate action.

"Nezumi, Nezumi!" He desperately kept calling his name, and and hugged him tightly. He could feel the body tremble beneath his fingers. Through the cracks of Nezumi's own fingers as he covered his face with his hands, he could hear Nezumi groan.

"St—Stop it..."

"Nezumi? What's wrong? Stay with me, Nezumi!"

"Stop—who... who's..." Nezumi's fingers latched onto Shion's arm and dug in. They were shaking violently.

Shion slipped on the spilled water, and collapsed on the floor with Nezumi still in his arms. A stack of books fell over, and the startled mice darted out of sight.

"Nezumi, what's wrong? Tell me what's wrong."

Hang in there. Get a grip on yourself. He told himself. But completely arrested by fear, his own body was also shaking. Nezumi. Don't tell me—not you too—

A wasp would come crawling out. It would come crawling out, breaking through his smooth skin. If it did—if that happened—

"No!"

No. No. No. No. No. I can't bear it. If I lost you here, right now, I wouldn't be able to stay sane. I would go mad. The world would turn upside-down.

No. No. No.

Confusion inflated his fear, and ground his thought processes to a halt.

No. This is too much. What should I do? Someone—somebody, please—

Nezumi's body began to burn. The perspiration that broke out moistened Shion's hands.

"—Shion—" Nezumi called his name weakly between his groans.

"—help me..."

Shion felt like he had been given a sharp slap. He was now wide awake. *Move. Move, before wailing and crying. Can't you do anything other than hold him in your arms?*

He bit his lip, and willed strength into his arms. He laid Nezumi on the floor, and tore his shirt open. He put a hand to the base of Nezumi's neck. It was drenched with sweat, but there was no abnormality. There was no stain or bulge. He pressed his ear to Nezumi's chest, and listened to his heartbeat. He measured his pulse. It was quicker than normal, but it was not erratic. There was no breathing trouble or vomiting. There was probably zero danger of choking. And his consciousness?

Shion squeezed Nezumi's hand, and leaned in towards him.

"Nezumi, can you hear my voice?"

Listen to me. Let my voice reach you. Open your eyes, and answer me.

"I'll help you, I promise I will." *I'll help you this time. So please. Give me a response. I want you to answer me. No—I know you'll answer me. You have to.*

"Nezumi!"

* * *

"It's a type of mutation that's never been seen before. But the fact that they're still active in this cold—it's impossible in the natural world." Shion abruptly clipped his words, and lapsed into silence as he looked down. It looked like he was trying to settle into a contemplative state. *Guess I better not disturb him.*

Nezumi thought to himself as he sipped his hot water. Whatever the case, today was over. He couldn't predict what would happen tomorrow. But that meant it was all the more meaningless to be dismal, fearful, or to brace oneself for tomorrow. He didn't believe in any God. He knew right down to the marrow of his bones how banal a word like "fate" was. He didn't think of entrusting himself to a word like that. He would not be swept up in its flow. If he gave up and abandoned his struggle, the only way to go would be down. He would descend into death, or something worse.

So he would continue to rebel. How many years had passed since he had decided to? But he would continue to rebel.

It meant that he would not abandon his will to fight, and that he would hold his ground against a tomorrow he could not predict. It also meant that at times, he would probably sink into deep contemplation like Shion. It was certain that Shion was struggling and fighting in his own earnest and singular way. It was clumsy, off-the-mark, and poorly developed, but he was still fighting. He was taking his stance in his own way. He wasn't trying to run away from battle. He had never run away once. Inukashi was right—Nezumi was a little impressed.

Shion's white hair shimmered orange, lit by the light of the heater. He never said it out loud, but Nezumi liked Shion's hair. He thought it was much more beautiful than the black hair he had before.

Maybe he would give that hair a light caress before telling him he was heading off to bed. He would disappear for the time being, so as not to disturb Shion's struggle.

He reached out.

A flash of light pierced his head. His breath caught in his throat. A wind, a turbulent gust whipped around the inside of his skull. His body teetered. He was falling. Crumbling. His consciousness was being stolen away.

“Nezumi!”

He heard Shion scream. Simultaneously, a song came flowing into his ears. Someone was singing. Someone was singing a song that sounded like murmurs of the wind—

“St—Stop it...”

He wanted to plug his ears, but his hands would not move. He was being dragged in. What was this? What was happening? An expanse of greenery spread before him. He could feel the humid heat of the grass. Hot vapours rose, filled with its grassy scent. Numerous trees nestled together, and ferns grew in clumps. Layers and layers of tree leaves and underbrush covered the ground in every shade of green. And he could hear a song from far away. Song? Was it a song? It was. For sure—but what mingled with its sound... the buzzing of wings. Countless insects were flying around.

This sound, this song, this scene—he had seen it before. Somewhere...

No, I'm being dragged in.

“No!”

A scream tore through. Was it his own? He was clasp ing something. He was being embraced by someone.

This was a lifeline. He would not let go, no matter what.

He used all his strength to dig his fingers in.

The firm sensation of flesh brought his consciousness a little closer to the surface.

Shion.

He clung desperately.

Shion—help me.

* * *

The bluish-grey elevator doors were closing silently. The moment their edges met as they closed completely, Fura let out a deep sigh. The Security Bureau officials flanking him on both sides were as still as stone statues.

“Why...”

He knew it was useless to ask, but he couldn't bear to be silent.

“Why are you arresting me?”

Just as he thought, there was no reply. He posed a second question.

“Is this... the Correctional Facility?”

His knees were shaking so badly, he could barely keep standing. This morning, he had left the house as usual. His wife had seen him to the door, with their son in her arms.

“The edge of your mouth still looks painful.”

“It's nothing. You can't even tell.”

“Silly you, falling down and getting yourself hurt like that.”

“Don't tell anyone, now. I'd be so embarrassed if anyone found out I got this from falling down the stairs at the park. I've been keeping this a secret.”

His wife's face suddenly grew concerned.

“Be careful. Thank goodness it was just a small wound this time. But every time I think something might happen to you—I get chills all over.”

“Nothing's going to happen to me. I have to get going now.”

He had kissed his wife on the cheek, and gotten into the car that had come to fetch him from the Central Administration Bureau. Just before he got into the car, his wife had called him.

“Dear, you'll keep it in mind, won't you?”

“Keep in mind?”

“My going back to work. I'd like it to happen in the new year.”

His wife had a career at the Traffic Administration Bureau. Since their son had been recognized as an elite and guaranteed a perfect educational environment, she had expressed a desire to return to her workplace and resume her work.

“It should be no problem.”

In No. 6, a woman who had given birth but desired to go back to work had an almost-one-hundred-percent chance of obtaining support to achieve it. Fura’s direct superior was a woman with two children. When people were given jobs, they were chosen not by gender but through judgment of their individual skills.

“You should start making preparations for returning. If there’s anything I can help with, I’ll be there to do it, of course.”

“Thank you. That makes me so happy.” His wife smiled. Their son wriggled in her arms. He flailed his arms at Fura.

“Papa, a bug was flying.”

“Huh?”

“A bug was flying. A black bug.”

“When it’s so cold outside? Ha ha, it would have to be a little warmer for there to be any bugs flying around.”

It was sunny, but a biting northern wind was blowing. Perhaps it would snow in the afternoon. *Maybe I’ll leave work early today.*

He waved to his wife and son. The car glided forward. It was a morning like any other. Other than the wound on his palm that throbbed with a dull pain, there was nothing out of the ordinary. It was a morning like any other.

Things began to change when they had passed through the gates of Chronos. His car was stopped by Security Bureau officials, and he was asked to comply.

“We’re very sorry. On mayoral orders, we’ve been told to change your destination.” The two men were wearing uniforms from the Law

Enforcement division, and spoke in a polite but firm tone that left no room for argument. Fura felt a violent chill run down his spine. It was a kind of chill that had nothing to do with the frigid wind that swept by him.

"You will be transferring onto this car which we've prepared."

"Where... will I be going?"

"The mayor is waiting."

"City Hall? Then there isn't any need for—"

"We will escort you there."

They transferred onto the Security Bureau car.

"If you will excuse my intrusion—" Vapid words of courtesy were followed by something covering his eyes. A special eye-mask shut out all the light from his vision, and Fura was plunged into a world of darkness.

At first he compared it to the darkness of the West Block, but quickly changed his mind. It was much too different. The darkness of the West Block was deeper, and more beautiful. It was a deep, deep darkness that seemed to hide something in its depths. It was frightening and unnerving, but nevertheless he was attracted to it. He was attracted to the fact that it made him certain that there was something mysterious lurking there. He had a healthy attachment for the women in the West Block, but he had also gone beyond the walls out of a desire to encounter that darkness. He was perhaps three when he had first felt like there was something lurking in a dark corner of his yard. He was scolded severely by his parents for saying so. *There's nothing in this world that we don't know about. Don't ever say something stupid like that again.* His mother and father—usually so kind, almost too kind—had both risen unrecognizably in anger, and chastised their son. From then on, Fura never made mention of the thing that lurked in the darkness. In time, he forgot about it. In the West Block he

encountered true darkness, and rejoiced even as he cowered at it. The sensations and memories of his childhood, long buried, resurfaced again. He was attracted to it. Yes, he had most certainly been attracted to that place.

But would that become a threat to his life?

So my trips to the West Block must have been found out.

But what would happen then? Rewriting records is a serious crime. If it's been exposed, it wouldn't go without grave consequences.

He would be stripped of all qualifications; his special privileges would vanish; he would be exiled from Chronos.

He thought of a worst-case scenario. Fura's heart was unusually calm. He had no attachment to his qualifications, privileges, or Chronos—not as strong as the attachment he had for the darkness of the West Block. It was strange. They were perplexing feelings which even he could not explain.

A boy's face floated into his mind. A snowy-haired, odd boy. He had announced clearly that he had no intention of returning to No. 6.

He had probably been able to declare it so firmly because of his age; he was young, reckless, and ignorant. But even so—even if he was young and foolish, was it possible to cast a place like No. 6 aside so easily? That was the part he could not understand.

This is taking rather long.

This was taking too much time for a trip to City Hall. With this amount of travel time, they would have passed through the centre of the city a long time ago.

"Wh—Where are we going?" His voice cracked nervously.

"The mayor is waiting."

"But haven't we passed the Moondrop already?"

"Quiet, please. If not—"

“If not, what?”

He heard a muffled chuckle. It was even more terrifying than threatening words.

“T-Tell me the reason why I’m being escorted—the real reason. I’m begging you, tell me.”

“Quiet, please,” the man on the right said. The man on the left tapped Fura lightly on the shoulder.

It was a fair amount of time after that before the car finally came to a stop. When it stopped, he was unloaded and seated in an electrical wheelchair, still blindfolded. He was wheeled down a long hallway. It was a very quiet place. He could only hear the subdued sound of the motor of his wheelchair. The two Security Bureau officials made no sound as they walked, perhaps due to some special footwear or because they had been trained to walk silently. When Fura’s eye-mask had been removed and he had gotten up from his chair, the first thing that jumped into his vision were the doors of an elevator about to close. Beyond the door he could see a glass-paned room filled with men and women clad in white lab coats.

A hospital? No... this surely isn't—

Why are you arresting me?

Is this the Correctional Facility?

He continued to pose questions that received no answer.

Tell me. Somebody.

The elevator stopped.

It had descended—gone down.

Correctional Facility. Basement. A place newly-built. A new elevator. He had abused the powers of his profession to rewrite records. He would be held responsible, and receive a stern warning from the mayor himself. Admonition. Punishment.

No, it was nothing like that. Not even half as forgiving.

Terror pierced his body.

“Let me go back!”

He twisted his body.

“Let me out of here. Let me out.”

There was a jolt in the base of his neck. It was electric current. His whole body went numb.

“I told you to be quiet.”

He heard the Security Bureau official give another muffled chuckle.

* * *

“It looks like the preparations are complete,” the man in the white lab coat said as he turned around. The mayor of No. 6, the first in his generation, brought his white porcelain mug to his lips, and sipped the dark brown beverage inside.

“I see. Alright.”

“Hmm? Something the matter? You look a little pale.”

“I’ve been busy lately.”

“Tired? That’s not good. Exhaustion opens the door for all sorts of ailments. I would advise you to be careful. I’ll write you a prescription later.”

“Please.”

“The project is almost finished. And until it’s complete—no, even after that—you have to stay healthy. Shall we go, then?”

The mayor put his mug down. It was a perfectly ordinary mug at first glance, but upon closer examination one could see intricate patterns engraved onto the back of the handle. It was a considerably expensive item.

“You’re sure you’re going to do this?” The man in the lab coat gazed at him in disbelief for a moment before letting his shoulders shake with laughter.

“Of course.”

“But unlike the girl before, this time—say, what have you done with that girl?”

“Her? She’s well. She’s having a little trouble coming to, but soon she’ll be fully alert. She’s a very beautiful girl, and I’ve taken a liking to her. I’ll treat her well.”

“She might have been an elite, but she was still a student. The elite we have in our hands this time is in an actual profession.”

“He will be all the more useful because he’s in a profession. In more ways than one. And besides, he was a defective product, was he not, according to your research? Despite pledging allegiance to our city, he was exercising treason.”

“Well, you’re right about that—he was going out to the West Block without a valid reason. He’s recently gotten wounds on his face and hand, which were probably received in the West Block as well. There are strong suspicions that he’s manipulated records. It most certainly is treason, but—”

“He ought to be punished.”

“In this sort of way?”

“Fennec.” The man in the lab coat called the mayor by his old nickname. *Was it this man who gave me this nickname in my school days, after a small desert-dwelling fox?*

The man stood in front of the mayor, and placed a hand on his shoulder.

“Fennec, you are going to be King.”

The tall man bent forward slightly, and spoke a little faster.

“Your days of overseeing politics as mayor are over. From now on, you will reign. As the absolute King, you are going to dominate this land.”

“I know.”

“Then why are you hesitating? Who cares about one or two defective products?”

“You’re right,” the mayor relented.

“And this is a contribution. He is contributing to our good. It’s an honourable thing for the man as well.”

The man in the lab coat muttered once again.

You will reign as the absolute King.

The mayor nodded, and squared his shoulders. *Let us go, then*, he said, as he ushered the man in the lab coat out.

The room was bare. It was called Experiment Chamber I. Walls of special alloy ran all around, and there were no windows. The only piece of furniture was a single chair. A man was bound to it. Fear and confusion swam in his eyes.

From this side of the wall, they could see everything that was going on in the room. The man in the lab coat was tapping his fingers lightly on a control panel with several buttons and lamps. His thin white fingers moved rhythmically across the panel, keeping the beat, as if he was playing a clavier.

Tap, tap, tap, ta-ta-tap, tap, tap, ta-ta—

Is it some kind of musical piece? An unsightly switchboard, no matter how many times I look at it. It looks like a misshapen toy. Couldn’t he have made it something more appealing to—

“What now, Fennec?”

“What are you talking about?”

“As mayor, will you declare this man’s sentence?”

"No, there's no need."

"The woeful criminal doesn't even understand what kind of situation he's in. Look how terrified he is, the pitiful man. Won't you save him?"

"Save? What do you mean?"

"Give him a chance to acknowledge his crime, and beg God for forgiveness."

The mayor gave a hearty scowl.

There he goes again, spouting strange things out of the blue. Has he always had these odd tendencies?

"Do you believe in God?"

"Of course not. But aren't there people who wish to obtain mercy from God before taking their journey, peaceful at heart?"

"There might be. But those people don't exist in No. 6."

"I see. I haven't said anything offensive, I hope?"

"You wouldn't normally make that kind of joke."

"My apologies. Then let us begin."

His fingers, which had been tapping out a light rhythm only moments before, moved almost carelessly this time to push a button. A part of the wall turned into a white screen, where various numbers and lines mapped themselves out.

"It's current data about the criminal on hand. His heart rate, brain waves, stiffening in muscle tissue—various measurements of each body part are recorded here."

"I see..."

"In that room right now, there are waves being emitted at a frequency beyond the level of human hearing. Sounds are essentially air vibrations. For humans, those vibrations are transmitted through the eardrum, malleus, incus, and stapes before they reach the cochlea.

You know that, right? And the range of frequencies that humans can perceive—”

“Nothing is changing.” Fennec stepped forward, and surveyed the scene in the next room intently. There was no change. The man bound to the chair, who had been gazing about uneasily, had just cast his eyes to his feet.

“There’s nothing to fret about. It’s starting. But this will take a little time. Will you have a seat?”

“No.”

“Then shall I treat you to a cup of coffee? I have the best blend of beans.”

“You’re offering me to drink coffee? Here?”

“Would you prefer wine instead?”

“No—that’s quite alright.”

“It seems you’re not in the mood to listen to my lecture.”

“I’m sorry to disappoint, but I don’t have much of an interest in organs of the auditory system.”

The man in the lab coat shrugged, and lapsed into silence. Nothing happened.

“Are you sure there hasn’t been some failure?” the mayor muttered in a low voice.

“Me? Allow a failure to happen? A rather flat joke yourself, Fennec.”

“But . . .”

The lab coat’s face stiffened. His bloodless face turned even paler, and a vein in his temple twitched.

Ah yes—he remembered that the man hated the word “failure” more than anything else. He detested the word as if it had the power to physically harm him.

He changed the subject.

“So about the incidents that have been happening lately—they appear to be quieting down for the time being. There have been no other reports.”

“There will probably be no more of them in the future.”

“Can I count on your word?”

“Of course.”

“I’m counting on you. If those *things* keep continuing their activities in the city, things will get out of hand.”

“Those were outlier cases.”

“But why are outliers even occurring? And they’re all occurring in people who aren’t registered to be samples.”

“There must have been instances of carelessness in the preliminary stages of the project. But it’s nothing to be upset about. Outliers are nothing more than outliers. —Ah—”

“Hm?”

“It’s happening.” The man in the lab coat pointed.

The so-called criminal had grown rigid in his chair, his chest thrown out and his head flung back. He was shaking his head from side to side, screaming something.

“Would you like to hear the audio?” The lab coat asked him with a finger poised over a green button.

“No, that’s quite fine,” Fennec replied hastily, shaking his head, yet taking care not to make his agitation visible.

If he could, he would not have wanted to see something like this. He wanted to leave this barren room and return to his office. *My room, on the top floor of the Moondrop. Exquisite furniture and a magnificent view—indeed, a place most suited for me.*

“See, take a closer look. *It* is coming out.” The lab coat’s voice was trembling. His face wore a dreamy expression. The man in the chair

was no longer moving. How easily defeated he was. The man's hair had grown white. The snowy strands fell softly to the floor, as if they had lost the strength to hold on. Senile plaque was starting to dot his translucent skin. Fennec could tell even from where he was standing. "Let's zoom in. See," the man in the lab coat jerked his chin at the monitor. A larger image of the man, his head bowed, filled the screen. His eyes were wide open, and his mouth twisted; he had the face of one who had lost his life even before he could decipher what was happening to him. Brown spots were scattered all over his face, which was lined with deep creases. His teeth, peeking out from his half-open mouth, looked like they were about to fall out any minute. He looked like he was nearing a hundred in age. And the base of his neck—there was a darker stain there, swollen and stirring. All sound was blocked out in this room. But for some reason, Fennec felt like he could hear the sounds of human flesh being eaten through.

It came out.

Wings that shone silver. Antennae. Numerous, constantly moving legs. A single bee had been born from a human body.

"We're going to capture you," the man in the lab coat muttered. His face still wore a dreamy look. A clear bubble emerged from somewhere below the chair. It was ball-shaped entrapment robot about ten centimetres in diameter. Like a soap bubble, it floated up. It enveloped the bee just as it took flight, and trapped it inside its spherical body.

"Success!" The lab coat cried. His eyes were bright with tears of joy. "We've finally succeeded. Ah, I mean—no, this is just the first step to success. But we've made certain progress, Fennec."

"Indeed. Congratulations."

"It's still not perfect—no, not near perfect. But success is still success. A little more—just a little more, and they will be completely under our control. Hatching, acceleration of development, eclosion, and

the laying of eggs. We'll control it all. We'll be able to move them however we want. Brilliant. Finally, we've finally come this far."

The man in the lab coat clenched his hand into a fist, and paced restlessly about the room. His cheeks flushed in excitement, while his lips lost their colour.

"With our last sample, we couldn't control the eclosion phase. With the male index case, and the male Park Administration worker, the best we could do was predict the period of eclosion. It's been how many months since then? In a mere few months, we've been able to get this far. Ah, it's as if all those long hours were but a dream. Once we've come this far, it's only a little more. A little more—"

Some say there is but a thin line that divides a genius and a madman. I couldn't have said it any better.

Fennec took his gaze off the man who was pacing and muttering to himself, and glanced beyond the wall, inside Experiment Chamber I. He thought "Execution Chamber" might be a better name for it.

The body was gone. It had been carted off to the autopsy room. The chair had been stored away automatically as well, and the room was now a barren, empty space. There were no remnants of death. It was a void.

"No, no, I mustn't overindulge in my happiness. Just because we can perfectly control eclosion doesn't mean that it's free of any problems. Of course—it's not like we have not had any problems. Ah, yes, we still have one very large problem. Now, as for what to do with it—Fennec!" The man's voice cracked in excitement as he barked the mayor's nickname. Displeasure became little jabs that pricked at his skin irritatingly.

"What is it?"

"I need people."

"For samples?"

"I need those too."

"What type? How many?"

"This time, type doesn't matter. I want numbers."

"Do they have to be people from inside the city?"

"That doesn't matter. I want quantity, not quality. Numbers, Fennec."

"Perfect. I've scheduled a Clean-up."

"Brilliant! I'd like one soon, please. And manpower."

"Manpower..."

"A capable workforce. I need staff that can be extensions of my own limbs, but also have the highest levels of intelligence."

"Are the people you have at present not enough?"

"Far from enough. I need more intelligent individuals."

"That would be hard," the mayor said hesitantly. "There's a shortage of elites as it is. If I transfer any more of them here, we would be severely deficient overall."

"I want you to give this top priority," yelled the man in the lab coat. At the same time, the lamp on the wall flashed.

"The preparations are complete in the autopsy room. I must go. What will you do?"

"I'll go back to the Moondrop."

That is my proper place, after all.

"I see. I'm counting on you, then. For both samples and manpower."

A section of the wall slid soundlessly open, and the man in the lab coat walked out.

Do we really need him?

A suspicion suddenly surfaced in his mind. It was so sudden, he had to clutch his chest to calm his jagged breaths.

Do I really need him here? Is this project itself even needed? Can I not rule this land without relying on him or his project?

He took a few deep breaths to resume his normal breathing pattern. He stared at the empty space before him.

How to dispose of the executed man? He thought.

Instead of publicizing it as an illness-related death, what would happen if he announced that he had been executed? He would let it be seen and known far and wide, what happened to those who broke the rules of the Holy City of No. 6; those who tried to trick it; those who retaliated and refused to submit obediently. He would not allow so much as a strand of hair to rebel against him. He would make that attitude clear. He would strengthen its enforcement. He would strengthen it enough so that everyone would know. All suspicious individuals were to be arrested and escorted away. If circumstances called for it, he could close the congress.

What would happen? Would the citizens rebel? These were people who had lived their lives devoid of anything like retaliation or objection: did they still possess any mind or method to object? *Would my beloved citizens, as loyal as dogs, as powerless as kittens, dare to post a rejection against my name?*

His lips curled, and a chuckle escaped them.

Impossible. There's no way that would happen. They will all cower in the face of power, grovel, and obey me.

"Mayor, your scheduled meeting is approaching," his secretary's voice informed him from a speaker embedded in the city emblem.

"Very well."

"We have a car waiting for you."

"I'm coming."

But I can't get ahead of myself. We've come this far. There's nothing to be over-excited about. I will make things proceed discreetly and artfully.

He walked towards the wall. The door opened, and he could see the dimly-lit hallway beyond. It, too, was silver.

4

A STAGE OF CALAMITY

*Adorable ladies, just as our pity is commended,
so is our cruelty severely punished by divine justice.
And in order to prove this to you, as well as to give you
an incentive for banishing all cruelty from your hearts,
I should like to tell you a story as delightful as it is full of pathos.*

BOCCACCIO, *THE DECAMERON*

HE WAS walking amidst the blades of grass, in a hot and humid haze. He could see his own feet. They were very small. The grass grew high, and reached up to his shoulders.

He realized that he was almost buried in the mass of vigorous grasses because he was still very young. He looked up to see the cerulean sky, which was far and high up. The winds were quiet, and it was very hot. He was called by his name.

His real name. It had been a long time since he was called by this name. The air shifted. The breeze swayed the branches above. The scent of greenery grew stronger.

Who had called him? Who knew his name?

He could hear a song. And the beating of insect wings. A black shadow crossed his vision. First one, then another, and yet another. Across a cerulean background, countless insects flew to and fro, making a ring. As he approached closer, they scattered in all directions, and came back together in one spot.

A dance.

They were dancing to the song.

Come here.

He could hear a gentle voice.

Let me teach you a song. I will teach you a song that you will need to keep living. Come here.

He was called by his name, and beckoned over. It was a voice that stirred nostalgic feelings. But he could not move.

The beating of wings grew louder. It buzzed incessantly in his ears, and the air was humming with it. Black shadows danced around fiercely.

Oh, this scene—

“Nezumi!”

He was pulled back, strongly, with a definite force. The song, the beckoning voice, the buzzing of wings, and the smell of lush greenery, all vanished into thin air.

“Answer me, Nezumi!”

A dim light stung at his eyes. A cold cloth was being pressed to the nape of his neck. It was very soothing.

“Shion...”

“Are you awake? Can you see me?”

“Somewhat.”

“And you do know where you are?”

“On the bed...” Nezumi said at length. “Did you carry me here?”

“What’s three plus seven?”

“Huh?”

“Addition. If you add three to seven, what do you get?”

“What’s this about? Are you quizzing me?”

“Just answer me seriously. What’s three plus seven?”

“Ten...” Nezumi answered apprehensively.

“Yes. Correct. Next—what’s three times seven?”

“Shion, listen—”

“Three multiplied by seven. Answer me.”

“Twenty one.”

“Correct. Okay then, what did you eat for dinner today?”

“Gee, I wonder if that even constitutes as a dinner? I had two strips of dried potatoes and a bit of goat’s milk. I stole a bag of stale crackers from Inukashi. Almost got bitten in the process.”

“Do you feel dizzy?”

“Not at all.”

“Nausea?”

“I feel fine.”

“No headache, either?”

“No.”

“Can you tell me what—when you fell, can you explain to me how it felt?”

Shion was studying him intently. There was a tense, determined light in his eyes. It made him think of the surface of a frozen lake.

“A wind... was blowing,” Nezumi began hesitantly.

“A wind?”

“The wind blows, and steals souls away.”

*The wind steals the soul away, humans thief the heart
O earth, wind, and rain; O heavens, O light
Keep everything here*

Hadn't the voice sung something like this? Nezumi couldn't remember clearly. But his throat was dry. So dry, it was painful. A white cup was handed to him. It was full of clear water. He drained it. Like showers that quenched a parched land, the water that was offered to him flowed into his body, and soaked through its every extremity. It was a deliciousness he could not put into words. He was now able to take a deep breath, and pose a question.

"Shion, are you worrying about whether I might have brain damage?"

"Well, you fainted so suddenly. I had to take all precautions."

Nezumi put a hand to the base of his neck. With the same hand, he felt his own chest through his open shirt. There were no abnormalities. At the least, there were no changes that could be seen by the naked eye.

"It's not the parasite wasp," Shion said as he exhaled. "There's no change in your hair or your skin. It wasn't them."

"That's too bad. It wouldn't seem so bad to have hair like yours."

"Don't even joke about it," Shion said sharply. "It may have only been for a few minutes, but you were unconscious. It's not something you can laugh off."

"It was just a fainting spell."

"A fainting spell? You're saying you just *fainted*?"

"You have a problem with that?"

"Nezumi." Shion sat down on the bed, and exhaled again.

"Don't overestimate yourself."

"What?"

“Don’t overestimate yourself. You’re a human being. There’ll be times where you fall ill, or get hurt. Don’t forget that. I’m no doctor, and I don’t have medical knowledge either—but even I could tell that the way you collapsed just now wasn’t from a simple fainting spell.”

“Thanks for worrying about me. Maybe I should go to the hospital tomorrow and get myself checked out more carefully. If I end up having to be charged at the hospital, I’ll make sure to get the VIP room on the top floor, so make sure to come visit me.”

“Nezumi, I wasn’t kidding when I said—”

“Shut up!”

He was yelling, but he couldn’t tell why. His temper wasn’t out of control, nor did he hate the person in front of him. But he couldn’t help the harshness in his tone.

He did not want someone to be so earnestly concerned about his well-being like this. He did not want anyone to be seriously worried. He did not want to be cared about. Feelings like concern, worry, and care fell all too easily into the frame of “love”. He didn’t feel like he needed anything like that. He could live without it. He always had. It was unnecessary.

But Shion didn’t know that. Here he was, burdened with all sorts of useless baggage. Maybe it was Shion’s ignorance and stubborn truthfulness that irritated him.

“No numbness in your fingertips, right?” Shion continued, “Doesn’t look like there’s any swelling, either...” His fingers took ahold of Nezumi’s hand, which was flung out on the sheets. Shion’s fingertips felt along his hand, and pressed down lightly at intervals. He was still calmly and intently searching for the presence of any numbness or edema. It was like Nezumi’s yelling hadn’t affected him at all.

So not only was he oblivious and stubborn—he was dense, to top it off.

Nezumi brushed Shion's fingers away, and jumped down from the bed.

"Nezumi, you shouldn't be getting up so suddenly—"

"I'll teach you."

"Huh?"

"I'll teach you a dance."

"What're talking about? You should be getting some quiet rest—"

"Over here, come on." Nezumi grabbed Shion's arm, and forced him to stand. He slid his hand around his waist.

"See, I knew it," he said.

"What?"

"I'm taller than you."

"Liar," Shion retorted. "There's barely any difference."

Nezumi chuckled.

"So, honourable Prince. Have you any experience with dancing?"

"No."

"I figured as much. Then first, we'll begin with the basic steps. Come on—back straight, chin up. Don't look down."

"Aw, come on, stop it," Shion protested. "We can't dance in here. Besides, it's too dangerous. If we move around in a small space like this, we'd knock all the books over."

"There'll be none of that kind of clumsiness. Alright, turn here. Step back. Once more, and turn. See, you can do it," Nezumi encouraged.

"You're just pulling me along."

"You're still doing pretty well. Your movements are light. Step out and turn. Good, you're staying on the beat. And repeat the first steps again. Keep dancing—dance, Shion."

Shion opened his mouth to say something, then shut it again and lent his body fully to Nezumi's movements. He tilted an ear to the

lighthearted melody that spilled from Nezumi's lips, and traced his steps. The flame from the heater cast a shadow of two figures. The little mice huddled together, and looked down at them from atop their lofty perch on a pile of books.

"Whoa—!" Shion tripped on his feet, and fell backwards on top of the bed. His breaths came out in pants, and his forehead was damp with perspiration.

"That was a workout. It takes your whole body to dance, doesn't it, huh."

"You didn't know?"

"I didn't. Guess I'm that much smarter now. So?"

"Hm?"

"I'm all out of breath, but you're not tired at all. Is that the point you wanted to make?"

"You could say that."

"You have far more energy, athletic skill, and resilience than me. You're not the one I should be worrying about—that's what you're saying, right?"

"I wouldn't be *that* blatant, but—"

Shion stood up. He stood in front of Nezumi, and reached out. It was a brief gesture, lasting only for a split second.

Hub?

Nezumi was being held at the base of his neck. Not even held—Shion's fingers were merely resting on it. But a violent chill ran through him. It was a piercing shiver like what a beast felt when it had fallen into a trap.

"I thought *it*... was going to come out of here," Shion whispered hoarsely, as if his voice were caught in his throat. "When you collapsed,

that's what I thought. I—I thought you were going to die. Nezumi, it's not for you."

"Huh?"

"I'm not worrying about you for your sake. I'm only concerned about you for my own sake—to be free of my own fears." Shion's fingers drew away. Nezumi realized he had been holding his breath the whole time.

"Nezumi, there are still a lot of things out there that I don't know. But I do know," he hesitated. "—How terrifying it would be for me to lose you. I'm probably more afraid to lose you than anyone—anybody else. I'm so scared, it's unbearable. I want to make sure you'll never disappear from my side. I don't care if you ridicule me, or sneer at me—these are my real feelings."

It was none other than a straightforward and simple confession of love.

I can't live without another—without you.

How direct, how blatant, how foolish of a confession it was. Shion was, at this moment, committing the enormous mistake of revealing his foolishness, feminine weakness, his fragility. But Nezumi found himself unable to ridicule or sneer at him. It wasn't because he had been overwhelmed by Shion's sincerity, nor was it because his heart had been moved by Shion's heartfelt confession.

Who... is he...?

"Good night." Shion cast his eyes down, and slipped past Nezumi.

"I'll sleep on the floor. Just get some good rest tonight, alright? You've sweated a lot. You're probably more drained than you think you are."

"Yeah—" Nezumi was barely able to choke out an answer. Once Shion's back had retreated into the shadows of the books, he clutched at his throat, his shoulders rising and falling as he breathed raggedly.

I couldn't avoid it.

He wasn't able to avoid Shion's hand. The neck was one of the most fatal points for a human. Even a small wound or impact could cost him his life. But he wasn't able to brush away the hand that reached out to grab it. Shion had no murderous intent. But Nezumi hadn't let his guard down either, and he hadn't meant to comply to Shion's fingers as they reached out to touch him.

I couldn't avoid it. I, out of all people, let myself get caught.

He couldn't predict, avoid, or reject Shion's gesture. He had been captured completely. If Shion had been an enemy, if he had had the intent to kill, if he had been holding a knife—Nezumi would most certainly have been killed. Without even a cry, unable to scream, he would have fallen lifeless to the floor. He would have been killed.

I'm going to get killed.

Among the feelings that stirred inside him when Shion's fingers had held his neck, not a single one of them had any hint of love or yearning. It was fear. He was terrified. Nezumi had been through numerous dangers before. He couldn't count how many times he had been cornered and almost given up. But he had never stood before someone who made him cower like this, stiff and unable to move.

Those eyes, those movements, that oppressive feeling.

What was that?

He gritted his teeth.

He could hear the little mice skittering across the floor.

"Cravat, Tsukiyo, quiet down. Come on over here."

Shion was calling the mice. Once the shuffling of blankets and the soft squeaking of the mice quieted down, there ceased to be any sound or movement beyond the stack of books. Silence surrounded them.

I can't live without another—without you.

His cloyingly sweet but sincere confession, along with the movements that had trapped Nezumi completely—they lasted for only an instant,

but in that time, all emotion had vanished from Shion's eyes. Those were not the eyes of one who was baring one's soul in a confession of love. They were the eyes of one who had delivered an accurate and fatal stab, and was twisting the knife in the wound. Shion himself was probably not aware.

Am I the one who hasn't known anything all along?

Shion was a sheltered boy with a stellar intellect and gentle heart. He had never known to hate, to rebel, or to fight. He could embrace people, but not hurt them. He could protect people, but not attack them. He was one who had nothing to do with brutality or cold ruthlessness. He was one who could only ever become the sun. Wasn't that what he was supposed to be? If he wasn't, then—

He had no idea of Shion's true nature.

Nezumi had saved his life, had his own life saved, and they had lived and spent their days together. They were connected more closely, more intimately to each other than anyone else. He had been avoidant and apprehensive towards this relationship, but nevertheless he could never completely sever it; somewhere in his heart he had desired it, and perhaps he had made it into a kind of haven for himself.

I'm more afraid to lose you than anyone else.

Shion's words were also his own feelings. He didn't like admitting it, but it was the truth, and he had no other choice. But still, even so, for the first time since they had met, he was losing sight of who Shion was.

Nezumi ground his teeth once more. They made a thick, heavy noise like the sound of rusty cogwheels turning. The sound resonated deep within his body.

It wasn't that he had lost sight—he had probably never seen him properly from the beginning. He had only looked at the brighter parts of Shion, illuminated by the spotlight. Until now, Nezumi

had always looked at the root of the plant instead of the flowers that bloomed above-ground, focusing always on the parts that were sunken in darkness rather than exposed to light—and he was confident that he had the ability to render them clearly.

But he had been blinded.

He had been too blinded by Shion's carefree smile, his defenselessness, and his earnest gaze, to be able to see anything else.

He had not lost sight—he had never seen him from the beginning.

Nezumi began to get goosebumps.

Shion, exactly what are you?

In his heart, he questioned the boy who was lying curled up in a blanket with the mice.

What are you?

* * *

The news came one day, out of the blue.

The sky was already cloudy in the morning, forecasting snow later on. The ground was frozen over, and showed no signs of melting even after noon. Snow came in scattered flurries, and a chilly wind whistled through the West Block bazaar.

It was on that kind of day.

An old dog passed away at Inukashi's place.

"He was siblings with my Mum," Inukashi mumbled as he dug a hole in the frozen earth.

"Then he would be your uncle?"

"I guess so. Now that's one dog less who I can share memories of my Mum with."

"He was—quite old, though, right?" Shion said quietly.

“Yeah. Probably close to a hundred in human years. So he probably didn’t suffer much. Yesterday he was still going around licking the puppies. But when I woke up this morning, he was already cold. No one noticed. The puppies that were sleeping with him freaked out because he was so cold, and they came whining to let me know. He lived a full life.”

“He must’ve lived admirably.”

“He lived admirably,” Inukashi repeated.

The ground was frozen solid, and they were not making much progress with the pitiful hand-shovels and scraps of wood they were digging with.

“Nezumi,” Shion called as he looked up to where Nezumi was sitting on a portion of a crumbling wall. “Help us out if you’ve got nothing else to do.”

“Me? Why do I have to dig a dog’s grave? Ridiculous.”

Inukashi sniffed.

“Shion, leave him alone. I don’t want him touching my dog’s grave.”

“But we have to get him to sing a song.”

“A funeral song, huh.”

“Yeah, to send his spirit off,” Shion said. “You’ll do it, right, Nezumi?”

“Dirges are expensive, just to let you know. Three silver coins.”

Inukashi flung his spade aside, and bared his teeth, growling.

“Get the fuck down here. You greedy, fraudulent bastard. I’ll rip your throat apart.”

“With your teeth, the best you could manage would probably be a piece of mouldy bread,” Nezumi replied. “Oh yeah, speaking of which, weren’t there some crackers left in your cabinet? Maybe I’ll have those for lunch.”

“Hey, you must be fucking kidding me,” Inukashi snarled. “You better not lay a single finger on those crackers, Nezumi!”

Inukashi bounded over the ruins after him. Nezumi was nowhere in sight.

“Hey, wait a minute, you two!” Shion called after them. “Nezumi, didn’t you tell me not to get out of your sight? Inukashi, are you just gonna leave your uncle here?”

There was no answer from either of them. In the end, Shion ended up digging the rest of the hole by himself, into which he laid the aged dog to rest.

* * *

By the time Inukashi burst into the room out of breath, Nezumi was already sitting on the table, dangling the bag of crackers in his hand. “Give it back.” Inukashi mustered the most intimidating glare he could. He didn’t think it would be effective, but the bag of crackers was tossed back to him promptly. He was caught a little off-guard.

“What? Aren’t you hungry?”

“What, would you treat me if I said I was?”

“Stop kidding yourself,” Inukashi snapped. “I might have food for my dogs, but I don’t have a single cracker to give you.”

Inukashi put the bag back in the cabinet. It was old and rickety, but he still kept it locked. However, he could see the lock had been effortlessly picked.

Geez, I can’t even relax or let my guard down around this guy. Not that I would ever, anyway.

Inukashi relocked the cabinet, and turned around. Nezumi was still sitting in the same position. Inukashi bent to pick a pebble off the floor. This room was relatively durable as opposed to the rest of the

hotel, which had mostly crumbled away into ruin. The wall and the floor were still intact. It not only blocked out the wind and rain, as a living space it fell into one of the best that the West Block had to offer. But even this room was beginning to show signs of dilapidation. The pebbles that had evidently been set into the walls as decoration were beginning to fall out.

If he squinted at the pebble in his hand, he could almost make out the blue paint on it. He clenched it lightly in his palm.

“Nezumi.”

As Nezumi turned to look at him, Inukashi hurled the pebble straight at his face. Nezumi tilted his head just slightly to dodge it, and furrowed his brow.

“Nezumi.” Inukashi called him again. This time, he didn’t throw anything. “What’s wrong, hey?”

“What do you mean, ‘what’s wrong’?”

“You got troubles or something?”

“Troubles?”

“I’m asking you if there’s something on your mind.”

“Huh?”

The two boys looked at each other, and snorted nearly at the same time. Then, they fell silent. Nezumi was the first to open his mouth.

“I don’t think I’ve ever had something on my mind in my life. Ever.”

“I da figured.”

“Same for you, isn’t it?”

“Me? I’ve always got something on my mind. Food for my dogs, tomorrow’s wages. The worrying never ends. I’ve got my dogs to take care of. They can be a great help, but a burden too. I can’t let them starve to death. It’s not as worry-free for me as it is for you.”

“Worry-free, huh.” Nezumi paused. “Hey, Inukashi.”

“What?”

“The Hunt is coming. I think it’s gonna come in a day or two.”

“You mean you *feel* it coming, right?”

“Yeah, I feel it. I’m wondering if I should tell them.”

“Who?”

“The other West Block residents.”

Inukashi blinked, and fixed Nezumi’s profile with a stare.

“You mean tell them to run away because the Hunt is coming?”

“Yeah.”

“Where would they run?”

Nezumi didn’t answer. His eyes were cast down, his gaze fixed on the tip of his boot. At a glance, it looked like his mind was racing with thoughts; then again, it also looked like he was hesitating to give an answer.

“If the nice folks over in No. 6 are gonna put up a bulletin saying ‘We will begin the Hunt at so-and-so day from this time until that time’, you go on ahead and tell everybody,” Inukashi said. “If that’s the only time the Hunt is gonna occur, they can run. But you don’t know, do ya? You say you think it’s in a day or two, but that’s just your hunch. It can happen in five minutes. It can happen in a week. If a tip as unreliable as that was enough to make people run away, they wouldn’t be living here in the first place. They have nowhere to run. They have nowhere else they can live. That’s why everyone’s hanging onto this place like their life depended on it.”

While he spoke, Inukashi thought to himself that Nezumi should know this already down to the marrow of his bones.

On this earth, there were a precious few places that satisfied all the conditions for human life. There were probably no other places left, apart from the six city-states. Although Inukashi didn’t know this,

No. 6 was situated in a considerably more favourable environment compared to the other five cities. People gathered here in order to live. Leaving this place was synonymous to death. The people sensed this, not from learned knowledge or information, but from instinct.

They could not escape it. They had no place to escape to. The Hunt occurred once every few years. *If we're lucky, we'll be spared. So let's stay here.* That was the only way.

Whether it was out of resignation or for survival, in the end, everyone remained on this land. This was the only place they could live. And that was why it was hell.

"I shouldn't even have to say this," Inukashi gave an exaggerated huff. *You're right,* Nezumi muttered.

What the hell has gotten into him?

Is he scared about what's gonna happen?

Nezumi? Afraid?

Inukashi found himself vigorously shaking his head from side to side. His long hair flopped as it bounced against his back.

Impossible. Inukashi didn't see Nezumi in a favourable light. On the contrary, he saw him as a danger to deal with. Nezumi never revealed the most important part of his thoughts, and he could be extremely callous at times. Every time Inukashi saw the impressive skill with which he wielded his knife, he wondered if Nezumi had perhaps sent several people to the grave like this.

Inukashi didn't want to deal with him if he could help it—that was his honest opinion. But even so, he knew that Nezumi was someone who was neither underhanded nor deceitful; and although he was extremely cautious, he was not a coward. Inukashi knew that much.

He's decided to sneak into the Correctional Facility. If he's decided it, he'll do it. And now that he's made his decision, he shouldn't have anything to fear or be intimidated by.

Perhaps Nezumi had noticed Inukashi's apprehensive stare. He shrugged his shoulders nonchalantly in response.

"You're right. You shouldn't even have to say this. It's just—"

"Just what?"

"Shion hasn't mentioned it."

"Mentioned what? About letting everyone know so they can escape?"

"Yeah."

"Well, it sure sounds like something the airhead would say—but I mean, Shion doesn't know much about the Hunt, does he?"

"He's catching on."

Nezumi got down from the table, and picked up a pebble that was lying near the wall.

"He's slow to get the hint sometimes, but he's not stupid. He's probably realized exactly what kind of hunt the Hunt is. Though it probably hasn't sunk in for him yet."

"Uh-huh," said Inukashi dubiously. "Well, then, that means he's gotten smarter. Maybe he finally gets the picture about what the West Block is actually like."

"Probably."

Nezumi was twirling the pebble in his fingers. The question was out of Inukashi's mouth before he knew it.

"What's nagging at you?"

A shadowy veil fell over the pair of beautiful dark-grey eyes. There was a tremulous flicker. Inukashi remembered seeing the same kind of shadow and flicker. Many, many times. It was what you saw in the eyes of a dying child. They were eyes wide open and staring, filled with suffering, agitation, and fear, unable to understand why it hurt so much, and what was going to happen next. They were not the same, but they were very similar.

“You scared of something?” Another question spilled from his lips.

So you really are scared of something? It's not about the Correctional Facility or the Hunt. Those might pose a danger to Nezumi's life, but wouldn't instill fear in him. Then what—

Shion?

Inukashi scowled, and sneezed softly.

“What did you say I was scared of?” Nezumi said.

“No—” Inukashi said nonchalantly.

He didn't quite know what kind of relationship Shion and Nezumi had or what kind of connection they shared, nor did he ever wish to know. He didn't care. But he was sure that Shion would never become Nezumi's enemy. That was one thing that would never happen. Besides, what kind of damage would there be if a single airheaded, oblivious boy turned against them?

Inukashi sucked in a breath.

Oh well, it doesn't matter. Whatever it is, I don't wanna get more involved with these two than I already am. He shooed Nezumi away with his hand.

“Go home.”

“Some greeting.”

“I wouldn't even give you one, if I could help it. —Nezumi?”

Nezumi was covering his face with his hands. He staggered, and leaned heavily against the wall. He slid down with his back against the wall until he was squatting on the floor. He propped his knees up, and bowed his head.

“Nezumi, what's wrong?”

There was no answer.

“Hey, Nezumi. Stop fooling around. You practicing for your play or something? I'm not gonna give you any acting tips, just saying.”

“Singing—”

“Huh?”

“I hear singing—again—” Nezumi’s voice was trembling as he trailed off, and Inukashi could hear his laboured breathing. It turned into a faint murmur.

The wind... steals the soul away... humans thief... the heart.

“Nezumi, what’re you saying? Get a grip on yourself.”

So he has some disease.

Inukashi crouched down, and laid a hand on Nezumi’s shoulder.

“You hang in there. I’m gonna get Shion.”

He was grabbed by the wrist. It was such a powerful grip, Inukashi almost cried out in pain. Nezumi put his other hand to his forehead, and slowly stood up. He exhaled slowly.

“Hey, Nezumi.”

“I’m fine.”

“You don’t look fine at—whatever,” he cut off abruptly. “None of my business what happens to you, anyway.”

“Right back at ya.”

Nezumi released Inukashi’s hand, and took a few steps. His feet were steady.

“Oh yeah.” Nezumi turned back at the door, and fluttered his fingers. In-between them was a silver coin.

“Wha—hey, don’t tell me you—”

“And I’m telling you I did. Hidden compartment in the back of your cabinet, huh? Pretty nifty gimmicks you’ve got in this room, Inukashi.”

“W-Wait. You—you opened it?”

“Of course. One silver coin. I’m taking it to pay for Shion’s day of work. And the bag of crackers, too.”

“The crackers too!?” Inukashi howled. “You must be fucking kidding me.”

“They’re not stale or mouldy. Superb bag of crackers. I’ll have a splendid afternoon tea with these. Thanks.”

Inukashi lunged at Nezumi, only to have the door shut firmly in his face.

* * *

He had buried an aged and emaciated dog.

Shion threw dirt over the grave, and placed upon it a rock which Inukashi had chosen from the rubble as a makeshift tombstone. He brought his palms together in prayer. Several puppies sat at Shion’s side, and wagged their tails at the newly-made grave.

He felt a presence behind him. Since he had not heard any footsteps approaching, he knew who was standing there without having to turn around.

“What’re you doing?” Nezumi asked.

“I’m giving my condolences.”

“You’re praying for a dog.”

“He lived a full life on this land. I think it’s admirable.”

Nezumi kicked at the pebbles with the tip of his boot, and nodded.

“Yeah, I guess you’re right. It’s almost like a miracle for him to be able to die of old age here. He was able to die a peaceful death in a world that doesn’t give it to those who deserve it. Yeah. It’s worthy of admiration.”

“Will you pray for him too?”

“No thanks. If you’re done, let’s go home already. You’re finished your work for today, aren’t you?”

"Did you nick those crackers from Inukashi?"

Nezumi lifted a finger at him and wagged it disapprovingly.

"Tut, tut. A royal prince like yourself shouldn't be using such crude words like 'nick'."

"You nicked them, didn't you."

"It's for the work you've done. Compensation for your grave-digging. And this, too." A silver coin appeared between Nezumi's fingertips.

"A silver coin and a bag of crackers. Don't you think that's ripping him off just a little?"

"It's fine. I hooked him up with a job worth two gold coins. Think of the silver as commission. Alright, let's get some dried meat at the market and then head home."

Shion walked shoulder-to-shoulder with Nezumi. The puppies followed him around at his feet, and saw the two of them off at the outskirts of the ruins.

"Where's Inukashi? I don't see him anywhere."

"He's crying."

"Did you make him cry?"

"He cries at anything. He talks like he's tough, but he's a crybaby. He's probably bawling his eyes out right now because he can't believe he let himself get nicked of his silver and crackers."

"That's horrible," Shion said worriedly. "Hey, Nezumi."

"Hm?"

"About Inukashi... uh—by any chance, is he—"

"What about him?"

"Uh—no, never mind. Sorry."

They climbed a set of crumbling stone steps, and headed to the marketplace lined with barracks. The wind was blowing at them head-on. It seemed to steal away every little bit of their body heat. *I wonder*

what Safu's doing now. I hope she's not freezing in the cold. I hope she's not going hungry.

I love you, Shion. More than anyone else.

He was not able to return the girl's feelings. He would probably never be able to. He could not love Safu in the way that she wanted him to. But he could love her another way.

Safu, stay alive. And be waiting for me. Please.

The wind got stronger. He shrank from the cold.

"What're you thinking about?" Nezumi glanced at him, his hair streaming in the wind.

"About Safu."

"I'd say don't get worked up—but it's probably hard not to. But no good'll come out of it. Just remember that."

"I know."

"Pull your hat down lower. The Disposers are here. It's gonna be a pain in the ass if they decide to talk to us."

Before Nezumi finished his sentence, a burly man approached them from the gang drinking at the barracks.

"Hold on a minute, fellas."

It was, without a doubt, the same man that had run into Shion last time. Shion remembered the snake tattoo on his arm.

"Hey, if it ain't those cheeky brats from last time. Nice meetin' ya fellas again, huh? I'll make sure you guys have a good time."

Tsk. Nezumi clicked his tongue. At the same time, his right arm moved lithely. A blue pebble struck the man right between the eyes. The man cried out as he bent backwards. Shion waded through the crowd of people, and broke into a run.

"This way." He followed Nezumi, skidded into an alleyway, and squatted hastily down. The Disposers thundered past them, yelling

angrily.

“That’s pretty serious,” Nezumi commented. “If you get caught next time, you probably won’t get away with just a beating. You better prepare for it.”

“Am I the only one who has to prepare?”

“I’m gonna make a run for it.”

“So will I.”

Nezumi looked furtively around before crawling out of the alleyway. Apparently it was an everyday occurrence for men to be bellowing and running around, for people were walking down the street as if nothing had happened.

“But you’ve gotten faster at running away, that’s for sure. You’ve made some nice progress since last time.”

“You trained me. —Oh, I said this last time too, didn’t I?”

Nezumi smiled. It wasn’t one of exasperation, scorn, or cold cruelty. It was a sensual smile. Shion found himself entranced by it.

“Eve!” Someone yelled from further down the alley. “What the hell are you doing here?”

A small-framed man wearing a white shirt and black pants was standing there, his face fuming. He was wearing a dark, wide-brimmed hat, and a scarf of the same colour. Although it wasn’t very becoming on him, his outfit had a flair that one never saw in the West Block.

“Oh—Manager. It’s been a while.”

“It’s been a while, indeed,” the man said indignantly. “I’ve been looking for you. Why haven’t you shown up at the playhouse? We can’t get anything started without you on the stage. What’s going on?”

“Ah—well, a lot of issues have come up, and . . . I was wondering if I could take time off from performing for a while.”

“Take time off?” said the man incredulously. “Are you insane? Most of our audience comes to see you. Planning to put my playhouse out of business, are you?”

The manager then suddenly smoothed his face over with a meek smile, and his voice took on a wheedling tone.

“Come on, Eve,” he said pleadingly. “Let’s talk it out, one man to another. If you’ve got any complaints, I’m always here to listen.”

“Complaints, huh . . . that’s kind of hard.”

“Don’t have any? Then—”

“I’ve got so many, if I were to list them off, it would take me until tomorrow morning.”

“Eve, I’m begging you. If it’s about your compensation, we can work something out. If you can’t come in tonight, maybe starting tomorrow—”

There was a noise. It was a sound that would linger in Shion’s ears, be engraved in his memory, and haunt him incessantly in his dreams in the days to come.

The sound of destruction. The sound of genocide. The sound of death. The sound of despair. Screaming, yelling, crying, footsteps. Everything melted together, tripping over each other, tangling with everything else, writhing, rising in pandemonium. Hell had materialized before Shion’s eyes.

People began to flee frantically in every which way. The barracks began to collapse, and tents were being torn down.

“It’s the Hunt!” someone bellowed.

It’s the Hunt.

It’s the Hunt.

It’s the Hunt.

Even the howling of the wind was drowned out.

An elderly person tripped and fell. Shion had no chance to help him up. Countless feet stepped on the fallen as they stormed past.

"It's begun." Nezumi swallowed. He turned around and gave a curt command to the manager.

"Run!"

There was a deafening explosion above their heads. The air rippled with it. A numbing impact came slamming into them. A barrack that used to be a meat shop was blasted to bits.

"Shion!" He felt himself being knocked over. Nezumi's body overlapped his own. As he was pushed against the ground, Shion choked on his own breath. He could hear Nezumi's voice at his ear.

"Shion, you alright?"

"Of course."

This was no time to fall unconscious. It had started. Everything was starting now.

Nezumi drew away. Shion lifted himself up, and gave a small groan. He saw the sky. A grey expanse of sky spread above him. The whole second floor of the barrack which had previously been blocking his vision was blown off and gone. The air was thick with dust.

"What about that man?"

"Who?"

"Your manager, or whoever."

"Oh, he probably got away. If he's lucky, he'll make his escape. If not—he'll end up like that." Nezumi jerked his chin. There was a bloody arm protruding from under a collapsed wall. It was thick and hairy.

"Probably the old guy from the meat shop."

It's the Hunt.

Help.

O dear God.

Damnit.

We're gonna get killed.

Run, run, run.

Ahh, ahh, ahh.

Voices clashed together in an unintelligible din. Shion squatted down in the shadows of the ruined remains of a wall, trying to avoid being caught up in the moving mass of people. Less than a step away was the arm of the man from the meat shop.

“Nezumi, is this—”

“Look.” Shion’s gaze roved to where Nezumi was pointing.

“Oh—” His breath and his voice were stuck in his throat.

Two armoured vehicles were travelling side-by-side down the road, almost blocking it entirely. They made their way into the marketplace at a crawling speed. The barracks were no match for them. They were like paper-craft, crackling as they were crushed beneath the wheels.

“Nezumi, those armoured trucks—”

“Yeah. Old models, by the looks of it. But it looks like their ammo is still in working shape. They used acoustic shockwaves to blast the second floor off the meat shop. When did they start putting it to use?” Nezumi muttered to himself. “Or did they use this place to test it out?”

“That’s not what I’m asking. I meant—do those belong to No. 6?”

“Well, they don’t belong to me, that’s for sure.”

The fact that No. 6 had an army was something entirely new to Shion. Before he was born, the six city-states that dotted the earth had conferred together to sign a peace treaty that clearly denoted their vow to abandon their armies and forbid the possession, development and use of any weapons. From the past they had learned that warfare between the states only caused environmental destruction and deterioration of

the motherland, endangering the existence of humankind itself. As a means to escape their own extinction, all cities had signed the treaty and vowed to honour it.

It was called the Babylon Treaty, after the ancient castle in which the signing was held.

But Shion was no longer surprised by any of it. If No. 6 was a fictional utopia, then it was only appropriate for the city to have an army, soldiers, and weapons in order to oppress, dominate, and erase its people.

Shion beheld the approaching armoured truck warily, and regulated his breathing. Nezumi gave a soft chuckle.

"I thought you'd panic a little more. You've toughened up."

"You trained me."

"You were a nice pupil to coach. But game time is just starting."

"Yeah, I know."

The mob of people rippled. The flow was pushed back. The same armoured truck had appeared in front of them this time, blocking their way. The screams of the crowd grew louder. People jostled each other, toppling over like dominoes, and as they screamed and shrieked tearfully, they became one churning mass herded into the centre of the marketplace. It was in the area where Shion and Nezumi had taken cover, right in front of the destroyed meat shop. The meat shop, the tavern across, the used-clothing store beside it, and the store selling dried goods were all destroyed. Perhaps they had been blown up purposely to make the capture easier. Soldiers had appeared with guns in hand to surround the mob.

"*Quiet down.*" A low, booming voice of a man issued forth from the armoured vehicle.

"Help! Please, just save my baby." A mother with an infant in her arms was raising her voice in plea to anyone who would listen. No

one answered her.

“Please, he’s not even one yet. Don’t kill him!” As if sparked by her agitation, the baby began to wail in her arms.

“Please . . . don’t kill him . . .”

Shion bit down on his lip. His whole body was shaking.

What should I do. What can I do? What—I can’t do anything.

A whimper.

A voice. It was a dog’s voice. As Shion whirled around, his eyes met with a dog who was poking its head out of the rubble. It was one of Inukashi’s dogs—the one that had delivered Shion his letter. Just the other day, Shion had given him a caring and thorough wash as his way of expressing his gratitude. It was a large, dark brown dog. Shion extended his arms to the mother.

“Give me the baby.”

The mother widened her eyes, clutching the crying baby to her breast.

“Hurry, give him to me.”

“What will you do with my baby?”

“We might be able to save him. Hurry.” He half-wrenched the baby from the mother’s arms. He shed his coat, wrapped the tiny body in it, and laid him down in a space among the rubble. The dog lay down beside it, and licked the baby’s face. The crying stopped instantly. The dog’s brown fur blended perfectly with the crumbled wall, which was the same colour. He was unnoticeable.

Maybe he’ll make it. Maybe—

“I’m counting on you.”

The dog swung its tail softly.

“My baby—my son—” The young mother covered her face with her hands.

"If you're able to make it through, go to the hotel ruins," Shion said to her.

"Hotel?"

"Hotel ruins. The baby will be kept there. Don't worry, he'll be taken care of. So make sure you make it out. Alive. And please be there to pick him up."

The mother nodded, and closed her eyes as if in prayer.

"I'll be damned if I die at yer hands!" a burly voice roared. "We ain't gettin' killed by the likes o' you!"

Along with the voices, several small rocks whizzed at the soldiers. An agitated buzz ran throughout the crowd. Rocks and pebbles flew one after another from the mob, aimed at the soldiers.

"Shit," Nezumi grimaced. "Shion, get down!"

"Huh?"

"Hold your head and duck!"

Shion did as he was told, covered his head with both hands, and squatted down. At almost the same time, the soldiers opened fire with a torrent of electric bullets. The beams of the electric guns pierced people's foreheads, chests, and stomachs. Men, women, the elderly, and the young all fell without even raising a cry. They convulsed, and were still.

"If you rebel, you shall be killed. There are no exceptions."

It was a low voice. It was not a threat. Everyone understood. The clamour in the bazaar, or what used to be, died down at once. People even stopped moving. They were frozen in fear, and rigid with despair. Shion stood up cautiously. There was a corpse in front of him. It had a wound between the eyes, but it wasn't fatal. It was only red and swollen. The fatal wound was a little bit above it. The person had been shot straight through the middle of his forehead. It was

the Disposer. His mouth was gaping open, and his lifeless eyes were staring at the sky. Beside him, an elderly woman was squatting on the ground, chanting something under her breath. Her vacant gaze roamed aimlessly.

The scene before him lost all colour. Shion was never able to give colour to this scene that had permanently burned an image in his memory. Although faded, he knew the people there had clothes and hair of various colours; he knew that the rubble was not just one shade; he remembered for certain that the dog had dark brown fur—but the man’s corpse on the ground, the old woman who had gone insane, and the sight of the frozen mob was only ever in monotone, in black and white. But there was just one exception, in the dark grey that floated before his eyes. It was not from the clouds. It was an eye colour. They were dark grey eyes that glowed brightly and from deep within, brimming with vitality. It was the colour which Shion had been drawn to, been beheld by, and ultimately had never been able to forget for the rest of his life.

“I repeat. If you rebel, you shall be killed. Don’t move.”

No one moved. They could not move. Only the wind blew freely.

“Shion.” Nezumi grabbed his arm. “Don’t lose it.”

Shion gazed into Nezumi’s eyes, and laid his own fingers over the ones that grasped his bicep. He wasn’t clinging out of desperation. He wasn’t giving in to complete reliance. He only wanted to make sure. *This is where my heart is. I was human when my heart was stolen by him, and I was human when I longed to be by his side. And this fact won’t change, no matter what name I give to these feelings.*

In a reality so inhumane, almost too inhumane, the only thing one could do to remain human was to refuse to abandon one’s feelings for others, and to hold onto one’s own human soul. Shion clasped his hand tightly around Nezumi’s.

Nezumi, I want to stay human.

Nezumi breathed out softly.

“Keep your sanity. You can do it, right?”

“I’m alright.”

“Of course,” Nezumi said reflectively. “You would be alright. I shouldn’t have worried.”

“You will now be transported.”

The armoured trucks turned and changed directions. A large, black truck loomed silently in its place.

5

INTO THE UNKNOWN LIGHT

*In the heavens, black clouds gathered
On the earth, blustering winds blew
For seven months and seven nights, the storm clouds covered the sky
For nine months and nine nights, violent gusts buffeted the land.
The waters of Yangtze swelled up to the top,
and river waters spread to every corner of the land.*

CREATION STORY OF THE LISU, CHINESE MYTH

“MA’AM, CAN I have some muffins, please?” Lili came bursting into the store.

“Huh?” She stopped abruptly, and blinked quizzically, still clenching the coins in her fist. Karan couldn’t help but smile at how adorable she was.

“You’re here again, Uncle?”

Yoming smiled wryly at his niece’s frank attitude.

“Lili, I’m here to do my job. You understand, right?”

“What job?”

“You know Ms. Karan’s muffins, the ones you love so much? I’m going to write a feature on them. An impressive job, don’t you think?”

“What’s a feature gonna do?”

“It’ll make the muffins famous. Ms. Karan will have lots and lots of customers.”

“I don’t want that,” Lili said, puffing out her cheeks sulkily as she glared at her uncle. “If everyone buys her muffins, there won’t be any left for me.”

“Don’t worry,” Karan said as she took two muffins out of the display case. “You’re my important customer. I’ll always set aside some for you. Cheese and raisin, one of each. The raisin one is a present from me.”

“Really? Thank you,” Lili glowed. “Can I eat it now?”

“Sure you can,” Karan said. “It’s right about tea time, anyway. Why don’t we make some hot cocoa for Lili, hmm?”

“Yay! You’re the best,” Lili grinned.

How lovable she is.

Karan’s heart warmed. It always happened when she saw children smile. A warm, gentle feeling rose up inside her heart each time.

As a resident of Lost Town, an older district of No. 6, Lili was certainly not in the most plentiful of environments. In a city like this, where elites sat at the pinnacle and a complete hierarchy ruled, no matter how hard Lili tried, she would never be able to climb to the upper echelons. Lost Town was a residential district for people who sat at the bottom of the hierarchy. Among adults, there were many people who showed listlessness or angry abandon at their defeat, but children were not infected by this. They raced down alleyways, laughed at the smallest things, and set their eyes aglow at tasty foods. Perhaps this was an easier place to live for them compared to Chronos, where they would be placed under strict management and thorough instruction.

I want them to be happy.

Karan thought in her heart while she gazed at Lili’s carefree smile.

I want the children, at least, to be happy.

But what should I do so that they can? As an adult, what am I able to do? I can't even save my only son, or even the girl that loved him—

"Karan, what's the matter?"

Yoming lifted his face from photographing the muffins and croissants.

"Oh, no, I was just—"

"Were you thinking about your son?"

"I guess you can say that . . . But I'm always thinking about Shion," Karan said. "I haven't forgotten about him for a single second. He appeared in my dreams last night, too."

"Of course," Yoming said softly. "Of course—you're a mother. I'm sorry, that was inconsiderate of me."

Karan turned to face Yoming, and shook her head firmly.

"He looked very well."

"What?"

"My son. He was smiling. He looked a little thinner, but he had such a nice smile on his face. I thought, my, this boy must be happy. I was happy, too. Even my heart felt a little lighter when I woke up."

"Happy, huh," Yoming said thoughtfully. "Karan, whatever state he's in, your son is out there alive. That's for sure."

"And I'm grateful for it."

As long as you're alive, I won't ask for anything more.

Shion, live—and come back to me once more.

She placed a cup of cocoa down in front of Lili, and a cup of coffee in front of Yoming.

"Huh? Are you eating too, Uncle?" Lili asked sternly. "Don't you think you're overstaying your welcome?"

Yoming choked on his coffee. Karan burst out laughing.

“Both you and your uncle are my special customers. It’s on the house,” she reassured her.

“Okay,” Lili replied, somewhat unconvinced. “You know, Mommy thinks Uncle Yo might be making moves on you, ma’am. What’s ‘making moves’ mean?”

“Oh dear,” Karan said with a smile.

Yoming broke into a fit of coughing.

“Th-That’s absurd,” he sputtered. “Tell Renka—tell your mother, that Uncle Yo was very, very angry about that.”

“I don’t think Mommy’s gonna be scared of you even if you get mad,” Lili said boldly. “You won’t get dinner next time you come to our house, Uncle.”

Karan was so amused by the sour expression on Yoming’s face that she knelt down behind the display case to succumb to laughter. As she laughed, she remembered what Yoming was saying to her before Lili came in.

Karan, do you think we ought to keep on being this way?

That was how Yoming had started the conversation.

Do you think this city, No. 6, should keep being the way it is? You might not know much, but you do know enough. You know that this place is built on lies.

Yes, I know.

Both you and I have had our sons stolen from us. You still have hope, but my son will never come back again. Nor my wife. This city eats people up like a demon.

Yes.

Karan. Don’t you think we can change this place?

Pardon me?

Don't you think we could change the Holy City so it can be reborn again into a place of human beings?

Us... change...?

Not only the two of us. There are others who have realized the true nature of the Holy City. We're—

That was when Lili had come bursting in.

Karan lapsed into thought.

Instead of just waiting, just praying, or just crying the days away, what can I do to embrace Shion again? What can I do to save Safu?

Cheep-cheep.

There was a small squeak. A cry she had long awaited. A small mouse was curled up under the display case. Its long tail and grape-coloured eyes shone in Karan's vision like diamonds. In the long hours after Shion had disappeared, what strong support this tiny creature had given her at times when she felt like she would be washed away by her despair, loneliness, and hopelessness.

She gently placed a morsel of cheese muffin on the floor.

Thank you. Thank you so much.

"You came again."

A pea-sized capsule dropped into her outstretched palm. It was a letter from Shion. She had been told at the beginning that if anything out-of-place happened, a black mouse would come to notify her. It was a brown mouse this time, like the last. Shion was still safe. He was still alive. Perhaps he was even breaking out into joyous laughter now and then.

Shion.

She spread open the contents of the capsule with trembling fingers. It was a folded scrap of paper. On it was just a single line.

Mom, thank you. I'll love you always.

That was all it said. It was Shion's writing, without a doubt. It was his letter, which she had long hoped for. But a sense of unease rippled through Karan's heart. This—

Mom, thank you. I'll love you always.

These were almost like words of farewell. Like a last kiss, a last embrace, the last words.

Mom, thank you. I'll love you always.

Goodbye.

The last unwritten line swirled inside her head.

She stood up. She felt faint. The ceiling, the floor, was spinning.

"Karan!"

"Ma'am!"

She heard Yoming and Lili calling her from far away.

Shion, wait.

She reached out and yelled.

Where are you going? What do you plan to do? Don't tell me—Don't say you're—

The Correctional Facility.

She couldn't stop shaking. Karan was seized by the horror of what her actions had brought about.

She had told him about Safu. Shion was intending to help her escape. He was the kind of boy who would do something like that. It was something Karan would have known he would do. She should have known more than anyone else.

Her ego as a mother emerged fully exposed.

I shouldn't have told him. Out of all people, I should never have told Shion.

No, Shion. You can't go. You can't be the one that dies.

Wait, wait.

She fell to her knees. In front of her was a small mouse. It was holding the muffin morsel in both paws, and nibbling at it.

Nezumi—

Uncertainty weighed heavily upon her chest, and her heart felt like it was being wrung.

Where are you? Are you by his side? If you are, then please don't leave him. I'm begging you. Protect him. Protect him.

Nezumi!

* * *

The air was thick with the stench of blood, refuse, and sweat. The people had been crowded into a windowless cargo container, squeezed so much they could barely move, and they were gasping amidst the stench of blood, refuse, and sweat. He couldn't breathe. It was hot and humid in this confined space, and there was no light. It was like they were not even permitted to breathe.

Beside Shion, a man entering his senior years gave a short gasp. After several sharp breaths, his head lolled forward. Shion could feel the man's body begin to convulse repeatedly through his own shoulder, which was pushed up against him. Shion managed to squirm enough to get his hand free and place it on the man's mouth.

"Nezumi," he said.

"What?"

"This man—he just died."

"I see," Nezumi responded flatly. "Did he have a heart attack or something?"

"It might be."

“I see. Well, if he was able to go quickly, maybe it was all the more lucky for him.”

Maybe it was luckier to be able to die here, rather than not being able to die here. Nezumi’s words weren’t sarcastic or joking. It was probably the truth.

As Shion withstood the weight of the deceased man, he thought about the baby—the small baby he had left along with a dog in the shadows of the rubble. Would the baby survive?

“Inukashi’s probably in a rage right about now.” A smile spread thinly across Nezumi’s lips.

“Huh?”

“He’d be flying off the handle because you dumped that baby into his care. I can just imagine him holding that wailing baby in his arms and cursing you to high heaven.”

“He’d take care of the baby somehow, wouldn’t he?”

“Who knows? It’s probably already taking everything he’s got to take care of himself and his dogs. Though he probably won’t go as far as to feed the baby to them.”

“Inukashi’s kind,” Shion said firmly. “He wouldn’t abandon a helpless baby.”

“Wouldn’t he, now?”

“He wouldn’t, because he’s been raised by a compassionate mother.”

“I see. So you’re taking advantage of his compassion and kindness to dump that baby on him, huh?”

“Oh—well, I guess if you put it that way, I have. I didn’t realize.”

“It might be hard to imagine for Little Mr. Naive, but it’s tough. Babies and puppies are different. Humans take ten times more hassle. Poor Inukashi, he has to cut back on his own food income to care for someone else’s baby.”

"I'll apologize," Shion said simply.

"What?"

"I'll apologize next time I see him."

If you ever do, Nezumi muttered as he shrugged his shoulders.

"But how could you tell?" Shion asked. "How did you know I was thinking about the baby?"

"We've been together long enough to get sick of each other. I can tell most of the time. You're pretty easy to read, and—no—" Nezumi cut off abruptly, and touched his neck. *That's not it*, he muttered. "I can't read you at all."

Suddenly, they heard muffled sobbing from somewhere. It was a feeble voice, belonging to a woman.

"Oh... oh... oh..."

As if dragged along by her weeping, there came an eruption of sobbing from all over. Some belonged to women, others to men. No one was strong enough to raise their voice in an anguished cry. Seized by despair, exhaustion, and fear, they could only weep softly, in a voice that was barely audible.

As he squatted on the floor hugging his knees, Shion felt the tearful sniffing of the people soaking into his body.

Oh, oh, oh...

Oh, oh, oh...

He wanted to cover his ears, but he knew he could not. Even if he did, it would come seeping in through his skin. It would seep in through his nostrils, the tips of his hair.

Oh, oh, oh...

Oh, oh, oh...

Nezumi lifted his chin, and shifted his body slightly.

A song rang out. It was a song Shion had never heard before.

*On the mountaintop far away, the snows are melting
Becoming the stream that colours green in the beech wood
The fields are now brimming with blossoms
And a maiden more beautiful than they
Makes a vow of love in the beech wood
O youth
Wet your feet in the green waters
And gallop to me like a deer
Before the blossoms fall, come and kiss the maiden's hair*

It was a strange voice. Inukashi had once said that his song was like the wind, and that it stole the soul away like a wind scattering flower petals. He was right—Shion could feel his heart being enveloped by the song, and his soul being beckoned away. In this hopeless space without a ray of light, for just an instant, flowers bloomed, water babbled, and the lovers glowed.

The sobbing ceased. The people were enchanted by the song.

Here, in this hellish place, they had heard a beautiful song. It was like they had encountered a miracle. And it meant that these things could happen. *Even if we've been cast down into the pits of hell, it doesn't mean we've been torn away whole from beautiful things.*

Nezumi caught his breath, and gave a dry cough.

"That was a stretch. There's just not enough air in here. My voice won't last."

"That's more than enough," Shion reassured him. "It's amazing... I don't know how to describe it... this is my first time hearing you sing."

"Well, the acoustics here aren't the greatest. There's no orchestra, and no spotlight. On the stage it would look a little better."

"I'd love to hear it."

"Then let me extend you an invitation. Box seats, the best in the house. You should bring Inukashi and his baby too."

"I will. I bet even a crying baby would quiet down after hearing you sing."

"Shion, I was kidding," Nezumi said flatly. "Don't take it seriously."

"Eve." Someone raised his voice in the darkness. "Sing for us, Eve. Don't stop singing."

"Yeah, Eve. Sing for us."

Shion touched Nezumi's shoulder.

"Everyone wants to hear your song."

"I'm being put through slave labour now, am I?"

"You can save people with your singing. Nezumi, you're amazing." Even Shion himself knew how inept his words of praise sounded. He was embarrassed. But he did mean what he said.

Nezumi, you're amazing.

"Shion, you can't save people with songs or tales," Nezumi said coldly. "It'll make them forget their suffering for a little while. But that's about all it can do. They can't save people in any of the real sense of the word."

"Eve, sing us 'All the Shimmering Things'," a woman's voice pleaded.

"Geez," Nezumi muttered. "If the Manager finds out I've got fans even in a place like this, he'd probably burst into tears of joy."

Sing for us, Eve. In this moment, give us your song.

The truck slackened its speed just a little.

"We've passed through the gates," Nezumi muttered, in a voice low enough that only Shion could hear. Then he began to sing softly again. This song had a loping tempo, with a touch of melancholy.

*The pearls at the bottom of the sea
 The stars winking in the night sky
 And the love that rests in my heart
 All the shimmering things I surrender to you
 The sea grows stormy—the pearls disappear
 The sky grows stormy—the stars disappear
 But my love will never change
 Through generations of time
 Things that shimmer for eternity are just*

The truck stopped. The song cut off abruptly, and atmosphere in the cargo container froze over again.

“Shion, you hear me?” Nezumi whispered quietly. His voice was heavy now, completely different from when he was singing. “No matter what happens, don’t get separated from me.”

Shion nodded. He clenched his fists.

No matter what happens, I’ll never leave you.

The truck doors opened.

“Get off the truck.”

The crowd swarmed off the truck as they were told. Shion followed the throng. Nezumi nudged him in the ribs.

“That’s the Correctional Facility. The place *thy breast hath ached longingly for.*”

Shion swallowed. He swallowed, and stared at the building before him. It was a building of white walls. This piece of architecture, almost devoid of any embellishments and clearly designed to prioritize efficiency, was something Shion was used to seeing in No. 6.

Apart from the fact that it had very few windows, this building looked perfectly normal. Its height was about the same as that of the Moon-drop, and four wings about two storeys high protruded from it in

different directions, like arms. The protrusions were perhaps unusual, but not something that gave off an oppressive or foreboding air.

Shion had expected something more hideous. He had believed it to be something so hideous, he would not be able to lay his eyes on it.

The Correctional Facility, which was coloured crimson in the rays of the setting sun, could easily pass as a medical building. It appeared a sterile and functional place to the eye.

It was far from what he had imagined.

This was the Correctional Facility—and this was where Safu was.

“This would be the back of the building,” Nezumi said. “The front doesn’t look much different, though. So, how is it? Looks a lot more decent than you imagined, doesn’t it?”

“A lot more decent,” Shion agreed. “It almost looks like a normal building.”

“Yup. But maybe ‘normal’ is the scariest thing about it.”

“Walk forward.”

The mob lurched forward. The line fell slightly out of array a few metres ahead of Shion. Someone had collapsed. A soldier approached, and dragged the person away from the line. It was an old woman wrapped in a tattered shawl. She was thrown out onto the ground like a rag doll.

“Nezumi, what’s gonna happen to her?”

“Don’t worry yourself with other people’s problems. Even if you knew what would happen, it’s not like you’d be able to do anything.”

Another person fell. It was a young woman. Her clothes were torn, and she buckled to her knees, with her arms covering her bare breasts. One of the soldiers out of the evenly-spaced line dragged her out promptly. The same thing was occurring both behind and in front of Shion.

Are they sorting us?

Saliva welled up inside his mouth.

They put us in a confined space, so crowded we couldn't breathe; put us through confusion, despair, terror... but even after that brutal experience, now they're selecting those who can still manage to walk in a straight line?

"Yeah," Nezumi nodded. "They're sorting us. They're disposing of the ones who've gotten weak or died during the transport."

"What's the sorting for?"

"I don't know. I still don't know what they're planning to use us for."

"Funny you wouldn't know, huh, even though you seem to know everything I'm thinking about."

"Heavens," Nezumi exclaimed in mock surprise. "To think you can still be sarcastic in these conditions! That's quite something. Worthy of praise, my boy."

"I was trained by you—I've toughened up."

"But the real sorting is only starting."

"Just starting, huh..."

They trudged in the blustering wind. In that time, several people collapsed, and were removed from the line.

Among them were those who lay still, those who shook in the cold, and those groaning in pain. Without exception, they were all dragged out and herded into one spot.

What's going to happen to them? What's going to happen, what's going to happen? I don't know. Even if I did, there would be nothing I could do to help it.

His emotions began to grow numb, starting from the extremities. He was getting used to atrocity. He was becoming unperceptive to brutal murder. His thoughts slowed and became sluggish. The death of others no longer fazed him.

Shion reached out and grabbed Nezumi's arm. He made sure he could feel the body of flesh at his fingertips.

Nezumi, keep me as the human I am.

"There's a chance—" Nezumi dropped his gaze. "—that you might change."

"Huh?"

"Here—in this Correctional Facility, you might change."

"What're you talking about?"

"Maybe the time will come when I'll finally realize—I never knew a thing about you."

"Nezumi, what are you saying?"

Nezumi clamped his mouth shut, and fell silent.

The people were ordered to stop in front of a set of black doors.

"Begin entering, starting with the ones at the front. Do not make any noise."

The line was divided into three groups, and the first group disappeared beyond the other side of the door. There was not a sound. A few minutes later, the door opened again.

"Next."

It was Shion and his group's turn.

We're going in there?

Into the interior of the Correctional Facility.

He had steeled himself. He had already made the decision. But he could not help shrinking back a little. His heart was expanding so much, he felt like it would burst through his pectoral muscles.

"This was the only way," Nezumi said softly, his gaze staring steadily ahead. "This was the only way we had, Shion."

"Nezumi..."

"Let's go."

“Yeah.”

A gust of wind blew past them. The doors swung open on each side. “Eve,” someone yelled suddenly from somewhere behind. “A song for us. A song—”

A soldier wordlessly fired his gun. There was the heavy *thud* of a body crumpling on the ground. The voice was cut off mid-scream, and the roar of the wind grew stronger.

Damnit.

Nezumi’s lips moved to form the words.

Damnit. Someday, someday surely I’ll—

“Move forward.”

Beyond the door was a world of darkness.

It was too dark to decipher how large the space was. Like the cargo container, they were squeezed in well past the capacity of people it could hold.

The doors closed.

Lurch. The whole room began to shake. And it began to move. They were moving down at a considerable speed.

“An elevator, huh.” The floorplan of the Correctional Facility emerged in Shion’s mind. The blank space underground. *This is it. We’re moving down into that place.*

They were descending. Descending. It was like they were falling into the abyss.

Nezumi’s arm slid around his waist.

“Hold onto me. No matter what happens, never let go.”

“Nezumi, what—”

“We’re going to hell together.”

The arm around his waist grew tighter.

“But we’re coming back alive. Don’t forget that, Shion.”

“Of course.”

The elevator stopped. The darkness wavered.

“We’re gonna fall.”

Nezumi’s voice echoed into a world cloaked in darkness.

Volume V

Was this the end for him? Shion and Nezumi succeed in infiltrating the Correctional Facility in order to save Safu, who has been taken away by the Security Bureau. But what awaits them is worse than anything they could have imagined — like Hell on earth. Shion is close to giving up. On the other hand, an ominous force looms closer to Safu every minute. What will unfold in their future?

I can't... see... Don't... come... near me...

1

A PRAYER YONDER

*Good fortune, then,
To make me blest, or cursed'st among men!*

THE MERCHANT OF VENICE, ACT II SCENE I

S_{HION.}

She tried to call to him. But her voice would not come out. Her tongue would not move. Her arms and legs were heavy as if they had been bound in shackles, and she could not get them free. Shion didn't turn around. His back, clad in a white shirt, moved further and further away. Around them was darkness. An inky black darkness spread out all around. There was not even the smallest ray of light.

Shion, wait. You can't go.

Turn around. Come back home. Don't go any further.

The darkness shifted. It bristled slimily and reared like something alive, and swallowed the retreating white back whole.

Shion!

A shriek tore through her throat. Terror turned into vicious pain as it raced through her whole body. She tried to leap into the darkness

after Shion, but her body would still not move. She couldn't take a single step forward.

Someone—someone help me. Stop him.

“Karan.”

“Ma'am!”

She heard voices. Someone was holding her hand. She was shaken lightly.

“Karan, can you hear me? Can you hear my voice?”

“Ma'am, wake up!”

The voices had strength. The darkness was brushed away from her eyes, and her vision lightened into a dim haze.

Oh—I hear you. I do hear you.

Karan opened her eyes. Her vision was blurry, like there was a veil being draped over it. Two hazy faces—one of a tan man and one of a girl—were peering into her face. But they were fleeting. She felt like if she blinked, they would ripple and shimmer, and disappear.

She could smell bread. Butter rolls, with ample butter kneaded into the dough. Come evening, Lost Town residents would flock to Karan's bakery for her affordable and delicious breads: labourers, after a long day's toil; hungry students; children with loose change in their fists—for these poor customers, she had set the oven to finish baking at 5 o'clock sharp. It looked like the outdated oven had functioned properly—the dozen or so butter rolls were finished and ready.

For Karan, the aroma of baking bread was the aroma of life itself. The savoury smell, now long familiar to her nose, yanked Karan energetically back into the real world.

The veil was thrown off. The outline of two faces flew clearly into her vision.

“Lili... Yoming...”

"Looks like you've come to," Yoming heaved a relieved sigh. *Thank goodness*, his lips moved. "Can you get up? You don't have to force yourself."

"Yes—I'm... I'm fine."

Yoming supported her while she raised her upper body. She had been lying on an old sofa in a corner of her workspace.

"I... went unconscious..."

"Yeah," Yoming said. "Behind the display case there, you just kind of crumpled to the ground. I was so startled. My heart's still going a mile a minute."

Yoming flashed a relieved smile. Karan tried to smile back, but her cheeks were stiff, and didn't move the way she wanted them to.

"Ma'am!" Lili threw herself at Karan and clung to her neck. Her eyes were brimming with tears. "Ma'am, you're okay, right? You're okay now?"

Lili pressed her cheek against Karan's neck. It was wet. The arms that clung to her were trembling as well. The little girl's tears were warm. They were almost hot. Normally she would gently embrace the little girl, but Karan's arms would still not move as she wanted them to. They were still heavy, and she felt like she was still clawing about in her dream.

Shion.

She wanted to tear her hair out. She felt like she would go insane. Right this moment, what if Shion was heading to a place where his mother's hands could never reach? What if he was descending into the depths of hell?

If he is, if that's really happening, what am I to do? What should I...

"Oh!" Lili gasped softly, and drew away from Karan. "They're little mousies!"

A little brown mouse was sitting on the spice shelf. Another grey one poked its furry face out from beside it.

“Hey, there’s two.” Lili raised two fingers. Were they siblings? The two mice blinked their very similar grape-coloured eyes, and huddled together.

One had brought her Shion’s letter. But what about the other one?

“Lili, can you bring me a tiny piece of cheese from the fridge? It’s in the bottommost drawer.”

“Okay.”

Karan extended her hand up to the mice on the shelf, gently, but with as much strength as she could. The tips of her fingers trembled. The two mice looked at each other, and busily twitched their whiskers.

Cheep-cheep.

One of them encouraged the other, and the encouraged one turned to face Karan. It had such small eyes, but they were eyes that showed intelligence. These mice possessed intellect. They could understand human language and emotions.

Karan reached out further. She turned her palm upwards.

Cheep. Cheep.

The grey one slipped forward. Without a minute of hesitation, it jumped down onto her palm. It shook its head side-to-side, and spat a small capsule out of its mouth. It was her second letter today.

“Ma’am, are you gonna give the cheese to the mousies?”

Karan nodded at Lili, and opened the capsule. It wasn’t Shion’s writing. But she remembered seeing it before. It was the writing that had extended a hand to Karan and pulled her up when she had been wallowing in the depths of despair, after Shion was taken away by the Security Bureau. It was the beautiful, flowing hand that showed its owner’s intelligence and resilient will. She could never forget this writing.

Reunion will come. *Nezumi*

The short sentence didn't even add up to a tenth of his last note, but Karan was able to heave a sigh of relief. A cool, soothing breeze blew through her body. The obstruction in her chest, her airway, cleared somewhat.

Oh, I can breathe.

It was too early to despair. She could not lose hope yet.

"Nezumi..." She found herself saying his name out loud. For an instant, she felt like someone had put an arm around her shoulders. Although she couldn't see it, she could feel strong and supple arms supporting her.

Reunion will come. Whatever happens, I will bring Shion back to you alive. This I promise.

She could hear a low voice whisper at her ear. She breathed deeply again.

Nezumi was there. Always, at any time, he would be by Shion's side. Her boy was not alone.

"Karan, what's that?"

Yoming was peering into Karan's hand.

"A letter."

"Letter? Do the mice deliver the post where you live?"

"They do," she smiled. "And it's handwritten, too. Isn't it so much more delightful than electronic mail?"

Now she could smile. Yoming and Lili looked at each other, and the corners of their mouths turned up as well. Lili, who was breaking the cheese and feeding it to the two mice, came up to Karan and buried her cheek into Karan's bosom. This time, Karan could finally put her arms around her properly.

"I was scared," Lili mumbled tearfully. "I was scared that... you wouldn't move at all anymore... like Daddy... I was scared. Really scared."

"Daddy? Did something happen to your Daddy, Lili?"

"My Daddy before. My real Daddy."

"What?"

Yoming shook his head slightly.

"Lili's current father is Renka's second husband—she remarried."

"So Getsuyaku-san is..." Karan trailed off. "—I see."

She conjured to mind the long, thin face with drooping eyebrows. Now that Yoming had mentioned it, she realized he and Lili were not alike at all in facial structure or body type. But she never felt anything strange about seeing them walking hand-in-hand, or coming to buy bread together. They were a happy family, father and daughter who truly got along. After Shion had disappeared, she felt a twinge of pain in her heart at times when she saw Getsuyaku and Lili together. She was both saddened and envious.

"Then Lili's father..."

"He passed away a few years back."

"A little before you moved in here, ma'am," Lili chimed in. "But you know, I love my new Daddy too. He's really funny. He always makes me laugh."

Lili lifted her chin, and a grin spread across her face. It was a bright smile of relief as she confirmed that Karan could speak properly, feeble though it was.

"I never knew. Renka never mentioned anything."

"She probably didn't want to," Yoming said. "They're painful memories for her."

The words had probably slipped without him knowing. Yoming gave a deep sigh. Lili began to speak.

“One day when we were eating together, Daddy stopped moving. He said, ‘I can’t breathe’ and fell out of his chair. And I don’t know why, but he stopped moving after that.”

Lili’s body began to shake, as memories of her younger days began to come back to her. Karan slid her gaze to Yoming. She questioned him with her eyes.

What is this about?

“Lili’s father—died, before her eyes,” Yoming said hesitantly, casting his eyelashes down. “No,” he then said momentarily. “He was murdered.” “Murdered!”

The frightful word overlapped with the image of Shion’s retreating back. Karan found herself clenching her fists so hard that her nails were digging into her palms.

“Lili’s father—his name was Suifu—was a construction worker, and a giant of a man who was proud of his strength, and rightly too,” Yoming said.

“Mommy says he was really kind, strong, and cool. He was really in love with Mommy, right?”

Yoming smiled wryly.

“I think Renka’s prettying it up a bit too much, even for a story to tell her daughter. Suifu was a big drinker and a loose spender, so they were always getting into fights. But, well, he was a nice guy, and worked hard for his family. He was a boisterous one, and liked to sing. When he’d get drunk, he’d always sing in that booming voice. Yeah,” he nodded. “He was a good guy. He certainly did love his family very much.”

“But he was... killed?”

“Indirectly.”

“Indirectly . . .” Karan repeated. “Yoming, will you explain in a way I can understand?”

Yoming drew up a battered chair, and sat down. With his right hand, he gently stroked Lili’s hair. It was a gesture that showed how much Yoming cared for and cherished his niece.

“Explain so you understand, huh . . . if only it was as easy as that. There are so many things I still don’t know, that it’s hard to even tell in proper sequence.”

Yoming always spoke in a muddled way, and often ended his sentences awkwardly. But nevertheless, he groped for the right words, and began to weave the story in fragments.

“Suifu, back then, was involved in the construction of a certain building. He was a construction worker.”

“A certain building . . .”

“Yeah. But we still don’t know what building it was. I heard even Suifu didn’t have an idea what it was. He used to be taken to the construction site in a windowless van—he couldn’t see anything outside.”

“Then to silence him—?”

“No, Karan, that couldn’t be it. Suifu took his assigned job seriously, but he wasn’t interested at all in what he was building. He didn’t care which part of the city this building was in, or what it was going to be used for. Even if he was interested, it wasn’t a kind of secret that a construction worker could sniff out. It was put under skilful concealment. Right after Suifu died, I did some footwork of my own trying to find out where this brother-in-law of mine used to work, but to no avail. Open disclosure doesn’t exist in a city like this. If the authorities wanted it concealed, there would be nothing we citizens could do against it, anyway. There shouldn’t have been any need to go as far to kill Suifu to hide a secret.”

“Then . . . what did he die of?”

“Outwardly they’re saying it was a heart attack. But I can’t bring myself to believe that Suifu could have had one. It’s as likely as a duck drowning in a pond.”

“So it must mean there’s something else to it.”

“Yeah...” Yoming sealed his lips gravely, and cast his gaze around the room.

“It’s alright,” Karan reassured. “We’re not being tapped.”

“Is that so.” Yoming paused. “I’m sorry,” he said abruptly, “being all furtive like this. It’s shameful.”

“No, not at all.”

Were they really free from tapping devices? Frankly, Karan wasn’t completely sure. The authorities possessed enormous power. They could do anything if they wished to. It should be no large feat for them to tap all citizens’ conversations and manage that information.

But even so.

Karan grasped the memo tightly in her hand.

She would accomplish nothing if she kept shrinking back from fear. *Instead of being afraid, sealing my lips, plugging my ears—let me speak, let me listen.* She would say it out loud; she would tilt an ear to listen. To her it seemed like it was the only option left.

Karan leaned forward determinedly to the man and his roundabout words.

“And this ‘something else’ that you were talking about?”

Yoming blinked just once. Then, he stared straight into Karan’s eyes.

“All of this is speculation. But if I tell you, I might end up loading you down with a burden.”

“I want to hear about it, and this is from my own will.”

She tried spurring Yoming on.

“You went and you investigated your own side of the truth. You said you barely know anything, but knowing you, you’ve probably at least gotten a clue. You’ve grasped *something*, haven’t you? A hint—it might be thinner than a thread, but something to lead you to the truth?”

“You’ve expected too much from me,” Yoming said heavily. “I didn’t have the power, courage, or method to do any of that . . . but I can say that the pay that Suifu received while he was working at that site was quite, quite high. I heard it was double that of how much he usually gets. Renka was surprised when she heard Suifu was getting ‘special danger compensation’. It’s hard to imagine a construction site with danger risk in a place like No. 6.”

“Special danger compensation . . .” Karan pondered. “For tearing something down, or blowing it up . . .”

“Or handling chemicals.”

“Chemicals—you mean poison?”

“Or the equivalent. Something unknown: something even the scientists of No. 6 wouldn’t know the proper method of handling.”

“I can’t imagine anything that would fit.”

“It’s hard to. There’s just not enough information.”

“But Lili’s father wasn’t the only one working at the site, was he?” Karan persisted. “Wouldn’t we be able to find out more if we asked those other people too?”

“That’s the thing; I can’t find any of them.”

“You can’t find them?”

“Yeah. They’re missing—or maybe they didn’t exist in the first place. In other words, there were no other humans involved in the construction other than Suifu.”

“No other humans . . . oh, then do you mean robots—”

“Yes. Robots. They were using construction robots.”

Karan lifted her face, and gazed at the ceiling without really seeing it. Shion used to operate robots, too. They were cleaning robots for the park.

“They’re really cute, but functionality-wise they’ve still got some ways to go. Like just the other day: a lady had her hat blown away by the wind, and the robot picked it up, which was perfectly fine. But the robot couldn’t control its grip, and ended up squashing the hat. The lady was furious, can you imagine? So I think humans are still better with small and delicate tasks. Human fingers are really amazing, you know.”

And he would wiggle his fingers lightly...

Karan screwed her eyes shut to forcefully scatter the memories of her son from her mind. She spoke in the calmest voice she could muster.

“Lili’s father must have been doing a job that robots couldn’t do.”

“Probably,” Yoming conceded. “But Suifu wasn’t a technician. He didn’t have any special technical skill. I mean, being the serious guy he is deep-down, I’m sure he would have done a thorough job with anything that was given to him, but... I can’t imagine what he could have been doing amongst those robots.”

“Fingertips?”

“Huh?”

“The difference between humans and task robots.”

Shion’s fingertips fluttered in her memories. They were deft fingertips. They always skilfully performed the delicate work she asked him to do. Once in a while, she even found herself gazing in admiration at their dexterity.

You know mom, human fingers are really amazing.

“Robots might be more useful for things like tearing down walls, or carrying heavy things, but with smaller tasks that require more care... for example, let’s see... using small tiles to make a complicated pattern

on the wall, or engraving letters into a pillar . . . robots still can't do that, right? It's the same with bread. If you want to make bread that tastes the same and looks the same, a machine would be enough. But celebration cakes, for example—where it's important for them to look nice, and to match that person's taste—you'd have to make them by hand if you wanted something good."

"But Suifu couldn't bake bread or cakes like you can. He didn't have the skill to make patterns with tiles, or engrave lettering. He really couldn't do anything special . . . or at least, I don't think so."

"How about carrying things?"

"Carrying things?"

"Yes, important things . . . like fragile items, or soft things . . . things that have to keep their shape, like a hat. Human hands would be more suited for things like that."

"You're right. That might be it. Maybe Suifu was carrying some highly-dangerous something-or-other, that couldn't be left to robots. But . . . even if that was true, I have no idea what that might be, or how it could relate to those sudden deaths. No matter how much I rack my brains, I can never get out of the range of speculation. In the end, with nothing to work with, we can only keep asking the same questions that will never have answers. We don't know anything for sure . . . all we know is that Suifu was involved in city construction work, and that he died. That's it. Right, Karan?"

Yoming's tone of voice grew more leaden by the second, and dropped so low she could barely hear him.

"This city devours people ruthlessly," Yoming growled. "Sometimes I can't help but think so. It devours people that have fallen out of the boundaries of the city's values; people whom they've deemed inferior to their values; people who have objected against their values. They devour them head-first, ripping them, strewing the bits, until they

throw them away.”

“Mm...” Karan answered vaguely.

“So in the end, a place like this, Lost Town, is like a cesspit for the city: it’s a gathering-place for people who have fallen out of the city’s criteria of value, inferior humans. No, they probably deliberately made it this kind of gathering-place. It’s a warehouse of disposable people.”

Karan felt an onset of shivers at Yoming’s heavy, low voice, as well as the words that were coming out of his mouth. She stole a glance at Lili. Apparently weary of the adults’ conversation, the little girl had moved some paces away to play with the two mice. The brown and grey mice were in Lili’s lap, stuffing their cheeks with morsels of cheese. Whether human or some other animal, small beings were always adorable. It was the adult’s job to protect these small and fragile bodies and minds, with whatever it took.

That was what Karan believed. She didn’t want to thrust the terror of reality on Lili, still so young. Yes, one could not be blinded. One must not be tricked. One had to be able see through the deceit and find real truth. But this hardened will was something to be born by adults who were old enough to withstand ‘knowing’. Lili was still much too young.

“Lili.”

The little girl turned towards Karan’s voice with her large, black eyes.

“I don’t think the cheese is enough to make those little mousies full. I think there’s a butter roll from yesterday left in a corner of the display case. Will you give them half each?”

“You can give bread to mousies?”

“Yes. Will you give it to them as a reward? And could I ask you to watch the store, too? If a customer comes in, I want you to give

them a nice greeting, and say, 'welcome!'. I promise I'll treat you to freshly-baked butter rolls later."

"Yay! You know, I've always wanted to do a baker's job."

The mice were now perched on Lili's shoulder, evidently having become close friends with her. They were a pair of smart mice: they could tell which humans were dangerous, and which ones could be trusted.

"Ma'am, you know what?" Lili stood on her toes and brought her lips to Karan's ear. "I'm gonna tell you a secret."

"Alright, what is it?"

"Mommy's gonna have a baby. I'm going to be a big sister."

"Oh my, Renka? That's fantastic. When?"

"When it gets warm, and lots of flowers start to bloom."

Yoming gave an exasperated smile.

"Hey, Lili, are you sure it was okay to just reveal Mommy's secret like that?"

"Ma'am's allowed to know."

"I'm so glad," Karan said warmly. "Thank you for telling me. When the baby is born, we'll have to celebrate with a giant cake. Alright, Lili, you'll watch the store for me, right?"

"Yeah. I say 'welcome!' right? 'Welcome!'" With the mice sitting on her shoulder, Lili left the room and made for the bakery counter. Yoming gave yet another sigh.

"Right. I guess it's something we wouldn't want Lili to hear."

"Of course. To hear that your own father was treated like an object, and that he lost his life as a result... even if she were to find out eventually, right now is too early."

Yoming slowly lifted his gaze from the exit into which Lili had disappeared, and rested it back on Karan.

“Treated like an object—yes, Suifu was given the same treatment as the robots. He wouldn’t have been told how risky that job was. They must have glossed it over with something vague, and dangled high wages under his nose. Suifu wanted money. It was still only a short time after he’d been fired from his former workplace for getting into a disagreement with a colleague. If it was to support his family, he would have been prepared to risk a few things to get a job. The authorities researched all of that, of course, and chose Suifu for that reason. After all, they’ve got complete access to citizen information. It was probably a piece of cake for them to pick a suitable candidate. They needed someone to handle a job with unknown dangers; someone who was used to heavy lifting; someone who was responsible, and worked silently and efficiently. A man without curiosity, inquisitiveness, or a sense of suspicion. Someone who wouldn’t mind risking danger for money—Suifu was probably the perfect choice.”

“So that’s why his job and his sudden death must be related somehow. You’re sure of that.”

“Yeah. I don’t know how in the world they *could* be related, but I certainly believe they’re connected to each other. Ask me why I think so, and I’d say—”

“You’d say?”

“The ambulance. Suifu collapsed, and Renka, naturally, called the ambulance. But she told me it came unusually quickly. She said it wasn’t even three minutes after she’d phoned them.”

An ambulance arriving within three minutes—this was an extremely rare occurrence in Lost Town; no, one could even say it was nonexistent.

The Holy City of No. 6 was an urban society built upon a rigid hierarchy. With the mayor and his city policies at the apex, only a handful of “chosen ones” reigned. They were named “elites”, and

lived in the luxury residences of Chronos in a special district, blessed with an undisturbed, excessive, and exceedingly comfortable life. The regular citizens below them, although far from having a life like one in Chronos, lived their daily lives supported by highly-developed medical and scientific technologies, in happiness—or in what they were made to think of as happiness. People like Karan who lived in Lost Town, even farther from “elite”, were not insured of any of the city’s services and aid that were normally available to regular citizens. They were treated like sub-citizens. To borrow Yoming’s words, Lost Town was like a warehouse for disposable humans.

Emergency medical care was almost unattainable in Lost Town. Karan remembered hearing that the number of ambulances and medical clinics were less than a tenth of Chronos. This was regardless of the fact that Lost Town had many more injured and ill patients than Chronos.

An ambulance had arrived in less than three minutes. What was the meaning behind this almost miraculous occurrence?

“Do you mean that Lili’s father was being placed under surveillance, so that they could deal with it quickly if anything out-of-the-ordinary happened?”

“It was probably Level 3 surveillance. Suifu started convulsing at the dinner table, but by the time the ambulance arrived, he was already not moving. I don’t know whether he was still alive at this point, or if he was already a corpse, because people from the Health and Hygiene Bureau carried him off. Renka tried to accompany him in the ambulance, but she was refused. They ordered her to stay at home.”

“And after that, Lili’s father...”

“Two hours later, he came back as a cold body. A doctor that was sent over by the Health and Hygiene Bureau explained that it was a heart attack, but of course we could never believe that. I was at the scene

too, because I'd rushed over after getting Renka's call. I begged him to explain in more detail, but it didn't do any good. The only thing that happened was Suifu's ID card getting exchanged for a Confirmation of Death card to permit his funeral."

"I see... so that was what happened."

She knew she was giving a rather unthoughtful answer. But she had no idea what kind of answer she could have given to Yoming's words—what answer she ought to have given. It wasn't something she could just let in one ear and out the other. But of course, easy words of consolation and condolence were equally as inappropriate. Then what would she say, and how? She couldn't help but hesitate. Her hesitation turned to unease, and faintly took on a tinge of fear. Yoming's words further coloured this fear deeply.

"When the doctor was leaving, what do you think he said to Renka? 'This patient passed away almost without any pain at all,' he said. And true, Suifu's dead face was peaceful. He was smiling like he was having some nice dream. But Renka and Lili saw how his face was twisted in pain before he collapsed. How could they ever believe that he'd died a peaceful death?"

"So you're saying the Lili's father's dead face was *made* to look peaceful by some special method..." Karan swallowed hard. Her own parents included, all of the bodies that Karan had ever seen were always smiling peacefully. Their faces were graced with smiles that made them look like they had never experienced a single pain or hardship while they were alive. Every dead face was beautiful. That was how she thought they were supposed to be—that in No. 6, where palliative care was highly developed, everyone was promised a calm and painless death.

It was a lie. It was all artificial. Here, even human deaths were covered up and modified. All the circumstances and truths that clung to each and every human death were scrubbed clean like tanned hide, levelled,

fixed up, and tucked away as a “peaceful death”.

We’re living in a world that is more disturbing than I could ever fathom. And what if this disturbing nature was far beyond what my pallid imagination could visualize...?

“Whatever the case, Suifu’s death is still shrouded in mystery. Renka’s remarried and managing to get on with her life. I’m—as you can probably see—living day-to-day as an information-broker. I’ve been so caught up with other tasks that a lot of times, I forget about Suifu. And I say damnit to myself every time. Those are my days: gnashing my teeth, reminding myself that I can’t let myself forget about Suifu, and of course my wife and son.”

“There would be no way you would forget it,” Karan reassured him, “if Lili’s father and your wife and son have been murdered by this city. You wouldn’t be able to, would you?”

“No. And that’s the only thing I can do now: remember. Keep remembering. I’ll never forget all the people that were taken from me. But sometimes I get a nasty chill when I think—what if the authorities catch me? And I wonder, if they ever erased my memory...”

Yoming peered closely at Karan’s face. Her eyes were shadowed. It looked as if despair had been poured into her eyes, and her gaze was swimming in it.

“What do you mean, erase your memory?” she asked.

“Lobotomy. Cutting into my brain with a scalpel, and taking my memories and thinking ability from me.”

“Yoming, you’re—” *You’re letting your thoughts run away with you. You’re being delusional.*

She couldn’t say the rest of her words. Lobotomy—maybe it was possible. After Shion disappeared, the Holy City shed mask after mask of artifice, right before her eyes. Although she had only seen a

small portion, what Karan saw of No. 6 was not a Holy City; it was a remorseless authoritarian city-state.

This city is trying to dominate people.

They wanted to dominate without exception the minds, the bodies, of everyone who lived in the city. They wanted to put their thoughts, lives, and fates under relentless scrutiny, and dominate them.

Yes, it was like Yoming said. No. 6 devoured people. They tore through any attempt to remain human, any soul, or will to resist, any wish, and wolfed it all down. It was no Holy City. It was a rearing monster, gone mad with desire for domination.

Had no one realized? Was everyone too fooled by their appearance of a satisfactory and comfortable lifestyle to even notice the monstrous figure? What stupidity...

Karan shook her head vigorously. These were not simply someone else's problems. They were most certainly not.

"Karan, are you starting to feel ill again?" Yoming said with concern. "You just fainted after all—you should rest a little. I'm sorry for bringing up something like this."

Yoming looked sincerely apologetic. Karan shook her head firmly again.

"No, that's not it. I was just—remembering something."

"Hm? What?"

"Lili's asked me that before. Whether we're really happy or not."

Lili had once asked her.

"We're happy, right?"

It was quite a while back. It was after Karan had gone through the struggle to open her bakery, and it was finally starting to operate smoothly. Karan had murmured, *hmm, well, I guess*, and cocked her head to the side. She had been able to make baking, which she liked,

into her life's work. It wasn't much to live on, but at least she had an idea now of how she and her son could make a living. Even after being revoked of all their special privileges and being exiled from Chronos, they had been able to acquire a stable life. It was during that time. Back then she had no way of knowing that in a few years, a cruel separation from Shion would be waiting for her. So in truth, if she was asked are you happy, she could very well have nodded and said, *why yes, I guess I am*. Karan had indeed not thought of herself as unhappy at that time.

Karan's fall from Chronos to Lost Town didn't cause her much grief or suffering. On the contrary, she was enjoying the lightness of her load, having cast off her life insured of all amenities like food, clothing, and shelter. Despite having to deal with treatment as a sub-citizen, she was still within the walls of No. 6 as a resident of Lost Town. As long as she didn't desire anything extravagant, she had nothing lacking in her life. Clean water and food were easily accessible. Although understaffed, there were medical clinics for Lost Town residents where she could go to get examined. She had an abode that could withstand wind and rain. She was free from any fears of malnutrition, starvation, hypothermia, or genocide. Shion was by her side, and she had customers who came to her bakery to buy her bread.

She was not unhappy at all.

She had not been able to agree promptly to Lili's question of whether they were happy, not because of her own situation or state-of-mind, but because of a shadow that had flitted across Lili's eyes. Perhaps it was uncertainty. Perhaps Lili was uncertain, her emotions so unsettled, that she had clung to the bakery madam, whom she loved and trusted.

"It's hard to say whether we're happy or not, in one word. There's a lot of times where we're happy and we're not, when we're joyful or sad. Lots of different feelings."

“Right?” Lili squeezed her fingers. “We have lots of different feelings, right?”

“Right. You feel like that too, don’t you Lili? Even during a single day, sometimes you feel happy, and sometimes unhappy, right?”

“Yeah, I do. When I’m really hungry, and I get to eat your muffins, ma’am, I feel happy. But when Mommy gets mad at me or when I get into a fight with my friend and we can’t say sorry and make up, I feel sad. But...”

“Hm?”

“But at school, the teacher says that everyone who lives in No. 6 is happy. He says there’s no one in No. 6 that’s unhappy.”

“You learned this in class?”

“Yeah. When the principal was saying his speech. He said outside of No. 6, the world is really tough and unhappy. And people die there every day. They die because they don’t have enough to eat, or because they fight and hurt each other. He said people are like beasts, and they live like beasts too. And compared to those people, No. 6 is heaven, and everyone’s happy.”

By beast-like people, he probably meant the residents of the West Block. It was such a scornful way to talk about people. To think that someone involved in the education of children would call another human a beast...

Karan knitted her brow. She crouched down, and looked Lili in the eye.

“But you didn’t think so, Lili?”

“Hmm,” Lili thought aloud. “I just felt kinda weird. Like this wiggly feeling in my stomach. Because—because you know... Mommy sometimes makes a sad face because she’s tired from work, or because we don’t have money. And Grandpa Saiton next door always looks

painful because his back hurts. So when he said everyone's happy, it just felt weird..."

"And you didn't tell the principal this?"

Lili widened her eyes, shook her head vehemently.

"If I said that, the principal would be really angry at me. Sometimes you get called to the office and they hit you with a whip."

"My goodness, with a whip! That's terrible..."

"If you live in No. 6 and you don't think you're happy, it means you're a bad kid. So they say, of course we should get whipped."

"*Certainly not!*" Karan found herself saying shrilly. She placed a hand on Lili's shoulder. "Lili, that's certainly not true. Not true at all."

"Ma'am..."

Her heart grew restless. She could hear its fitful rustlings. She knew she had to tell this young girl in front of her something important, but she could not put it well into words. She felt frustrated at herself.

"Lili, you're still a child, and..." She stopped. "No, even adults are allowed to have all sorts of different thoughts. It's just not right if everyone thinks and feels exactly the same, right? And—and—"

There are unhappy people in No. 6, too. Probably a lot more than I think.

It was something Karan knew first-hand. She had transferred from Chronos, a place of chosen citizens, to Lost Town, a residence for sub-citizens. She didn't think of that as any tragic fate, but she had definitely seen with her eyes and experienced with her body the apex, as well as the bottom, of the city-state of No. 6.

Indeed, there were unhappy people not only in Lost Town, but even in Chronos—a place that was known far and wide as the ideal neighbourhood. Yes, there were unhappy people, and many of them. But no one in that area ever said 'I'm unhappy' out loud. Chronos had not a single person who lamented difficulties with their household

income, or those who complained of physical ailments like Saiton. All residents were promised a high and stable income, and they were in a position that granted them access to the latest, most developed medical treatments at any hour of the day. But yet there were still unhappy people.

“Whatever shall I do tomorrow?” she had heard someone mutter once. She was an elderly lady who lived next door. However, “next-door” in terms of Chronos was quite a distance because of the spacious yards attached to each house. Periodically, gardeners from the city would come to maintain the gardens (and also check up on and maintain the security systems in the yard, which Karan didn’t find out until much later), so unlike Lost Town, where only a single wall separated one household from the other, Karan wasn’t accustomed to seeing her neighbours in person or having conversations with them.

But Karan was on unusually good terms with this woman of over seventy, and once in a while she would be invited over for tea. The woman’s husband, daughter, and grandchildren were all acknowledged as the highest elites like Shion, and she was provided for and insured with extremely favourable circumstances even compared to other residents of Chronos. But despite that, she was neither arrogant nor condescending, and often looked out for and lent a helping hand to Karan, who was raising her son all by herself.

On that day, it was the same. On a sunny and temperate afternoon one day in late autumn, the woman had invited Karan over for tea.

Smelling the fragrant aroma of black tea poured from the teapot, Karan had been about to give an appreciative *mmm* when the woman had mumbled those words. Her voice was dry and brittle, like the foliage that danced on the streets. It was dry, but heavy and gloomy.

“Whatever shall I do tomorrow?”

Karan slowly raised her gaze from the rose-patterned teacup, and stared

at the elegant, composed profile of the woman who had just spoken. The words had reached Karan's ears, no problem. But the tone of her voice clashed so much with the beautiful scenery, the lavish mansion, and the fragrant tea, that she couldn't help but ask her to repeat.

"What was that?"

The elderly woman slowly let her gaze wander. Behind her ruby-studded spectacles (almost solely a fashion item), her two eyes, set in the wrinkles of her skin, blinked.

"I... have no idea what I would like to do tomorrow."

"Do you mean you've got nothing to do?"

"I don't know... what I want to do, Karan-san." Tears welled up in the rims of her eyes.

"You don't know...?"

"There's nothing. It's just empty. And it makes me so afraid. I especially despise mornings. They're utterly horrible. When I think that it's the start of another empty day, I feel so terrified, so..."

Karan, who had still been young, was perturbed by the elderly woman's tearful face and her mumbled words. As if to prove that she wasn't acting, the woman's shawl-clad shoulders were trembling.

"Ah—but—" Karan stammered. "As long as you're willing, I should think you'd be able to do anything you like. So many things..."

"Do you think so? I just have a feeling that it's going to be one empty day after another until I die... When I think about how I'll die without having been able to do anything, I feel more fearful than painful."

Karan rose out of her seat, and shook her head almost automatically.

"That's not true. Because, look—the decor of this room, or the way you arrange tea—it's all so nice, and you're so good at it."

The elderly woman responded to Karan's awkward compliments with a serene smile.

"You're a kind soul, Karan-san. But . . . well, someday I suppose you'll have a taste of the same fear I feel."

The pair of eyes behind the spectacles were not laughing at all. They were like dark caverns. Karan remembered shivering. She had felt a chill in this room, filled with extravagant furniture and maintained at comfortable temperature levels all year long. The elderly woman's gaze had been so vacant, so morose, that it had made her shudder. The woman had plentiful time and wealth. Was she not in a position where all her wishes could come true? Yet here she was, lamenting: how overprivileged of her, how greedy . . . Karan tried to mutter those words in her mind. But both her heart and body shrank back from the morose and vacant look before her. A despair enough to petrify someone was living behind those spectacles, emitting a dull light. Karan drained her tea, and left hastily. She remembered clearly how the dishes had clinked as she replaced her cup on its saucer with trembling fingers.

Then not long after, on the edge of the changing seasons, the elderly woman suddenly passed away. In her coffin and surrounded by the white lilies which she always said she loved, the elderly woman with her eyes closed had the same glowing skin as when she was living, and her face was graced with a gentle smile. Karan felt like if she called her name, the woman would answer.

"I've lived a very happy life. I'm thankful for everything about No. 6."

Those were her last words, according to the woman's daughter, who worked at the Central Administration Bureau.

I've lived a very happy life.

I'm thankful for everything about No. 6.

"Your mother said this? Really?"

"Of course. Why wouldn't she? My mother lived a life lacking in nothing. Wouldn't anyone think the same?"

“Well... I was just wondering if you yourself were just under the impression that...”

“I?”

“Yes,” Karan had said. “Have you ever thought that your mother may have been unhappy?”

The daughter furrowed her brow, and a clear look of distaste swam in her eyes. She gazed at Karan as if she were looking at a hideous beast, and took half a step backwards.

“It’s simply impossible that my mother could have been unhappy,” she snapped. “She has never spent a single day in that kind of state. Wouldn’t you know from common sense? I do hope you refrain from any more rude comments.”

She turned her back to Karan. Throughout the funeral, she kept her distance. That was when Karan was certain that the elderly woman had been unhappy. She had been struggling with her unhappiness that came from being required to be happy—a life in which she was not allowed to be sad.

Maybe...

Her heartbeat grew more frantic. In her mind rose the woman’s face, doll-like, surrounded by white lilies.

Maybe... she killed herself—?

She could not say it out loud. It was simply impossible for a resident of Chronos to take her own life. It was unthinkable. They had been told it was unthinkable.

Yet... but... if unhappiness existed despite the fact that it wasn’t supposed to, then couldn’t there also be people who took their lives, on the brink of despair with no other choice?

Karan tightly clutched her mourning gloves as the coffin was carried out and whisked away to the cemetery.

I should have told Lili about the elderly lady. Unhappiness was bound to exist anywhere, whether it be Chronos or Lost Town. Karan felt like she should have thought it out together with Lili—about why people were unhappy; about how they could be happy again; what it was that they could call real happiness. She should have talked it out with the little girl—about her principal who forced happiness upon them; about the elderly woman and her morose gaze; the pain of being whipped like cattle. She should have reflected more intently on her own disquieted soul, and the little girl's agitation. But Karan had not said anything, and had done nothing.

"There are unhappy people everywhere. Just because he's the principal, I don't think he has the right to say everyone has to be happy," she had said, taking the most neutral way out. Just then, she had heard the flour merchant calling from the back door with his rye and wheat flour. Customers were trickling into the store.

"Thanks, ma'am. See you later."

And Lili had left. Karan pretended to be immersed in her work, and pushed Lili, memories of her fear at the funeral, her thoughts of happiness and unhappiness, clean out of her mind. She had not stopped to think. She had even forgotten. Yoming had set his jaw and committed everything to memory. But she had forgotten. She had never tried to remember.

She herself was the fool, and no one else.

If I had been more wise, if I'd stopped to think a little harder, maybe Shion wouldn't have had to go through what he did.

It was not only Shion. Perhaps she had burdened Safu as well, with an unfair and cruel fate. Karan chewed her lip hard.

Shion, Safu, be alive. Please, live on. Live to come home, and let me apologize for my foolishness. Let me embrace you with these arms. Let me beg for your forgiveness.

She pressed the scrap of paper to her bosom, and prayed.

Reunion will come. Nezumi

Nezumi, I pray to you. Please, let me see their faces again. Just one more time.

She heard Lili's tinkling laughter. It was lighthearted and carefree, and punctuated with soft chirrups from the little mice.

Reunion will come.

She murmured the words on the memo. She tried to hold back the tears that were threatening to spill from her eyes. Crying wasn't going to solve anything.

Right now, I can only send my prayers to you, whom I've yet to see.

Reunion will come.

2

THOSE IN THE ABYSS

*I was in it up to my neck by the time I realized the way things were going.
What could I do?... if I refused to obey I would be killed. Or I could commit suicide.
On three different occasions I thought of resigning, but it was impossible.*

WILHELM KEITEL, *THE NUREMBERG INTERVIEWS*

THE DARKNESS was stabbing at him. Into his retina, his eardrums, his skin, the darkness turned into needles that pricked at him viciously. Shion sucked in a deep breath and filled his chest with air—no, darkness. By doing so, he repressed his pain and trembling. He didn't want to cower. He didn't want to let out a cry of fear. And he didn't want Nezumi, who was beside him, to hear it.

Damnit if he ever hears me scream.

He didn't want to expose his unsightly self to Nezumi's eyes. Shion gulped in another breath, fully conscious of the pride within him which, even in these circumstances, nagged persistently at him.

Hn.

Nezumi sniffed derisively inches from his ear. At the same time, the arm around Shion's waist grew tighter, pressing around his torso.

So much for trying to act tough, he thought he heard Nezumi whisper. But what actually reached his ears was:

“We’re gonna fall.”

It was a flat voice, stripped of all emotion. The emotionless voice became a frigid wind that wrapped around Shion’s body. With his sense of pain, his fear, and his pride whipped away, for an instant, Shion was empty. Like a cicada shedding its skin, he became a hollow cavern that left only its outward appearance intact. He sometimes had this sensation when listening to Nezumi’s voice. He didn’t mind it much. In fact, it even felt refreshing. Exhilarating, even, to become empty.

When Shion tried to suck in his third breath, the floor disappeared from beneath his feet. With a heavy *thunk* it had split in two. It was like a gallows. It almost felt strange that he wasn’t feeling the rope digging into his neck; hearing the sound of his cervical vertebrae cracking; feeling his body swinging limply in the air.

They were falling. Falling, straight down—at least they were supposed to be, but he couldn’t grasp what was happening. He wasn’t sure whether they were falling, floating, or rising. He couldn’t distinguish between descent, suspension, or ascension. His senses were swallowed up by the darkness that surrounded him on all sides.

An impact hit him. He felt his whole body slam into something hard. His breath died on his lips. Whatever he had fallen on was slightly elastic, absorbing and mediating the force enough to avoid spraining his muscles or shattering his bones.

What did I land on—?

He had no time to check. He was yanked forcefully.

“Roll.”

He was half-shoved into a roll by Nezumi. He turned over and over, thinking of nothing, feeling no fear. His shoulder hit something

hard, and he felt a pain followed by tingling. He had evidently hit a wall. As he placed his palm on the floor to push himself up, he felt a tremor—like vibrations, like strange rumbling.

“Stand up. Push yourself up against the wall.”

Shion stood up, and huddled close to the wall, which was rough on the surface—probably concrete. His thoughts, willpower, and senses were half-numb. He could only barely manage to follow Nezumi’s directions and move as he was told. Nezumi’s body overlapped his. It was hotter than usual. But the heartbeat Shion felt against his back was not even slightly out of rhythm. Crushed with such force, Shion couldn’t help but cry out.

“I can’t breathe.”

But his voice, which came out as a gasp, instantly dissolved in the tremendous noise from behind them. He couldn’t even tell if he had heard his own voice.

“Nezumi.”

He squirmed slightly.

“This—”

Never in his entire life had he heard sounds like this, voices like these.

What is it? What are they?

Groaning? Rumbling? Screaming?

A booming, thick and heavy sound roared at Shion and pressed in on him from all directions; it welled up from below, it came raining down from up top; it twisted and tangled with itself. A piercing shriek rang out. Then it rasped, cut off, and an eerie silence replaced it. But only for an instant. And again, it welled up, it rained down...

These were not sounds of a human world. They were not mere noises.

“Nezumi!”

Unable to bear it anymore, Shion wrenched his body around. The force pressing against him relaxed. The heat of Nezumi's body drew away. Shion was grabbed by his hair, and turned around. His back was pressed against the wall this time, and his hair yanked roughly. His chin jerked up. Nezumi brought his lips to Shion's exposed ear, and whispered as if to cram the words into it.

"Look if you want to. Listen if you wish. But—"

Nezumi's fingers released his hair, and slid down his neck. They traced the red band of his scar.

"But you'll be haunted with nightmares for your whole life. Be prepared for it."

Heh. His short laugh, almost a mere breath, seeped into Shion's body. It was a cold laugh. It may have been condescending. Nezumi freely controlled the various ways in which he laughed. Normally, this would have sparked Shion to anger. He would have reproached Nezumi, telling him not to laugh like that.

None other than Nezumi had taught him: condemn from your heart those who scorn, look down upon, and belittle themselves. He had taught him not only to be angry, but to hone all of the emotions he possessed, whether it was to cry, laugh, fear, reject, yearn, or love.

Don't let them go numb. Don't let them wither. Bare your fangs at all that threatens to desecrate your humanness.

Shion had definitely been taught. But right now, he was too overwhelmed to be angry. His emotions were falling, sifting right through him.

"Nezumi... what is this?"

"Reality." There was no hint of laughter left in his voice. "If you're gonna look, see it through 'til the end. If you're gonna listen, don't ever think of plugging your ears."

See this through... all of this?

Shion opened his mouth, and gasped for air.

Before his eyes was darkness. The bottom of this darkness was crawling with people. To him, it looked like they were crawling. The darkness had shades both dark and light, and his eyes, beginning to adjust, caught the darkest shades. It was a lump of overlapped people. The people who had been packed into the elevator had been smashed onto the floor, and were now squirming, crawling.

There was a blood-curdling scream. A shadow came dropping down. Someone who had been clinging onto some part of the elevator had finally spent his strength. Shion couldn't tell whether it was a man or woman. Like the roar of a beast, the scream echoed into the painted black darkness.

Thud.

The sound of flesh hitting flesh. Its vibrations shook not his eardrums, but his entire body, making his skin bristle.

Shion tried to remember. He tried to remember each and every one who had been shut in with the elevator with him.

There was a man. There was a woman. There was an elderly lady with mussed grey hair. There was a young girl with tanned skin. There was a wiry merchant with sunken eyes. There was a deathly pale man, a surviving member of the Disposers.

Wasn't there a mother holding her infant? Wasn't there a baby in that mother's arms? There was. There certainly was.

Wrapped in a dirty white cloth, the infant was wriggling at his mother's breast... somewhere, in this mass of people—a stench came flowing into his nostrils. It was like all of his senses, numb and dormant until now, had opened themselves out to the outside world all at once.

He began sweating profusely. His teeth refused to come together, and they chattered incessantly. The stench of blood, fecal matter, body odour, assaulted his nostrils many times more viciously than inside

the cargo container. He heard people being crushed. People were being crushed under the weight of others. Although it was a sound he was hearing for the first time, he could tell it was the sound of human destruction.

“This is hell,” he heard himself utter weakly.

“This is reality,” a mutter answered back. “This isn’t any hell. This is the reality of the world you’ve been living in, Shion.”

A wave of nausea washed over him. Leaning heavily on the wall, Shion covered his mouth with his hand. His stomach fluids spilled through his clenched teeth. The sweat stung in his eyes. Behind his closed eyelids, memories of his days in No. 6 floated and flashed by.

The roses of myriad colours that bloomed in the residences of Chronos; the evening sky; the powder-blue walls of his classroom; Safu waving her hand; early morning in Lost Town; the fragrance of bread that filled the house; Karan with her back to him; a little girl’s footsteps—’Good morning, brother’ ’Good morning, Lili’; Sampo’s clunky round body; the ladies’ hat that Ippo had squashed by mistake—it had been decorated with a pink flower pin—’*Oh no*, Ippo, that’s not good—’ Yamase yelling; the aroma of coffee at the café that he had stopped in with Safu; the tree branches rustling and swishing in the breeze—oh, the green—it was so vivid.

I want to go home.

He longed for it achingly.

I want to go back to No. 6.

He wanted to go back to the world within the walls. He wanted to return to his peaceful, fulfilled, quiet world. Even if it was a land ornate in falseness, he wanted to bury himself in beautiful artifice.

He gritted his teeth. He swallowed the stomach fluids inside his mouth. Shion slowly raised his heavy head. His face was drenched with perspiration.

“Nezumi...” He mustered as much strength as he could into his legs, and managed somewhat to keep himself upright. If he fell to his knees now, he would never be able to get up. He would have to dig his heels in and remain standing, even if he had to gasp for air. Nezumi would not extend a hand to him. He would not support him. If Shion was going to curl up here, if he was going to go mad, if he lost his ability to stand on his own feet—there was nothing left for him ahead.

“What should I do next?” Shion managed to speak, albeit in a raspy voice. He felt the presence in front of him give a short intake of breath.

“Can you move?”

“I will.”

If he didn’t, he would die. And he could not. He had not come here to die. *I’m here to save her, to live. Don’t forget that. I’m going to survive this reality.* A crack ran through the cross-section of No. 6 that was drifting in the back of his eyelids. It tore apart into shreds. It shattered and disappeared, along with his desire to flee and return.

Shion extended his hand, fully prepared to have it shaken off. His fingertips felt a firm arm. He clenched his hand around it.

Nezumi.

I’m not doing this to cling to your help. He wanted it to get across.

I’m alright. I can move. I won’t squat and curl up here.

His clenched fingers were not shaken off. The cold and brittle arm only twisted slightly. An answer came to his unspoken thoughts.

“I got it.”

Almost at the same time, an orange light blinked behind Nezumi. Shion widened his eyes. His heart trembled at the tiny, marble-sized light. He felt like crying. His arm stretched forward, and his fingers clutched at thin air.

“We’re gonna run, following those lights. They’ll stay on for a minute and a half.”

Miniature light bulbs were attached to the wall at equal intervals. They were tiny, tiny lights, barely enough to water down the darkness that lay thick upon them. But it was still light. There was still something here that was not darkness.

“Let’s go.”

Nezumi turned his back to him, and broke into a run. Shion also stepped out to run after him, but his foot slipped on something slimy. There was a pool of blood at his feet.

“Fucking hell,” he snarled without thinking. Something that wasn’t quite fear or shock was roaring in his chest, filling it up and pressing against it; and at the bottom of it, a spark was lit. Wrath. The flames of wrath circled its licking flames in a spiral, and came racing upwards. *This is reality. Reality. Reality.*

“Goddamnit.”

I’ll never forgive it. I’ll never forgive this reality.

He moved forward. He moved forward, as if kicking the puddle of blood out of the way. He desperately ran after the figure that was threatening to melt into the darkness.

I’ll survive. I’ll live to destroy this reality.

Shion’s anger became heat that coursed through his body. He was filled with energy right down to his toes. Nezumi turned around. It was too dark to see the expression on his face. He swung back around, and slackened his pace a little. Even in times like these, his movements were still graceful.

The light bulbs flickered. Before them was a narrow walkway, wide enough for one person to squeeze through. The walls were bare concrete.

“Move along the wall.”

“Nezumi, where does this lead?”

“The execution grounds.”

“Huh?”

“Whatever’s behind you and in front of you, you might as well call them execution grounds. The question is just how early or late the sentence is gonna be delivered.”

A motor was humming behind them. It was an outdated model that rattled and screeched.

“Nezumi, wait. The elevator’s moving again.”

“Don’t stop,” Nezumi clicked his tongue irritably. “Keep moving forward. Don’t stop walking.”

“But the elevator—”

Shion’s lips trembled. A cold bead of sweat rolled down his spine. Nezumi opened his mouth.

“But of course,” he said stonily. “They’re planning to cram all the people they’ve hunted in this underground chamber.”

“There’s gonna be more people falling?”

“They don’t fall, they get dropped. Same mechanics as a gallows. The floor opens up. They fall to the bottom of the abyss. If they’re lucky, they’ll break their neck and leave this world painlessly for good.”

“We have to tell them about this passageway.”

“Who?”

“Everyone. There are still people that can move. We have to tell those people to escape here.”

“And then what’s gonna happen? Imagine.”

“Huh...?”

“Yeah, there are people that can still move. Quite a few. But what’ll happen if they all trample over each other to rush into here?”

“Well...”

A desperate mob would come swarming in. Each would jostle and shove, vying to get into a passageway that was barely wide enough for one.

What would happen?

One would fall, and others would fall on top of him. The passage would fill with more screams and groans.

“Now do you see?” Nezumi said. “Look behind you.”

With a hand still on the wall, Shion turned around. Several shadows were coming this way, dragging themselves across the ground.

“Only the people who’ve noticed this passage and are able to break away get saved. Then they get to move to the next stage.”

“Then this light—is that what it’s—?”

Before he could finish his sentence, the light bulbs were extinguished. They were again plunged into inky darkness. Then, there was a sound. The air vibrated. The darkness trembled.

How many people were crammed into that elevator? Ten, fifteen, twenty... more? But gee, you could probably only see a transport elevator like that in a museum nowadays... judging by the annoying noises, the conveyor belt is probably worn pretty thin... wait, I have a feeling there might have been an elevator like that in Lost Town. Where was it again? It made annoying noises...

He was slapped across the cheek. The pain stung in the inside of his mouth. The empty rattling of his thoughts and perceptions returned to their normal state. But it also meant that his conscience was being pulled back into a hellish reality.

“Shion.”

“Uh... yeah?”

“There won’t be a next time.”

Next time, I'm leaving you behind. I'm not a saint who'll drag you along if you space out. You said you could move. Then use your own legs to escape.

Shion wiped the sweat dripping from his chin with the back of his hand.

"Follow me. Don't get separated."

Nezumi turned his back to him again. It was so dark, and yet Shion could see the outline of his figure clearly.

I won't leave you.

He pressed a hand to his cheek, now hot and stinging.

I'll never leave you. I'll sink my teeth in, and latch on no matter where you go.

He would never lose sight of that back turned to him. He would crawl across the ground to follow him if he had to. That was the only thing in his mind. He had no room to think about No. 6, his mother, Safu, or the parasite wasps. He slapped his own cheek this time. He finally knew first-hand that pain could be a sign of being alive. His throbbing cheek was telling him, *you can live, you can still walk.*

Apparently the lights only reached a short distance in from the entrance of the passage. It was relatively straight, and uniform in width. Just this motion of continuous walking seemed to be awakening his thought processes.

This passage—it's man-made.

The thought occurred to him, and Shion smiled a little. He would never have believed he could smile, but he felt the corners of his mouth tugging up. It was a bitter smile, aimed at himself.

Of course it was man-made, he was smiling at himself. This was the Correctional Facility. It was a building into which No. 6 imprisoned the people it deemed as criminals. Naturally, every path, every wall was man-made. The scene that Shion had witnessed in the darkness

just now was the same. It wasn't hellish wreckage generated by some natural disaster. Was it not a reality that had been created by human will? Everything here was made by the human hand.

This is the reality of the world you live in.

He repeated Nezumi's words in a corner of his mind.

This is the reality of the world I live in. Then who made it happen, and for what purpose?

He tried to visualize the mayor's face. He used to see photographs of his gently-smiling face everywhere on the streets. He remembered seeing him on television. *"I don't like his ears. They're so vulgar."* That was what his mother Karan had spat, but no one ever criticized the mayor of No. 6. He had close to one-hundred percent support from the citizens.

Him—is it him? No, but... is it possible for such a catastrophe to occur under one person's command? None of the No. 6 residents knew of this gruesome reality. Why don't they know? Why... his thoughts creaked haltingly like the outdated elevator. They caused an unpleasant racket. But he still had to keep thinking.

Why didn't any of them know?

"Because they don't try to find out," Nezumi said, with his back still turned to him. His feet stopped, and he twisted the top half of his body to face Shion. Shion didn't know whether his eyes were getting used to it, or if Nezumi himself was deflecting the darkness, but he could see the expression on his face clearly.

"Nezumi, how did you know what I was thinking?"

He was genuinely surprised. He was so startled, he had almost lost his train of thought for a moment. Nezumi shrugged.

"I told you before, didn't I? You're easy to understand... well, parts of you are. Everything else about you just baffles me."

Nezumi's tone of voice changed. It took on a hint of softness and rang out clearly. It was a beautiful voice. Shion couldn't express what exactly it was, or how it was so beautiful. He couldn't put it into words, but he could feel the comfort slowly seep into him. It was like the comfort of lying in soft grass. He even thought he caught a glimpse of clear blue sky.

"You tired?"

"No, I can still walk."

"Hungry?"

"Huh?"

"I'm asking you if you're hungry."

"Oh, uh—no."

He tried to remember the last decent meal he had. He couldn't. But he was not hungry. He didn't feel any desire at all to put anything into his mouth. Considering what he had just slogged through, he wasn't so tough that he could still feel hunger.

"I'm not hungry at all."

"But you're running low on energy, aren't you?"

"No—"

An arm reached out to him. Nezumi's fingertips lightly touched Shion's chest in a soft and languid gesture. But Shion felt his body tipping over.

Huh?

He staggered, and fell down on his bottom. He had no strength in his knees.

"See?" Nezumi said. "You can barely stand. At least make sure you can assess the state you're in."

Shion was grabbed by the arm and pulled upright. A pain racked his chest. His heart was palpitating; he couldn't breathe. He broke into a

sweat again.

“It’s a considerable amount of trauma. Careful your heart doesn’t decide to quit. I don’t think there are any doctors who are attentive enough to come all the way here to examine you.”

“Throw physic to the dogs, I’ll none of it.”

“What was that?”

*Canst thou not minister to mind diseas’d;
Pluck from memory a rooted sorrow;
Raze out the written troubles of the brain;
And with some sweet oblivious antidote
Cleanse the stuff’d bosom of that perilous stuff
Which weighs upon the heart?*

Nezumi shifted uneasily. Shion could hear a deep sigh.

“Stop that, will you? The way you’re butchering his lines, Macbeth is probably spinning in his grave.”

“Are you saying I’m not cut out for acting?”

“Astonishing lack of talent. You probably couldn’t even be an extra in a Shakespeare play. I’d advise you to give up any fruitless hopes, Shion.”

“I guess I will. It’s too bad, really.”

“There’s a good boy.”

Shion was smiling. It was no ugly twist of the lips: he felt a faint but genuine smile spread across his face. At the same time, he could feel an expanse of sky spreading out over his head.

Invited along by Nezumi’s voice, Shion had smiled, and seen the sky. It was that deepest hue of blue he had seen, lying in the grassy field. The colour of the heavens was spreading across the darkness. True, this world was ridden with brutality and falseness. Indeed, it was rife

with it. But that wasn't the only thing that existed. Because, look—in this world, and in people's souls, there definitely existed beautiful things like the blue of the lofty skies.

Nezumi's voice became a bubbling spring that quenched Shion's body and filled him to the brim. It was a strange voice. It melted the soul, and regenerated people to life.

"Just a little more, and we'll be able to catch a breath."

Nezumi half-twisted to look at him. Shion could see a dim light over Nezumi's shoulder. It didn't flicker like the light bulbs. It was dim, but it wasn't the kind of dimness that made one uneasy about when the light would go out.

"What's there?"

"A resting place. A temporary one."

"Resting place... we can rest there, huh."

He had felt like he could go on walking forever. He thought he would have to keep thinking like this, else they would not be able to escape.

But we can rest.

He exhaled. He wanted to spring forward, but his knees were weak, and walking was the best he could manage.

They emerged at the end of the passageway. Shion gulped. The scenery changed abruptly.

It was a room with white walls and a white floor. It was quite spacious. Thanks to the man-made light attached to the ceiling, the thick inky darkness had lightened into a dusky evening shade. Although hazy, Shion's vision could now capture things clearly.

Ahead of the passage, he could see a greyish door. There was no furniture or windows in the room. There was no stench of blood, or groaning voices. It was a white room, filled with nothing. There were a few shadowy figures curled up in a corner of the room. They were

presumably the ones who had been crammed into the first elevator load, and had managed to survive and make their way here.

Shion buckled near the entrance. All the strength was leaving his body.

“Don’t go to sleep.” Nezumi knelt down beside him. “We don’t have time for that.”

“We’re heading somewhere else again?”

“Why, it would be no fun if this was our final destination. I thought you came here to see that certain cute girl of yours?”

Safu.

He clenched his fists. He let his gaze dart around. Just as he thought, he was not met with the gaze he was looking for. She had been kidnapped, after all, by the Security Bureau, and imprisoned inside the Correctional Facility.

“I wonder if Safu’s safe?”

“Who knows?” Nezumi answered. “But if she’s alive, she’s probably in a much better situation than we are. She might even be enjoying a luxurious afternoon tea. If she’s alive, that is.”

“Safu is alive.”

“You’re trying to believe that she is. Your own selfish wishes.”

“You must believe it too. If you didn’t, you wouldn’t have come with me.”

“Oh really?”

“Am I wrong?”

“Shion, why don’t you rewire your brain once in a while to get out of that naive thought pattern, hm?”

“Nezumi, but... oh—”

Shion shut his mouth. A man was staggering across his path on unsteady feet. He swayed forward, and crumpled face-first onto the floor.

The man behind him tripped over the body, and also fell. Neither of them moved. However, Shion could tell that they were still breathing. Their fallen backs were still rising and falling slightly. But the man who fell first lay still moments later.

“Aren’t you gonna help him?”

Shion fell silent this time in answer to Nezumi’s question.

“What’s wrong? Usually you’d be there in a flash, helping him up.”

“I can’t.”

His hands and feet felt like they were tied to lead weights. Even moving a finger took a large effort. It took all this energy to keep his body standing. He wasn’t able to extend a hand to to others. And besides... If he reached out and helped the man up, what would he do then? He wouldn’t be able to treat his wounds, or console him in his grief, or even give him water to drink.

Suddenly, the man let out a groan. Then he began coughing violently. Once it passed, he groaned again. He was probably gravely wounded. His groan was fraught with pain, as if his innards were being twisted. “Somebody... help me...” The man moaned. He gasped for air like a wounded animal. “Somebody... please...”

Shion plugged his ears. He closed his eyes. He knew he was being a coward. Hadn’t he learned so many times over how cowardly, how shameful it was not trying to see, not trying to listen?

Look. Listen. Don’t try to make excuses. Fight with anything that tries to make you. Your enemies aren’t only outside of you. They’re inside you, too. You have to fight with your own self who tries to avert your eyes from what you don’t want to see, and cover your ears from things you don’t want to hear.

I know. I know, Nezumi. But I can’t do it now. Right now, I’m more powerless and fragile than anything. I can’t bear seeing, or hearing, any more.

The man lifted his face. Their eyes met. To his utter misfortune, their eyes had met. Shion shrank back. The man was dying. He was on the brink, but unable to die completely, and writhing in the suffering of it.

“Help... me...”

Perhaps his bones were broken; perhaps his innards were crushed: bloody foam was spilling out of the man’s mouth. His whole body was convulsing in small jerks. For the man, death was the only path out of his suffering. But even Death was laughing scornfully at him. It would not visit him so easily. His residual life came back to lash the man again and again.

He came crawling towards them. His gaze never left Shion. His eyes were like a murky swamp, and at the same time, like a bottomless cavern.

“Help me...”

Please. Save me. Save me and raise me from this eternal suffering. Let me rest—oh, please—let me be at peace.

Shion swallowed the saliva in his mouth. Before he knew it, he was kneeling down beside the man who was lying on his back. His long neck protruded from his shirt which was reduced to rags. It was a thin, stringy, pitiful neck. Even above ground, he had probably not led a hospitable life. It was admirable for him to have come this far.

The man was looking only at Shion. A murky swamp, a bottomless cavern. Its clouded depths reflected nothing, harboured nothing. His eyes did not even blink. Only his bloodstained lips were moving.

“Why... did I have to...” he croaked.

Yes. What did this man ever do? Why did he have to go through something like this? He was a West Block resident: why, for that reason solely, did he have to be crushed like an insect? For what reason did he have to endure so much suffering?

“Why... why...”

The man’s lips never stopped moving. Wringing the last strength from his body, he repeated his question, over and over and over.

Tell me. Why? Why? Why? Why?

Shion, stooped above the man’s face, slowly shook his head.

I can’t answer that. I can’t give you any answer at all.

“I’m sorry,” he whispered. If there was anything he could do, it was... He put his fingers to the man’s throat. It was damp, yet cold. All he had to do was put a little strength into these fingers. His weakening breathing would probably stop without any pain. Then he would be at peace. *If there’s anything I could do, it would be to flex these fingers, and choke him.*

On his palms, his fingers, he felt the sensation of raw flesh and bone. His slight convulsions, and his pulse. The man’s mouth opened, and bloody foam and a groan poured forth. The tip of his tongue was wiggling. Shion’s arms trembled. He couldn’t put any strength in them.

“Stop, that’s enough.”

He was pulled back by the shoulder. The neck slid from Shion’s fingers like it was coated in sticky ooze.

“He’ll never go easily like that.”

Shion turned around, and gazed at Nezumi. For an instant, a shadow flitted across his glittering dark-grey eyes. It was a pitying shadow.

“Nezumi, I...”

“You can’t do it.” A quivering sigh escaped his shapely lips. “I think Executioner might be an even worse job for you than Actor.”

Shoving Shion aside, Nezumi stepped forward. The man was lying on his back, breathing raggedly. With every breath, there was a gurgling at the back of his throat. His fingers bent, and clawed at the air. His

suffering was not allayed even a little. The man only lay and gurgled, as if he had even lost the strength to writhe in pain. Nezumi knelt down on one knee, crouched low, and whispered in his ear.

“Does it hurt?”

Only the sound of breathing answered him.

“It’ll be alright. You’ll feel better soon.”

“Feel... better...”

“Yeah. You hung in there well. There won’t be any more suffering for you. Relax, and close your eyes.”

“I committed... a crime...”

“A crime?”

“I beat... a little child... once...”

“Mm-hmm.”

“I tricked... an elderly... and st-stole... money...”

“Mm-hmm.”

“I told lots... and lots... of lies...”

“Mm-hmm.”

“I b... betrayed... so... many people...”

Nezumi slid a pair of leather gloves on. Then, he gently stroked the man’s cheek.

“Good. I’ve heard everything. It’s alright now, everything is forgiven.”

“For... given...”

“Yeah. All your crimes are now forgiven. There’s nothing to be afraid of.”

Nezumi’s hand rested over the man’s mouth and nose.

“You endured. You lived. I admire you from the bottom of my heart, and dedicate a song to you.”

“A song... for me...”

“For you.”

With the bottom half of his face covered, the man narrowed his eyes. He was smiling. Shion couldn’t believe what he was seeing. He stared transfixed at the man’s softened eyes.

He’s smiling.

“Close your eyes softly. See, all the suffering . . . it’s going away.”

A quiet melody flowed through the air. Soft, lilting, the sounds overlapped. Shion felt like his own body was rising up. It was weightless, like cotton fluff, and bobbed and drifted on the breeze. Like a bird, he faced the stream of air, and soared. Released from myriad things, he was free.

His song steals away souls that are struggling because they can’t die. Just like how the wind scatters flower petals, his song cuts the soul away from the body.

Inukashi had once said those words. It was not a lie. Indeed, his soul was being led off. To some place that was not here, it was being carried effortlessly. It was being thieved away.

* * *

The singing stopped. Silence wrapped around them. Shion had closed his eyes without realizing. The silence seemed to gently urge him to lift his eyelids. He opened his eyes to see Nezumi still on one knee, about to take his hand off the man’s face.

The man still had his eyes closed. His mouth was still stained with blood, but it was no longer twisted in agony.

“Has he passed away?”

“Just now.” Nezumi let out a long exhale, and slumped back against the wall. He took off his gloves, and clenched them in his fist.

“Piece of shit,” he heard Nezumi swear under his breath.

“Nezumi...”

“Fucking, idiotic piece of shit.”

“Who’re you talking about?”

“You.”

The pair of gloves whizzed towards him. As if they had a will of their own, they attacked Shion, smacked him right on the face, and slid to the ground.

“You’re hopeless. Foolish, clumsy, useless beyond all hope.”

“Yeah.”

Shion picked the gloves up. Nezumi was right. He was foolish, clumsy, and useless. Powerless, and unskilled. No matter how many insults were hurled at him, he could only nod and agree.

“Not just you.” Nezumi raked his bangs up, and looked down. “So am I, and the guy that just died. We’re all pieces of shit.”

“You’re not!” Shion leaned forward to face him. Nezumi lifted his face, and furrowed his brow.

“We’re the same. You and I.”

“No we’re not. We’re totally different.”

“How?”

Shion drew his chin back, and looked directly into the pair of grey eyes.

“You saved him.”

“Me? I just helped the guy stop breathing. Gave him a little push.”

“Isn’t that the same as giving him salvation?”

The rims of Nezumi’s eyes quavered slightly.

“It’s murder.”

It was a word he had not expected to hear. Nezumi blinked slowly, just once, in front of Shion’s eyes, and extended a hand to him.

“Give me my gloves.”

“Huh?”

“My gloves. Give them back to me.”

“Oh—right.”

With the leather gloves back in his hands, Nezumi clicked his tongue irritably and muttered that they had gotten dirty.

“Now they’ve got that guy’s blood and spit on it. These were my favourite gloves.”

“Nezumi... what do you mean by murder?”

“Murder is murder,” Nezumi answered brusquely. “What I did was kill that man. I covered his mouth while he was still alive, and suffocated him. People usually call that murder, Shion, just in case you didn’t know.”

“But thanks to you, he was saved. He was freed from suffering.”

“So?”

“So—” Shion stammered, “so you saved him. Now he’s at rest. He was released from pain, he was able to repent his sins, and he was able to go peacefully. What you did wasn’t murder. It was salvation.”

Nezumi leaned against the wall and blinked at him again.

“That’s arrogant of you.”

“Arrogant?”

“Yeah. That’s arrogant of you, you know that? Arrogant enough to be able to call killing someone ‘salvation’. Who are you, Shion? God? Are you mighty enough that you can preside over other people’s deaths?”

“Nezumi, I just—”

“That man shouldn’t have gone peacefully,” Nezumi said savagely.

“Huh?”

“He should have kept suffering until he died. He should never have repented his sins and gone in tranquility. He should have loathed and

cursed his unfair death, and he should have gasped his last breaths writhing in pain. Look.”

Nezumi jerked his chin.

“Just look at this room. Remember what the execution chamber back there looked like. How could you leave this world peacefully after being crushed, killed, and tormented like mere insects? You can’t. Of course you can’t. Most people who get caught in the Hunt don’t escape. They’re forced to die a gruesome death. And when those dying people leave, they ought to leave strewn words of suffering and hatred everywhere. Then at least their true feelings— even if it’s just deep resentment or damnation... They should never have their true feelings stolen from them. A peaceful death would be a fake imitation. Getting treated like bugs, getting abused, only to die smiling? What salvation, huh? That’s just a convenient excuse. It’s a low, filthy excuse. Don’t you agree? There’s only gruesome death here. I trust even *you* would be getting the picture by now, I hope?”

“Yeah...”

“Do you really understand? Then—” Nezumi averted his eyes from Shion. His grey eyes had only shifted a little, but Shion felt like a shadow had been thrown over the light that had been shining on him dimly. It was impossible, he knew, but he could feel it.

“Then restrain your arrogance. Respect death as it is. Don’t think so highly of yourself, and don’t think you can be the one to give people a painless death. Don’t ever put your fingers around someone’s throat again.”

Shion stretched both his palms. He could still feel man’s neck on his hands. His fingertips were shaking.

If these hands had power, if they had the power to bring a peaceful death, if they had the power to steal souls away like Nezumi, what would I have done?

He asked himself, and Shion felt like his shaking fingers were answering him.

I probably wouldn't have loosened my grip... and if that's called murder, then I would have become the murderer. But—but—could that really be evil?

“Nezumi.”

“What?”

“Is it wrong to make excuses?”

“What?”

“Is it wrong to be released from suffering in the last moment of your life? Is it wrong to die smiling?”

Whether it was just an excuse, or fake imitation, Shion, unlike Nezumi, wasn't able to reject the fact that people wished a peaceful death, and that there were those who wanted to grant that wish. Nezumi sighed.

“Shion, do you still not understand? If you think of the dozens—no, hundreds by now, if you think of the people who have been killed already... what happens to those hundreds of lives, their hatred, their resentment? Are you gonna make excuses, and pretend it never existed?”

“No. It wouldn't happen that way. That would never be tolerated. But that's what the survivors are supposed to do. They live, they remember, and they tell others. They tell the truth of what happened in this place. It's a job for the survivors—for us. We'll engrave it into our memory, and never forget. But—but at least—for those who are already dying... if only they could go without hatred, if only we could—”

“Grant them an eternal slumber?”

“Yeah.”

“Idealistic, aren't you.”

“I don’t think it’s wrong. I don’t think what you did is murder, at least. I just can’t see it that way.”

Nezumi’s breathing quickened slightly. A shadow skimmed across his eyes. His gaze darkened as he looked at Shion, and wavered along with his breaths.

“Remembering is the role of the survivors, huh . . . convenient, isn’t it? How can you be so sure that there’ll even be survivors? No wait, I see, you’re already assuming you’ll survive. Quite the optimist, aren’t you, young master?”

“We vowed together that we’d make it back alive.”

“That we’d never die, no matter what?”

“Yeah. We’ll live, and go back to that room together.”

Back to that room. The basement room in which they lived flashed in the back of Shion’s mind. It was vivid, as if it were right before his eyes. The numerous books he had taken a whole week to sort through; the bookshelves, which covered the wall and reached to the ceiling; the beautiful and lavishly-bound book—Nezumi had said it was a story of a far-off land; the tattered and faded, though sturdy, chair; the pitiful bed with its stiff mattress; the pot puffing steam over the heater; the little mice scampering about the room. Cravat, Hamlet, Tsukiyo.

Shion clutched at his chest. He yearned for them so much, he felt dizzy.

I want to go back, to that place. I want to live those days once more. Those images did not shatter like the phantom vision of No. 6. It didn’t ripple and disappear. It stood firm, vivid and almost repulsively real. It brought to him even the smell of the books, and the chattering of the mice. The impulse to dig his nails into his skin and tear at himself, pressed on his chest. He longed, and desperately so. He wanted to go back.

That room was the only place he intended to return to alive.

Nezumi gave a little snap of his fingers.

"You should survive and write a reportage of your infiltration into the Correctional Facility. Who knows, it might sell."

"You told me a while ago I wasn't meant to be a writer."

"Did I? It's quite the difficult task finding the right job for you. But I do acknowledge that you have a way with handling dogs, and sorting books, for one thing."

"Speaking of which, I think I left a half-finished book on your bed."

"What book?"

"It's a story that takes place in some faraway land. About a man who sells his soul to the Devil."

"Ah." Nezumi closed his eyes for some moments, and muttered something under his breath. "Shion," he said.

"Hm?"

"We've only just started this journey."

"I know. Everything lies ahead... right?"

"I'm sure looking forward to it."

"To what?"

"Watching you," Nezumi replied. "Remembering is the role of the survivors—your own words. I wonder how far you'd be able to act on them? I'll be sure to watch carefully whether you seriously try to remember everything you see from here on out, or force yourself to forget. I'll see it right through to the end, when those lips go from spewing pretty words to twisting into a scowl."

His tone was flat and regular. There was no hint of sarcasm, anger, or irritation. Though devoid of all emotion, his voice, for some reason, was heavy. Shion clenched his fingers, and posed a question.

"Do you not believe me?"

“If it’s about your memorization abilities, then I have absolute faith in that.”

“Which means you have doubts when it comes to my own humanity.”

“Quite a few.”

Nezumi’s fingers reached out and pinched Shion’s chin. His eyes narrowed, and their grey light intensified.

“I’ve always thought we could never live in harmony,” he said, “that no matter how much we lived together, how many experiences we shared, I would end my life without ever having understood you. Shion, I’m going to tell you the truth. Sometimes... I feel hatred towards you to the point that I want to kill you. Just happens sometimes.”

“I knew that.”

“You knew?”

“I kind of realized that you—hated me.”

Nezumi’s fingertips dug into his chin.

“You’re like No. 6 itself. It flings pretty words and ideologies around, but its true form is something hideous. Like a cruel devil shrouded in a beautiful veil.”

“And you’re saying that’s me?” Shion grabbed Nezumi’s wrist, and wrenched his fingers free from his chin. “Is that my true form, as you see it?”

There was no answer. Shion gripped Nezumi’s wrist tightly.

“I’m different from No. 6. Absolutely different. You don’t realize that.”

He could feel Nezumi’s pulse against his clenched fingers. He gripped harder.

“How are you different?”

“I would never deceive you. I wouldn’t wear any veil. I’m laying everything before you, as who I really am.”

“Shion, let go of my hand. It hurts.”

“I’m laying it out right in front of you. Your eyes are the ones that are too clouded to see. You cling to the idea of No. 6, and don’t try to see me without tying me to it. True form? You must be kidding me,” he spat. “When have you ever honestly tried to see me as who I am?”

His anger boiled, and its heat scalded his body.

You’re the one who never tries to take that step towards me. If you hate me so much you want to kill me, then why don’t you? You only ever judge my crimes, or loathe me through the lens of No. 6. If you could hurl your emotions at me—me as a human being—then even if it was hatred so potent it was murderous, I would accept it. I’ve steeled myself to accept it. Why don’t you understand that?

Shion’s anger passed its boiling point, and now frothed and steamed fiercely. Nezumi shook his head as if to push him away.

“Let go.” He extracted his wrist from Shion’s fingers. “Geez, don’t just grip as hard as you can like that. That could’ve broken bones.”

“You’re not that delicate.”

“I’m talking about your strength. If you had this kind of power, I wish you’d use it when you actually need it. Look, it’s all red.”

Nezumi’s extended wrist now bore faint red bands. Shion had been gripping harder than he thought.

“Didn’t know you had this much power, did you?” Nezumi asked.

“No, I didn’t.”

“See, you don’t even know about yourself.” Nezumi slid his gloves on, hiding the reddened part of his wrist. “You don’t know what kind of human you are. Your Mama the talented baker probably doesn’t know either. She probably thinks you’re a gentle and adorable, well-behaved little boy.”

“Not like you know either, right?”

“Me? Well, I dunno about that,” he said lightly. “I probably know more than you or your Mama, to say the least. Shion, you’re right: I was too caught up with No. 6 to see you clearly. But it’s not always like that. Sometimes—just occasionally—I feel like I’ve been able catch your tail, grasp a piece of the human you really are.”

“And that’s when you want to kill me.”

“No, no that’s not it. I don’t want to kill—rather...”

“Rather?”

“I might even be—afraid.”

“Afraid? What do you mean?”

Nezumi lapsed into silence. His lips moved slightly.

Monster.

Was that the word his thin, shapely lips had moved to form?

Monster?

Agitated, Shion opened his mouth to prompt him again.

But there were footsteps. Several sets of them. They were slightly more steady than the fallen man’s. A couple men and a woman overtook them from behind, and sank onto the floor in the middle of the room. They were all out of breath, but were not on the verge of dying.

“It’s all over,” Nezumi said.

He meant that the task was complete. From the crowd of unfortunate people caught up in the Hunt in the West Block, they had eliminated the ones who had fallen on the way to the elevator; then, they had hurled everyone into the dark depths of the underground. They had tossed them away: the elderly, infants, men, and women, without distinction.

“Well, let’s go, then.”

“Huh?”

“Don’t ‘huh’ me, I’m saying we have to move our chess piece forward. Nothing will get done if we hang around chatting. About time anyway, since we’re probably both getting sick of it.”

“Nezumi, wait. What you were saying bef—”

“That’s enough.”

Words were cut off by more words.

“Unfortunately this isn’t exactly a situation where we can indulge in idle conversation. Damn it,” Nezumi swore, “I’m always thrown off track when I’m with you. This is what I mean by piece of shit. Come on. We can wait forever, but no one’ll bring us afternoon tea. Break time is over. Get moving.”

“Where are we going?”

“We’re going back along this passage, opposite of how we just came. Now isn’t that easy? I think even you might be able to manage it.”

“Go back! What for?”

“To move forward.”

Nezumi started walking. Shion followed behind him once again. The passage reeked of blood. He wondered if odours could have weight to them. The smell of blood that still flowed from the bodies was heavy, and seemed to slither over the floor, and crawl up from his feet.

He realized he was getting used to this smell. Compared to when he had walked down this path the first time, the queasiness in his chest and the impulse to cover his nose were not as strong. He was getting used to the smell of blood. Did that mean he was becoming stronger, or turning numb?

Shion took wider steps as if to tear apart the stench that swathed him.
Monster.

The word that had slipped voicelessly from Nezumi’s lips: what did it mean? Even if he asked, he would probably not get an answer.

Shion lifted his face. Nezumi was close enough that if he stretched, he could touch his shoulder. The stench of blood grew thicker. The groans and screams of people who could not die came pressing on him. Shion was faced anew with the reality that he was standing at the brink of life and death itself.

“Nezumi.”

There was no answer. His right shoulder only rose slightly.

“On the floorplan of the Correctional Facility, apart from the newly-built area, there was another large blank space underground, wasn’t there?”

“Yeah...”

“Is this that blank space?”

“Yeah.”

A clear answer bounced back to him.

“You knew about this place, didn’t you?”

“What if I did?”

“Then what was the line that was extending further down from the space?”

This time, Nezumi did not even turn around. But his gait slackened.

“You noticed?” he said.

“Well, it seemed out of place...”

It was an odd line. Especially because the map was filled with layers of electric circuitry, barriers at equal intervals, and countless rooms that made up the complicated interior structure of the Correctional Facility, the two blanks were eye-catching. The first was the newly-built area on the topmost floor; the other was this basement area. From here, there was a white line drawn that extended still further downwards. A straight line. It wasn’t the symbol for a circuit or pipe; in fact, it looked like a passageway. But there was nothing at the end

of it, not even a blank space. It abruptly ended in the middle. In the Correctional Facility, every minute detail was carefully calculated to cut off any possibility of escape; it was designed to maximize its functionality in the most efficient way possible. Amidst all of that, this line was a queer and unnatural existence.

Nezumi stopped. Turning only partly towards Shion, he threw a glance at him.

“What do you think it is?”

“Is it something I would be able to figure out?”

“No. No matter how much you put your pitiful imagination to work, you could probably never guess. I bet this place was off the radar of your imagination too, by quite a bit.”

If there was such a radar, it had long been shattered to pieces. He had never imagined that a world like this could exist.

He had known nothing. But now, he knew.

The two blanks: with his flimsy imagination, he could not perceive what could be on the topmost floor. But he understood now what was in the basement. He knew now, down to the marrow of his bones. This place, which had been a vacant space on the floorplan, was the Hell that the Holy City had materialized in this world. No. 6 was a city state: this meant that humans made it function. Then did that mean it was possible for humans to become this brutal? Then how heartless could they ultimately become? Then how could they stop themselves from becoming so? Then ...

Shion chewed his lip. While chewing, he gave his head a shake.

It was no good to think now—he had neither the time nor the strength. But someday, someday surely, he would find the answer.

How heartless could humans become?

How could they stop themselves from becoming so?

Someday, he would seek it out.

Shion sucked in a breath, and smelled blood. He had confidence. The confidence was firmly seated deep in his breast, that someday he would grasp the answer with his own hands. Like an unshakable boulder, it existed. It was also the conviction that no matter what situation may befall him, he would still be able to keep a foothold and remain within the range of humanity.

Nezumi was still twisted around, looking at Shion. Shion fixed his gaze directly on Nezumi.

Yes, Nezumi. I'm confident. As long as I'm beside you, I can say with conviction that I can remain human.

"What?" Nezumi blinked. "What're you grinning about?"

"Grinning?" He brought a hand to his cheek. Sweat and blood had mingled, dried, and left a crust on his skin. "Was I grinning?"

"You sure were. Really, would you smile in this kind of situation? I thought you'd finally lost it."

"I'm still sane. Probably."

"I sure hope so. In a place like this, you could probably hop the border between sanity and insanity with one leap."

"If I went mad, would you toss me away here?"

"Of course. I can't have you being more of a burden than you already are."

"I figured as much."

Heh. Nezumi's lip curled. He was also smiling, in this kind of situation. It was a smile neither bitter nor cold. It was somewhat mirthful, even.

"I wouldn't toss you away, Shion."

Shion drew his chin back a little. There was no way it would be followed by any sugary line like, "I'll take you there if I have to carry you myself."

"I'll slit your throat in one resolute stroke."

Still smiling, Nezumi lifted a single finger. His grey eyes were not smiling at all. They were still, like the surface of a frozen lake.

Shion clutched at his throat without thinking. There was a scratch that Nezumi had left a few days ago. He had made a shallow cut on his skin with the tip of his knife. The scar from the wound, which had bled only slightly and had closed up long ago, was thudding with a pulse.

“Relax,” Nezumi drawled. “Even I take pity on people. I’ll end it all in an instant. I would never make you suffer.”

“Thanks,” Shion said, for want of anything else to say, still clutching his throat. “That’s kind of you.”

“I’m always kind to you. Sometimes I think I’m spoiling you too much. It’s something I regret nowadays.”

“It could be a temporary state of confusion.”

“Huh?”

“Make sure you can distinguish whether I’ve actually gone mad or if I’m suffering temporary confusion from shock. Then you can decide if you still want to slit my throat. It shouldn’t be too late for the decision.”

“If I have the time.”

“Hey, wait a minute,” Shion said indignantly. The scar was still throbbing under his fingers.

If he was going to be killed by Nezumi, he had no complaints. True to his promise, Nezumi would probably slash his throat without causing him any pain or suffering at all. Shion had just seen for himself how welcoming a peaceful death was. He would not complain. But he did not want to die a meaningless death. He wanted to live and return to that room, no matter what it took.

“It might be hard, but I want you to check for me, just in case. Please.”

“How?”

“Just throw water on me. If there’s no water . . . then no choice, I guess, you can slap me across the face like you did back there. They say with fits of hysteria, people can recover with a shock as little as that—”

“I’ll give you a kiss.”

“Huh?”

“Before I slit your throat, I’ll give you a kiss,” Nezumi said softly. “You’ll find out exactly how much better I am at giving farewell kisses. Then you can go off to heaven.”

“Nezumi . . .”

He was probably bright red in the cheeks, right down to his ears. He felt hot. Even his forehead was damp with sweat. Nezumi spoke in a joking tone, but he was most likely not joking at all.

Whether you go mad, or get wounded, if you can’t move anymore, then that’s the end of you. So I’ll give you a farewell kiss, before I slit your throat.

A kiss of death. The innermost part of Shion’s body pulsed in response. He shook his head. No matter how seductive, he had to reject anything that tried to lead him to death.

“That’s no good. I need you to find another way, or else I’d be in trouble.”

“Why?”

“My panic attack would get worse.”

Nezumi snapped his eyes open for an instant, then turned his face aside to snort. Although he was trying not to laugh, his body shook with the effort, and he couldn’t quite restrain himself.

“You—” he gasped, “You really—don’t get it, do you? To think you’d . . . give me a serious answer . . . I . . . you’re really dense.”

“Is it that funny?”

“Couldn’t have done better.” Removing his gloves, Nezumi wiped at his eyes with his fingers. “I would never have thought I’d... laugh for real in a place like this. Really funny.”

“I didn’t really mean it as a joke.”

“Alright, Shion, spare me. I understand now. You’ll never go insane, yeah?” Wiping his eyes again, Nezumi drew a short breath. “Humans are more prone to laughing than I thought. New discovery.”

The smile vanished from Nezumi’s face. With a stony expression that reminded Shion of a mask, Nezumi slowly motioned with his chin.

“Let’s go.”

They were at the end of the passageway. They were standing in that place again. It seemed as if the darkness had turned a deeper colour since their last escape from it.

The mountain of casualties had grown higher. It was natural, since the third group had added their numbers to the pile. But nevertheless, Shion found himself backing away unconsciously. To think the mound of fallen and crushed people would grow even larger...

“Hmm, I think this would do,” Nezumi muttered, standing amongst the torrent of darkness, stink, and the groans of people unable to die. Shion felt a faint chill around his back.

“Nezumi, what are we about to—?”

“We’re gonna climb.”

“Climb?”

“Have you any experience with hiking or rock climbing?”

“Nezumi... what are you talking about...? By climbing, surely you don’t mean—”

“I sure do mean it. There’s gonna be no path. No signs, map, or portable lights. You only have your body to depend on. Got it? Make sure you keep up.”

Nezumi swung a foot onto the black heap. Shion stood stock-still, with his mouth hanging half-open.

“What are you waiting for? Hurry up.” He could hear Nezumi’s voice raining down on his head. It didn’t contain a smidgeon of irritation or contempt, but the voice hurt him. He felt like he was being struck with a whip.

I won’t allow any hesitation. There’s no option left for us to go back, to delay, to look for another path. We have no choice but to move on. And I won’t allow you to hesitate here, Shion.

I know. I know. I know.

Shion reached out into the black heap. His fingers were shaking violently. He couldn’t grasp properly.

“Shion!”

He knew. He wasn’t allowed to cower. He thrust his knuckle in his mouth, and bit down hard. The shaking stopped. The sound of the earth rumbling came from somewhere in the mound. He froze. It wasn’t the earth rumbling. They were the voices of people. This mound was made up of people. *Don’t forget. Live, and commit everything to memory. Live through it, and pass our story on.*

I won’t let myself hesitate.

He reached out. The trembling in his fingers had stopped completely.

3

THOSE WHOSE BUDS BLOOM

*Then shall I speak of the two primal Spirits of existence,
of whom the Very Holy thus spoke to the Evil One:
neither our choices nor words nor acts,
not our inner selves nor our souls agree.*

ZARATHUSHTRA'S GATHAS, YASNA 45.2

THE BABY started crying. Lying atop a grimy blanket filled with holes, it flailed wildly, raising a voice loud enough to echo off the ceiling.

Geez, enough of you already.

Inukashi clicked his tongue, and put the coins he was counting back into the bag. It was his profit for the day, and it was a hefty sum.

A night had passed since the Hunt, and the West Block was still in the throes of confusion and anguish. Nobody knew how many had been killed, kidnapped, or had escaped, and no one had the energy or the means of finding out.

Early this morning, Inukashi took a dog with him to walk down the bazaar. More accurately, it was what had been the bazaar—the patch

of land where it had once been until yesterday.

Most of the buildings—though it was doubtful whether those barracks even deserved such a name—had been destroyed, and were reduced to rubble. This Hunt had been particularly large and sweeping compared to the ones before. No, that was an understatement. Although they had destroyed homes before, even razed them completely for the sake of capturing people, they had never been in the habit of being bent on destruction like this. If Inukashi could get a bird's-eye view from the sky, he would probably have seen a strange scene—a crater in the middle of the market, with debris forming a ring around the edges.

The bazaar had once been filled with a raucous, though lively bustle, lined with store barracks of questionable nature, with prostitutes, pick-pockets, starving children, old beggars, cockroaches and rats roaming about. But in mere minutes, it had all but vanished from this land.

It's mindblowing.

Inukashi stood atop the ruins, and sighed. It was not a sigh of despair. He was not so innocent anymore to feel anguish towards this catastrophe. Rather, he was astonished.

This is how far they're gonna go.

The people of the West Block were not enemies. They had not retaliated. They had merely gathered there, without power or weapons. What reason did they have to be crushed to this extent?

Rather than feel anguish, or wrath, he found himself simply astonished. This destructive power, such thorough ruthlessness. It amazed him.

He bent to pick up a piece of debris at his feet. Although it was crumbled badly, it had no burn marks. So No. 6 had not used firearms in the Hunt this time around. Usually they used outdated high-calibre weapons like cannons or howitzers; sometimes they simply burned everything to the ground with flamethrowers.

Inukashi twitched his nose. Even with his olfactory senses, he could not smell the distinctive smoky smell of firearms. Only the overwhelming stench of dead bodies wafted over to him. An odourless weapon. It would leave nothing in the wake of its destruction.

Acoustic shockwaves?

He tried saying it out loud. He remembered hearing a little about it before from Nezumi. They had been talking about whales. He didn't remember how they got to talking about them. Inukashi had neither touched nor seen a whale before. He didn't even know what the ocean was like. The world that Inukashi knew was limited to the ruined hotel and its surroundings. For as long as he could remember, he had lived within those boundaries. He had never thought of travelling outside of the West Block. He was satisfied with his segment of the world, with the ruins, his dogs, and the market at the centre. He had no intention of going anywhere. But Nezumi was a wanderer. He was the kind to appear on a whim, and disappear on a whim. He would never settle in one place. Inukashi didn't trust wanderers, and he didn't want anything to do with them if he could help it. But he was attracted to the tales of the world that were spun from his mouth. They were stories of worlds he had never seen and would probably never see. The ocean was one of these. A wide, blue expanse brimming with saltwater, and the enormous animals that lived within it—Inukashi's heart quickened with excitement just hearing about them. Although he had no intention of going anywhere, his heart was drawn to the unknown world that Nezumi told of. It was probably because of his skilful storytelling, and his beautiful voice—though “beautiful” was far from adequate in describing it, “beautiful” was often the only word he seemed to be able to come up with. And out of desire to hear his voice and singing, the residents of the West Block would scrape their meagre wages together, and would flock to the shabby playhouse.

Everyone falls into his trap so easily. But I'm not like that. Sure, I listened to his stories as if I were in a trance, but I wasn't tricked. I noticed. I still had enough wits to.

Inukashi threw his chest out, although there was no one to boast to on this pile of rubble.

But he had not missed it.

Inukashi had noticed Nezumi's tone of voice change slightly during his story about whales. It had grown flat, losing all of his softness that usually stroked the listener gently as if with a feather. It was just when Inukashi had picked a flea from one of his dog's furry collars and tossed it into his mouth.

"Acoustic shockwaves?" Inukashi licked his fingers, and echoed Nezumi. "What's that?"

"A sound beam. They turn sound waves into shockwaves to numb the prey and capture it."

"Those... spleen whales, or whatever?"

"Sperm whales."

"Hah," Inukashi ejected. "Catching food with sound waves, huh. That's pretty impressive. If there was a sperm whale in front of me right now, I think I'd want an autograph."

"Humans might do it too."

"Uh?"

"I'm saying humans might start using it too."

"Those acoustic shock-whatcha-ma-callits?"

"Yeah."

"To catch food?"

"For destruction."

To destroy with sound waves? Inukashi didn't understand. But then again, more than half of what Nezumi usually said was incomprehen-

sible to him. Nor did he want to understand. But it was also true that many of those words he could not understand left a mark in his mind. For destruction.

“Did he . . .”

Inukashi clenched a piece of debris in his hand.

Was he predicting that this would occur? Did he know that this destruction, this catastrophe was coming?

The wind was blowing. As if to mock what had happened, today was a bright, sunny day, and a beautiful blue sky spread out over his head. How alluring the colour was. It stung at his eyes.

Inukashi took a deep breath. His body trembled at the joy that he was alive, right this moment, and breathing. Many had died. Nezumi and Shion were missing. They were either buried under this rubble, or had succeeded in sneaking into the Correctional Facility—either way, they would never meet again. He was sure they wouldn’t.

Everyone’s dead. Everyone’s disappeared. But I’m still here, and I’ve survived. He licked his bottom lip. He was smiling, though at no one in particular.

I’m alive.

A triumphant glory raced through his body and made him want to let out a cry; it shook his body and soul with an even greater force. Loss? Listlessness? He had no time to be feeling those. *Those who live are the winners. I lived. I win. Aren’t I right, Nezumi?*

A dog barked. It dug at the rubble with its front paws, nudged at it with its nose, and scabbled at it again.

“Find anything?”

The dog, which had a grey coat and drooping ears, gave a proud bark, and trotted over to Inukashi to drop the contents of its mouth onto his palm. It was a silver coin.

“Good boy.” He patted the dog on the head. “Now dig some more. We gotta find more cash.”

The dog’s tail wagged furiously at being complimented by its master. “Listen. This is where the meat shop used to be. Dig, and you’ll find meat. That’ll be your dinner tonight. Meat and money. Make sure you find both.”

This time, a small white dog gave a bark. In its mouth was a cloth pouch.

“Whoa, nice!”

There were no gold coins, but there were several silvers and plenty of loose change. Inukashi felt like jumping up and down. Frankly, he had not expected to find this much booty this easily.

I’m lucky today. Might be the best luck I’ve had yet.

He encouraged his dogs to dig more, find more.

He had already heard that the owner of the meat shop had a fat sum of money stored away. He had just confirmed that owner of the meat shop was lying lifeless underneath the rubble. A familiar hairy arm had been poking out from a gap in a crumbled wall. It was the same arm that used to throw twigs and stones at kids loitering in front of the store, or at beggars. Inukashi himself had nearly been punched by that arm once. The man had worn large golden rings on his thumb and index finger, and every time he swung his arm up for a blow, they used to glitter. Inukashi made away with the ring on his index finger. It didn’t go as well for his thumb, for it had been blown off entirely.

He was a stingy, greedy bastard. But too bad. Once you’re a corpse, you can’t spend your money, much less save it.

After the meat shop, Inukashi planned to dig up the used-clothing stall next door. If he did it well, maybe he could get his hands on two, three wearable pieces of clothing. He wanted a thick jacket preferably, but he would take even a single shirt, a single cape. After that was the

food stall. If he could find the large soup pot that they used to stir leftovers in over the fire, it would come in handy.

Inukashi felt a presence. His eyes darted around, and he clicked his tongue quietly. Quite a number of people had appeared out of nowhere, and were beginning to dig up the piles of rubble as well. Some unearthed something and raised a cry, like Inukashi had just done. A gaggle of dirty children were fighting over a piece of cloth, presumably a blanket. For the time being here in the West Block, physical items would probably be more cherished than money. Money was useless in a destroyed place like this. But within a month, this place would turn back into a market again, unchanged from before. It would be lined with the same haphazard shops, people would come and go, and the place would fill with bellows, cheers, laughs, and smells of every kind. Prostitutes would stand in the dim alleyways, and beggars would wander about. Gold and silver would speak, and speak loudly. More and more people flocked to the debris. They seemed to spring up out of the destroyed buildings themselves. If Inukashi dawdled any longer, all the valuable items would be carried off. He had countless competitors.

What pain-in-the-asses.

Inukashi clicked his tongue again before laughing voicelessly. He lifted his face, and threw a glance at the dim outline of No. 6's fortress walls in the distance, the walls of special alloy.

No. 6, this is who we are. No matter how many times you step on us, we'll raise our heads again. We'll never be destroyed. We'll crawl across the ground, we'll set our roots down, and we'll live. We're a lot tougher than you think.

He narrowed his eyes. The special alloy caught the streams of light coming from the sky, and glittered. Inukashi had always averted his eyes from that light. It had been too blinding for his eyes. But not

today. The glittering wall looked as cheap and flimsy as the rings on the meat shop owner's hand.

"Maybe *you're* the one that's fragile." He startled himself. He glanced around, wondering if someone else had muttered it, but there was no one else around, other than his dogs, within hearing distance. Inukashi was the only one who spoke a human language.

He pressed a hand to his mouth, and scowled.

He wasn't supposed to think about No. 6. He wasn't supposed to have anything to do with it. The Holy City had always reigned over their heads. It was a tyrant. It possessed absolute strength, and crushed the West Block beneath its feet. But on the other hand, it was also true that people and merchandise trickled out of the city into the West Block through smuggling routes. It was also true that Inukashi himself gained a share of the profits that came from it.

He would latch onto No. 6 like a flea or tick, and live on. After all, their existence was nothing more than fleas and ticks to No. 6—though city residents had probably never seen a flea or tick before.

That was what he had thought all along.

The Holy City reigns; as for us, we're as good as insects.

Thinking like that did him no harm. He had long discarded any pride or shame. Once he did away with useless things, and told himself that was just how things were, he could live anywhere.

This was Inukashi's philosophy, which he had built up during his life. He had lived by it, with his dogs, and done decently more or less.

But these days, he felt a little strange. The axis of his philosophy was beginning to wobble. The fortress walls of the Holy City, which were supposed to be absolute, sometimes looked to him like a cheap toy. Here he was, mumbling things like, 'maybe you're the one that's fragile'. There was something wrong with this. It was clearly odd.

He thought maybe—what if—but shook his head.

It was an absurd story. Absurd, indeed. A tick was a tick. As long as he minded not to get squished and could manage to suck a little blood in the process, it was good. It was wise not to even think about whether he could tear through the other's vulnerable spot.

Inukashi told himself so, and grimaced again. His mind was frantic, urging him to dig out things of worth instead of leaving it all to his dogs, but his hands remained still.

With his hands dangling, Inukashi furrowed his brow, and turned his scowling face to the city walls.

The Holy City reigns.

As for us, we're as good as insects.

But too late, the thought had occurred to him: he could shake the foundations of that relationship. He could tear through that artificial wall, and lay No. 6 exposed and naked. It was their fault. *Those two—Shion and Nezumi—poisoned my mind.*

Suddenly, Shion's face flashed in his memory. It was so sudden, Inukashi arched his back and stumbled over, almost touching the ground behind him with his hand.

Shion. The boy whom Nezumi had brought with him. He was a resident of No. 6, hopelessly dense, and—hard to believe—a first-rate criminal.

It was utterly unbelievable. Speaking of fleas and ticks, could he even bring himself to kill any? And that hair. Despite being young, his hair was pure white. It was too weird. Well, maybe his hair wasn't so bad. It was shiny, and not the kind of hair you'd see anywhere. If Inukashi could somehow manage to peel his scalp off, perhaps it would sell for a good price—but never mind, his appearance wasn't the only weird thing about him; in fact, he was weirder than his appearance.

"Yeah." Shion's clear answer reverberated in his ears. *Are the people of No. 6 the same humans as us?* Inukashi had asked. Shion had given a

clear answer.

“Yeah.”

Inukashi had scoffed at him, but the instant he had heard those words, his chest had thumped loudly.

The same humans. So the people who lived on this side and that side of the wall were the same?

Yeah.

Inukashi could tell more than easily that Shion wasn't just saying this for the sake of saying it; he honestly believed it. According to Shion, it didn't matter where you lived, what colour skin or hair you had; any person fell into the category of “human”. It was weirder than anything he could believe. *I should've asked him where he learned that.*

And Nezumi. He was no good, either. He was mysterious, much more dangerous than Shion. Some day, he was planning to utterly destroy No. 6. He was planning to slash No. 6 and tear it apart, like he would slit open a person's belly and drag out their organs with his skilful knife.

Inukashi rubbed his arms. He had goosebumps. It wasn't because of the cool air. Every time he thought of Nezumi, he got these. He was afraid. He would've rather died than admit it, but Inukashi felt a horror towards Nezumi. From the first time they'd met, he had been afraid of him. Those grey eyes, that soul-snatching voice, his way with the knife: it wasn't normal. It was impossible to get a big picture of him. He couldn't place a finger on him. For some reason, it was horrifying. But what was strange was that Nezumi was afraid of Shion. Inukashi wasn't completely sure, but he could feel it. Inukashi trusted his instincts.

Nezumi was afraid of Shion. The reason was beyond him, but this was no mistake. Both of them were weirdos. Odd. *But I—I let myself*

get poisoned by those two. And I believed them—that we could one day shatter those walls, and bring them down.

A dog barked. It had apparently found some meat. Drool was dripping from the sides of its mouth. It looked up at Inukashi in a pleading way.

“Eat.” Inukashi jerked his chin. The three dogs pounced on the hunk of meat. A hollow-cheeked boy was staring at them intently. Inukashi sniffed loud enough for him to hear.

Too bad, kid. Here, you gotta find your own food. No one’s gonna give you a handout.

The boy left. The dogs latched onto the meat, and sunk their teeth into it. The sky was blue, and there was not a single cloud in the sky. *Shion, Nezumi.*

He looked up at the heavens.

Have you really gone away? Will we really never see each other again? Have you guys really left? Am I the only one here?

The glory that had raced through his body only moments before showed no sign of bubbling up again.

How am I supposed to face that wall here in this West Block, without you guys here?

Awooo.

A dog whined. It wasn’t any of the dogs he had brought with him. Inukashi could distinguish each of his dogs by their bark.

This voice was—

Inukashi leapt off the wreckage, and gave a short whistle. A large, tan dog came bounding out of the shadows of what remained of the meat shop from yesterday. It pounced on Inukashi.

“You made it alive, huh.”

If the Hunt was close, it would be dangerous to roam the bazaar. But if he shut himself up in the ruins, he wouldn't be able to do business. So Inukashi had ordered this dog to scout the bazaar out. Since it had not come home last night, he had given up, assuming that the dog had been rounded up in the Hunt. Inukashi hadn't expected it to be alive. "Good job, you pulled through it. But why didn't you come straight home? Hm? You hurt or somethin'?"

Inukashi ran his hands quickly over the dog's body. No blood came off on his hands. It didn't seem to be in pain. It was dirty, but not hurt.

"Well then, what were you up to?" he said sternly. "If you were alive, you should've come straight—" he stopped mid-sentence. He could hear crying. It wasn't the dog. It was— a human? And it sounded like a baby. The dog clamped its jaws on Inukashi's sleeve, and yanked.

"What?"

The dog was telling him to follow. Inukashi had a bad feeling. He never had good feelings about anything, and if he did they often weren't right, but he always had bad feelings. And they often turned out to be right.

Oh come on, don't tell me...

The dog led its master between the ruins of the meat shop and clothing store. It turned back, and flicked its ears proudly. Inukashi stood still, and stared at the thing that was nestled in the crack between a crumbled wall and the ground. His gaze wandered for an instant once, then he blinked, and scrutinized the space between the wall and the ground.

It was a baby. No matter how he looked at it, it was a human baby. Wrapped in a dark cloth, it was wailing. It was a clamorous, energetic voice, almost unsuited for this place.

"Were you here with this kid the whole night? Warming him up so he wouldn't freeze?"

You bet, the dog's impressive brown tail seemed to say, as it wagged side to side.

"Idiot," Inukashi snapped at him. "What are you gonna do, picking up a human baby? What good is he, if you can't even sell or eat him? What were you thinking?"

Although probably not due to Inukashi's bellow, the baby's wailing escalated to a shrill scream. It was a voice loud enough to make Inukashi wonder for a second if the wall would collapse from its sheer volume. He hastily turned his back to it.

Nothing good came out of mingling with babies. Pigs and goats served as meat, and produced milk as well. There was nothing to lose in taking care of them. But human babies were nothing but hassle, and useless baggage. But then again, it was also possible to sell him off after raising him to a certain age. Indeed in the West Block, there were merchants who bought and sold children.

No thanks for me, though.

Inukashi usually never turned things down if it brought him money. He dirtied his hands with almost any trade. This place wasn't nice enough to let you live on pretty ideologies. Yes. He did anything to stay alive, and he would continue doing so. But trafficking children was one thing he didn't want to do. Only those who had stooped to the lowest of the low laid their hands on that business. Inukashi wasn't trying to preach morals. But he didn't want to fall that low. But that didn't mean he was going to save the baby that was wailing behind him. He liked to think he wasn't prone to the kind of softness that would make him extend a hand out of pity or sympathy, especially if he knew it would be nothing but a burden.

If he left this child as is, without a doubt, it would die. The flighty sky was already starting to turn cloudy. Perhaps it would snow in the afternoon. The ground would freeze over along with the coming of

night, and would easily nip the life of that powerless bundle.

But what was it to him? If the baby was going to die, it may as well be sooner than later. If it could leave the world without having to know what suffering was like, maybe that was happiness in a sense. He would make a grave for the baby, at least. It would only take a small hole to bury it. It would be much easier than burying a dog.

Woof!

The dog barked, and rammed into Inukashi, almost making him fall over.

“Hey, stop! That’s enough fooling around,” Inukashi shouted at it. Their eyes met. Even among the other dogs that lived in the ruins, this one was particularly smart. It was also a descendant of the female dog that had raised Inukashi.

He has the same eyes as my Mum.

Peaceful, intelligent eyes.

If only all the humans had eyes like my Mum’s...

At times, those thoughts crossed Inukashi’s mind.

If everyone had eyes like my Mum’s, maybe the world would be a somewhat better place.

The dog was dragging the baby out from under the wall. It pawed the ground lightly.

“What the... hell...” Inukashi gulped. He recognized the cloth that the baby was wrapped in. He picked the baby up, and realized that the cloth was a coat. It was second-hand, but of considerable quality.

“Shion...” It was what Shion had been wearing. It was a coat that Rikiga had bought and forced onto him. “Why did Shion...”

The dog lay down at his feet. Inukashi remembered now, that this dog had loved Shion. Shion had loved it too, and would brush its fur

almost every day. Both of them were smart; maybe like minds got along.

“Did Shion leave this baby to you?”

Just a single bark—*woof*—an affirmative.

“Th-This must be some kind of joke,” Inukashi said, flustered. “Why do I have to end up with some baby? No way in hell am I gonna take care of this. Geez, you must be kidding me.”

The baby wriggled in his arms. It wasn’t crying anymore. Two watery eyes were fixed on Inukashi. They were black, with a tinge of purple. Depending on the way the light hit them, the purple shone through more strongly. Maybe it was the tears: those eyes reminded him of the surface of a lake at night, brimming with still water. He thought they looked a lot like Shion’s eyes. They were similar. Maybe exactly the same.

“Hey, you wouldn’t be Shion’s kid, would you? He probably doesn’t even know how to have children.” Inukashi found himself speaking to it. The baby suddenly broke into a grin. Still looking up at Inukashi, it had raised its voice in an ecstatic giggle. Inukashi felt like something had reached into his chest yanked violently. He felt like he was going to cry.

What the hell, man.

Inukashi was agitated at the laughing infant, and also at himself, about to cry. He didn’t know what to do.

A shadow crossed the sun. Clouds were coming in. The wind whipped around his body. He felt something icy on the nape of his neck. Inukashi finally realized that he’d been sweating.

I’m gonna go home.

Inukashi firmly dug his heels into the ground. The gravel beneath his feet crunched.

I gotta get home. Uh—so what do I do now... yeah, I'll throw this baby back where it belongs, and I'll wave goodbye. And then, and then... I gotta hurry back to the ruins... oh, before that, I gotta dig out what I can find at the clothing shop...

He glanced at the rubble beside him, and almost raised a cry. Almost three times as many people from a few minutes ago were swarming around the rubble, digging through the remains of the buildings with their bare hands. They didn't care if their hands bled, or their fingernails peeled off. In this season of brutal cold, warm garments were next to food in necessity. They didn't carry the risk of breaking like dishes, or being crushed, like fruit; if they dug out, washed, and mended the clothes, they could be resold.

Got a late start.

Inukashi clicked his tongue. Even if he joined that crowd now, he probably wouldn't be able to find anything much. Could he use his dogs to chase them away? The thought flitted across Inukashi's mind, and he quickly brushed it away. It was too dangerous. The residents of the West Block were always on the edge as they clung to their lives, but today they were even more desperate. No. 6 had, along with the marketplace, blown away the little morals and order that had set their roots down on this land.

If Inukashi set his dogs on them, the people would disperse temporarily. But what would happen afterwards? He would be surrounded and lynched. People didn't forgive people who tried to monopolize living necessities amidst destruction and confusion. If they allowed it to happen, their own portion would not come around. There was no way they would tolerate anyone who endangered their own lives. The kind of people who did were not to be tolerated.

Inukashi knew very well how violent someone could become if cornered. It was no different from a hungry wolf. But Inukashi also knew

that once the confusion settled, order would be restored as well, at least to the minimal level. Order existed even within wolf packs.

But with all that aside, today's work was done. He would have to be satisfied with what he had managed to reap from the meat shop. It was idiotic to risk getting lynched for instant gratification.

Knowing when to make a clean break was also a skill you needed to have in order to survive here.

"A-bah," the baby sputtered, stretching its hands toward him. Its soft palms touched his cheek. Perhaps it wanted milk: the baby puckered its lips and started making suckling sounds. It had been brought up more or less with care, and was not pitifully thin. For a baby in the West Block, this was a rarity.

He felt a definite warmth and weight in his arms as he held the baby. Inukashi sighed, and gazed at it. He had taken it in his arms. They had made eye contact. He had felt this warmth and weight in his arms, and now there was no going back.

Oh, geez.

He wanted to throw his head back and cry anguish into the heavens. *What am I gonna do with even more baggage? What the hell am I gonna do?*

Clouds began to cover the sky above him. The wind grew even more chilly.

What am I gonna do, Shion?

The dog at his feet gave a great swing of its tail, as if to encourage him. Inukashi had no experience with raising babies. But as for puppies, he had raised a countless number of them. He told himself he would manage it somehow.

Humans and dogs weren't all that different.

From his experience, Inukashi felt it was true. The only difference between them was whether one had two legs or four legs, whether one had a tail or not.

I've taken it on myself to do it. I'll raise it.

He had picked it up in his arms, and carried it home—there was no abandoning the baby now. He would raise it, in his own way. If he was lucky, it would grow. If it wasn't... well, that was not much to worry about. It would only die.

Two of his dogs had given birth out of season. Births in the wrong time of the year were often stillborn. Each dog had four puppies, and half the litter of each had already been dead when they came out of the mother.

“Well, hang in there, little guy. It's up to how lucky you are, whether you'll live or not. If you're unlucky, then don't blame me. You got God to—no, you got Shion to thank for that. Got it?”

He laid the baby down beside a female dog with black fur, so that it nestled against the dog's belly. The mother dog, which had lost its puppies recently, gave a great sigh as it lay on the ground. The baby was looking up at Inukashi wide-eyed.

They were eyes like a lake surface at nighttime. They reflected nothing, but they looked like they would suck everything in. Inukashi averted his gaze, and swiftly backed away. He had to go over what he had collected today. Inukashi was soon engrossed in the silver coins that were piled on his table.

It was more than he had expected. He still regretted that he hadn't gotten any clothes or a pot, but he had no complaints with this amount of profit.

One, two, three... that meat shop geezer, I can see how greedy he really was, look how much he's saved up. Don't worry, I'm in charge of all of it now. You have nothing to worry about in your afterlife.

When he had the silver coins between his fingers, shining dully, he couldn't help but grin. *I sure wish that baby came with his own pouch of money.*

But—he thought, as he clenched the coin in his fist. *I've sure gone soft.* He was sighing again. He sighed, and lapsed into thought. *Why? Why did I bring it here?*

Inukashi swept up the coat that had been flung onto the floor. It was Shion's coat. He had heard the rough gist of things from the dog. Shion had wrapped the baby in his coat, and left it in the dog's care. Or, rather, he had left it in Inukashi's care.

Inukashi, please take care of him.

Even before hearing it from the dog, as soon as the baby had gazed at him, Shion's voice had echoed in his head.

Inukashi, please take care of him.

He could almost see the figure of the white-haired boy in the midst of the Hunt, in the midst of utter chaos in the market, hiding the baby underneath the rubble. That was why Inukashi could not resist. He could not abandon what Shion had left him at the border of his own life and death. If Inukashi let this baby die, then Shion...

Shion probably wouldn't blame me, he thought. He would only be crestfallen. The purple of his eyes would deepen, and a heavy sorrow would cross his face. Seeing him like that pained Inukashi. *I don't... want that to happen.*

He drew a breath. The silver coin rolled out of his hand onto the table. *Hey,* he scolded himself sharply. *Are you supposing you can see them again? See them alive?*

His own self answered.

No, I... no, of course not.

Yeah. It's impossible. Right? As impossible as waking up tomorrow morning to see the whole ruins in full bloom.

Yeah... you're right... that might be true, but...

But? Hey, what're you thinking? This is the Hunt we're talking about. You saw the mountain of rubble, right? How can you be sure that Shion and Nezumi are buried somewhere in there? Well, I can't imagine them being buried so easily if Nezumi's around. The meat shop geezer is the one who got flattened under his own house, haha. But still—if they escaped being buried alive, then what? They probably got rounded up and carted off. To the Correctional Facility.

Taken to the... Correctional Facility.

Yeah. Correctional Facility. Once you get through the gates, you can never get out again. They passed through those gates of death, man. They've gone to hell. They won't come back. There's no way they could. They'll never appear in front of you again.

Inukashi bit his lip. He thumped his chest hard, with his fist.

People who went through the gates of death never returned to the world of life. He knew. Of course he knew.

His mind knew. But this—this here, refused to comply.

He opened his palm now, and rubbed his thin chest.

His heart was raising an objection. It was screaming that it wasn't convinced.

They had said so many times. *We're going to hell, but we'll come back alive.* Nezumi with Nezumi's own ways, and Shion with his own, they had said they would definitely return. Yes, and—and besides, Nezumi had promised.

If you're overcome with unbearable pain one day, I promise I'll always rush to your side. No matter where you are, I'll deliver a song to your soul.

Inukashi couldn't forget his serious tone as he had whispered those words. Although he resented it heartily, those words had supported him. If he could be wrapped by that beautiful singing voice, all suffering would disappear, and the peaceful death he had always hoped for

would come. To be unfearing of death meant he could be unfearing of life. Thanks to Nezumi, Inukashi was able to be relatively unafraid of life or death.

He made a promise. I'm gonna believe it.

One was an airheaded little boy, and the other was a highly dangerous fraud, but neither of them ever went back on their word.

They would come home.

He stood up, and turned around. He realized it had been unusually quiet behind him.

The baby had brought its lips to the dog's nipple, and was suckling. The black dog raised its head and was staring curiously at the human child clinging onto its nipple.

"Wow," Inukashi mused. He had to admit he was surprised. "You're a tough one."

He had not expected the baby to be able to feed from a dog so well. But it had been one to escape the carnage of the Hunt: perhaps it was blessed with a strong and good fortune.

Fate decided between life or death. God presided over it. But the ability to cling to life and snatch it came from human power.

"Well, good luck giving life a try." Inukashi nudged the baby's bottom with his toe. He hadn't kicked it. He had really only poked at it as if to tickle it. But the baby began to cry. It flailed its limbs, and broke into sobbing. And soon, that turned into a full-out wailing.

"Huh? Hey hey, what's wrong?" Inukashi hastily picked it up in his arms, and the crying instantly stopped. "Don't cry, stupid. I still got money to count. I'm busy. I have no time to be playing with you."

He put the baby down, and it instantly erupted into tears again. When he picked it back up, it stopped, and even smiled.

So Inukashi had to roam about the room with the baby in his arms. The baby remained in a splendidly good mood as long as it was being

held. Eventually, it began to lapse into quiet breaths as it fell asleep in Inukashi's arms.

He gently laid the baby down on a blanket, and covered it with Shion's coat. The tan-coloured dog nestled alongside it. After a moment of hesitation, the black female dog also sprawled out beside the baby, as if to hold it to its belly.

What's up with him? He's just a kid, and the dogs are already starting to like him.

The dogs around Inukashi were midway between wild and domesticated. They lived in the world of humans alongside them, but they did not trust humans. They were apprehensive, fearful, and even attacked humans at times. They were cautious and aggressive. It was highly unlikely for them to accept any human apart from Inukashi so easily. Sure, it was a defenseless baby, but Inukashi couldn't believe that they had taken it under their wing so promptly. He had even been prepared for the baby to receive two, three bites at least...

Geez, what's up with this kid? Maybe he really has some of Shion's blood in him. Don't tell me he's gonna grow up to be an airhead like him, too.

It was kind of funny when he tried to imagine it, and he laughed. But now, the baby had no fear of freezing. It had filled its belly, and was now able to sleep, free of the cold. It was something to be thankful for. For Inukashi, this would have been the most fortunate circumstances he could ever be in, But yet the baby still cried. Whatever it was that made him unhappy, made him start crying not even five minutes after being laid down. If he carried it, it stopped crying and went to sleep; if he put it down, it woke up and cried. This repeated itself. Counting money was the last thing he could do.

"You idiot. I'm the one that wants to cry here. If you don't knock it off soon, I'm gonna throw you in a pot and make you into dog food," he griped. It had apparently not gotten across to the baby, for it

squealed and giggled enthusiastically, its voice bouncing off the walls. *If this was Nezumi, he'd probably sing it a gentle lullaby*, he thought. A super-special one that would lull the baby into a deep sleep that would not make him wake until morning.

Inukashi didn't know a single lullaby. Raised by dogs, only thing that lingered in his ears was the sound of the wind and the growling of the dogs. Both of them stirred unsettling feelings rather than invite sleep.

Could I get my hands on food tomorrow?

Could I avoid freezing to death tomorrow?

Could I avoid getting beaten up too badly tomorrow?

Could I still be alive tomorrow?

The wind brought snow, and growling brought news of danger. It had always been like that.

Danger, danger. Be careful. Don't let your guard down for even a second. See, that vulnerable moment could cost you your life. Look out, it's dangerous. Look out, be careful.

The dogs and the wind had always whispered those words. No one ever sang to him, told him, *relax and rest, sleep peacefully*.

Inukashi stopped pacing, and rocked the baby in his arms.

When I see Nezumi next time, I'll request a lullaby for this baby. Of course, for free. This kid is Shion's business anyway, he wouldn't be able to say no.

I'd want to hear it too, he thought. *I'd want to hear Nezumi sing a lullaby, even just once.*

He touched the baby's cheek. It felt plump. It wasn't hard or taut, and had a smooth elasticity. It was comforting to the touch.

Might be tasty to eat.

The thought crossed his mind, half-serious. His stomach, empty save for leftover food, contracted, squealing insistently. His mouth watered.

In the end, it was meat over lullabies. He needed a full stomach more than sleep. He swallowed his saliva.

Geez, am I hungry.

The air shifted. The air that surrounded the ruins hummed. The barking of dogs resounded throughout.

Who is it?

* * *

Someone was coming. The dogs lying down outside were now raising their voices in apprehension. But there was nothing to be agitated about. The barking of the dogs, both large and small, was not overly wrung in alarm or threat.

It was not an enemy. No stranger had wandered in; no thief had snuck in either. It was someone unwelcome, but of low risk.

Inukashi raised his face and quivered his nose. He caught the smell of alcohol. At the same time, a puppy with a torn right ear burst into the room. It yapped insistently, reporting who the visitor was. Inukashi gave a light wave of his hand to shut it up. See, dogs were great. You told them to shut up, and they did.

“I know, I know. I could smell it from here. The alcoholic old man, yeah?”

His eyes fell on the coins sitting on his table.

“Oh, crap.” He shoved the baby onto the dog, and hurriedly shovelled the coins into a bag. The moment he stuffed the bag into his pant pocket, he heard footsteps clambering up the stairs.

The door burst open violently.

“Will you knock, at least?” Inukashi seated himself in a chair, and scowled exaggeratedly. “What if I was changing?”

“How many—times—in your life—do you ever— change your clothes?” Rikiga panted heavily, his shoulders rising and falling with every breath. He leaned against the wall.

“Hey old man, you better not run around so much. Your lungs are probably half-melted from the booze. Watch you don’t suffocate and die.”

Rikiga thrust his right hand out, still gasping.

“What? You want a handshake?” Inukashi said.

“Get me a . . . glass of water.”

“One copper coin.”

“*What?*”

“You want something to drink, you trade me one copper coin for it.”

“Inukashi . . . you little . . .”

“Hey, this is a ruins. I don’t have any running water like your place, old man. I draw the water from the stream. Precious stuff. One copper, no change.”

Rikiga clicked his tongue. His forehead was damp with sweat, despite the biting cold. He must have been in a great hurry, for his breathing took a while to return to normal. Wheezing raggedly, Rikiga sank into a chair, and quipped in a sarcastic voice:

“You’re not . . . charging for seating, are you?”

“This time it’s on the house. So, on what visiting business, sir?”

“So the Hunt has actually come, huh.”

“Uh-huh.”

“Shion’s been taken away.”

“Looks like it.”

“I’m . . . worried, so worried . . . I can’t sit or stand still.”

“So that’s why you decided to run a marathon here? Kudos to you.”

Rikiga's fist pounded the table. A copper coin that Inukashi had forgotten to put away fell to the floor and rolled. He stopped it with his foot, and picked it up.

"No matter how much you worry, it isn't gonna do any good, old man. Besides, things just went according to plan, didn't they? They managed to slip into the Correctional Facility, just as they wanted. We should congratulate them."

He blew on the copper coin, and shined it with his sleeve. "If they make it out alive, it'd be a cause for celebration."

A deep sigh escaped from Rikiga's stubbly mouth. It stank of alcohol.

"Shion... poor boy... when I imagine what horrible things he must be going through right now... a good boy, such a good boy... please be safe."

"Old man."

"What?"

"Not that I really care or anything, but—aren't you forgetting something?"

"Forgetting? What?"

"Shion didn't sneak into the Correctional Facility alone. Well, they didn't 'sneak in' really... more like 'captured'," he added as an afterthought. "But anyway, he's not alone. He's got a partner. Aren't you worried about him?"

Rikiga's face contorted. If someone were to thrust a rotting corpse under his nose, his face would probably not be as twisted as it was now. It was an expression of blatant dislike.

"Are you talking about Eve? I don't care about him. It'd be a load off my chest if he could get himself caught in a mouse trap while he's at it."

"I do agree," Inukashi said amiably. "Just imagining Nezumi flailing

around in a mouse-trap box makes me giddy. But you were his fan, old man. I heard you used to go see him at the playhouse all the time.”

Rikiga sniffed dismissively, and turned aside.

“I was being tricked. Who could imagine that personality from a face like that, a voice like that? Goodness, he’s as deceitful as a female fox.”

“He’s a guy.”

“Either way, it doesn’t change the fact that he’s a trickster fox demon.”

Fox demon, huh. That’s a good description. More suitable for him than Rat, though he’s probably closer to a wolf than a fox.

Inukashi shrugged, and closed one eye. “Shion’s got a demon fox with him, then. He’ll be fine.”

Rikiga leaned forward and grabbed Inukashi’s arm. Inukashi almost let out a cry: Rikiga’s grip was that strong. He instinctively clapped a hand over his pocket. He felt like silver was going to be stolen from him.

“Really?” Rikiga had his bloodshot eyes open wide. “You really think so?”

“Th-Think what? Holy crap, old man, that hurts. Leggo of me.”

“You really think Shion is okay?”

“How the hell should I know?” He withdrew his arm. Rikiga began mumbling to himself.

“Eve is a knave, a trickster, a fraud, but he’s there when you need him.”

“Are you insulting him or complimenting him?”

Rikiga ignored him, and continued mumbling.

“Yeah. I can count on him. Eve would probably protect Shion just fine. Am I right, Inukashi?”

“I told you, I dunno.” He closed his mouth, and directed his gaze at the ceiling.

Nezumi was a knave, a trickster, a fraud, no mistake, and that was putting it mildly. But you could count on him in any situation too, to put it mildly. This was also no mistake. Nezumi was more cunning and cautious than anyone Inukashi knew. He was also level-headed, nimble, and tough. He was like a wolf that didn't conform to a pack. He had never seen a real wolf before. But he had heard about them from his mother.

They're terrifying creatures. They don't open their hearts to humans like we dogs. Never. They would rather die than be taken care of by a human. They're prideful. But they're also treacherous and always on the prowl for a profit. They're greedy and ruthless. They don't carry a tiny bit of sympathy in their hearts. That's the difference between dogs and wolves. Now you listen, you're a dog. You're not a human, or a wolf. You're a dog. Don't you forget that.

A prideful and heartless creature. In Inukashi's mind, the image of the wolf he'd been told about so many times overlapped perfectly with that of Nezumi. He was dangerous if he turned against you. But as a guard, he was cut out for the job.

If Nezumi seriously tried to defend Shion, maybe they would be able to return from the Correctional Facility alive. It was a slim chance, but it wasn't zero.

Nezumi would probably defend Shion seriously, and with all he had. He would. As long as Shion didn't trip him up, they would probably return alive like they'd promised.

Inukashi's heart grew calm. *Yeah. Yeah, that's right*, he told himself.

Evidently reading something from Inukashi's expression, Rikiga adjusted himself in his chair, and nodded resolutely.

"If that's the case, then we should get moving as well."

"Huh? If what's the case?"

“We have to help them from the outside, so Shion can come home. What else?”

“When did we decide that? I’m staying outta this,” Inukashi said hastily. “I already agreed to be bait once. I’ve contributed way more than my share.”

“You’re acting like you did volunteer work,” scoffed Rikiga. “You did receive your pay for that, if I’m not mistaken.”

“That doesn’t even amount to pocket money. Whatever. I have no plans of having anything to do with them or the Correctional Facility again. None. Zip, I tell ya.”

“You’re not going to help Shion?”

“Lemme tell you something, old man. I don’t got any debts or favours to repay to that airhead. We’re not friends, or brothers, or relatives, or a parent and kid.”

“But he’s part of our group.”

“Our group?” Inukashi drew his chin back. He had not expected to hear the words “our group” from the kind of alcohol-pickled example of a corrupted man who published lewd magazines and made his money off of selling women’s bodies. What a surprise.

Group mates?

“We’re all in it together. Am I wrong?”

Wrong he most certainly was. *In it together?* The tip of his nose tensed. Inukashi remained silent, not knowing whether he should laugh or be exasperated. Rikiga, on the other hand, seemed to turn more eloquent by the minute.

“Shion is part of our group. Nobody could ever replace him. Come on, Inukashi, you like him too, don’t you?”

“Not—well—I don’t hate him.”

“He’s like an angel. Untainted. You can’t find people as pure as those just anywhere.”

“Uh-huh, is that so?” Inukashi said flatly. “So sorry, for being the *tainted* one in your company.”

“Nobody said you were tainted. See, Shion would never twist people’s words around like that. He accepts things openly, honestly, and as they are. His heart is rooted in the same place as his mother. Oh, Karan, I wonder what she’s doing now,” Rikiga said forlornly. “What if she’s fallen ill from worrying about her son?”

“Who’s Karan? Aren’t we talking about Shion here? Besides, old man, all you’ve been talking about so far is Shion-this and Shion-that. What about Nezumi? If Shion’s part of our group, then Nezumi has to be too, doesn’t he?”

“Eve, part of us? Give me a break. I’d rather welcome a slug into my extended family than be in the same group as a deceitful fox like him.”

“You sure treat him differently from Shion, huh.” Inukashi glanced up into Rikiga’s liquor-flushed face. *Pure and angelic? Is this old man really serious about that?*

Just like how he didn’t know what Nezumi really was, he didn’t know what lay inside Shion either. If he peeled off a layer, what would this angelic and pure figure reveal? Maybe he would be more horrendous and fierce than he ever expected. Maybe within Shion, there existed some dark pit of truth that even Nezumi feared.

Rikiga favoured Shion too much. Angel? That was absurd. People could become devils, but never angels. Besides, sometimes angels could be much more brutal than devils. A man like Rikiga, who was thoroughly versed in wiles through his life experience, should know best.

It stinks.

There was a stench, other than alcohol. But it wasn't a smell Inukashi disliked. He preferred the smell of rotting meat over the perfume of flowers.

Catching Inukashi's gaze, Rikiga smiled vaguely.

"So selfless, don't you think Inukashi?"

"Who? Me?"

"Please tell me where the hell I can find a trait like 'selfless' inside you. I was talking about Shion. He infiltrated the Correctional Facility, risking his own life, to save his friend. He's putting his life on the line for someone else."

"Around these parts, we call those kinds of people Huge Idiots."

"Inukashi, knock it off. If we don't help them out, who will? Shion believes in us, and he's waiting for our help."

"Old man."

"Hm?"

"I can help you, depending on the event and circumstance."

"Now that's more like it, Dogkeeper of the Ruins. Admirable decision."

"Stop buttering me up, and let's hear your real story."

"Real story?"

"Your aim, old man. What're you after in the Correctional Facility?"

Rikiga blinked.

"What am I after... what're you talking about? I just wanted to help Shion, that was the only—"

"How much profit is it gonna make you?" Still holding his pocket with his hand, Inukashi leaned forward. In response, Rikiga slid back, chair and all.

"Geez, look at you. Every other word out of your mouth is 'profit'. Money, money, money. Don't you have anything else to think about?"

“Lots. My brain is always going full-throttle. And you too, old man. Your gears are still turning in there, your greed is still going strong. The only thing that’s gotten sluggish is probably the blood in your veins, from the alcohol. There’s no way you’d stick your hands into a job that didn’t carry profits, am I right, old man? And we’re talking against the Correctional Facility, a direct affiliate of No. 6’s Security Bureau. Enemies don’t get any more dangerous than that. Both you and I helped Nezumi sneak in, either because we were tricked or because we got talked into it. But this is where it ends, usually. We get however much money we deserve for that job, and go back to our own nests. Whatever happens afterwards isn’t any of our business... right? That’s usually how it is.”

“Inukashi, listen—”

“But this time, old man, you’re crawling out of your nest on your own, even saying you wanna stick your nose into dangerous territory. For Shion? Of course not. I’d never believe it. If my dogs started baa-ing like sheep, I’d believe that over you.”

“Like I said, it’s—”

Inukashi waved his hand impatiently. He was sick of excuses and justifications. He found himself a little irritated. More and more he felt like he had had enough of wasting words, trying to make excuses to each other. He was beyond weary of coating his honest words with lies, and trying to read the other’s intentions.

At the very least...

Inukashi inhaled through his nose. The frigid air of the room, which had no heater, coursed through his body.

At least those two never made excuses to each other.

He didn’t think Nezumi and Shion had bared all to each other. Nezumi, especially, probably hadn’t. But they never made excuses to each other. They didn’t try to manipulate each other, or shroud their

honest opinions. They lived for each other, not out of give-and-take, nor greed, nor calculation.

Inukashi had never encountered that sort of relationship. There were mothers who threw away their lives for their children. He knew a girl who had sold her body to support her family. But *those two* weren't in such a sacrificial relationship. One of them didn't have to destroy himself for the other to be saved.

Friendship, love, group mentality, pity, sympathy, empathy—it didn't matter what name it was given, but none of them seemed to fit their relationship.

Both could live for the other, without the give-and-take, without greed, without calculation, without sacrifice. Perhaps he was tired. Inukashi found himself envying that relationship—just a little.

He inhaled again.

But I don't have to be jealous of them. I've got my dogs. Humans will always betray you one day. They'll never give back to you with their whole body and soul, like dogs do. Dogs are enough for me.

"Fine." Rikiga's shoulders shook. A smug smile spread across his lips. What a hideous grin it was. He committed almost any crime for money. He had nothing against tricking, threatening, or swindling people.

Yeah, that face is more like it. The day you put on some mask of a kind-hearted good Samaritan is the day I stop talking to you.

"You know, Inukashi, I don't think there's much time left."

"For you? Oh, really? What a shame. I thought so too. The alcohol's poisoned you, old man. If you've got anything to leave behind, give it to me before it's too late."

"Who said I was talking about myself? I was talking about No. 6."

"No. 6?"

"Yeah. The oh-so-beautiful Almighty Holy City."

“Not much time left? Give me the details.”

Rikiga’s grin widened. *Got you biting the bait*, his smile said. There were times when you had to swallow the bait, even if you could see the hook. It was bait that was too attractive to ignore.

“Is there something strange happening in No. 6?”

“Yeah. I’ve been seeing strange movements around the city that are really standing out.”

It looked like Rikiga was serious about his talk: the smile vanished from his face, and the sarcasm disappeared from his voice. “First: there have been several cases of a strange disease reported inside the city. Now, what it is, or whether it’s contagious, we don’t know yet. But you remember Fura saying this, don’t you? The Correctional Facility, that other facility that’s just been built, and the Health and Hygiene Bureau are connected. Health and Hygiene Bureau, you hear? Now what does it do?”

“It monitors the health and manages treatment of all citizens...”

“Exactly. Which means now, that strange disease is also connected to the Correctional Facility too. You understand what I mean so far, right?”

“More or less. I got a good earful during that farce we did.”

“Apparently, Shion’s friend was pretty much kidnapped and taken to the Correctional Facility. And this is still unconfirmed information, but... someone who was involved in the construction of the facility inside the Correctional Facility supposedly died a sudden death. He was a resident of the city, of course.”

“Was he killed?”

“Not quite sure about that. But it reeks of death, and it’s coming from the city. And then we have the acoustic shockwaves. Went all-out, didn’t they? One blast, and the whole market’s gone. They used a

brand-new weapon to blow up barracks. That's like eating leftovers on a silver platter."

"Good simile. It just screams education."

"Why, thank you," Rikiga said unconcernedly. "So that means the city was developing weapons in secret, which is prohibited by the Babylon Treaty. And now they've started using it openly in public. The Hunt that happened this time was probably to test-drive their new weapon."

Inukashi swung his neck around in a wide circle.

Rikiga had run all the way here, out of breath, worried about Shion—or feigning it—but had managed to collect information about the Hunt, and investigated the remains of the destruction on the way. Maybe he had rifled through the debris and picked out things that might make him money while he was at it.

You can't trust this guy around anything, the tough cookie, Inukashi snickered silently in his mind.

"Don't you think it's been hectic in there lately?" Rikiga continued. "And too many people are dying. Not in the West Block, either—in No. 6, the ideal city, the Holy City, as it's been paraded as. I've had a long relationship with that city. It always used to perch prim and composed, never ruffling its demeanour as a utopia. But it reeks these days. I've never smelled death come from it so freely, without restraint. Of course, there have been people killed, people committing suicide, but..."

"Not this blatantly."

"Yeah. Every death they put under wraps, and disposed of it as a calm and peaceful death. Do you know about the Twilight Cottage?"

"Whas' that?"

"Outwardly it's a facility for palliative care. A hospice, you might call it. Ill patients who don't have long to live—mostly the elderly—have

all suffering removed, and can die a peaceful death, not much different from a deep sleep. That's what they say the Twilight Cottage is for."

Inukashi purred in his throat. He felt like he would salivate. A death not much different from sleep: it was something he'd wished for, harder than anything. He would be embraced in softness, warmth, and he would softly close his eyes. He would never wake up. His heart would slowly stop beating, and his breathing would grow few and far between. But his brain would keep dreaming. Sleep would gently coast over to death. He would live his last without being shut into darkness. He would be smiling.

Rikiga peered into Inukashi's eyes.

"Geez, don't make those begging eyes. You're sure easy to understand. What I was talking about was the Twilight Cottage as it's publicized by the authorities."

"—which means?"

"Things are different, apparently."

"Different?"

"The Twilight Cottage isn't a hospice; it's an execution grounds."

"Execution grounds? Does that even exist inside the Holy City?"

"Of course, it's nothing like the Correctional Facility. It's not as obvious... all the patients brought to the Twilight Cottage don't live out their lives and die a natural death... as soon as they've been transported, they're drugged, put to sleep, and—"

Perhaps even Rikiga felt resistance towards saying it out loud; he only twitched his mouth, and then gave a long sigh.

"But why do they do that to the citizens? What for?"

"Because they're useless," Rikiga said promptly, as if he had been expecting Inukashi's question. "No. 6 is that kind of city. It's ruthless against people who are useless to it. If that person's only got his death

to wait for, then why not let him go quickly and easily with drugs? Less waste that way. That's how they think."

Inukashi shuddered. He was getting goosebumps.

He had seen his share of grisly deaths. He had seen so many, the fingers on both his hands weren't enough, even if he counted over them twice. He had committed to his heart, and resigned himself to the fact that in the West Block, you had to accept many different kinds of deaths. That life and death were different within the walls and outside. But did grisly deaths pervade inside the walls just like they did outside?

"Old man, who'd you hear that from?"

"My customers. Fura isn't the only one who sneaks out here from No. 6 in search of our ladies. The tight restrictions they're making these days is enough to put me out of business now, but I've still got a couple returning customers. Among them, some work at a direct affiliate of the city, though not in a position as high as Fura's. Those guys babble to the girls. Spill the beans. Why do you think?"

"Why—well—because they feel talkative after finishing, or something..." Inukashi said awkwardly.

"No, no. It's because they don't think of the West Block's prostitutes as humans. They don't even think that the girls might have brains and hearts like they do. They don't think the girls can think, or can feel sadness in their hearts. So they spill the beans. To them, it's probably like talking to a rock lying on the road. That's why they can go on divulging workplace secrets. Humans are talkative animals; they can't shut up. 'I can't talk inside the city, so why not talk to the prostitutes in the West Block? They probably can't even understand language anyway.' That's what they think. But those girls listen. Sometimes they even flatter the guys, in order to draw out more."

"And you take that information and sell it, or use it to threaten people to make money, huh, old man."

“Well, you have a mix of good and bad information. Most of it is useless. But my customers from No. 6 these days are more talkative than ever. Before, it was mostly bragging or exaggerated lies... but now we have complaints, discontent... uncertainty. All we’re getting are stories about uncertainty. See, Inukashi, No. 6 is no utopia. It’s only trying to keep a skilful hold over its citizens to dominate them. And that’s starting to get obvious. It’s starting to fray at the seams. Those citizens are starting to get suffocated in that interior. They’re living in the ideal city, and yet, they can’t even breathe. And they’ve started to wonder why. I’ve heard of a customer who lay in bed all night, mumbling ‘why? Why do you think this is?’.”

“I see.” Inukashi could finally see where this was going. *So that’s how it is.* “Strange illnesses, the new equipment at the Correctional Facility, all that information leakage, and the mounting complaints, dissatisfaction, uncertainty. You’re saying gas is building up within the walls of No. 6?”

“Yeah, gas. It might still be thin now, but what happens when the density increases?” Rikiga spread the fingers of both his hands, making a bursting gesture.

“Explode? You’re saying No. 6 is gonna collapse from the inside?”

“If everything goes as planned. Before the city-state of No. 6 wields overwhelming military force—before it can dominate over the world and its citizens with its power, we have to set the gas alight. And the Correctional Facility is where we’ll start. Most of the mysteries are focused on that place. We try prodding it for information. Aren’t you excited to find out what we’ll find?”

“—and that’s what Nezumi said.”

“Idiot. How could a kid like him come up with an advanced theory like this?”

“Advanced, indeed. No alcoholic brain would be able to come up with

that. What happened to the talk about making money, huh? Is the treasure gonna get blown up along with it, and come raining down on our heads?"

"It won't come raining down. We have to dig it up."

"Dig?"

"There's supposedly a secret safe in the basement of the Correctional Facility."

"Secret safe? In that blank space?"

"I don't have bearings on the exact location. But rumour says the head honchos of No. 6 have hidden a total of several tens of thousands of tonnes of solid gold bullion."

"Gold... gold bullion, didja say?"

"Tens of thousands of tonnes of gold bullion. They might be bars, I don't know. So? Don't you feel blinded just imagining that brilliance?"

"But... I mean, where did you get that information?"

"From a girl, of course. A red-headed one named Sulu, who has a returning customer who works at the Finance Bureau. Quite pretty."

Inukashi didn't care about the red-headed woman. His interest was piqued many times more by the gold bullion than human flesh.

"So you got it from her."

"Yeah. It was a bed-time story, though, so I'm not one-hundred percent sure about its credibility. But it's plausible, isn't it? A mountain of gold in a place where infiltration and escape is impossible. Safer for hiding than anywhere else. Pretty believable, I would say."

"Are we gonna be able to get it?"

"We *will* get it. Once No. 6 begins to crumble, the whole place will be chaos. If we take advantage of it... what do you think?"

Inukashi growled softly. It sounded like a dream. Should he simply laugh and call it a stupid story, or play along with this fairy tale, just

for the sake of it?

“Does Nezumi plan to destroy the Correctional Facility?”

“Eve? He might do it. He can’t create much, but he can sure destroy. No, why don’t we have him do it? Let’s have him make a spectacle out of it.”

The Correctional Facility—the very embodiment of fear itself—would crumble. Inukashi’s heart danced just imagining its destruction unfold. The collapsing Correctional Facility and the glittering mounds of gold. He would receive two of the best compensation he could ever get, in these two hands. Perhaps it was worth the challenge. However—Inukashi licked his lips. He inhaled, filling his nostrils with the odour of dogs that permeated the room.

However, if he had to invest his own life in this capital, he would decline. He would rather remain in the ruins starving, but living, with his dogs, rather than die buried in gold.

“What do I needa do? If it’s anything risky, I’m not in.”

“I know, I know. I wouldn’t put you in danger. I just need your connections.”

“Connections?”

“There’s a man who passes on leftover food to you from the Correctional Facility, am I right?”

Inukashi narrowed his eyes, and clenched his jaw lightly. Behind the drink-drowned middle-aged man, Nezumi was wearing his signature ironic smile. He could see it.

Good job, Nezumi. You softened this tough cookie up. Nice cooking skills.

Many different feelings and desires were mingling, melting, and writhing within Rikiga: genuine compassion for Shion, destructive impulses, a strong desire to see No. 6 crumble before his eyes; and more than anything, an attachment for gold bullion. Nezumi had used this

to his advantage. He had very artfully used this in his favour, had given orders to him, and was controlling him this way. It was quite something. But it was also possible that Rikiga was fully aware that he was being controlled, and had agreed to play the marionette for Shion and for gold bullion; for greed and love.

Inukashi found himself sighing. They were like a raccoon dog and fox trying to out-trick each other.¹ Suddenly he began to miss Shion. He was a mystery, sure, but he was a hundred times better than an old raccoon dog and demon fox. Inukashi missed those awkward, naive actions of his; his earnest and foolishly straightforward way of saying things; his carefree smile. He wanted to see Shion.

“You’re receiving a substantial amount of leftovers, aren’t you? That route hasn’t been cut off, has it?”

“No.” It wasn’t cut off yet. The man who was in charge of waste disposal not only resold leftovers, but also the clothes and belongings of prisoners through secret routes. He had even once complained that he was assigned to dispose of dead bodies. It was the department where all of the facility’s garbage and corpses were gathered. It was located inside the Correctional Facility, and it was regarded with the least importance, and for that reason the management was also lax. But it would probably be impossible to use him as a foothold to sneak into the Facility, much less get back out of it. The man had said he was not allowed even a single step inside the Facility from the waste disposal site. The door that led inside simply didn’t open.

“Would he be useful at all...?” Inukashi said dubiously.

“He will be. Every knife, no matter how dull, has its uses.”

“Did Nezumi say that too?”

“Who cares? You clearly have something against Nezumi, and it’s over the top. Look, Inukashi, keep the line open with that man. It’ll come

¹In folklore, raccoon dogs and foxes are known to be tricksters.

in handy. If you can, get him wrapped around your finger.”

“Got it.” *What was his name again?* The man had a thin, long face with drooping eyebrows, and sighed a lot. He cared about his family—and he had complained that he wasn’t even allowed to tell them that he was working at the Correctional Facility, and that he would be instantly fired if he did. ‘It gets you down, really, not even being able to tell your own daughter what you do for a job,’ he had said. Daughter? Oh yes, he had one daughter. He had also said that a baby was coming soon . . . and he was in need of money. He wanted a good amount to sustain his family—*yeah, it might not be that hard to soften him up.*

“I need money. You gonna set me up with some, right, old man?”

“I know, I know. I won’t force you to dig into the savings that are loading your pocket down right now.” Rikiga scratched his chin, and grinned. “Going after the meat shop man’s savings, huh? You’ve got a sharp eye. I have renewed admiration for you, Inukashi.”

“Same for you. Who woulda known you’d find about it so fast? Pretty amazing. I’m in awe.”

Geez, the raccoon dog. Nothing goes unnoticed when it comes to him.

Inukashi had just shrugged when the baby began to cry. Rikiga stood up from his chair.

“What’s that?”

“What’s what?”

“That voice. It’s a baby crying.”

“Huh? I don’t hear anything,” Inukashi said nonchalantly. “You having auditory hallucinations now, old man? My heart goes out to you.”

After throwing a glance at Inukashi, Rikiga took big strides toward the dogs laying in a corner of the room. They instantly rose and began to growl menacingly at him.

“Inukashi, what’s this?”

“My dogs.”

“This crying one too, the one that’s lodged in between the dogs? New breed? Because it has no tail.”

The wailing renewed itself with even greater volume. Inukashi reluctantly picked the baby up in his arms. Rikiga shook his head.

“What did you pick it up for? Planning to sell it?”

“I didn’t pick it up, it was thrust onto me,” Inukashi said obstinately.

“By your little angel.”

“Shion?”

Inukashi gave a brief explanation. Rikiga nodded in assent with a solemn expression on his face.

“Sounds like something Shion would do. It probably came to him instantly to hide the baby. When his own life was in danger, too... he’s a living angel.”

“Angels don’t thrust babies on other people. Geez, nice burden he’s given me.”

“Don’t complain. Think of how Shion must have felt. The little guy’s got a cute face. It’s a boy, huh. What’s his name?”

“Shionn².”

“Huh?”

“He dumped the thing in my care, so he can have the same name too. Hey, old man, don’t you think this kid’s eyes look just like Shion’s?”

“Hmm, now that you mention it, they’re the same colour,” Rikiga said thoughtfully. “And they’re clear, like his. Beautiful eyes.”

“Right? He’s an angelic child. So take him home, will ya?” He proffered the baby in his arms. Rikiga backed away, shaking his head.

“No, sorry, I’m a bachelor.”

²The spelling was changed to distinguish him from Shion.

“Well, so am I. But you’ve got tons of women with big boobs, old man.”

“Yeah, but none of them can give breast milk. Here, on the other hand, you don’t even need diapers because the dogs will lick the baby clean. They’ll even warm him. You grew up like this too, didn’t you? Brilliant childrearing environment . . . oh, I know, I’ll get my hands on some powdered milk and deliver it to you.”

“*Shion* left the baby, you know,” Inukashi said pointedly.

“I’ll get some soft and clean blankets for you, too. And not just one—two or three. Well, see you then, Inukashi. I’ll come by again soon.” With a scramble of hurried footsteps, Rikiga all but sprinted out of the room. Apparently his knack for making speedy getaways hadn’t deteriorated yet.

The baby smiled in Inukashi’s arms. It grabbed at his long hair, and grinned happily.

“Hey Shionn, that hurts. Don’t get carried away.” Inukashi prodded the baby’s nose. A wide grin spread over the tiny face. “You happy that you have a name now? You gotta stay alive until Papa comes back, then, alright?”

A wind blew into the room. The sky was completely covered in grey clouds.

Stay alive, Shion. Live to come pick this little guy up.

As Inukashi turned his face up to the snow clouds drifting by, he found himself murmuring those words as if in prayer.

4

A NAME FOR WHITE DARKNESS

*My elder brother is a cannibal!
I'm brother to a cannibal.
Even though I'm to be the victim of cannibalism,
I'm brother to a cannibal all the same!*

LU XUN, *DIARY OF A MADMAN*

S_{HI-O-N}. She tried calling his name. Since being brought here, how many times had she called it? No matter how many times she did, her voice never reached him.

Safu let out a deep, deep breath. The sound of her own sigh reached her own ears very vividly. And it wasn't only her sighing: the faint sounds of her own body as she shifted, her heartbeat, and even the name she'd called out silently, all echoed back to her vividly with a clear outline. On the contrary, her eyesight was always vague and closed off, blankly white. It was like she was in a fog.

Where am I? She let her gaze roam about.

It was a white world, like she was seeing through layers and layers of lace curtains. A world enveloped in fog. When she first awoke, she had thought for a fleeting instant that she'd wandered into a deep

forest. But she soon realized how different it was. The only thing here was the white darkness that closed off her vision. There were no birds chirping in the canopies; no bubbling brook, no swishing of the trees. There was no fragrance of flowers, nor the smell of dirt. It was odourless, soundless. Only the sounds of her own body and soul became clearer and clearer by the day.

Inside a deep forest...

Safu sighed again. She had walked through a forest with Shion once. It was a forest park in the centre of No. 6, however, so all animals and plants were minutely scrutinized and managed by human hands. 'I don't think a place like this should be called a forest,' Shion had said, and grimaced in clear dislike.

Oh, I remember. How many years ago was it? I can remember it so clearly.

Safu smiled. A feeling of happiness coursed through her body. It was very warm, soft, and comforting. Every time she thought of Shion, every time she revived the hours she spent with him, she could smile.

I remember. I was beside him, and I was very happy. Shion, don't you think memories are amazing? The memories of being with you still bring me happiness. Yes, it's true. I haven't forgotten a single thing. Your tone of speech, your gaze, your gestures, your scent... I haven't forgotten anything. You told me once, while we were walking through the beech-tree block of the Forest Park.

"They call it a forest, but it's a place that's under human control. I don't feel right calling it a forest. I wish they would at least let us walk in the natural wood in the North Block. It's hard to get permission, though."

"But this is your workplace too, isn't it?"

"That's why I can tell how much more it's being managed. I feel like nature should be more unpredictable— like something that surpasses human intelligence. Safu, don't you feel anything wrong with this?"

"Hmm. Well, I don't feel much resistance really," she had pondered aloud. "It's so beautiful here, after all." Safu let her gaze wander amidst the numerous branches that framed her above her head. The beech leaves were beginning to turn yellow. Catching the sunlight streaming down from the clear autumn sky, they looked almost like they were glowing.

"Oh, look!" she had said.

"Hm?"

"There was a squirrel. It went running along that branch."

"Beech trees bear fruit during this season, so animals come looking for food."

"Can you eat the fruit?"

"Yeah. They're nuts, actually. They usually grow in twos or threes, cased in a cupule."

"What's a cupule?"

"What you find in Mongolian oak fruits, and sawtooth oak... called, uh, acorns. What's attached to the bottom is part of it too."

"Oh, I think I know what you're talking about," Safu grinned. Shion smiled too. His smile, glowing in the sunlight that streamed through the beech trees, stung at her eyes. It stung in her heart. She had been smiling then, but she had also been about to burst into tears.

We were walking alone together. But what did you talk about? Nuts? Cupules? Can't you be a little more tactful with your conversation? Did it ever occur to you to not say anything, and just snuggle up together, and feel each other's breathing and warmth? Shion, didn't you want to hold me? Didn't you want to love me?

I suppose you didn't. You looked like you enjoyed being with me, though. You laughed a lot, and you were more talkative than usual. Oh, yes yes. It was only once, but you even said so out loud.

"It's fun being with you, Safu."

I don't think you were lying. You're the kind of person who could never lie.

Shion, do you enjoy being with me?

Yeah. A lot.

Wouldn't it be nice if we could be together forever?

Sure we could. Safu, you're my most important—

You cared for me. You cherished me. But you didn't love me. You didn't feel the kind of desire for me that burned your body with yearning.

Safu, you're my most important friend.

You cruel person. So cruel, it's almost unbelievable. I don't think anyone could be as gentle, innocent, and cruel as you.

Shion, who are you in love with? Who do you burn with desire for?

Knowing you, you would probably love her singly, devotedly, and earnestly to the point of being absurd. You two would share both life and death, but go walking towards life instead of death.

Shion, who do you love? Who do you desire? Why can't it be me?

The white curtains fluttered. A dark, hazy shadow appeared.

It's that man again.

The man that smells like blood.

"Hello, Safu." It looked like the man was raising his hand. "How do you feel?" Even his voice was dripping with blood. She didn't want to converse with him. She didn't want to speak. She didn't want him to come closer.

"It looks like you can hear me just fine. But oh dear, what is this response? Do you not like me, Safu?" The man chuckled. It was a muffled and dark voice. Only his voice was laughing. His heart was not. "There's nothing more sorrowful than being hated by you. I see, so you dislike my voice? Goodness, what a horrible response."

"I can't... see..."

“Oh! Is that an audio response? So you feel like talking to me now, Safu? I’m delighted to be able to have a conversation with you. Nothing could delight me more. Come on, give it another try.”

“I can’t... see. Just... white.”

“You can’t see? Oh, yes, you probably wouldn’t be able to. You haven’t completely recovered yet. Visual functions are the slowest to recover. Almost—you’re almost there, Safu. In a little bit, those hazy things will become clear. Then you’ll finally be able to look at yourself.” The man laughed again. This time, it was from his heart. A high-pitched, somewhat vulgar laughter. It was chilling. Safu felt a foreboding shiver.

“Ah, have I made you feel unpleasant again? Hm? These waves—Safu, is it fear you’re feeling rather than dislike?” The man drew nearer. His fingers touched her.

“Stop... go... away...”

“Safu, there is nothing to be afraid about. I don’t intend to hurt you at all. You’re beautiful. If I said you’re the most beautiful person I know, it wouldn’t be an overstatement. See, that’s why I want to make you happy.”

“Ha... ppy...”

“Yes. Happy. You won’t feel any suffering or sadness, and you’ll never contract a disease or have to groan in pain. You’ll never age—no, in fact, death will not even exist. I want to give you that kind of happiness.” The man grew even more eloquent. The words streamed from his mouth as if he were possessed.

“Safu, you’re beautiful,” he said. “I’ll confess this truthfully. I can’t lie to beautiful people. Please don’t be angry. At first, I only wanted an elite sample. That was why I had you come here. It didn’t matter, as long as it was an elite. Oh, but a female one. Yes, a female... I needed a sample of a woman. But you were so beautiful, my heart was stolen.

I couldn't treat you in the same way I did all the other samples. That's why you're right here, where I can reach you. See, Safu, soon you'll stop fearing me, and begin to feel grateful towards me."

"No... no... you're... scary..."

"Such an intelligent and beautiful person like you shouldn't whine like an obstinate child. Say, weren't you a student specializing in cognitive functions? I had the opportunity to read through the thesis you submitted for your application for exchange students. It was about the cortical column—on the functions of the finer structures within the cerebral cortex, am I right? 'The Cortical Column as Functional Module: The Mechanisms of Composite Information Processing' it was called. It was quite interesting, though the development was rather awkward. But as a student thesis, it was top-notch."

Another layer of white curtain was swept aside. The man turned from a dark, shadowy figure to a human-shaped one.

"Oh? It looks like your eyesight is on the road to recovery as well. I'm getting good numbers. Not only are you beautiful and intelligent, you're also healthy. Supremely ideal. I'm very fortunate to have met someone as ideal as you."

My eyesight is coming back? I can escape from this white world?

No happiness welled up in Safu's heart. She felt no sense of freedom. On the contrary, she was terrified. She was afraid of when all the curtains had been drawn aside, when the fog cleared, what she would see, what she would have to see.

Shion, I want to see you. I want to look at you. I want to hear your voice. You are the only one I seek.

Shion.

—Safu.

She had heard him. She had heard his beloved voice calling her name.

“Hm? Hey, Safu. What’s the matter? What is this response? Where did you receive this stimulus?”

Shion.

—Safu. Wait for me.

Shion.

—I’ll get there. I’ll save you.

Shion...

Shion is nearby. He’s close to me.

A joyful thrill pierced through Safu’s body. Hope was born. Hope was strength. It was a searing energy that came alive, and coursed through her whole body.

Shion, you are my hope. I’m waiting for you. I’ll wait for you to come to me.

Shion.

* * *

He was grasping a handful of hair. It was long and durable. He couldn’t tell what colour it was. He clutched at it like a lifeline, and climbed. He was climbing a mountain of people piled and folded on top of each other. He was going up, up, wedging his feet in, stepping on people’s heads, buttocks, shoulders, and legs to move forward.

Some raised a groan the moment Shion’s foot pressed down on them. He almost screamed. But it only stuck in his throat, and quivered there. A corner of his head ached dully, and the muscles of his back were tense and stiff as a board. Sweat glided down his back and chest. It drenched his whole body.

He had been prepared for it.

From the moment he decided to infiltrate the Correctional Facility, he had prepared himself. He had thought he did. But that resolve had

been blown into smithereens. It had shattered, leaving no trace. After experiencing this hell, could he still say with certainty that he wanted to go into the Correctional Facility? He asked himself over and over inside his head, which only pounded with a dull pain.

So what'll you do, Shion?

I'll do it, of course.

But he couldn't say it with certainty. He couldn't even reassure himself. What a fragile decision it was. What a half-hearted decision it had been.

He lifted his face, and gazed at Nezumi's figure. The gap between them seemed to be as wide as Heaven and Earth: Nezumi, who knew this hell and yet was still here; and he, who was gasping from the difficulty of his half-hearted and ignorant declaration. They were all too different.

It was no wonder if he was called a naive little boy, or scorned for it. It was true.

His foot slipped. As he lunged and reached forward, he felt something soft and malleable at his fingertips. He had grabbed someone's face, who was lying sideways. His index finger dug into the person's nostril. The pain in Shion's head grew worse. He felt dizzy. The strength was leaving his hands and legs. *Ah, I can't—*

"Shion!" He was grabbed by the wrist, and pulled up. "We're here."

"Here?"

"At the summit. Well, but that's only about half of the whole journey. But for the time being, congratulations on a job well done."

The summit of a mountain of people, huh.

"It's too bad we haven't brought lunch with us. Wanna take a break anyway?"

"A break... here?"

"If you know any other resting area, then there."

A tumult of groans rose up from below. They were, quite literally, rising up from where he was standing.

"There are . . . still people alive . . ." Shion said falteringly.

"Probably quite a few. The ones who fell first probably didn't make it. The ones that fell second, third, might've gotten away with broken bones. If they're lucky. See, Shion, we were lucky to be in the second group. If we were the first, we would've been smashed directly against the floor."

Shion remembered what he felt at the moment of the fall. The sensation of falling on top of human bodies. He had used the people in the first group as a cushion, those unlucky people who had been smashed to the floor, to lessen the impact of his own fall.

Can I even call that fortunate?

"You okay?" Nezumi said. "If you're nauseous, it'll feel better if you get it all out."

"Nezumi . . ."

"Hm?"

"I'm sorry."

"Huh? Why're you apologizing?"

Shion covered his face with his hands. The stench of sweat and blood, the groans of the dying people, enwrapped him whole. They dug into his flesh, and corroded his bones.

This is all I can take. I can't bear any more.

"I . . . can't do it." He could only make it this far. This was the best he could do. He couldn't move a single step more. If Nezumi hadn't grabbed his wrist back there, he would have tumbled back down the slope. He couldn't do anything alone.

"I'll . . . only ever become a hindrance to you."

“What’re you bringing up old news for? You’ve always been a hindrance. You’ve never been anything more than that.”

“Nezumi... leave me here.”

“You’re staying alone?”

He nodded.

“You’ll die, Shion.”

“I know,” he whispered.

“You won’t die painlessly,” Nezumi said. “I don’t know how many days you’ll be like this for. It might be the dead of winter, but if these corpses are left out, they’ll start to rot. You’ll either go insane in the stench of decay, or you’ll faint again and again from oxygen deficiency, and weaken that way, or...”

“Or... die on my own.”

“Shion, don’t take death lightly. If you underestimate it, it’ll come back to bite you in the ass. Do you have some instantly effective poison on you, huh? How’re you gonna kill yourself here, without a knife to slash your throat, without a rope to hang yourself? You can try biting your tongue, or jumping off of here, but you won’t die easily.”

“You’ve—got a knife,” Shion said hoarsely.

Nezumi’s shoulder twitched.

“So that’s what you meant.”

Shion was grabbed roughly by his hair. His head was flung back, and a knife was brought to his bared throat. He felt like the sharp blade would slice through his skin just from taking a deep breath.

“Are you asking me to kill you?” Nezumi hissed.

Shion inhaled silently. What would happen if he got his throat slit right here, by Nezumi’s hand? Would his blood spurt forth, and colour Nezumi crimson?

“Shion.” Nezumi’s voice shook. “Are you trying to make me kill you?”

“Huh?”

“Don’t ’huh’ me. I’m asking you if you’re trying to make me kill more people than I already have.”

“Never—” Shion shook his head. Nezumi’s fingers withdrew. “I would never want that. I’d hate for you to.”

A long sigh. The aged female dog at Inukashi’s used to sigh in a very similar way.

My goodness. What are we ever going to do with you, child?

“Look, think about it,” Nezumi said tersely. “If I slash your throat, that’s murder. If I give you the knife, I’m assisting your suicide. Either way, I’ll have to take the blame for your death. Are you ordering me to take the brunt of it? And besides—”

Shion was grabbed by the hair, harder this time.

“Then what would you have memorized the layout of the Correctional Facility for? We’re just starting to need your brain the most. I’m not gonna let you forfeit the match now. I won’t allow it.”

His hair was yanked mercilessly. The pain threw needles into his delirious consciousness.

“Without you, it’ll be nearly impossible to escape from here. If you wanna die, I won’t stop you. But do it after we get outta here. You understand what I’m saying, right?”

“Pretty well.”

“Then listen. It’s just starting. Got it, Shion? I need you.”

“Yeah.”

Shion willed his legs to stand. He could do it, but barely.

“Good boy.”

“Yeah.”

“Let’s get going, then.”

“Okay.” Shion had no idea where they were going next, whether they were going to climb or descend. He didn’t think of asking. He had no energy. He could only muster all the strength he could, and follow Nezumi. If he could be a necessary existence for him, then it was more attractive than dying in one stroke. To feel like this meant he still had the will to live. He still had... the will. So his soul hadn’t completely withered away after all.

Nezumi whistled shortly. A clear, high note resounded in the darkness. After the sound died away, a silence fell. Even the dying people’s groans were cut off.

Chit.

“Huh?”

Cheep-cheep.

A pair of small glowing dots appeared in the darkness. It was a colour Shion remembered.

“Hamlet?” It was the colour of the little mouse’s eyes. They were the red stars at Shion’s pillow as he got ready to go to bed; they were on top of the lofty pile of books; under his bed, always twinkling.

“It’s not Cravat or Tsukiyo, is it...?”

“I told you not to give funny names to my mice,” Nezumi said in annoyance. “And besides, what the hell would they be doing here?”

“You’re right.”

“But you’re right about the mice part. It’s a nameless mouse.” Nezumi whistled again. This time, it was a melody. The red lights disappeared for a moment, and when Shion blinked again, they were right up close to him. Nezumi unwound a thin rope from his wrist. He tossed it lightly to the red lights.

“It’s all yours.”

Cheep-cheep-cheep. The mouse squeaked. The light was gone—the mouse had run off holding an end of the rope in its mouth.

“Oh—it’s young.”

“What’d you say?”

“The nameless mouse. It’s younger than Hamlet and the rest, isn’t it?”

“How can you tell? You couldn’t even see the thing.”

“Oh... well, I just had a feeling. Like it was still young.”

After a few seconds of silence, he heard Nezumi click his tongue.

“Geez, your instincts seem to sharpen in the weirdest moments. I dunno if that makes you easy or hard to deal with.”

“I only said what I felt.”

“Hmph,” Nezumi sniffed derisively, “talkative for someone who was about to give in a minute ago, huh? Means you’ve still got strength to spare.”

“You said you needed me. So I’m gonna try my best.”

“God, you sound like a kid. I only need your brain. Soon you’ll have to run it full-throttle. Enjoy your holiday while you can. Here, take this.”

Shion was handed a rope. He could see it was woven with a special fibre. It felt pliant and durable in his hands. Depending on how you used it, the special fibre could be used to sling and lift over a ton of weight, or cut cleanly through a single hair. The rope had been tied to something, for it was taut.

“Tie this rope to your waist. Tie it tight, and then you’re gonna fly.”

“Fly?”

“Yeah, You’re gonna fly through the darkness like a nightbird. Have you tied it yet?”

“Yeah.”

“Alright, we’re gonna jump. Catch a breath.” Shion was drawn closer, and he flew, half-carried by Nezumi, through the air. The darkness swayed all around him. He felt like he had become a pendulum. But his body soon hit a wall. He smelled dirt.

“Hold onto the rope with both hands. Don’t dangle, get a foothold on the wall. Apply your rock-climbing skills, Shion.”

“Sorry, I’ve never gone rock-climbing before.” He told himself over and over to calm down. The smell of dirt that tickled his nostrils gave him courage. It wasn’t blood, or vomit, or the stench of dying people. Shion inhaled a breath of air. Nezumi climbed up ahead of him, as if to show him by example.

“It’s not much of a distance. Take your time on your way up. It’s much easier than climbing a mountain of people.”

“You can say that again,” Shion replied. But it was a daunting task to climb a wall that rose almost perpendicular from the ground. Shion felt like he was struggling fruitlessly.

“Did the little mouse come up this way?” he asked.

“They’ve got their own routes. You really love mice, don’t you? Here, look, put your hand there, on the rock that’s sticking out—yeah. Now here: there’s a groove, right? Stay like that, and lift your body up.”

Guided by Nezumi’s precise instructions, Shion tackled the wall with all his concentration. It looked like Nezumi was only holding the rope with one hand. Sometimes he swayed unsteadily. The rope was probably not long enough for them both to tie around their waists.

I’m much worse than a hindrance: I could be endangering Nezumi’s life. That’s how powerless I am.

Shion was confronted with yet another reality.

I’m powerless. But—

‘I need you.’

He tasted the words in his mouth thoroughly. They were like an aphrodisiac. He could feel it quenching his body. Shion dug his nails into the wall of dirt, and continued inching his way up.

* * *

His fingers touched something hard. The moment he noticed it, he felt himself being pulled up. When he fell face-forward, out of breath, he felt the same sensation of something hard on his cheek. It was also cold to the touch.

Is it... rock?

Cheep-cheep-cheep!

The lighthearted chirruping of little mice. He felt the small animals scurrying over his back. Cravat and the rest would often scurry across his back like this, in their bold demands for food or play.

Shion got up carefully. He cautiously tugged the rope bound around his waist. The other end was secured tightly to a protruding rock. It was a strange one; there was a round hole bored into the tip. The mouse had slipped through this hole several times to bind the rope tightly. Maybe it had been trained to do this. If it was, then was this rock also a man-made object, placed like a moor for a ship? He untied the rope, and coiled it around his arm.

He tried to hand the coil to Nezumi, but Nezumi didn't look up from where he was squatting on the floor. His breathing was laboured, despite how athletic he was. It was no surprise. He had looked out for Shion, given him instructions, and supported him throughout their climb here. It had probably taken many times the energy it would have cost him if he had climbed up by himself. Shion's heart ached.

"Nezumi—I'm sorry. I—"

"Don't apologize." His voice, a little hoarser than usual, cut Shion

off. “You apologize for everything. I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m sorry. What’s apologizing gonna do to solve the problem? All it does is cut your delicate and injured conscience some slack.”

“Yeah.”

“Don’t use words to excuse your guilt. Treat them with more respect.”

“Okay.” He was right. No matter how many tens of thousands of apologies he lined up, he wouldn’t be able to solve a single thing. From now on, he would swallow the words that threatened to spill all too easily from his lips. Before speaking words of apology, he would silently bear the weight of his guilt.

He watched Nezumi’s profile, whose lips were parted in laboured pants, making his shoulders rise and fall.

Some day, I’ll return the favour. You said you needed me. I’ll live up to it. I’ll put my life on the line to protect you.

“Oh—Nezumi.”

“Shut up. I told you to stop apologizing.”

“No, I meant to say... I can see your face.”

“Idiot. Took you long enough to notice, didn’t it? From here on, we’ll have a light. It’s a small one, but still a light. A splendid gift, don’t you think?”

Shion looked around him. The place they were in was slightly more spacious than a bed. The ground and walls were cobbled with stones of all sizes, and a number of them glowed with a white light.

“These are... LEDs...”

“Yeah. Light-emitting diodes. I’m guessing familiar lighting for a No. 6 resident? It probably glows with a bit more flourish in No. 6, though.”

“What are LEDs doing here—?” Shion said perplexedly. “The passage down there only had incandescent bulbs. Nezumi, this is inside the Correctional Facility, isn’t it?”

“We haven’t gotten inside yet, unfortunately.”

“But—the wall we just climbed up was a natural one. It wasn’t man-made.”

“Oh, so you noticed?” Nezumi said with an impressed air.

“Even I could pick that up,” Shion replied indignantly. “If it was man-made, I wouldn’t have been able to climb it, even with your help. Either that, or it would have been much easier. But that wall was neither. It had handholds and footholds, but only just enough for me to manage the climb—not by myself, though.”

“Are you still insulted that you couldn’t climb up by yourself? Pretty sensitive, aren’t you? Take injury to your pride easily?”

“My pride practically aches right now,” Shion said. “Nezumi, what is this about? What is a natural cave doing directly connected to the basement of the Correctional Facility, an execution grounds?”

Nezumi stood up. A mouse had appeared on his shoulder without him noticing. It was grey and small. Its tail was a little longer than Cravat’s.

“This place is a naturally-occurring series of caves, huge and complex. No. 6 decided to use part of it as its execution grounds. That’s all there is to it.”

“But these rocks aren’t natural. This place is man-made too, isn’t it? But it’s completely different from the Correctional Facility. Which means it was made by the hands of someone else—”

Nezumi’s hand reached toward him. Before he could utter anything, it clamped over his nose.

“You talk too much. Shut up and follow me.”

“Okay. Right behind you.”

“Shion, is your curiosity stirred just as easily as your pride? Your eyes are positively glowing.”

Stir it certainly did. Curiosity thudded with a steady heartbeat inside Shion. What was there? Hell wasn't the only thing beyond this place. There was something else, a world different from the hideous inferno.

What is it?

What's waiting?

Nezumi slowly walked down a steeply slanted slope. His back floated dimly in the darkness.

A passage had been carved out of the boulders. The ceiling was low, and it was impossible to get through unless you crouched. Nezumi stopped once in a while to catch a deep breath, his shoulders sagging. He looked like he was having considerable difficulty.

Just as Shion opened his mouth to ask if he was alright, Nezumi swayed, and leaned heavily against the wall.

"Nezumi!"

He wondered if it was the same spell as last time. Nezumi would collapse suddenly, and lose consciousness. Shion thrust his hands out, expecting Nezumi to be overcome by the same fit. But Nezumi didn't collapse. Still leaning against the wall, he only murmured:

"It's come again."

"Huh?"

"Never mind—"

"Can you walk?"

"Of course. I've got legs. And much better ones than yours at that."

Rejecting Shion's hand, Nezumi resumed his walk. Shion gave his hand, which had been dangling without anyone to accept it, a little shake, and moved forward as well.

"This is—"

He widened his eyes. They were, indeed, in the heart of a cavern. Rugged boulders protruded in some places, but it was considerably

spacious. It was too dark to see into the corners. But it wasn't an inky darkness. Although dim, there were lights. But they did not come from light-emitting diodes.

"Candles?" There were a number of them lit in the crevices of the boulders. Shion had encountered these lights for the first time in the West Block.

"Nezumi, where—"

Is this? he had planned to finish, but the words stuck in his throat. Nezumi's profile was rigid. His throat slowly contracted as he swallowed. It was rare to see Nezumi so on-edge.

"Something wrong? What's—"

"Shion, get down!"

Just as Nezumi yelled, Shion felt himself get shoved. He fell backwards on his bottom. A black shadow whizzed past his nose.

Scratch. Scratch.

He heard a sound like rusty cogwheels turning. It was a voice.

Nezumi swung his hand. A black shadow bounced and splayed at Shion's feet.

"Whoa!" He bent over backwards. It was a grey rat, quite big. It looked like it had come from the sewers.

Screech, screech, screech.

One sewer rat after another attacked him. One leapt onto Shion's shoulder, opened its mouth wide, and attempted to sink its teeth into Shion's throat. He grabbed it and hurled it. The rat smelled dank. A dull pain raced through his arm next. There was a rat latching onto it. Shion's hands moved before he could feel fear.

"Damnit!" He battered his whole arm against the wall.

Screech, screech.

The rusty, creaking sounds echoed. The rats were crying out in alarm.

Countless red lights were winking at him. From crevices in the boulders all around, red eyes were looking down on Shion. He was being surrounded by several dozens of sewer rats. Their crimson gazes were directed unblinkingly at the two boys, as if they were waiting for the next opportunity to attack.

“Shion, you alright?”

“Of course.”

“Just to let you know, imitating a cat isn’t gonna scare these guys off.”

“I figured as much. The cat would probably get scared off himself.”

“That’s some coarse welcome for someone they haven’t seen in a while.”

“Huh? In a while?”

Nezumi brought two fingers to his lips, and whistled. A variant melody, dancing high and low, flowed forth. It was a song Shion had never heard before. It made him think of a fog that drifted among a grove of trees in the dark. A black-and-white movie played in his mind.

Scratch.

A single sewer rat squeaked from somewhere nearby. It slowly approached them. Nezumi gently extended a hand forth, and the rat nuzzled his fingertips. Nezumi’s fingers moved gently over its grey fur in a loving caress.

Scratch, scratch, scratch.

One more, then another, came down from the boulders. Nezumi’s eyes flitted to Shion for a moment. Shion nodded deeply as a sign of assent. He crouched down, and extended his hand like Nezumi had done.

Scratch.

A slightly smaller rat rubbed against his hand. Shion scratched it between the ears.

Its red eyes narrowed. It was enjoying it.

Hey, he's not much different from Cravat.

The little mice used to love being petted between the ears as well. Every night before he went to sleep, they would always beg for it. Inukashi's dogs were the same. They were always ecstatic when he gave their fur a thorough brush.

"There there. There you go. Hey, wait. You want to be scratched too?" Shion looked down to notice several rats already sitting in his lap. They weren't as cute as the mice, of course. But they did not make him afraid. There was no trace of the aggression that they had showed before. More and more rats climbed into his lap, and it was starting to get heavy.

"Look at you," Nezumi said, cutting his whistling off to shake his head slightly, "you could give the Pied Piper a run for his money." Then he raised his chin, and glared into the air. "Is this the last of your welcoming procession?" It was a voice that rang out clearly. Nezumi's beautiful voice echoed off the ceiling of boulders, and rang out still further. It was like he was on a stage with top-class acoustics.

"Show yourself. Your sewer rats aren't gonna do any good."

A small rock rolled across the ground. The darkness bristled in the crevices. As if to tear through it, a black mass came falling down. It alighted without a sound.

The sewer rats scattered from Shion's lap. In a blink of an eye, they melted out of sight into the darkness.

Is it a human...?

It looked like a human clad in a black cloak. When the cloak flapped to expose what was underneath, Shion stood up and held his breath.

A tall man of sturdy build was standing there. Everything about the man was grey. The long hair that reached down to his waist and the colour of his skin was grey. The colour of his eyes which stared back at him were grey. But they weren't a lustrous dark grey like Nezumi's. They were the colour of sand. Grey was also the colour of the desert. It rejected life, and accepted the lives of others none too easily. It nurtured nothing, and changed its shape with the wind. A vast and fruitless land. Whereas Shion felt a vital energy from Nezumi, this man radiated an air of a barren world.

"What did you return for?" The man spoke, barely moving his lips. Shion felt a shiver run down his back, though he did not know why. He gripped his own arm tightly.

"You came back. That means you must die."

"Let me see Rou." Nezumi took half a step forward. "I have something important to discuss. Let me see him."

The man also took half a step forward. "You must die. Those are the rules."

He was the desert after all. There was no trace of life in him. Shion's chill got worse.

"You must die. Those are the rules." He felt an icy blast of wind coming from the man. Was it a hallucination?

Nezumi exhaled slowly. The darkness shifted above his head.

Shion couldn't catch the moment when the man moved, partly because it was dark. If they were immersed in inky darkness, the man's grey body may have been visible even just a little. But this dusky darkness, with only a candle as its source of light, allowed the man to blend easily into the background, and he was almost impossible to see with Shion's level of eyesight. But the man's movements would probably be difficult to follow even under the blazing sun of noon. He was that swift. His grey body glided and lunged at Nezumi. Nezumi

rolled to the side barely a moment earlier. The man's leg followed him, swinging upwards in a kick, and Nezumi swatted it aside with his hand. The man only lost his balance slightly before regaining his posture and lunging at him soundlessly again.

A sewer rat clambered onto Shion's shoulder.

Screech. Screech. Screech.

It raised its voice shrilly, and rubbed its paws together. Whether it was merely spectating the fight between the two humans or cheering for one of them, Shion didn't know; but its voice was strangely excited.

"Can you see what's going on?"

Screech-screech-screech.

"You can see, huh. Nezumi—is Nezumi okay?" Shion squinted desperately into the dim gloom. He could only squint. He could only watch.

It was always like this. It had always been like this. But—but I can't just let it end at that now. I have to do something—anything.

The man had said Nezumi had to die. It wasn't mere intimidation. Although the man's voice had been emotionless and flat, it had been full of murderous intent. He was really intending to kill Nezumi.

Screech-screech! Skrit-skrit-chit.

The sewer rat leaned forward and squeaked in an even higher voice. Simultaneously, he heard the dull sound of flesh hitting flesh. Nezumi sprawled at Shion's feet.

"Nezumi!"

"Idiot! Don't come closer!" Nezumi curled up and coughed. He hauled himself up unsteadily.

"What's wrong?" The man asked from beyond the darkness, in the same flat voice. "Softened up a lot, haven't you, during all the time you've spent above ground?"

“Well, you might say I’ve—enjoyed my vacation a little—too much.” He could hear Nezumi gasping for air. Shion stepped forward.

“Fool. It’s no wonder you can’t fight me; you can barely even stand.”

“Of course!” Shion was shouting. He wasn’t able to make out the man clearly. But he could still hurl words at him. “How much strength do you think Nezumi had to use to even get here? Try doing the same, whoever the hell you are, before acting high and mighty. Try climbing that wall—*with* a burden like me in tow.”

He was met with silence. The sewer rat on Shion’s shoulder flicked its long tail lazily.

“What is he?”

“Just a burden,” answered Nezumi.

“Why did you bring him here?”

“I want to introduce him to Rou.”

“And then, what?”

“I want Rou to hear the story out.”

“His story?”

“Mine.”

“No one here will lend an ear to a fool like you, who’s come crawling back and doesn’t even know to hide his shame.”

“You don’t know until you try.” Nezumi drew up softly beside Shion. It looked like Nezumi could see properly. For him, this dim light was enough.

“Shion, listen,” Nezumi whispered at his ear. “The gap in the boulders right behind us. Narrow passage there. Jump into it. And run.”

“And you?”

“Never mind me. Go!” Shion was shoved on his chest. He ran.

“Not so fast.” The man’s murderous intent bore down upon him like a shockwave. Nezumi spoke a short command.

'Go' ... or was it 'run'?

Shion stopped and turned around. Two shadows were wrestling with each other. He could see a blurry image through the darkness. He could definitely see.

"Nezumi."

The man was straddling Nezumi, and had both hands around his throat. Nezumi was writhing to get free. Shion breathed fast and shallow.

Nezumi is struggling?

He had never seen Nezumi this trapped, struggling this hard.

You must die.

That was what the man had said. He had definitely said it.

Shion lifted his wrist. The rope of special fibre was wound around it. He wasn't thinking. His body had been cut away from his soul, his brain, and was moving on its own. No—maybe it was his soul commanding him.

Kill him.

The sewer rat leapt off Shion's shoulder. It darted into the gap between the boulders that Nezumi had told him to jump into. Shion didn't follow it. He was going to turn his back on Nezumi's words.

Scree-scree-scree.

The sewer rats screeched in every direction from their rocky perches. Their voices were wrung in apprehension and fear. The man's movements froze. His gaze scoured the area. His chin jerked upwards just slightly.

Shion leapt onto the man's back. He hooked the rope under the man's chin, crossed it, and leaned backwards with all his weight.

Gah!

The man writhed. Shion dug a foot into his shoulder, and tightened the noose as far as it would go. Back when he had tried to strangle the wretched man in the room adjacent to the execution grounds, he had only had a vague notion of what he was doing, and his thought processes had been mostly numbed. But it was different now. He was completely alert. His conscious was crisp and clear. His intentions and thoughts were his own.

I'll kill him.

If you try to kill Nezumi, then you must be destroyed. You are destined to be destroyed.

He pulled tighter.

The man's body bent back like a bow.

"Shion!" A yell resounded. It was a scream. A strangled voice called his name.

"Shion! Stop—stop, please—" Nezumi pounced on him from behind.

"Stop, I'm begging you. Shion."

"Huh—?"

A pair of hands cupped his face firmly.

"Can you hear my voice?"

"Oh—yeah."

"Let go. Hurry. Loosen your grip."

He did what he was told. The man rolled over, and tried unsuccessfully to get up. He remained on his knees, coughing heavily. The air whistled through his half-collapsed throat like a wind that whistled through a wasteland.

"Shion—I told you before. You're not made out to be an executioner." Nezumi picked up the rope, and gripped it in his hand. His lip was cut and painted with his blood. The pair of red lips moved. "—or are you saying this is salvation?"

“No.”

“Then what? If you were trying to save me, it was none of your business. Shion, don’t ever pull a ridiculous stunt like this again. This isn’t something for you to do.”

“It’s punishment.”

“What?”

“This is punishment.”

“Punishment—what do you mean?”

“That man tried to kill you. So he paid the penalty.”

“Shion, you—”

“I’ll do the same thing again. If that man tries to kill you, I’ll do the exact same thing.”

The man sat squatting on the ground, still wheezing, clutching his throat.

“Who—is he?”

This time, Nezumi didn’t answer. He looked down at Shion silently. His fingers which held the rope were trembling.

“He choked me,” the man said in disbelief. “And I didn’t—I, out of all people—I didn’t notice his presence.”

“Yeah—you sure didn’t.”

“I was choked from behind, and I couldn’t escape.”

“Yeah. You were flailing about like a rabbit in a trap.”

“The rats were afraid of his presence.”

“Yup.”

The man shuddered. “Who... is he?”

“He’s a resident of No. 6.”

“No. 6? —What is a resident of No. 6 doing here?”

Nezumi exhaled shortly. “Let me speak to Rou. I’ll tell him everything.”

Shion sat listening to Nezumi and the man converse. His palms finally began to throb in pain, from where the rope had dug in.

“Let us hear your story.”

A voice rained down from above their heads.

Shion raised his face and looked around. There was a dark painted space in the darkness where even the light of the candles didn’t reach. The voice was coming down from there. Just a sentence—

Let us hear your story.

With those words, it disappeared. There was no human presence there.

“Much obliged,” Nezumi sighed. The man stood up. He staggered and disappeared between the boulders.

“Let’s go then, Shion.”

“Oh— right.” He stepped out into the darkness.

“Shion.”

“Hm?”

“It’s probably useless to say this, but—”

“Mm-hmm.”

“I want you to stay as you are, Shion.”

“Huh? What do you mean?”

“The Shion I know would never commit a sin. Never.” *Fight it*, Nezumi murmured. “I want you to fight with yourself.”

It was a plea. His tone was strained and imploring. Wasn’t this the tone of voice that Nezumi himself despised the most?

Shion closed his eyes.

Behind his eyelids, there was a darkness even deeper than the one that spread before his eyes.

Volume VI

Shion has reached the underground depths of the Correctional Facility, and meets an Elder who knows of Nezumi's past. From him, he hears of the invasions and genocide that No. 6 has perpetrated in its history. What awaits the Holy City now — destruction, or salvation?

Where did you come from? Where were you born?

1

'TWERE BEST NOT KNOW MYSELF

*To know my deed, 'twere best not know myself.
Wake Duncan with thy knocking! I would thou couldst!*

MACBETH, ACT II SCENE II

HE HEARD the sound of the wind. It was a dry, sorrowful sound.
It can't be...

Shion stopped his feet, and blinked slowly. It was dark. Even when his eyes were accustomed to darkness, the gloom only reflected into his eyes as gloom, and was entirely painted black. And of course, there was no wind blowing.

Here, they were at the bottom of the earth.

A place in the bosom of No. 6—precisely, a place of darkness. The basement of the Correctional Facility. Of course there would be no wind blowing. There was no way he could have even heard its sound. Yet he had definitely heard a high-pitched whistling. It was for a mere instant, but he had heard it.

It wasn't a sound he had heard before in No. 6, where he had been living only a short while ago. It wasn't a breeze that gently shook

the abundant canopies, nor was it something that wafted the sweet fragrance of flowers to him. It was—

The wind of the ruins.

It was the cry of the wind that whistled through the remains of the dilapidated hotel in a corner of the West Block. It was a cold wind. Every time he felt it against his body, he remembered feeling like he'd been chilled to the marrow of his bones. And indeed, people like the elderly who collapsed on the road, unable to move, or children who had been depleted of energy from starvation, were whipped by this frigid wind and eventually froze to death. It was a cruel and ruthless winter wind.

But he missed it.

He yearned many times more for the chilling wind that swept through the ruins over the gentle, harmless breezes in No. 6.

What was Inukashi doing now? Was he simmering leftovers in the big pot, briskly making food for his dogs? Was he busy tallying up his earnings for the day? Inukashi, with his tan skin, ink-black hair and wiry body.

He had left a baby in Inukashi's care. He had thrust a small infant boy upon him against his will.

Cut the crap, Shion. I'm operating a business here, my hotel. I'm not running a non-profit orphanage.

Shion could imagine his face, scowling in disgust.

Sorry, Inukashi. I didn't have anyone else to depend on. I had no other choice but to cling and beg for your help.

Tsk.

Inukashi clicked his tongue.

Pain in the ass wherever you go, aren't ya? Fine, I'll take it. Even I have the heart to feel a bit of compassion. But it's a tiny one, and even a dog

would turn its nose up at it. No choice, though. This baby's someone my own dog has risked its life to protect. I can't just throw him away... Look at me, I'm a pushover. Makes me sick of myself, even.

Inukashi, my gratitude.

Doesn't make me happy one bit to have any of your gratitude. Doesn't give me any gain. Shion, I'll take the baby for now. Got it? Only for now. You better come pick him up. You decided to take this guy in. You gotta raise him. Understand? You better come pick...

"Shion."

Nezumi turned around, and called his name. He could clearly see the pair of lustrous grey eyes. Even in this darkness, Nezumi's eyes both sucked light in, and released it. Or—Shion let his thoughts wander.

Or could I still render those eyes, even if there was no light, even if I was in complete darkness without a single ray to illuminate my way?

"Don't stop walking. Keep right behind me."

"Oh—right. Sorry, I was spaced out a bit."

"Spaced out?"

"I thought I heard the wind blowing. Like the wind that used to blow against Inukashi's ruins... I know I'm just hearing things, but—Nezumi."

"Hm?"

"I wonder what Inukashi's doing right now."

Nezumi blinked. Shion could make him out catching a breath.

"You've got guts."

"Huh?"

"Not just anyone can space out in a situation like this. There are probably tons of people who go into shock from nerves, but to be able to hear the wind blowing, or casually think about other people—that's colossal. The amount of guts you have probably puts you in ranks

with the gods. You will let me worship you every day, won't you, once in the morning and in the evening?"

"Are you being sarcastic?" Shion said flatly.

"Why, never," Nezumi said. "I haven't got the courage to smart-mouth a god. I'm genuinely impressed. But—"

Shion was grabbed by the arm. It hurt. He felt Nezumi's fingers digging into him. He knew how much strength those fingers held, despite how slender and almost delicate-looking they were. So many times Nezumi had clenched his arm, making him wince in pain. So many times he had grabbed his arm and pulled him up. Again and again, countless times—from death to life, from despair to hope, from fiction to reality, Shion had been able to crawl up and out thanks to these fingers.

"From now on, be a bit more of an earthly coward. Don't give a damn about Inukashi. Only think about protecting yourself."

"Got it."

"—Do you really get it?"

"I do—probably."

"Probably, huh. Nothing reassures me less." Nezumi gave a sudden laugh. It was small, but it was lighthearted and filled with mirth. "Look at the conversation we're having, in this place, in this situation. The epitome of flippancy, I think, both you and me. Maybe I'd be able to join the gods if I hang around you more."

Then his tone suddenly changed, into one that was heavy and severe. His fingertips dug in with even more force.

"No matter what happens, don't stray from me. Keep up with your own strength. I told you before. I won't say it again."

Shion nodded. Nezumi turned his back and resumed walking, either having seen or felt the slight inclination of Shion's head in reply. The

figure before him wouldn't turn back around as easily. Shion knew that well, too.

If he wasn't desperate enough to live, if he didn't greedily latch onto life, then Nezumi would not turn to him.¹

Nezumi would never revere a flippant and unobservant god. Shion inhaled a breath of darkness, and placed his foot forward.

A small path continued up a slight slope in the crack between the boulders. It was just wide enough for an adult to get through. It might even be narrower than the former passageway, cased in concrete with small light bulbs at equal intervals. It wasn't a long journey, but twists and turns made it that much harder to walk through.

But at least—

Shion wiped his sweat with the back of his hand.

But at least it doesn't smell like blood here.

The air was absent of the bloody stench that had filled the other passageway. There were no screams or groans of the dozens of people dying—being murdered.

There was only darkness.

Even if this were only to last for a short moment; even if there was a reality beyond Shion's imagination waiting for him beyond the darkness, as it had always done, he would not have to breathe the stench of people being unfairly and pitilessly obliterated.

He was grateful. As if he had encountered an oasis in a desert—he was grateful.

You're naïve.

He chewed his bottom lip.

Nezumi didn't even have to tell him. He was so very much naïve.

¹The expression *turn around to face someone* is often used in the romantic sense to mean *requiting someone's feelings*.

I just can't smell it. I just can't hear it. I just can't see because of the wall that divides us.

But it's still happening right beside me.

The reality that dozens of people—including newborns—were being unfairly and pitilessly obliterated, still existed on the same stretch of land that Shion stood on, right here, right now.

Just because he couldn't smell it, just because he couldn't hear, just because he didn't see, didn't mean that it didn't exist. Just because he had arrived at an oasis, it didn't mean the desert had disappeared.

I'm naïve; I'm idealistic. He couldn't help but make excuses. He couldn't help but try to forget the wrath he had felt when he had witnessed the brutality. He wanted to avert his eyes from grisly things. He was trying to curl up and lend himself fully to the comfort of falling into an ignorant slumber.

I am naïve. And I am weak.

He traced the rocky wall with his hand, and did his best to keep up with Nezumi.

What was important right now was to follow him. *And I've always followed him.* He had walked down a nighttime path for the first time in the West Block. He had torn through it, even. If it weren't for that experience, he would probably not be able to walk through the oppressive darkness now that seemed to crush his very eyeballs.

In that sense, I've toughened up a bit, he told himself. *Believe. You've got your own kind of strength stored up inside you. Believe yourself wholeheartedly.* It was easy to fall back to self-loathing, and wallow in defeat—but it was meaningless. Believing yourself was strength. With this strength as fuel, as a weapon, one could overcome innumerable difficulties.

Shion funnelled his concentration into the soles of his feet, and moved forward one step at a time. He met a light. It was dim. It was gradually

beginning to lighten before his eyes.

Nezumi's figure glided into that dim light as he watched from behind. Shion quickened his pace.

"Oh—" his breath caught in his throat.

They had emerged into a spacious chamber. It was much more spacious than where Nezumi and the sand-coloured man had fought. The ceiling was lofty. It looked almost three storeys high. The same rugged boulders jutted out from all around.

This place is a naturally-occurring series of caves, huge and complex. Nezumi had told him. Then this must be a chamber that nature had created. Candles were lit here and there in the crevices, and they were not the only thing; lamplight also winked in some places. They were all dim, but warm, sources of light. They were beautiful, too—like small flame-coloured flowers blooming in the alcoves of rock.

Alcoves?

Shion squinted. He baited his breath, and squinted as hard as he could. He baited his breath more.

A shadow moved.

One, two, three, four... They were not mice; those were not small animals. Numerous shadows were moving around. They stood on two legs, and were whispering to each other. On two legs, whispering...

Humans!

The lump he had swallowed stuck in his throat. His heart raced.

Humans. There are humans here. They're peering out at us from the alcoves. Humans. If he squinted even more, he could see a large cavern yawning its large mouth from behind the lit candles in the crevices. So there were tunnels even further on inside these caves. The people had probably crawled out from there.

Shion couldn't make out each individual figure with his eyesight, but he could tell that they varied in height and build.

Were there men and women, both adults and children? All of them identically leaned forward, and were gazing down upon them. Shion felt like he could see each person's eyes glinting dully if he stared long enough.

"Nezumi, these people..."

"Who do you think they are?"

"Oh—survivors. They must be people like us, who've managed to escape the execution grounds."

"Wrong." Nezumi shook his head. It was a languid gesture, unusual for him. "They've lived here way before that."

"Way before... what do you mean?"

"You'll see in a bit."

'You'll see in a bit'—I guess you're right.

You will see. As long as you have the will and the strength.

Shion clenched his fist. It was easy to question. He had always been asking questions up until now. He had always instantly, so easily, begged Nezumi for the right answer without trying to decode the reality that appeared before his eyes.

It won't work anymore.

He would find the answer himself. He would grasp it. He would decode it. Other people were other people, even someone as close as Nezumi. He would not be able to render the truth if he kept leaning on other people's words. He would not be able to face off with a reality that surpassed his imagination. He would not be able to stay equals with Nezumi.

He had to render it himself.

Nezumi dropped his gaze from Shion. His grey eyes clouded over. Clearing it away with a blink, Nezumi swept his hand aside in a smooth gesture. It was a graceful move unique to him.

“Look, isn’t it spectacular? Everyone has turned out for the welcoming parade.”

“Famous even in a place like this, aren’t you?”

“—Idiot. Shion, this is your welcoming.”

“Mine?”

“You’re the spectacle here. It’s unheard-of for an outsider to come bursting in. And a No. 6 resident at that.”

“*Former* resident,” Shion corrected. “I’m not one anymore. I threw my ID card away a long time ago. I’m not a citizen of that city.”

“Don’t get hung up about it. It was just a form of expression.”

“I *will* be hung up,” Shion said stubbornly. “It isn’t ‘just’ an expression. I’m not as weak as you think. I’m not attached to No. 6.”

Maybe it was bravado. But Shion squared his shoulders the best he could.

I am weak. My mind and body are all too fragile. But nothing can shake my resolve. Nothing can confuse my feelings. My resolve to live not within, but outside the city; my feelings of wanting to live together with you; nothing can shake them, nothing can muddle them.

“Who said you were weak?”

“You always say so.”

“Never. You’re a superpower. You just overwhelmed me with your brilliance back there. It’s quite something... I’m even more impressed now. I certainly am.” Nezumi shrugged. “And I would never have thought you would trip me up at every petty word and start complaining about it. In this situation much less.”

Skrit, skrit, skrit.

A sewer rat crawled up Shion’s body, and sat on his shoulder. It was quite heavy compared to Hamlet or Cravat. And it smelled rotten. But it twitched its nose and tilted its head to the side in the same way.

Another one crawled onto his other shoulder. It stuck its head into Shion's snowy hair, and nuzzled its face into it. Yet another one—this time, a baby rat—rubbed itself against his feet. One more came, and still another.

The rats scurried up and down Shion's body, chirruping affectionately.

Skrit, skrit, skrit, cheep cheep cheep.

Chit chit chit. Chit chit chit.

"Hey, cut that out," said Shion, suppressing a laugh. "I'm not a playground slide. Stop that, it tickles!" Shion gave his body a shake.

The air buzzed. The darkness rippled uneasily. Shion could feel the presence of the rock dwellers: breaths sucked in, inaudible whispering, shifting bodies, furtive glances.

"An intriguing child."

A voice came raining down from above. It was a low voice, but it rang out clearly. It wasn't quite the level of Nezumi's singing, but it was deep, soothing, and flowed into his ears comfortably. Was it the same voice as a few moments ago? The voice that had come floating down from the black painted void?

'Let us hear your story.' Was it the same voice as that?

He looked up.

He saw a figure of a man seated in a chair in the middle of an alcove, in a spot that was jutting out like a balcony. At least... he thought it was a man. It looked like... an elderly man with long white hair and a long white beard, clad in a long gown-like garment. It was too dark to get a good look at his face.

"An intriguing child. You haven't stirred any animosity or apprehension in the mice. Shall I ask you your name? What are you called?"

"I'm Shion."

"Shion—ah, a beautiful name."

“Th—Thank you. For, um, complimenting me,” Shion stammered.

“And you are?”

“Me? What about me, Shion?”

“What is your name?”

Buzz.

The darkness rippled even more fiercely. The rats chattered on his shoulders. Laughter rose. From alcoves in every direction, various kinds of laughter rose, and showered down upon Shion.

Giggle, giggle, giggle.

Name, he says.

Giggle, giggle, giggle.

He asked for his name.

Giggle, giggle, giggle. Giggle, giggle, giggle. Giggle, giggle, giggle. Giggle, giggle, giggle.

He had no idea why he was being laughed at. He had only asked for the man's name. Why was that a cause for such derision?

Giggle, giggle, giggle. Giggle, giggle, giggle.

The laughter didn't cease. Shion turned to look at Nezumi, who was standing at his side.

Nezumi stood unmoving. He wasn't smiling. Naturally. No expression adorned his face. He was like a statue.

“Rou.” A deep voice pierced through the rippling darkness. The noise in the caverns was silenced immediately. An almost painful stillness fell, like one you encountered in a forest when all the winds had died. In this stillness, only the elder's words unfolded leisurely.

“Rou. That is what I am called.”

“Rou—that's your name?”

“Perhaps, perhaps not. It may only mean *old person*².”

²rou / 老, literally means *elder*

“So this is not your real name?”

Some moments of silence.

“Young one. No one here places importance on names. No one. Has Nezumi not taught you that?”

Come to think of it—

Shion exhaled.

Come to think of it, I still don't know Nezumi's real name.

“Rou.” Nezumi moved. He had taken a step forward. “I want you to hear our story.”

“Let us hear it.” The elder straightened his posture in his chair. “You have returned. We were never supposed to meet again, yet you have appeared again before my eyes. Let us hear the reason.”

“I'm grateful.”

“Grateful? Nezumi, I see you have been grown weak and cowardly from being buffeted by the wind outside. But no matter how weak and cowardly you have become, I hope you have not forgotten the rules.”

“Of course not.”

“Those who have left this place must never return. You have broken that taboo. You must recompense.”

“I know. I'll pay the penalty. So listen to me, please.”

The elder snapped his fingers. Although Shion had not noticed this before, two long poles were attached to the legs of the elder's chair. It was perhaps better called a palanquin than a chair.

Two men held the poles and hoisted the elder along with the palanquin.

His legs?

There was nothing filling out the lower part of the elder's gown. The hem hung lifelessly. The elder had lost his legs from the knees down. Both of them.

The palanquin with the elder in it began to descend from the boulders slowly, as if slithering down the wall. A shadowy figure, whose long hair was bound in a ponytail—a woman, evident from the outline of her body—was sweeping the path in front of the palanquin with what looked like a broom. She was like a forerunner for a procession.

There was a path. A path just wide enough for people to brush shoulders as they passed. The slope was steep, yet the men walked steadily down it, without missing a step.

It was not something naturally-occurring. Walkways had been carved into the boulders by human hands. If he looked closely, paths spanned all along the rocky walls; perhaps it was structured so that people could come and go freely.

Is this... a settlement?

Shion took in his surroundings anew. At the same time, he set his brain to work. Caverns, which were no doubt residences; paths on the boulder walls; this chamber; the dark space that continued beyond this chamber—and he could almost smell something being boiled or stewed. And faintly, very faintly, he could feel a wind. Which meant the air was moving, and this place was connected to ground-level. Here was a settlement of humans.

An underground settlement?

He restrained his thoughts, which threatened to stray every which way. He organized them, and searched for a coherent thread.

Nezumi had said that these residents of the dark were not people who had survived the Hunt. It was perhaps so. An underground world, where no sunlight would reach, would be too harsh of a condition for people to live in. Humans were organisms that were adapted to life above ground. It seemed implausible that one could keep living in a place where there was barely any change in amount of sunlight, air current, and natural surroundings. But before his eyes were those

very people themselves, and the signs of human residency.

The scene before him was clearly not something that had been created overnight. He could gather that much. Had these people lived underground for a long, long time, having established their settlement, and gradually adapted this way? It was the only guess he could come up with.

Shion unconsciously let out a long sigh.

Remember this place. The basement of the Correctional Facility. What is a settlement doing here? Is it a coincidence?

Maybe...

Shion's thoughts emitted frustrated sparks inside his head. No matter how much he thought about it, he wasn't able to grasp it. He couldn't set foot outside of the boundaries of speculation. But that was also why he thought harder. He speculated. He devised theories of "what-if"s. Desperately.

What if people had been living in this place for much longer—this place that had been a series of large caves from the very beginning?

Aboriginals...

What if there had been people living on this land long before the birth of the nation-state of No. 6?

The West Block area had once been a small but beautiful town. Many kinds of people, Rikiga included, had resided there. His mother had been there. And his father—though he had no memory of him or his face—had also been there. The town had mutated, and became the mother from which No. 6 was born. Except it wasn't the town that had changed, it was the people. Under human hands, the massive walls of special alloy and the enormous city-state had been born. Outside of the walls, the remnants of the town became a barren wasteland known as the West Block. But that was only the west side.

Was the western town the only place No. 6 had destroyed? What about the northern mountains, the forests, the grassy plains that stretched from south to east, the lakes and marshes that dotted the land from eastern to western edge? Considering No. 6's geographical area, it was logical to think that it had enlarged in all four directions, proliferating and expanding...

A chill ran down his spine.

In the northern mountains, the southern plains, the eastern marshes. Somewhere, a race of peoples unknown to Shion had once lived. And not only one race. In the mountains, forests, and plains, people had carried on their lives. In these caverns, too...

Aboriginals. A people who had taken up residence in the caves from a time dating far back.

They had been people of a different kind of world than the town Rikiga and his mother had lived in; they had probably stayed in their own territory, as the "town people" lived in theirs, and had not had any contact with them. Perhaps neither group was even aware of the other's existence.

This stretch of land had once been a sprawling forest. On this planet, there were only six regions which fulfilled the conditions adequate for human life.

People built towns in those regions, and those towns eventually grew into city-states. Learning from history's moral lesson, they had abolished civil wars between the states. They agreed that a ban on all military power was the bottom line for the continued survival of mankind, and so, they had acted in accordance with the Babylon Treaty, which called on the abandonment of all armies and weapons. Also in accordance, each city had discarded its unique name, and adopted a simple number as its title—from No. 1 to No. 6.

The six cities, while still respecting the uniqueness and independence

of each, nevertheless maintained strong ties, and were acknowledged to be part of one nation; both political leaders and the populace agreed that this was the mindset each and every one should have.

These lands are the only things left to us. Further destruction is not permissible. War is evil. It leads everything to extinction. It threatens our very existence. We must abandon all weaponry for the future of humankind. Under this ideology, we shall found six cities linked in friendship and understanding.

From No. 1, to No. 6.

The sixth region had been blessed with natural conditions more favourable than any other. Everything was utilized to the fullest—nature’s bounties, human intelligence, and scientific technology—to build this utopian city, one rarely found throughout history.

This was the birth of the Holy City of No. 6.

That was an outline of the history Shion had learned as an elite candidate in his perfectly-equipped classroom.

His chill had gotten worse. He felt like he was frozen right down to his fingertips.

If he closed his eyes—but even with them open—he could see images of the Hunt flashing in the back of his mind. It was reality. Those were scenes he had seen with his own eyes.

Barracks had been blown apart; tents had been torn down. Frantic, fleeing people had been ruthlessly murdered. Men and women, both elderly and young, and even infants had been indiscriminately vaporized. The most modern weapons had attacked people who could only retaliate by throwing rocks. It was a massacre if anything.

‘Abandon all weaponry’ indeed.

He had been biting his lip without thinking. The bloody taste spread inside his mouth. He swallowed it with his spit. He did not know about the other cities. But—but...

At the very least, he knew that No. 6 was on its way to becoming an armed state with overwhelming military power.

Since when?

He swallowed his bloody saliva again.

When did that city start to change? When did it begin to stray from the policies and ideals of the Babylon Treaty? Since when... since the beginning?

* * *

Shion felt a gaze on him. His eyes met with Nezumi's. He felt like he was being wrapped in an elegant grey cloth. The core of his body pulsed. All the thoughts that had been swirling around in his head came to a full stop.

A moment of pleasure.

It was strange. Just the kind of light in Nezumi's eyes was enough to make him feel like he was being pushed away or being embraced.

But now was not the time to be giving himself up to selfish and indulgent emotions. People were easily swayed once they ceased to think. They were too easily led along by the flow of other people's words and the mindset of the times.

Nezumi would never embrace and protect anyone who avoided thinking, who let himself simply be pushed along with the flow.

And besides, Shion thought as he lifted his chin. I don't want to be protected by him. I haven't abandoned my thoughts. I'll keep decoding the world around me and its workings in my own way. I will confront the world in its true form, and look reality in the eye. That's probably something you would call a battle, Nezumi.

Shion dropped his gaze from Nezumi, and meditated. He set his thoughts in motion again.

Since when?

From the beginning?

Yes, from the beginning. Perhaps No. 6 had been removed from ideologies of peace and co-existence from the very moment of its birth.

On this land, there had once been a people that had lived here long before. No. 6 had invaded them. They had tried to dominate them in the same way a starving beast devoured its prey and gnawed on its bones. By doing so, it had expanded its boundaries, and established its foundations as a city-state. Peace? Co-existence? It had laughed contemptuously in face of these words, and with brute force, made the surrounding areas its own.

Just as it had destroyed the West Block. Just as it had massacred its people. Using overwhelming military force.

But still... what about the other thing? LEDs—light-emitting diodes. LEDs lit up when electric current was applied to the joint between two special semiconductors. They were man-made lights that didn't exist in the natural world. Scientifically manufactured lights. Were they not things that No. 6 had created? Or—or, rather, had some scientific civilization existed which was at par with, or even more advanced than No. 6? But if that was so, the civilization would probably not have been invaded so easily. He did know that science was neither all-solving nor almighty, however...

He didn't know. It was like walking in a fog. No matter how much he pondered and contemplated, no matter how far he stepped in, he never reached the truth. The more he thought, the further he ventured, the more lost he felt. He couldn't get out of the labyrinth. His thoughts wandered aimlessly.

He was frustrated.

Cheep.

The rat jumped down from Shion's shoulder. The little mice also hid themselves in the boulder cracks.

What's wrong?

As Shion's gaze started to follow the little mice, he was suddenly attacked from behind. A shadow twisted his arm up behind him. His mouth was gagged. In the blink of an eye, he was bound up with rope. He was shoved from behind. He fell with his hands still tied behind his back. He rammed his shoulder on the ground.

"What was that for?" he shouted.

"Shion, keep quiet." Nezumi, also kneeling in ropes, shook his head at him. "Don't resist. Stay quiet."

"But why—ow! The rope really hurts!"

"Let your body relax. Breathe out and loosen up. It'll feel a bit better."

He did as he was told. Nezumi was right—he felt a bit better. *Pretty amazing, though. Capturing and binding us in a matter of seconds—oh, but still—*

"Not as good as you."

"What?"

"You'd have a better handle on it. Whether it be a rope, or a knife."

"Why, thanks for the compliment. I'm undeserving of the privilege, really, to be complimented by you."

"I'm always in awe at your—*gh*." The rope dug into his neck. His breath caught in his throat.

"Do not speak." A flat voice hissed at his ear.

Was it that man? The man with sandy-grey hair, skin, and eyes?

"Any more idle chatter, and I will wring your neck."

The rope tightened. He really felt like his neck was being wrung. His airway caved in from the pressure. He felt like he was suddenly swelling from the neck up. He couldn't breathe. It was painful.

“Knock it off,” Nezumi said quietly. “Revenge for what happened back there? Taking your frustrations out on an unresisting human? I see you’ve picked up some low habits while we haven’t seen each other, Sasori.”

The rope loosened. For an instant, Shion didn’t know what was happening. He threw himself out on the ground, and dissolved into a fit of coughing. He heard the sound of flesh hitting the ground as if it were crawling across it. He raised himself.

Nezumi was crumpled beside him. The man’s foot landed on his shoulder. He was wearing sandals that were woven out of what looked like thin strips of bark.

“You too, Nezumi.” The man’s voice grew leaden. “Enough of your insolent complaints. Do you not understand your place? Then it is only a matter of making you understand.”

The man’s foot moved to kick Nezumi’s shoulder.

“You are the ones who have trespassed from outside. You have no right to protest if you get killed.”

“Stop!” Shion twisted and yelled. Nezumi lifted his face, and shook his head as if to tell him to shut his mouth. But he could not.

“You coward! You’re just as Nezumi says. Tying us up and making it so that we can’t fight back, and then beating us—it’s low, it’s filthy!”

“Shion.” Nezumi grimaced. Several streams of blood ran from his temple down his cheek. Shion clenched his stomach, and stared up at the man.

“What is this place? No. 6?”

“No. 6, you say?” The man’s whole body quivered. His sand-coloured eyes glinted sharply. The light seemed almost murderous. But Shion was not about to be silenced. He was also trembling, but not with fear. It was with wrath. Wrath boiled within him.

"It's true. You're just the same. What you're doing is no different from No. 6. You oppress the weak by force. You inflict pitiless violence. How are you guys any different?"

"I'm not really weak, just saying," Nezumi shrugged with his hands still tied behind his back. "Shion, I get what you're trying to say. Just leave it at that. Say any more, and you'll be kicked to death. Kicking is this old man's specialty."

"I will kill you," the man growled. "You are a demon. A wicked bringer of misfortune. If I do not dispose of you now, you will only bring catastrophe upon us."

"A sharp eye, Sasori," Nezumi sighed exaggeratedly. "You're spot on. A catastrophe, indeed. Of the highest class."

"Nezumi, what do you mean 'catastrophe'?... You mean I am?"

"You are," Nezumi chuckled lightheartedly.

"He is evil," the man continued. "He wears a demonic aura like a cloak, and carries misfortune wherever he goes. I can tell. Nezumi, you said he was a resident of No. 6."

"Former resident, to correct you. He was inside the city up until just recently."

"That must be why he is so evil. He is... like No. 6 itself."

Nezumi narrowed his eyes. The tip of his tongue licked the blood on his lips.

"No. 6 itself, huh... I see. That's how he appears to you."

"I know," the man answered. "I can tell. I must kill him. I must dispose of him before it is too late. If not..." The man took a step forward. Shion shrank back without thinking. The man was radiating such a murderous intent that he could not help but recoil.

He's serious...

This man is serious about killing me.

The man took another step forward, but suddenly spun in a somersault and crashed to the ground. Nezumi had tripped him.

Nezumi was up in a flash. The ropes slid to the ground. It was like a magic trick. In his hand was a small knife.

The man tried to get up, but was stopped by Nezumi's knee digging into his stomach. The man let out a muffled groan. He bent backwards from the pain, leaving his throat defenseless; a blade was soon pushed up on it.

"We worked hard to get here. I won't have you disposing of him that quickly."

"Why... did you bring... such catastrophe?" choked the man. "Do you plan to destroy us all?"

"The opposite." Nezumi's lips curled. "I want to send *No. 6* to its grave. That's why I brought him."

"No. 6? Does that boy have the power to?"

"Who knows. We don't know until we try. I can't let you kill him before we even test it out. That jealousy of yours, by the way: a little embarrassing, don't you think?"

"Jealousy?"

"Yeah. You're jealous of Shion. He's got your rats in the palm of his hand like it's nothing. You're jealous. Am I right?"

There was a heavy grinding sound. The man was gnashing his teeth.

"Nezumi... just as unpleasant as you used to be. It irritates me. I will strangle you to death first."

"What a splendid promise. I can't wait. But before that—" The man's smile disappeared from Nezumi's mouth. A drop of blood that had slid down his chin dripped on the man's chest, and coloured it red. "Let's have you swear, Sasori. Swear that you'll never lay a finger on Shion again."

The blade of the knife jerked. The man's throat contracted as well.

"Swear it."

The man fell stubbornly silent.

"That is enough." A gentle voice rang out. It even held a hint of a laugh. "You have not changed, Nezumi. Neither your skill with the knife nor your sarcastic way with words has deteriorated. I daresay it seems to have become even more polished."

The elder on the palanquin was smiling with the same benign air as his voice. The palanquin was lowered steadily.

"Rou."

"You have grown. I can barely recognize you. I would never have thought I could encounter you as a grown man."

Nezumi released the man and knelt down. The knife spun once in his hand before disappearing. This too, was like witnessing a magic trick. The man muttered something, and gnashed his teeth some more. Rats raced over Shion's lap.

"I believed that you had left long ago for a land far away. Did I not command you to do so? To leave this place behind, forget everything, throw everything away, and to live freely?"

"Rou, please listen to me."

"You should never have returned. Regardless of what happened, you should never have come back."

"I can't be free." Nezumi clenched his fingers hard. "As long as No. 6 exists, I can't be free. I can't forget it, nor can I throw it away."

"Nezumi."

"You should know. No. 6 still exists. It's still here. How can I be the only free one? It's impossible."

"I have told you not to become trapped. I have told you to live unfettered. If you did not, you would not be able to survive; I understood

this well. That was why I released you into the outer world. But to think that you would come back . . .”

“I’ve realized.”

“Realized?”

“I’ve realized your words were nothing but white lies.”

The air wavered in agitation. Voices which were barely voices traversed between the people nestled in the rocky walls, looking down at them.

“Your words were white lies. False. There was no way I could live without being trapped. On the contrary, I *had* to be trapped. Even if I deceived myself, pretending I was free, I would still be in chains anyway. From now on, I’ll acquire real freedom with my own hands. I’ll set myself free. That’s why I came back.”

“Is this freedom you speak of fighting with No. 6?”

“It means fighting and winning. Erasing it clean from this land. The day I see the Holy City arrive at its end is when I’d be free for the first time. I’d be able to live a truly free life. I would be able to leave this place . . . of my own will.”

“Nezumi!” Shion yelled without thinking. As he yelled, grabbed Nezumi’s shoulder. “What do you mean by that? Leave this place? What—”

“Shion.” Nezumi’s eyes blinked rapidly. “The rope . . . how did you—?”

“Huh?”

“The ropes. How did you get out of them? You don’t have a knife on you.”

“What? Oh, the rats chewed them apart for me.”

“The rats? No way, you must be—”

Shion thrust an end of the rope to Nezumi, and waved it before his eyes.

“Look. They all chewed at it together. It happened in no time. Impressive, isn’t it?”

Nezumi’s eyes flitted to the jagged end of the chewed rope before furrowing his brow.

“You have that much control over those rats?”

“Me? No, of course not. I couldn’t pull tricks like that. The rats did it on their own. They’re all very kind and intelligent,” Shion said proudly.

“Kind and intelligent, huh. So your rats chew apart the ropes their master has tied. He’s right; they *are* kind and intelligent. You’ve trained them to be very well-behaved, Sasori.”

The man—the sand-coloured man called Sasori—only fidgeted a little, and didn’t reply. Instead, the elder let out a short breath.

“Enough sarcasm, Nezumi. It is a bad habit of yours. It seems your tendencies have not changed, despite how much you have grown physically. A problem, indeed.”

There was warmth in the elder’s tone. He was like a father smiling exasperatedly over his child’s antics. His voice radiated with the source of its warmth—love.

This man felt tenderness for Nezumi.

Shion gazed at the elder on his palanquin. *This is my first time*, he thought. It was his first time meeting someone who expressed a peaceful and warm attitude to Nezumi.

Nezumi had always been alone. He had always lived alone. There was never anyone by his side. He didn’t let anyone approach him. Shion yearned for Nezumi in his own way, and he was also entranced by Nezumi’s resilience, litheness and beauty. He hoped to remain by Nezumi’s side. These feelings certainly existed inside him as unmovable fact; however, it was also fact that he was uncertain of what name to give those feelings.

Admiration, friendship, deference, love... He was uncertain; he couldn't help it.

But what he felt from the elder on the palanquin was definite affection. It was like a parent bestowing affection upon a child.

To think Nezumi had someone like this.

"Shion," the elder called.

"Yes."

"Come here."

"Yes, sir."

"Wait," Sasori stepped forward and grabbed Shion's arm. "Rou, this boy is dangerous. He is cloaked in evil. You cannot let him near you."

"Evil—this boy?"

"He is not just a boy. He is a demon. He will destroy everything. I can see it. Why can you not, Rou?"

It was hard not to get angry when this much was being said about him. Shion tried to shake off the hand that held his arm. Sasori's fingers showed no signs of moving, and squeezed even harder, choking its hold.

"I see no problem. Bring Shion here."

"Rou."

"I see no problem. Good and evil, virtue and wickedness, truth and lies—they are all very similar. So similar, in fact, that it is often hard to tell them apart. True, is it not, Nezumi?"

"I see what you're saying."

"It is a boy whom you have brought. Surely he is neither entirely wicked, nor entirely virtuous. Now, Shion: here, if you will."

The fingers drew away from his arm. Sasori retreated a few steps, growling lowly. His sand-coloured limbs blended into the darkness.

Shion approached the palanquin slowly. Several rats scurried around his feet.

The elder had clear, dark eyes. They harboured a twinkling light as he gazed unflinchingly at Shion.

This man...

Shion felt like this man was younger than he had originally thought. He had assumed—from the man's name as "elder" and the white hair that framed his face—that he was an aged man. But the strength of the light in his eyes was not that of an ageing person.

The elder raised his hand. It was thin and pale.

"Your head."

"I'm sorry?"

"Will you let me touch your hair? It is a rather odd colour."

Shion crouched, and bowed his head forward. The elder reached and gently ran a hand through his hair in a circular motion. It tickled a little. Shion felt a little sheepish, like he was being patted on the head.

"Why?" the elder said, with added heaviness to his voice. His voice trailed off hoarsely. Its gentleness was gone; now it sounded tense.

"Why has your hair—"

"It's not only his hair." Nezumi strode purposefully forward. "Shion, show him your red snake."

"Huh? No way."

"Why not?"

"I'd have to take off my clothes. I don't want to be naked in front of so many people."

"Dumbass," Nezumi clicked his tongue. "What kingdom are *you* from, Princess? This isn't the time to be a blushing maiden. Quickly! Show him what you've had to endure."

Nezumi's fingers flipped his shirt up. Shion hastily recoiled.

“I get it! I’ll do it myself. I don’t need help undressing.”

“Is that so? I’m impressed. Worthy of praise.”

Nezumi’s eyes were not as buoyant as his voice. They were tense and sharp. Shion cast his shirt aside, and took another half-step towards the elder.

The elder drew a breath. His trembling fingers traced the crimson band that had scarred his chest.

“These... these scars...”

Nezumi jerked his chin as if to encourage Shion.

Can I tell him?

“These marks, why—” the elder said. “No, it couldn’t be...”

“They’re from a parasite wasp.”

“Parasite wasp,” the elder repeated.

“They feed off humans. They ultimately kill their host before hatching. I—was able to survive. The result of it are these scars, and my blanched hair.”

The elder’s mouth twisted. His eyes, set in his face among countless wrinkles, glittered unnaturally bright. Nezumi grabbed Shion’s shoulder roughly.

“Rou, No. 6 will disintegrate. One day, it’ll crumble not only from the outside, but from its own powers working inside. These are the first signs.”

“A parasite wasp which lodges in humans... I see... they have begun to appear inside the city.”

“Yeah. And apparently out of sudden coincidence. They appeared unexpectedly; even the guys holding the reins of No. 6 couldn’t predict it. Several citizens have died in strange ways. The authorities haven’t been able to prevent it. I don’t see them desperately trying to, either.

Maybe they don't have a grasp of how serious the situation is yet. They've become complacent."

"Complacent..."

"They're complacent because they think the world will run according to their plans. They're arrogant enough to believe that they can be a universal and omnipotent ruler... they've been blinded by their own delusions, and can't see the truth of reality. They're losing the eyesight to see through the facade."

Even when it seemed to scrape across the ground, Nezumi's voice nevertheless reached the ears of his listeners crystal clear. In the darkness, only his low, resounding voice filled the air.

"Things are still quiet inside the city. They're still managing to maintain peace and daily routine. But it's like a cup that's been filled to the brim with water, about to spill over any second. It's maintaining its balance, but barely."

"One has only to stimulate it slightly, and everything will spill over... is that what you mean?"

"It would burst. It would destroy the cup and come gushing out."

The elder muttered something softly. Then, he locked his fingers together as if in prayer.

"Let us hear it, then—everything, from the beginning."

A pair of glittering eyes trained steadily on Shion.

2

WHO DID SEE HIM DIE?

*Who did kill cock Robbin?
I, said the sparrow,
With my bow and arrow,
And I did kill cock Robbin.
Who did see him die?
I, said the fly,
With my little eye,
And I did see him die.*

MOTHER GOOSE

THE MAN was gazing at the gold coin Inukashi had given him with fascination.

“It’s real,” Inukashi whispered to the man’s profile, with its thin and jutting chin. He dropped his voice into a hush to make himself sound as intimidating as possible.

“It’s real gold... is it?” The man’s Adam’s apple bobbed up and down.

“Look at it for as long as ya need to. It’s the real thing, no matter which way ya look at it.”

“Y-Yeah... you’re right, it’s real...”

“It’s yours.” This time, Inukashi spoke a little quicker, like he was thrusting the words onto him. The man’s chin trembled.

“Mine?”

“Yeah. Yours. I’ll give it to ya.”

“What? But—ah—a whole gold coin, it’s so much money—”

“Of course, I’m not saying it’s for free. I’m not a do-gooder with money to spare. I’ll give this to you as payment for a job. How about it?”

“Job?”

The man’s eyes shifted from the gold coin to Inukashi. His eyes were round, like some frightened pet animal. A shade of suspicion flitted across them.

Here it comes.

Inukashi clenched his fist.

This is the crucial moment. I won’t give this guy any room to think. I won’t let any suspicion sneak into his thoughts. I’ll wave the gold in front of him, and tantalize him. It’s gold, man, gold. Not something he’d be able to lay his eyes on often. Not to mention, this guy wants money, needs money... but then, I don’t know who wouldn’t want money, unless they were dying.

You just had to dangle the other’s most desired object in front of his nose. You had to ensnare him with crafty words. You would chase him into a corner so he wouldn’t be able to escape. You would do it thoroughly, and with skill. All he had to do was trace Nezumi’s way of doing it. *He’s done it to me enough times for me to get sick of it.*

Heh.

He felt like he could hear Nezumi chuckle. He could even see Nezumi’s unique ironic smile.

See, you can do it just as I taught you. Good boy. I’ll give you a treat later.

Shut up, Nezumi. Just to let you know, I'm not undertaking this to help you. It's for the gold bullion. I'm crossing the perilous bridge so I can lay my hands on that gold bullion.

He shook his head to dispel the illusion.

Stop popping into my head like that, asshole.

"Job... what do you mean?"

"A job is a job. I'm asking you to do a job. For a gold coin."

Inukashi snapped his fingers smartly. The man blinked. The shade of suspicion in his eyes grew more pronounced.

The man was called Getsuyaku. His job was managing the cleaning duties at the Correctional Facility. He was Inukashi's acquaintance. A while had passed since Inukashi had first started receiving his stock of Facility waste and leftover food from Getsuyaku. Of course, it was an under-the-table transaction; it was smuggling. About once every three days, Inukashi received a portion of leftover food and waste, and handed Getsuyaku an amount that was appropriate for the load. It was usually a few copper coins. If there was a considerable find, a silver coin.

But this was probably the first time they had exchanged so many words with each other. It was always only a couple words, things like: "This is it"; "Thanks. Your payment, then"; "Right"; they didn't even count as conversations, and they didn't make eye contact either. It had always been this way.

Getsuyaku was in charge of managing and incinerating the waste produced by the Correctional Facility, as well as operating the cleaning robots inside. In a small room adjacent to the waste collection area and the incinerator, he spent the whole day alone, operating machines. "When I'm here, I don't say a word all day. I don't see anyone, I don't talk to anyone. It's really lonely. Sometimes I can't tell if I'm still a human, or becoming a machine myself." One day, on a rare

occurrence, Getsuyaku had loosed a string of complaints. Inukashi had given him offhanded answers. *That must be hard*, he had nodded, but had responded scathingly in his mind.

Stop acting like a baby.

The monitoring room for the disposal of leftover food and other trash was located in the most remote part of the Correctional Facility. All of the trash produced in the facility was collected here. The machines sorted through it and carried it to the incinerator; machines adjusted the temperature of the incineration, and disposed of the ashes. Almost the entire procedure was completed automatically. Getsuyaku's only job was monitoring and tuning the machines. One person was enough for the job. Sure, a workplace without anyone to talk to was probably lonely. So what? You wouldn't die from not speaking for a day.

Try living a life where you're so, so hungry that all you can think about all day is food. Try spending your days licking pebbles on the road to stave off your hunger. Loneliness? That's just a luxurious toy for you people who don't have to worry about filling your bellies.

But Inukashi only remarked in his mind. Out loud, he feigned pity, saying things like, "that must be hard". Getsuyaku was an important partner in trade. Nothing good would come out of getting on his bad side.

Although the sorting, incineration, and cleaning of the incinerating chamber were all automated, the step before the sorting required human hands. It was the task of transferring the trash from the collection area to the conveyor belt. For some reason, this step was the only one that was not automated. Getsuyaku had to operate a small power shovel himself to lift the trash onto the conveyor belt. Sometimes he even had to use an archaic tool like the shovel to scrape it out by hand. At this step, he would swiftly set aside raw garbage, or clothes that still looked wearable, and hide them. Inukashi bought the lot off of

him: that was how it worked. Inukashi distributed his wares to the food vendors and secondhand clothes merchants in the West Block, and made a decent amount of money.

For Inukashi, it was a heaven-sent fortune that there was a manual task before the automated process. It was thanks to this that he was even in business.

Getsuyaku's workplace was equipped with neither surveillance cameras nor security systems. If anything happened, Getsuyaku himself had to flick the emergency switch on the corner of his control panel. "I don't imagine they would actually come to help, even if I did flick it." Inukashi remembered Getsuyaku muttering as if to himself, gazing at the red switch.

Although facility employees were normally taken from the general gates to their respective sections by shuttle bus, Inukashi had heard that Getsuyaku was the only one being crammed into an outdated compact automobile.

"Being treated like that makes me feel ashamed of myself. I don't have pride in myself anymore."

This was probably another one of his complaints. These days, Getsuyaku's complaints had increased noticeably.

Pride? Hah, first loneliness, and now pride? So you're pulling out another luxurious toy to show off, huh? Geez, the least you could do is talk about something that would fill my stomach.

These were, of course, remarks confined to his mind.

He didn't care about Getsuyaku's loneliness or pride. What mattered was that this was the one and only place that was off the dense map of surveillance criss-crossing far and wide throughout the Correctional Facility. It was also the one and only place which was connected directly to both the West Block and No. 6 without any barriers. He could naturally see why Nezumi had set his sights here. However, it

was impossible to go beyond and get inside the Correctional Facility from here. The hallway leading into the main parts were blocked by double doors, and they were made so that they could not be opened from Getsuyaku's end.

Whoever designed this stout building had made it into a kind of dungeon where infiltration and escape were both exceedingly difficult; maybe this guy had poured so much life's blood into the effort that he didn't have attention to spare for the waste disposal system. Or, maybe he never had any consideration for the people managing the waste. Even in the Security Bureau, which presided over the Correctional Facility, there would probably be no officials at all who were concerned about Getsuyaku's working conditions. If an accident happened during the operation, and Getsuyaku suffered a life-threatening wound, not in a thousand chances would the Facility doors open from the inside to admit paramedics. The doors would remain closed, and Getsuyaku would be left to die.

It felt strange, to think of it this way.

As a resident of Lost Town, Getsuyaku was a semi-citizen. But it didn't change the fact that he lived inside the city. He may be poor, but he could live without fearing starvation and the pain of freezing in the cold. He was fortunate enough to be able to complain of loneliness. To people of the West Block like Inukashi, his lifestyle was equivalent to heaven.

Inukashi could tell even from their sparse exchange of words that Getsuyaku was an honest and amiable man. But even Getsuyaku's gaze sometimes carried a hint of scorn or superiority when he looked at Inukashi, the West Block resident.

I'm still higher than him.

I can eat 'til I'm full.

I don't have to freeze in the dead of winter.

I am a citizen of No. 6.

That's why I'm higher than him.

It was a funny story.

People put other people into classes. Those who were looked down upon and slighted turned around and looked down upon others and slighted them. This was not a mechanism of society that forced them; people established such order in their own hearts, of their own will.

Getsuyaku, who was treated like less than a machine by the upper class of No. 6, who lamented this treatment, and even complained about it, showed a superior attitude to Inukashi, because he lived in a corner of the West Block. He condescended upon him.

It was a funny story. And it was strange.

Sometimes he thought humans were even more foolish animals than dogs. Dogs also had a social order, but it was based on their strength. Dogs didn't rank themselves based on pedigree, the state of their coat, or where they were born.

Humans weren't bothered at all at doing something even dogs didn't do. Humans— what ridiculous—

We're all the same.

He suddenly recalled a voice. It rang faintly deep inside his ears. It wasn't Nezumi's. Nezumi's voice was vivid too, but it wasn't as soft as this.

Shion...

He's a weird, pampered boy with white hair. Not to mention he's a most-wanted criminal on the run. Top-class criminal. That's something you can't just wake up and decide to be one day. Leaves me in awe, really. But on the other hand, he did turn out to be an airhead with a capital A... just baffles me. He's such a weirdo.

But he'd said this once.

They're the same humans as us, Inukashi.

And then I asked him.

Are you and I the same humans?

Yeah.

Are the people of No. 6 the same humans as us? The answer had come back, clearly, with not a hint of hesitation.

Yeah.

Shion. He was a weirdo, through and through.

Hey, Shion. Don't you have any sense of hierarchy in your heart? Don't you draw lines between groups of people at all? Don't you ever feel contempt towards other people, and then feel you're better because of it?

Shion, as humans, are we really all equal?

"What do you mean by... job?" A hoarse voice questioned him. Inukashi's mind, which had been deeply immersed in thought, took a while to respond.

"Eh?"

"The gold-coin job... what do I have to do?"

"Oh! Right, that." *He sure swallowed the bait easier than I imagined. This old man must really need the money.*

"Just to let you know, I'm not taking any dangerous jobs," Getsuyaku said hastily. "My baby is due in the spring. I've still got to work and keep earning a solid wage into the future. Under no circumstances whatsoever will I take a job that endangers my life."

I see. Fine, fine. You don't want to get yourself in danger. But you still need money desperately, enough to do almost anything. I see.

Inukashi narrowed his eyes and let a slow smile spread across his lips. This was also an expression he had picked up from Nezumi. When you wanted to entice someone, you smiled at them gently, like this.

If possible, so beautifully that the other's breath would catch in his throat . . .

Fat chance I'd be able to pull it off. I'm no actor. I can't put people under a spell as easily as Nezumi does.

He tried smiling anyway. *And then... then what next, Nezumi?*

He felt his heart racing. His heart pounded against his chest. He heard the thudding in his ears. His palms were sweating as he clenched his hands into fists. Sweat streamed down his back. His throat was dry, and his tongue felt like sandpaper.

Inukashi realized he was almost nervous out of his wits.

He realized he had to lure this man into his trap using any method he could get his hands on. He had to get the man to do what he wanted, no matter what it took. He had to make him do it. If he failed, Nezumi and Shion's escape route would be completely closed off. He would never be able to see them again.

They had made a reckless bet from the beginning, anyway. There was less than a one-percent chance of them escaping the Correctional Facility. Those two had embarked anyway. He thought they were stupid to do so. Fools of fools. It was logical for fools to perish. They were reaping the rewards for what they had sown.

I know that's how it is, I know. But—

But I'm still wishing they'd return. I find myself still wanting to see them again. Yeah, sure, I've got my sights set on the gold bullion, too. My eyes are dazzled by the mountain of gold. But I want to see them too. I want to hear with these ears again, Nezumi's sarcasm and laugh, Shion's awkward way of speaking.

'Oh, you're back.'

'So I am. I told you I'd come back. I don't make empty promises.'

'Egh, stop trying to act cool. Does that mean I get to hear you prattle on forever again? Gee, I can hardly wait.'

'Inukashi, I'm sorry for worrying you.'

'Worry? Hah, Shion, are you still dreaming? I haven't been worried even a teeny—'

'You were worried about us, right?'

'Idiot.'

He wanted to have that sort of conversation with them. He wanted to exchange words with them. *I... I'm actually, seriously, praying that you guys will survive, and that you guys will come back still living. I won't pray to God. I won't cling to Him. I'll pray to myself, and cling to myself. I'll do whatever I can push myself to manage. Without ever giving up... I'll keep on believing in myself and in you guys.*

Isn't that what praying is, Nezumi?

Getsuyaku saw Inukashi's smile, and drew his chin back. So it didn't go as well as with Nezumi. Go figure. There was probably something awkward about it. And that had made Getsuyaku feel apprehensive.

Inukashi cleared his throat, and pursed his lips.

"Isn't that nice. Congratulations. Don't worry, I'm not gonna ask you something as idiotic as your life in exchange for pay. It's an easy job. Very easy. But it's also something only you can do. That's why it's worth one gold coin."

"It's easy, but worth one gold coin," Getsuyaku repeated suspiciously.

"I told you, it's something only you could do. I have no choice but to cling to you, Getsuyaku-san. Really. Only you can do it. And I know you'd be able to do it."

Getsuyaku's face relaxed very slightly.

Only you can do it.

And you would be able to do it.

You had to tickle his pride. Caress him gently with words. It would no doubt soothe his battered and stinging self-respect.

"I'm begging you. Work with me, Getsuyaku-san."

"It's not that easy... what are you saying I have to do?"

"I want you to send the cleaning robots haywire."

"Huh?"

"You monitor the cleaning robots as well as doing waste disposal, don't you?"

"Ah—well, yeah. Monitoring goes as far as me pressing the control switch on the robots that are on standby, though. The robots start moving on their own, and commence cleaning. I'm only in charge of monthly tune-ups."

"When's the next tune-up?"

"In a week."

"Couldn't you make it tomorrow?"

"Tomorrow? Tomorrow is the Holy Celebration."

"It is, isn't it? It's a holiday in No. 6."

"It—it's a holiday, which means most workers are off... including me."

"You don't get the day off," Inukashi replied. "You told me before yourself. You only have three days off a month, and even the Holy Celebration isn't part of that. You were mumbling complaints about it."

"Well—B-but..."

"It should be easy. You come up with some excuse like you're noticing something weird in their movements, and push the maintenance a week earlier. That's all there is to it."

"No, there's no way—"

"You *could* do it. You must've had a lot of similar cases in the past." Shion had told him once.

“Cleaning robots are actually required to perform more complicated motions than you’d expect. If they were like Ippo and the rest—(here Inukashi had unwittingly blurted out a question as to what Ippo was. He was exasperated to hear it was the robot’s name. Supposedly Shion’s dead colleague had named him. *Said he named them Ippo, Niho, and Sampo. One-step, Two-step, and Three-step. Hah, I can’t believe how placid this guy was.* He had found it funny that the airheaded boy even called the robots’ names lovingly, like he did to the mice)—and only had to clean the park, they would only have to make relatively simple movements, because there’s no strict sorting of trash. But they’re operating inside a building, and not the average household either: you’ve got trash from various sections all coming together. One simple type of movement isn’t gonna be enough. The type of trash and how soiled it is is going to vary according to what section it comes from, so I’m pretty sure the mechanisms are much more complicated too.”

“Which means it needs meticulous maintenance. And you can’t rule out them breaking down.”

That was Nezumi’s line, if I remember. And Shion had nodded.

“Judging from my experience, I’m pretty sure they experience a lot of petty trouble. Their distinguishing functions decline, or their movements turn sluggish, or something like that.”

“I see.”

Then Nezumi put on that wan smile of his, and glanced at me. It wasn’t a gaze I liked. It was a meaningful glance, and somewhat suggestive. Nothing good ever comes out of him making eyes like that. I broke eye contact in a hurry. It was already too late, though.

Back then, I didn’t understand fully what his gaze meant. Now I know. ‘Inukashi, this is your chance to shine. It’s a key role. Play it well.’

I know. You just watch, Nezumi. I’ll pull it off so well, it’ll blow your

hammy acting away.

"I heard the cleaning robots break down a lot. Am I wrong?"

Getsuyaku knitted his brow. He answered grudgingly. "Well, it doesn't happen *that* often."

"So what about speeding up the maintenance day, hm? It's not unnatural at all."

"Well, I mean... it's not something I can't do, but..."

Inukashi had to keep himself from bursting out laughing. *This guy is way too truthful.*

He found it hilarious that Getsuyaku couldn't help giving him straight answers, even though he was supposed to be apprehensive towards Inukashi. But this wasn't the time to be laughing, and he didn't have the concentration to spare. Inukashi set his jaw. He had to pull this man onto their side, even if he had to take advantage of the man's straight-laced and honest nature.

"If you can't not do it, it means you can, right, Getsuyaku-san?"

"Scheduling the maintenance earlier isn't... well, it isn't impossible. But what do you mean by making the robots go haywire?"

"Just that. I want you to do a little rigging so that it does the opposite of cleaning."

"Opposite?"

"Make it spit out trash, all the trash that it's accumulated in itself. And I want you to mix this in with it."

Inukashi took out a jar with a small capsule inside, and showed it to him.

"What's this?"

"It's nothing dangerous, you can relax. It just releases a bit of an odour. It's not even that strong. This capsule starts melting when it touches the air. Very gradually, though."

“Why do I have to mix this in? Not to mention making the robot spit it back out.”

“It’s a prank.” Inukashi shrugged, and gave a show of chuckling. But he didn’t find it funny at all. His whole body was damp with sweat. He was in no state to be laughing.

But he still did. He showed Getsuyaku a smile like one of a child devising a little prank. Getsuyaku wasn’t laughing. His face made it clear that he wasn’t believing a word of what Inukashi said.

Geez, talk about ingrained suspicions. He must be made up of a lot of Coward.

“If a robot starts spewing trash and odours everywhere, it’s gonna cause a commotion. No mistake about that, right?” Inukashi continued nevertheless.

Getsuyaku nodded. His fingers were still clenched around the gold coin.

“No mistake about a commotion. Those guys inside the Facility, prisoners aside, are always working in comfortable and immaculate rooms. They most likely haven’t even gotten dirty before. Yeah—I’m pretty sure they haven’t even touched trash in their life.”

“Right? No one thinks about how tough and important your job is. So this is why you’re gonna pull a little prank. The cleaning robot goes haywire, and starts strewing trash everywhere. Those guys inside will make a big deal, and what’ll they do first—?”

“Order me to stop the robot.”

“Exactly. And you’ll do that. Then—then, you’ll probably be called inside the building.”

“To repair the robot? Mm, well, that would happen, I guess.”

“And cleaning up the aftermath. You’ll be ordered to clean the garbage that was spilled. No one else can do the cleaning job. You’ll be summoned. And it’ll open.”

“What?”

“The doors. The doors which you could never open from your side will open up to you. You’ll go through them, carrying your outdated cleaning equipment. Around that time, the capsule is gonna start to melt, and the odour will start spreading. If it’s not melting properly, step on it a bit. That might be more effective, yeah,” Inukashi murmured to himself.

“And oh, you don’t needa worry. Like I said, it doesn’t smell that bad. The smell sensors might activate, but the danger level is still gonna be zero. My nose is probably too used to it to even pick it up. But those guys on their cushy perches are gonna take it *hard*. The commotion will get even worse. Then, you’ll pretend to be in a rush to clean up the trash, and—”

Now, this is the real deal.

Inukashi lowered his voice, and whispered into Getsuyaku’s ear.

One, two words.

Getsuyaku’s whole body went rigid. His mouth fell half-open, and a set of strong-looking white teeth peeked through.

“Th... There’s absolutely no way I could do that.”

“Why not? It’s so easy. I think using a power shovel is harder than this.”

“And if anyone finds out? I’ll get fired—no, probably worse. I’ll be arrested by the Security Bureau, and... oh, no, stop,” he moaned. “Just the thought of it is scaring me enough to give me goosebumps. No thanks. That’s a resounding No. Go home, Inukashi. I’ll give this back to you.”

Getsuyaku thrust the gold coin back at him. It was a real one; it glimmered faintly. Inukashi twisted his lips into a smile. He felt like this one was a little better than the last one.

“Give it back, huh. I see. Not tempted by material desires?”

“My life is more important than material desires.”

Inukashi gently placed his own tan hand on Getsuyaku’s upturned palm.

“Ooh—” Getsuyaku gulped his breath. The gold coin in his hand had turned into two. “Hey, Inukashi, I’m not—”

“One more.” He placed a third gold coin onto his palm. “Three gold coins. How about it?”

“Why—why are you—offering so much...”

“The job I’m asking you is worth this much. If it goes well, I’ll give you three more as your compensation.”

“Inukashi, what are you getting at? This isn’t just any old prank, is it? It can’t be. And where did you come across this much money?”

“No need for questions. This is what I’m asking—do you take it or leave it? Actually, you can’t really turn it down anymore.”

“W-Why not? *I will* turn it down. See: I won’t take it,” Getsuyaku said stubbornly.

“No can do. You sold me inside information. Did you already forget?” He tried licking his bottom lip. It was dry and sandy. The palpitations in his chest had settled down. Watching the blood recede from Getsuyaku’s face, Inukashi widened his smile.

I’m alright. I’m calm. I won’t panic and end up messing up the finishing touch. I’m alright.

“You told me the other day, where the electric circuitry was inside the Correctional Facility.”

“That was—well... it was only a broad idea of what I knew.”

“But you still told me. No, you sold it to me. Two silver coins that time, I think it was. You sold me information about your workplace to me for two silver coins. If that gets found out, it’s gonna be worse than getting fired, it’s gonna be—”

"I-I needed money!" Getsuyaku protested. "My wife fell ill, and I had to take her to the doctor's."

"Yeah. You're a good guy, a family man. But you think the authorities are gonna take that reason? *I sold information for two silver coins to a West Block resident so I could feed my family.* I'm sorry. What're the guys at the Security Bureau gonna do if you confess that, huh? Are they gonna give you a pat on the back and say, 'that must have been tough on you'? No way. That would never happen, you know that. Even you understand your own position and how dangerous the Security Bureau can be, don't you? Oooh, terrifying. I'm getting goosebumps just thinking about it."

Inukashi rubbed his bare arms. Getsuyaku's face turned even more colourless and flat, and looked like a sad caricature drawn on a piece of paper.

"A-Are you blackmailing me?"

"I just told you the truth. For free."

Getsuyaku made a strangled noise in his throat. Inukashi patted him lightly on the shoulder.

"It's alright, man. No danger is gonna swoop down on you. I'll ensure it. Think about it: you've been a hard-working man up until now. You're registered legitimately as a citizen. Who's gonna be suspicious of you? No one. It's because no one's paying attention to you. No one is watching you."

"But the surveillance cameras—"

"If you make suspicious movements, you'll be caught. But if you move naturally and unnoticeably, then fooling the camera is a piece of cake. Machines might be able to send you clear images, but they can't display what's inside your mind. Either way, it doesn't change the fact that you've already set one foot in."

Inukashi put the gold coins back in his hand and made him clasp it.

“You’ll take the job for me, won’t you, Getsuyaku-san?”

“Uh... only once. Just this once.”

“Thank you,” Inukashi said graciously. “Tomorrow, then. Right before your shift ends.”

“Right... and you’ll really give me the rest of the gold?”

“This is where humans and dogs are different. We don’t lie. Once we make a promise, we always carry it out.”

“But—huh?”

“What?”

“Didn’t you hear a baby crying?”

“Baby? I didn’t hear nothin’.”

“I could swear I heard—”

“Maybe you thought you heard it. Isn’t your baby coming soon? That’s why you think the wind howling is a baby crying. But, see, I’m right: once the baby’s born, you’ll need even more money. You’ll need a warm bed for him, and nutritious milk.”

Getsuyaku moved his lips as if to say something. Instead, he promptly closed the door of the monitoring room without a word.

Once the light that spilled from the room was cut off, a heavy darkness wrapped around Inukashi. The frozen night air whistled past his feet.

Phew. He let out a great sigh. Even in this frigid weather, his whole body was dripping with sweat. His shoulders felt heavy, probably because his muscles had been tense.

Phew. This time, he intentionally let out his breath. As he breathed back in, cold air slid deep down into his chest, and swirled around.

Did it go well? Was I able to tie their lifeline down properly?

I’m not confident I did.

Getsuyaku, that fearful and goodhearted man, would probably worry. He would waver. He would probably hum and haw until the last minute, unable to make up his mind.

What'll I do? What should I do? Keep going? Call it off? Oh, what should I do. What should I do.

What last-minute decision would Getsuyaku make? Would he act as Inukashi hoped? He wasn't confident of the answer.

Human minds are like the ends of a thin branch.

They get shaken by the wind so easily.

I guess I just have to believe.

Not Getsuyaku. He had to believe his own fortune. Shion's face rose in his mind. Nezumi's profile did, too.

Guess I just have to believe in them.

He walked briskly through the darkness. A dark shadow shifted beside the cart holding leftover food. He heard hiccupping sobs.

"Stop making him cry," Inukashi said with a sharp click of his tongue. He pulled his face into a scowl. "What good are you as babysitter? Take care of him properly. At least just make sure he doesn't wail like that, I'm begging you, old man."

"I'm the one that wants to cry here, geez," Rikiga rejoined with a click of his own tongue while holding the baby. He was probably scowling, too. Inukashi just couldn't see through the darkness that shrouded him.

"Look, Shionn. Your mama's back. Isn't that nice."

"Who're you calling mama?"

"Who cares? I'm certainly not the mama. Here." Inukashi was handed the baby, wrapped in a soft blanket. The blanket was something Rikiga had gotten. Inukashi could feel the baby's warmth and weight in his arms. The baby felt a little heavier.

Could it be? No way. It's probably just me.

The baby he had picked up out of the rubble suckled at a dog's nipple, flailed his arms and legs, laughed often, and cried all the time. He had large, roving eyes and plump cheeks.

"Mama," the baby stretched his arms out to Inukashi. It looked like he was searching, longing, or calling for something.

"See, he's calling you Mama," Rikiga said. "He did miss his mummy."

"He probably couldn't stand your boozy breath, old man. Ooh, there there. Poor thing. That must've sucked, Shionn."

"So?"

"Hm?"

"How did it turn out?"

"Dunno. I did everything I could. I did what Nezumi told me to."

Rikiga sniffed.

"Eve, huh. What an insolent little bastard. He's off getting himself tossed into the Correctional Facility, and he still has the gall to give orders to us. Who does he think he is?"

"Nezumi is Nezumi, man. He doesn't 'think' he's anything. Besides, they didn't get tossed in there. They went through those gates of their own will."

"The gates of Hell."

"Hey, old man."

"What?"

"Do you think they'll come back?"

"When they've gone through the gates of Hell? Impossible. It would take a miracle for that to happen."

"I hear miracles happen pretty easily. Nezumi said so before."

“Eve is a fraud. You couldn’t find any truth in his words that’s bigger than a fly’s head. You know, Inukashi, I—I really do want Shion to come back, though.”

“How about Nezumi?”

“I don’t care about Eve. I wouldn’t mind not seeing him for the rest of my life. Actually, I couldn’t be happier if I didn’t have to see him. Brighter prospects for me, at least. Hmph.”

Inukashi laughed silently. Rikiga was in a terrible mood. He found it funny. He knew the reason why, and that made it funnier.

“Tsukiyo.” Inukashi lowered his voice and called the little mouse’s name. Shion had named this one too. Hamlet, Cravat, Tsukiyo... it was a strange thing. Once he knew their names, he found he could distinguish between each of them, when they had only been “just the mice” to him before.

It was strange, indeed.

Chit.

A black mouse appeared from under the belly of a similarly black dog, which was sprawled out on the ground.

“A message for your master: I’ve done what you told me to do. Tomorrow evening, everything springs into action.”

Chit.

“I’ll pray so you can reach your master safely, Tsukiyo.”

Cheep-cheep-cheep!

The mouse disappeared swiftly into the darkness.

“Does it know where Eve is?”

“I reckon.”

“Does he understand what you say?”

“He can probably understand you too, old man. As long as you’re sober, he’ll understand what you’re trying to say.”

“Why? He’s just a mouse.”

“He’s not just a mouse. Ordinary mice don’t understand human words. Those mice are unusually smart. They can understand words, and the intention we put behind them. It’s no wonder Nezumi treats them so preciously.”

“Why aren’t they ordinary mice?”

“How the hell am I supposed to know that?”

“Are they microrobots?”

“No. Completely natural living things. They just have intellect. Shion, you know, he was even *reading* to the mice. Some classic called Whachamacallit. I bet you’ve never read any classics before, have ya, old man?”

“Never read any classic called Whachamacallit before,” Rikiga responded sarcastically. “So why do these mice have intellect?”

“I said I dunno. They’re Nezumi’s, after all. I wouldn’t find it strange if they were somehow extraordinary.”

“Of course it’s strange. Where did Eve get those mice?”

“Old man.”

“What?”

“Why are you so hung up about them? What, you wondering if you can make a little extra cash by using those mice?”

“Of course not,” Rikiga said crossly. “Like I would have anything to do with Eve’s mice. I wouldn’t touch them even if they had gold coins in their mouths.”

Inukashi found it hard to believe that Rikiga would let a mouse with a gold coin go uncaptured, but he only shrugged in response, and didn’t say anything.

Mice that understand human language...

One of those mice had delivered Inukashi a letter during the day. It was from Nezumi. The words were scrawled with a thin pen.

Inukashi: I've ordered this letter to be sent to you after the Hunt. Knowing my mice, they would definitely have made sure it got delivered.

The letter began with no formal opening or seasonal greeting, and read rather standoffishly.

Doesn't he even know how to write a proper letter? Or does he think I'm not good enough for a greeting? If that's so then, well, what a rude prick. Nevertheless, a letter from Nezumi was unexpected and unusual, and his eyes were glued to the letter even while he complained. He read, and he growled.

On the letter were detailed instructions for those left behind in the West Block. Only after reading the letter did Inukashi finally realize what meaning was behind the meaningful and suggestive look in Nezumi's eyes.

I see. This is what you want me to do. What a touching love letter you've given me.

This guy is just rotten. Not that it's anything new.

He took a deep breath. He had to decide: whether to crush the letter in his hand and pretend he never saw it, or act on Nezumi's orders.

A short moment of hesitation came and went. Inukashi folded the letter neatly, and exhaled a long breath.

Apart from instructions for Inukashi, there were also detailed orders for Rikiga as well. That was the source of Rikiga's discontent.

"The brat thinks he can order me around. Damnit, I feel like that despicable rat is remote-controlling me. Pisses me off."

“Then you’ll ignore it?”

“I can’t just do that. Shion’s life is on the line.”

“The mountain of gold bullion is also on the line.”

“Exactly.”

Love and greed. These two conditions were often all it took to get most people moving. For the amount of continuous complaints that streamed from Rikiga’s mouth, he moved surprisingly swiftly and efficiently. He had brought in a stock of micro-bombs. He had probably had them prepared a while ago in advance.

He had said he had spent ungodly amounts of money. But if they were going to get that gold bullion, it was a small sacrifice.

Both Inukashi and Rikiga had accomplished half of Nezumi’s orders. Now there was the other half. This was the critical moment.

“We know for sure that Tsukiyo and the rest are on our side. Isn’t that enough peace of mind for now?” Inukashi voiced his honest thoughts. Whether it be a human, dog, or little mouse, as long as they weren’t enemies, it was something to be thankful for. He wished Rikiga would worry about this “strangeness” and “mystery” business later, when they weren’t in such a tight situation.

It’s been obvious since, like, a hundred years ago that Nezumi is someone you just can’t figure out, old man.

“Abah, abah, abah.” Shionn babbled animatedly.

“Congratulate us, Shionn.” Inukashi lifted the tiny body up to the night sky, where the stars were winking. “Celebrate for us. For our present, and our future.”

“Babhuh.” Shionn suddenly lifted his arms, wrapped in a tattered cloth. He reached straight up as if to indicate at something.

“What?” Inukashi looked up to see the golden city. The Holy City of No. 6, glittering, tore through the inky darkness.

Shionn's tiny fingers were stopped right on that golden light.

"It's No. 6. What about it? Did it catch your eye?"

Shionn wasn't smiling. He wasn't crying, either. With his purple-tinted eyes opened wide, all he did was stare intently at No. 6.

3

THE REASON WHY

*When people built the public office
wasn't the reason why
so it could take away their perils
and create a bright and peaceful world?
But the citizens suffer hardship, and the officials bloat with riches
On the vast earth, not a single one
of the citizens can voice their woe
So they take to their brushes, and entrust it to song.*

CHINESE FOLKSONG

SAFU LET out a scream.

This is me?

Why, why, why...

“Safu, are you awake? Good morning. How do you feel? Ah, I see all your cognitive senses have returned to normal. Splendid.”

This is me?

No, this isn't me.

This isn't me.

“What are you talking about? Look. You are beautiful. Not only beautiful—yes, soon you will have both beauty and power in your hands. And immortal life. Brilliant, is it not?”

No. No.

Help me.

Turn me back.

Turn me back to who I was.

“Safu. You cannot let yourself get over-excited. It hurts, doesn’t it? Yes, when your emotions are agitated, it causes pain. Headaches. So, calm. Calm down. Calm down, and think of the appropriate state you should be in. Yes... good girl. I will help you. Yes, calm down...”

Shion...

Where is Shion?

“Forget him. You have been reborn. Forget everything from before. Everything. No people, no names, or memories are of use to you anymore, Safu.”

I don’t want to forget.

I can’t forget.

I... won’t forget.

“You know, Safu, tomorrow is a festival. A day to celebrate the birth of this city. A celebratory festival. It’s called ‘The Holy Celebration’. You know about it too, I’m sure. You were a former citizen, after all.”

Shion.

Shion, where are you?

“Festivals are utter foolishness. Everyone makes a senseless ruckus and they don’t even realize what they’re celebrating for. Foolish, aren’t they? It would be troublesome if they weren’t, however. Ha ha ha... The real Holy ones are right here. You and I. Shall we give a toast, Safu? Will you have wine?”

I will not forget.

I will not forget you.

I would never be able to forget you.

“Safu, why are you expressing sadness? I’m planning a very splendid gift for you, you know. Soon. I will lead you to become an existence everyone would admire.”

I will keep remembering you.

Because this is my own heart.

I will not... forget.

“How troublesome. I thought you would be less of an obstinate child. I’m a little disappointed, Safu. Very well, then. Soon you will see the extent of my magnanimity. Then you will prostrate yourself and feel gratitude for me. See, Safu? Oh, yes, we’ll no longer need this name anymore either. Let us throw it away. A new future is waiting for you, after all. See? Doesn’t it excite you just thinking about it?”

I will not throw away my soul.

I will not lose my memories.

My feelings will not be stolen from me.

Shion,

where...

“Come on. Come over here.”

Shion, where are you?

* * *

Shion finished talking. He recalled, in as much detail as possible, the past few years starting from the stormy night when he met Nezumi, to where he stood today. He knew no amount of talking could tell his whole story. He didn’t have the confidence that he could accurately

tell all that had caused him such turmoil. But he told anyway. Rooting out the buds of countless emotions that had begun to sprout in his soul, to the best of his ability, he calmly and objectively told of his own experiences, what he had seen and heard, the scenery which spread before his eyes, and the sounds which had travelled through his eardrums. At least he had meant to.

But still, his voice shook at the end. He couldn't help the plea from creeping into his tone.

I am weak. So powerless. I can't even repress my emotions with my own strength.

He clenched his fist.

You knew, Shion. You've known this for a long time. You've been forced to face the reality of how weak you really are, over and over, before you came here. What's the use being afraid of your own powerlessness and ignorance now? You can be ashamed, but you can't be afraid. If you falter, you won't be able to move forward again. You've come this far. You can't turn back. You're not that weak.

Shion took a deep breath, and continued his words.

"I want to help Safu. I'll do anything to get her out. That's what I've come here for. Nezumi brought me here. I can't begin to imagine where this is, or how I can infiltrate the Correctional Facility from here. But no matter what, I have to accomplish it. That much I can be certain of. And... I'm the one that got Nezumi involved. Nezumi risked danger for me... that's also the truth."

The elder remained silent. They were wrapped in stillness. The silence was heavy on them, and Shion felt like he could even feel his bones creaking.

Beside him, Nezumi crouched. He picked up the shirt which had slid from Shion's hand without him knowing, and handed it back to him.

"Thanks."

Heh.

Nezumi chuckled.

“Your manners don’t leave you in this situation either, do they, young master? Maybe add ‘ignorant brat who thinks highly of himself’ to that nickname, while you’re at it.”

“Me? Think highly of myself?”

“Yeah. I didn’t come here for you. Don’t flatter yourself too much, young master.”

Before Shion could respond, Nezumi turned aside. His expressionless profile rejected Shion’s gaze and words.

“Rou.” The elder didn’t respond to Nezumi’s call. He remained unmoving, with his eyes closed. He looked like he was either meditating, or reciting a prayer in his head.

“Rou, there’s nothing false about Shion’s story. It’s all truth. There have been casualties in No. 6 from parasite wasps. Shion was spared. But most of everyone else won’t be. They all die strangely—” Here Nezumi shut his mouth, and glanced at Shion. A shadow of doubt wavered in his eyes, though only very slightly.

“Rou? Are you listening to me?”

The elder’s head nodded slightly. “I am. Your voice projects well, and reaches the ears of your listeners very clearly.”

“Has it reached your heart?”

“Of course.”

“Then I want you to answer me. I want you to tell me.”

“The fate of No. 6?”

“No, I don’t need to ask anyone to find that out. I know what’s gonna happen to it: destruction and extinction. I’ll be the one to pull the trigger.”

“Then... what do you wish to ask?”

“What the parasite wasps really are.”

Shion let out a soft cry. He looked at Nezumi’s profile wide-eyed, and then shifted his gaze to the elder.

“You are telling me to divulge the truth about the parasite wasps?” the elder said.

“Yeah.”

“Why ... do you ask me this?”

“Because you know,” Nezumi answered. “I have a feeling you do. I’ve been thinking all this time: maybe, just maybe ... you know most of everything I’d want to know.” Nezumi exhaled. The stiff angles of his profile gave way, and doubt shaded his face even more darkly.

“You know, because you were formerly of No. 6, as a citizen ... no, as a creator. Am I wrong?”

This time, no voice escaped Shion’s lips. It was caught in his throat.

Creator? This elderly man?

“Is what I’m saying incorrect? Rou.”

The elder didn’t reply. Nezumi turned his face up at the ceiling. There was only a pool of dusky gloom. But Nezumi blinked at it rapidly, as if he were staring at something blinding. Then with an unusually languid movement, he raised his arm up.

“This.” He was holding a square piece of paper between his fingers. He passed it to the elder. It was a photo, an outdated one that was still printed on special photo paper.

“The alcoholic old man had it. Your mama’s in it too,” he said to Shion. “I took the liberty of borrowing it from his files.”

“Oh, that ...” It was one of the photos that had been mixed in with the jumbled contents of several folders. They had been strewn about on the floor when the two had last visited Rikiga from the directions on Karan’s memo. In the photo were his mother and her friends, several

decades younger. He remembered hearing Rikiga, a former journalist, say that this was the photo he took the last time he ever entered into No. 6.

Back in those days, No. 6 hadn't been as closed off. There was no law yet that required a city-issued permit to enter or exit, and it wasn't like now where anyone who didn't possess a permit was prohibited from entering under any reason or circumstance. The special gates and alloy walls also hadn't been completed yet. Rikiga had said that it was still a time when travelling to and from No. 6's surroundings had been relatively easy.

"The young woman in the centre is Shion's mother. Her name is Karan."

"Karan."

"You know her, don't you? You're in the picture with her. Or have you long forgotten her?"

"With her? This man, with my mother?" Shion was surprised. He could tell his mouth was gaping open. He couldn't help but stare openly at the snowy-haired elder. He knew how insolent his gaze was, but he could not avert it.

He knows my mother? To think that this man who had settled in these underground caves, was called "elder" by the others, was connected to Karan. It was unbelievable, if nothing else.

Unbelievable, how can that...? For an instant, the surprise hit him so hard he felt like the core of his brain was tingling.

Since meeting Nezumi, the boundaries of his world had broken. The world he had lived in before had all but collapsed. Everything was full of surprises. Things he had believed in, had never had a doubt about, inverted and showed an opposite face. He experienced this heart-stopping realization many, many times.

Astonishment, awe, stunned silence, perplexity, and pain. He had experienced so many emotions and sensations. But he was also being forced to come to terms with how ignorant he had been before he met Nezumi, and how he had lived not knowing anything, and not trying to know.

That was why it hurt. It hurt enough to make him gasp in pain. But even so—he vowed not to hesitate at being surprised and perplexed.

Shion, in his own way, hoped to see the truth about himself and the world he lived in. He had also resolved to see *through* it all. He didn't hesitate at being surprised or confounded; on the contrary, every time he was surprised or confounded, he felt a layer peel away, and a new facet of the world unfold before his eyes. He had even come to revere the experience.

But this time, he was simply astonished. He fixed his eyes on the elder with his mouth open. Nezumi's fingers touched his lips. Why were his fingers always so cold? A feeling most distant from surprise or perplexity flitted across the back of Shion's mind. Nezumi clicked his tongue softly.

"Shut it. You have the most unbelievably idiotic expression on your face right now."

"No way..." Shion whispered. "*This* is what's unbelievable... Nezumi, what's going on? How does my mother factor into this? This man and my mother know each other... what does it mean?"

"How should I know?" Nezumi retorted. "I'm asking you because I don't. See that photo the alcoholic had: the one standing beside your mama is—" Nezumi swallowed. "It's Rou."

The photo slid from the elder's fingers. It fluttered to the ground like a flower petal.

"I was surprised too, when I first saw this photo," Nezumi said. "I probably had the same kind of expression on my face, though probably

not as idiotic as yours.”

Nezumi picked the photo up, and held it out for Shion to see. Shion leaned forward, and squinted at it. It was a rather aged photograph. Several young men and women were standing in front of a grey building. Karan was standing in the middle of them. Her hair was grown out long, and she was smiling shyly. Her smile still carried a sort of girlishness. On her right was a tall man with a long face. He was clutching a lab coat in one hand, and had gentle eyes. Even from the old photo, Shion could make out the deep intellect that resided in those eyes.

My godfather. Nezumi had pointed at this man, and said those words. *He’s my godfather.*

Shion knelt down in front of the elder.

“Please tell me.” His voice was raspy. His throat was painfully parched. “Please tell me the truth. That’s all I ask.”

The elder’s torso swayed slightly. It reminded Shion of swaying silver grasses. His white hair, which shone dully in the candle light, was almost like the ears of the silver grasses themselves.

“Knowing the truth, and rescuing your friend: do you think the two are connected, Shion?” Shion shook his head slowly in answer.

“I don’t know.” He answered truthfully. He really didn’t know.

He had to do anything to rescue Safu even a minute sooner, a second sooner. But what did he need? Did he *need* to know the truth about the parasite wasps, the relationship between his mother and the elder, and No. 6’s future . . . did he really urgently need to know these things? Shion didn’t have an answer.

He did wish to know. He desperately yearned to know. But the most important thing right now was to save Safu—was it not?

“I don’t know . . . Maybe my knowing the truth and rescuing Safu are two completely different things. But . . .”

“But?”

“But I—or should I say we—we residents of No. 6, including myself, have been kept away from the truth all this time. We’ve lived our lives hidden from the face of reality, the true form it embodies.”

“You’ve just never tried to see it,” Nezumi remarked, emotionless. “If you squinted, you would have seen. If you searched for truth, you would have found it. But you didn’t. You got drunk and giddy on your false idea of abundance, and settled yourselves into blissful laziness. You didn’t try to look through it to see reality. Your foolishness allowed No. 6 to burgeon into the monster it is today.”

“I’m sure you’re right.” Shion inhaled. Nezumi was right. *But you know what, Nezumi? In the time I’ve lived with you, I’ve been able to touch the sprouting ears of truth. I touched them with my own hands. That was my starting point. That’s a truth in itself, too.*

I started off there, and now, I’m here.

“Safu getting kidnapped, and parasite wasps appearing... No. 6 turning into a monster, all happened because we’ve averted our eyes from the truth this whole time. The crime we’ve committed is grave; I’ve realized that. But that’s why I want to know. I want to see true form of the world, with my very own eyes—”

Shion bit his lip. *No*, he almost said out loud. It didn’t feel right. It wasn’t that he had lied to the elder. But he had decorated his words. Regret and resignation about the past weren’t the only things that lay behind the reason for his wanting to know the truth.

Curiosity. No, it wasn’t such a casual feeling; it was a deep-rooted desire. It roved in circles deep inside his chest.

It was intrigue towards a world his imagination could not render. Interest in the unknown. And more than anything... it was the expectation that he could acquire some piece of knowledge that had to do with Nezumi.

The part that Nezumi showed him was only a small fragment. In fact, Nezumi had many faces which Shion could not see through. And he felt it, painfully, everywhere, every time.

Where did you come from?

Where were you born?

How did you used to live until that stormy night when we met?

What have you thought about, believed, and rejected in your life up until then?

And there's the promise of telling me your real name, which you haven't fulfilled yet.

His soul was stirring restlessly. It stirred from wanting to know, and not for anyone else but himself. But he had put on an act. He had pretended to be the friend, the innocent youth who longed to know the truth.

His heart and words turned away from each other. How beautiful and rational were the words that spilled from his mouth. They were rational and beautiful to the point of sounding fake. His own words deceived his heart.

He bit his lip. He chewed on it hard.

Can I only speak in these kinds of terms?

Why can't I speak like Nezumi? I can only use empty, superficial words. Why do I keep putting on an act? Why do I still speak, when I'm not even prepared to reveal my true self?

Even though I've lived by his side for months...

He had directed his gaze at Nezumi without even thinking. There was no way he couldn't have noticed the decoration in Shion's words, but Nezumi's profile showed no hint of disdain, scorn, or pity. He had lowered his chin slightly, and was staring off into the dark void.

Nezumi never toyed with his words.

Safu was the same.

Like a flash of lightning in the night sky, an idea sparked in his mind. Safu had never manipulated her words. At least, any words she had directed at Shion were true. He had received her straight and earnest words numerous times.

He realized he ought to be ashamed of himself. Both in the face of Nezumi and Safu, he ought to be ashamed of himself.

"I... want to know." He squeezed out each word painstakingly. "There are too many things I don't know. That's why... I want to find out. That's it."

The elder's body swayed once again. "Just because you know, it does not mean it will make you happy. You may end up wishing you had never known at all. Such a reality may be waiting for you, Shion."

"I'm prepared for it." He would rather suffer from the knowledge than being blissfully ignorant. He preferred the pain and hardship of truth rather than fake happiness. With this as his fuel, he could move forward. He couldn't keep leaning on this illusion, which didn't even serve as a foothold.

He clutched his chest. He confirmed his feelings.

There was no doubt about it. *My feelings are here within me. I am not deceiving anyone.*

"I'm prepared. At least, I think I can prepare myself. Though—I can't say for sure that I won't regret it... I'll probably regret it a number of times... but I feel like it would be much better than going without knowing. That much I feel is true... so, ah, I..." As soon as he tried to speak in earnest, his tongue refused to co-operate. His words refused to run smoothly as they had just moments before.

Earnest words were heavy things.

They bore the weight of the speaker's beliefs, emotions, and honest feelings.

The elder suddenly smiled. At least to Shion, it seemed like he did. The elder let his momentary smile fade, and slowly lowered his eyelids. He fell silent.

“Rou, why are you silent?” Nezumi asked harshly in impatience. “Rou!”

“Elyurias.” The elder’s lips moved, and a whisper, like a breath, escaped. It was a word Shion couldn’t understand.

“Elyurias?” Nezumi furrowed his brow. Apparently, he hadn’t understood either.

“That is the name.”

“Whose?”

“Hers.”

“Her?”

“Nezumi, your eyes.”

“Huh?”

“Close your eyes. Shion, you also.”

Shion and Nezumi looked at each other. The elder’s voice was low and placid, and carried no hint of a command. But he found himself obeying it nevertheless. He felt like he had let himself go limp on the gentle flow of a river, and he was being born to the sea. Shion closed his eyes.

“Elyurias,” the elder whispered again. “She was a great sovereign. She was a rare existence.”

Elyurias...

Nezumi sucked in a breath from beside Shion.

“Looking back, it seems a thing of the distant past,” the elder continued. “It was still a time when this land... yes, this land was still without walls. Instead of walls, there was a lush green forest. There were lakes, marshes, and grassy plains. Myriad things intertwined

and maintained a harmony. A paradise... it may have been the last remaining paradise on this planet. A paradise that had escaped the destruction of humankind. A land of miracles. A place that could nurture life and put death to rest. She resided there. She really existed. I was the one who found her.”

The elder’s voice dropped even lower.

“Ah, no... that is an arrogant way to put it. I did not find her. I met her. We met by chance... as if God had drawn us together. Elyurias—she was a great sovereign. She would likely be one to this day. She still reigns.”

“Elyurias.” Shion said the name under his breath, imitating the elder. *Elyurias*. It was a sound unfamiliar to his ear and tongue. He couldn’t imagine what kind of appearance or voice a person with that name would have. Not to mention someone who was a “great sovereign”... Shion cocked his head in disbelief. It sounded too grandiose, too phony. He sensed domination. Had a kingdom existed here in the past? Just like how No. 6 dominated this land now, this sovereign called Elyurias had governed all...

‘She’, the elder had said. Then that would make her a queen. A paradise governed by a queen? *That sounds like a cheap drama. I find it hard to believe.*

The air shifted just slightly. He heard a hoarse groan. As Shion lifted his eyelids, the first thing that jumped into his vision was Nezumi covering his face with his hands. He was about to buckle to his knees.

* * *

“Nezumi!” Nezumi collapsed into his outstretched arms. Shion felt the heat and weight of his body. A low groan trickled through Nezumi’s fingers. *It’s the same. It’s the same as last time.*

They had been talking about parasite wasps in their basement dwelling. It was just when their conversation had moved from emergent viruses to the mystery behind the parasite wasps. Nezumi had suddenly collapsed.

They had been drinking hot water. Shion remembered how Nezumi's cup had slid out of his hand and bounced on a stack of books before rolling across the floor.

"Nezumi—relax. Can you hear me?" Shion knelt down, supporting the boy's body with his arms. If it was the same as last time, then there was no need to panic. Nezumi had recovered just fine last time. If this time was the same...

"Ow!" A set of fingers dug fiercely into Shion's arm. Nezumi gasped, his chest rising and falling. The tremor of his fingertips agitated Shion's worry even more.

"Water," Shion muttered, glancing all around. No one moved. "Please, give me water. Anyone."

"Will he die?" a voice asked from behind. It was flat and cold. It belonged to Sasori, the sand-coloured man. He had drawn right up behind them without Shion noticing.

"Will he die? Then there is no need to bring water." Contempt wafted into Sasori's tone. "There is no need to give anything to the dying. Furthermore, he is one who has once left. No need. At all."

Shion turned around. He looked up at the man who had concluded the discussion with such terse words. *No need.*

"Bring it," Shion commanded. As far as he could remember, he had never given an order to someone in such an oppressive manner. But the words didn't feel strange leaving his mouth.

"Bring water to me. Quickly."

Sasori shifted uneasily. The rims of his widened eyes twitched. A single bead of sweat rolled down from a corner of his eye.

“Here.” A wooden bowl was handed to him. It was about half-full with water. A small, thin child was holding it out as if it were an offering. “Mother told me to—take this.”

“Thank you.” Shion accepted the bowl from him. The child spun around, and trotted away into the darkness.

Cheep-cheep.

A small mouse scurried up onto Shion’s shoulder. It stared at Shion’s hands, twitching its nose.

“Nezumi... drink this.” Supporting Nezumi’s body with one arm, Shion slowly tipped the water into his mouth. Nezumi’s throat contracted. He took a gulp.

“Nezumi, can you hear me?”

His eyelids lifted, and a pair of grey eyes peeked from underneath. Shion thought they were beautiful. They were the colour of the sky at the coming of morning. They absorbed light, yet released it softly at the same time.

They were beautiful like the dawning sky.

A lightening sky at morning conjoined somewhere with the hope of life. It was a glow that lauded people who had resolved to live, or at least try to live, through today. That was why it was beautiful.

I’ve gotten so much hope from the beauty of these eyes.

Shion clicked his tongue at himself. *Idiot, now’s not the time to be admiring him.*

“—Shion.”

“Are you awake? Drink the water slowly—there—all of it. Then take a deep breath.”

Nezumi obediently did as he was told. He drained the water, took a deep breath, and exhaled.

“You alright?”

“Somewhat.”

“Does your head hurt? Any nausea, or palpitation—”

“Ten.”

“Huh?”

“Three plus seven is ten. And since I’m at it already, twenty-one.”

“Oh... three times seven.” So Nezumi had remembered the questions Shion had asked when he’d woken up last time. Shion stifled a chuckle. Yes, reality was brutal and cruel. The past few hours had been filled with human despair, death, and screams. It was dyed through with the colour of terror, futility, and intense regret. But there had also been many heartwarming moments, moments where his pulse had quickened and his spirits had soared. Memories with Nezumi were always like that. They always brought excitement and warmth to his heart.

Memories?

Shion straightened his back, and put more strength into his arms. *Why did I just think ‘memories’, like he was someone of the past?* Nezumi mumbled in Shion’s arms.

“I heard the wind.”

“Wind?”

“The wind was singing. I heard its song.” Nezumi raised himself. “I’ve heard it before. But this time it was... it was clearer. It was a gentle melody...”

“What kind of song was it?”

“It was...”

“Can you sing it?”

“Me? Hm... well. I wonder if I can.”

“Let me hear it.”

Nezumi blinked, and his lips moved. A song with a lilting melody poured 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*

The little mouse grew still on Shion's shoulder. It stopped moving as if rooted to the spot, and quieted its breath. Humans all around did the same. The people hidden in the darkness were also frozen in enthrallment. Their eyes were closed, and their bodies were lent fully to the song. Everything grew still. It felt like even time had stopped. Nezumi's voice, and his song, seemed to soak into them, enveloping them, rocking them, and making them feel as if their bodies and souls were floating.

*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*

The song ceased, and someone let out a gentle sigh. He was not the only one. Here and there in the darkness, soft sighs could be heard. Nezumi slowly shook his head.

"I feel like I've heard it before. Like I've heard it over and over, since a long time ago. Someone's taught me this song before."

Shion lifted his head and posed a question at the seated elder.

"Is this song somehow related with Elyurias?"

"Do you think so, child?"

"Yes." The moment he had blurted the answer, he felt certain. Nezumi and Elyurias were connected. The elder narrowed his eyes, and his gaze wandered in the air.

"It has been a long time since I heard it. I was convinced it had long disappeared from this land. I see—there still remains a person who can sing."

"The wind sings." Nezumi wiped his wet lips with the back of his hand. "Or maybe someone's singing in the wind. And I... hear it. I've come to hear it."

The elder nodded. "Since when?"

"A little while ago. Yeah—a little while before the Hunt. This is the third time. When it happens, my consciousness fades, like a stage in a blackout... and then green scenery appears... and then..."

Nezumi's eyes turned to Shion. His gaze wavered. Shion remembered that stormy night, the night he and Nezumi had met. The boy had appeared before him, soaked and blood-stained. He was so fragile, Shion had felt like he would make the boy fall apart just by touching him. Drawn to that fragility, and those vibrant eyes which were so much the opposite, Shion had extended his hand.

"I'll treat your wound." Those words had escaped his lips without a shadow of doubt, without resistance. He had felt like he had to do something. He had felt like it was his duty to protect this boy. He had never felt this protective of anyone, neither before nor after this incident.

A sharp, vivid moment. One that had burned an imprint into his life. Every time he recalled it, his heart quickened.

The fragility that had stirred Shion's protective instinct—the same fragility that had been completely wiped clean when they reunited four years later—returned into those eyes again.

His heart quickened.

"I don't know," Nezumi continued. "I was still young, and I was wading through the grass. And I could see... the sky."

"Right."

"An ultramarine sky. It was a really beautiful blue. And wings buzzing... and a song. I couldn't tell whether it was man's or woman's voice. It was a strange voice. It almost sounded like the wind, crossing the plains, or crawling across the ground, or showering down from the heavens. I... I was always just standing there... listening to that song..."

A song of the wind which crawled across the ground, and showered from above. *Maybe...*

"Was it a song of offering?" Shion said. It was mostly instinct. The spark of an idea turned into words, and spilled from his lips. "A song offered to Elyurias... either to praise or appease her... am I right?"

The elder's chest swelled and deflated. It looked like he was taking several deep breaths. *Is he agitated? Confused?*

"Sasori," the elder called. The sand-coloured man materialized like a blot in the darkness. "Provide these two with food and rest."

"Rou—"

"They will probably not have much time to rest... but that cannot be helped. Provide them whatever they wish for, to the best of your abilities."

"Why?" Sasori yelled angrily. "Why do you help them? Nezumi is

one who has once left this place. He left, vowing never to return again. He was forbidden to return, was he not?"

"Yes."

"But he did return. Bringing a demon with him, nonetheless. Rou, can you not understand? He is evil itself. He brings calamity and destruction." Sasori's finger pointed squarely at Shion.

"Did you see his eyes just now? Those are the eyes of evil. The eyes of wicked darkness. Nezumi is being puppeted by this demon."

"Now you listen." Shion was now feeling more than cross. "You've been repeating yourself all this time. I only glared at you a little, and you're making me sound like I'm some monster. Kind of rude, don't you th—"

Sasori cut Shion off by shaking his head. His face contorted, as if every word Shion uttered was a curse.

"The very picture of a monster. Rou, I am fine with Nezumi. If you command me, I shall obey. I will provide him rest and food. But I cannot do that for *him*. If we do not kill him now, then he will bring misfortune upon us. He may obliterate us entirely."

"Sasori." Nezumi stood up. "Sometimes poison and medicine can come from the same plant. Sometimes you can't tell if it's going to be poison or medicine until you drink it. Right?"

"... What is your point?"

"There's no need to reveal Shion's so-called true identity, whether he's a demon or not. His identity doesn't matter. Right now, all I care about is that he's kept alive. That's all."

"Why?"

Nezumi's fingers grasped a handful of Shion's hair.

"Inside this head, Sasori, is information about the inner structure of the Correctional Facility. The most up-to-date stuff. I can bet it's

probably as accurate as computer data. I wouldn't be able to destroy the Correctional Facility without it."

"Destroy the Correctional Facility—" Shock spread across Sasori's face. Just for an instant, it the expression made the sand-coloured man actually look human. This man had shown the same reaction to Nezumi's words as Rikiga and Inukashi did. *Ah, I see*, Shion thought. His skin and eyes were a strange colour, but those were the only differences. This man was made of flesh. Blood coursed through his body, and he gave off heat. He would feel pain if he was wounded, and he had both emotions and intelligence. He was a human, just the same. Skin and eye colour were such small differences, they didn't even seem to count.

"Surely you are not *really* thinking of doing that?" he said in disbelief.

"I am," Nezumi said promptly. "In fact, that's probably all I've been thinking about. The Correctional Facility isn't just a prison. It's also a research organization that's connected to the core of No. 6. If we destroy it, it'll put a crack right in No. 6 itself, for sure. We're going to use that crack as a foothold to throw No. 6 into its grave. And to do that, I need Shion. I told you before, Sasori, I won't let you kill him that easily."

The elder opened his mouth before Sasori could.

"There may already be a crack appearing."

"What? What do you mean?"

"No. 6 may disintegrate even before you strike a blow, because of Elyurias."

"Rou!" Nezumi barked irritably. "Speak in a way I can understand. So far you haven't clarified a single thing."

"Nezumi, perhaps it is fate that you have returned with Shion. Perhaps it had already been decided beforehand."

“Beforehand?” Nezumi retorted. “Who the hell can decide how I’m going to live? I’d like to see anyone try. I’ll never bow down to cheap words like God or Fate. That’s enough, Rou. No more word-play. Stop your mysterious nonsense and answer my question. You were involved in the birth of No. 6, correct?”

“Yes.”

“How?”

“Be seated. You too, Shion. Be at peace. I will give you water. You are probably thirsty.” Before the elder even finished his words, a pair of slightly bigger bowls were being handed to them. They were filled with clear water.

Shion felt a powerful thirst return to him.

He hadn’t realized how badly he had wanted water. He felt like all the moisture had been wrung out of him in the numerous experiences leading up until now. He was so thirsty, he felt like his throat was chafing. When he had fed Nezumi water earlier, he had not wanted any for himself. He had completely forgotten his thirst. But now it was like his parched state was a reaction to that; he felt like he was burning up.

“Water—” Shion held the bowl in both hands and greedily gulped it down. It was cold and delicious, like the water that Nezumi had fed him over and over during his battle with the wasp—the water that ran near Inukashi’s ruins. It had the same taste. It was delicious, and it quenched him.

He drained it in a single draught. More water was poured into his empty bowl. Shion was so grateful he felt he could cry.

“Good, isn’t it?”

Shion found himself nodding vigorously in answer to Nezumi’s question. It was too good to put into words.

"There's an underground lake here. Lots of minerals. —Geez, you must have been thirsty."

Shion finally stopped to take a breath after he had had several bowls of water. The elder must have been waiting for him, for now he opened his mouth to speak.

"This will take a rather long time. I had intended not to tell anyone for my whole life... but I must tell it now. However, before that... Nezumi."

Nezumi lifted his chin.

"There is a path leading to the Correctional Facility, but it is only connected partway. The Facility has built a door from their side sealing the way off. It has not been opened for decades."

"I know."

"There is no other way into the Correctional Facility unless you open it. You know that too, I presume?"

"Naturally."

"It is impossible to open it from this side. Nor will it ever open from the Facility's side. It absolutely will not happen."

"The thing with doors—" a wan smile spread across Nezumi's lips, "is that you don't just wait for them to open politely by themselves. You force them open."

"Have you a plan?"

"I'm not unprepared."

"I would not have expected you to act without some strategy. But I cannot imagine how you would open the door."

"Shion." Nezumi crouched down, and put a firm hand on Shion's shoulder. The startled mouse hastily hopped down out of his way.

"The door we're talking about: it's the only point on the map that

connects the blank space underground to ground-level. You know where it is, right?”

“Yeah.” The floorplan appeared in his mind, the one of the Correctional Facility that Nezumi had commanded Shion to memorize as if his life depended on it.

“It’s in location po1-z22. From the Facility’s side, it was labelled Point X.”

“You remember the energy circuits which were connected to that point too, right?”

“Yeah. It was a single circuit, an old system. There are no auxiliary circuits.”

“The unopenable door doesn’t need a carefully-crafted backup system,” Nezumi said. “Efficiency is paramount. Remove everything else that isn’t absolutely necessary. Both people and machinery.” He chuckled. “Sounds like something they would think of. But this is where it works to our advantage.”

Nezumi snapped his fingers.

“The unopenable door opens. We’ll pry it open. Rou, we’ll fight our own battle. You have nothing to worry about.”

“Only death is waiting.”

“For us?”

“For many people. Many more people will likely die, more than you can imagine. Perhaps you are the only ones who can stop that. Nezumi, fate does exist. Fate has brought you together, and you are here because of fate. It was fate that Elyurias and I met. Let us begin with that story first. Listen well, and make haste, or else it will be too late. You must hurry...”

Then the elder began to speak. It was a story of No. 6.

Shion and Nezumi huddled together and grew still, like children

listening to their grandfather tell a tale of the past. Only their ears strained hard to listen.

It was a story of No. 6.

A tale of destruction and creation.

4

LEAVE EVERY HOPE

*Through me is the way into the woeful city;
through me is the way into eternal woe;
through me is the way among the lost people.*

*Justice moved my lofty maker:
the divine Power, the supreme Wisdom
and the primal Love made me.
Before me were no things created, unless eternal, and I eternal last.
Leave every hope, ye who enter!*

DANTE, *THE DIVINE COMEDY* VOL 1: *THE INFERNO*, CANTO III

IT BEGAN suddenly. No one would have been able to predict it. It began suddenly, and amidst the crowd that had gathered in the square. It began as when gas erupts after being compressed for a long time underground.

THE HOLY CELEBRATION DAY, 2017.

12:15 PM

FRONT SQUARE, CITY HALL (ALSO KNOWN AS THE MOONDROP)

The wind blew icily and nipped at the skin, but the sun was bright. The sky was clear, and was dyed a brilliant blue, appropriate for the festivities. The hearts of the people were buoyant. They waved flags, and all praised the Holy City.

“Our mighty No. 6.”

The square in front of the city hall where the ceremonies were to be held was bursting with people.

“It’s hot,” complained a woman in the stuffy crowd. She was young and slender. “I feel like I’m going to suffocate, there’s so many people.”

“So true,” her friend agreed beside her. She was short, with black hair. She sighed as she dabbed the sweat off her nose. “Isn’t it horrible, how there’s barely even space to walk? How disgusting to sweat in the winter. I feel all sticky.”

“Really, I don’t believe it. We dressed up for nothing.”

“I *know*.”

Both had barely any experience of sweating. They had always lived in places where the temperature and humidity were adjusted just so for maximum comfort. They couldn’t stand the sweat that streamed under their arms and down their backs. They found the heat of the jostling crowd exceedingly unpleasant.

The black-haired woman pouted her painted lips.

“My supervisor said I absolutely had to participate in the ceremonies. If I didn’t, I would get my salary cut.”

“Me too. Boss’ orders. He said it’s *mandatory* that I show up. If it wasn’t, I definitely wouldn’t be here.”

“They’d know from your ID card if you didn’t show up, wouldn’t they? The gates scan your citizenship number when you pass through them... and I heard they notify your workplace afterwards.”

The slender woman nodded gravely, and furrowed her brow. A bead of sweat rolled down her cheek.

Oh, how unpleasant. I wish I could take a shower and freshen up.

The black-haired woman continued loosing her stream of complaints.

“My younger sister is still a student, but she told me all of them have to meet at school, and they get bussed over here.”

“Really? They didn’t have anything like that in our day, did they?”

“No. I heard it’s just started this year. They want to confirm your loyalty level to the city. My sister was complaining that if you don’t participate, you get negative points for your Activities column. You get placed in Rank D. That means you wouldn’t be able to get further schooling, or land a job. I thought it was a bit harsh, don’t you think so?”

“It is. They’re practically forcing us. And speaking of which—it’s a bit much these days, isn’t it? Everywhere you go lately, it’s loyalty-level this, loyalty-level that. I kind of find it weird—”

The slender woman was interrupted suddenly as somebody grabbed her by the arm. White shirt, grey pants. He was a nondescript middle-aged man with a strong build.

“Um, what—?” the woman began.

“What were you talking about just now?”

“Excuse me?”

“What were you two talking about just now?”

The two women looked at each other. Their hearts quickened. “W-We were only talking about... you know, how hot it was... stuff like that...”

“Is that so? It rather sounded to me like you were expressing some dissent, discontent towards the city. Am I wrong?” The man’s narrow eyes glinted. His words were courteous, but the light in his eyes was sharp and fierce. It made the women cower. Fear pierced through their bodies.

The Security Bureau.

“N-No!” they protested. “Discontent—no—never, we would never say that. We would never think of that. Not us, we would never...” The black-haired woman clasped her trembling fingers to her breast. Tears welled up in her eyes. *Help me. Mom, Dad. Help me.*

“No matter. Will you kindly let me escort you two? We will have plenty of time to hear your story later.”

“How can you... that’s not... no...” Unable to bear it any longer, the black-haired woman began to cry. The slender woman was also shaking.

“Kindly let us escort you.” Another man in similar clothing materialized and grabbed the woman’s arm. His fingers were shockingly cold.

No—that’s not fair, we were only having a conversation. We were only saying our thoughts out loud.

She was so stunned by the incident, no tears came. She could not cry like her friend. The slender woman only trembled.

“Come, then.” The man’s eyes flashed incisively.

I’m scared. I’m so scared. Help me, Mom, Dad.

—Mmgh.

There was a muffled groan. It had trickled from the man’s mouth. His eyes were bulging, wide open, and his mouth was opening and closing like a fish. No voice came out. Only his lips moved. His hands tore at his neck. His face began to discolour into a dark shade.

“Wh-What’s the matter?”

The man with the cold fingers reached out towards her.

Abbbh!!!

The woman screamed. She felt like her shriek would tear her throat apart. The black-haired woman had started screaming at almost the same time.

“Oh God!”

The man stopped moving. He stiffened, his eyes and mouth still open. They could see inside his mouth.

Plunk.

Something fell to the cobblestone with a soft sound. Something small and white...

Teeth.

All the man's teeth were falling out of his mouth, one after another. His hair was also falling out. Clumps of it turned white and scattered all around. The man's eyes rolled back into his head as he fell face-forward onto the ground. His body convulsed. A black stain spread from his neck. It swelled into a bump, and then—

An incomparably stronger wave of fear came crashing down onto her. She felt like she would go insane. Perhaps she was insane already. Perhaps she had gone mad, and that was why she was seeing something that wasn't supposed to exist. She had no other choice but to scream. She had to raise her voice, and release her terror somehow. If not, her body would swell and burst. She would shatter.

The woman breathed in.

Abbbh!

Eeeeeek!

Before the woman could open her mouth, shrieks and bellows welled up from the rest of the crowd. Here and there, they rose and burst. Voices of men, shrill screams of women, yells of young people, the

clamouring of the elderly—everything writhed, mingled and twisted around.

“*Nooo!!*” The black-haired woman was frantically flapping her hands and feet. She looked like she was doing a disturbing dance. “Someone—someone’s there. Inside me. Help—help me—!” Her teeth fell out as she opened her mouth to scream.

Plunk, plunk, plunk.

A stain was spreading from the black-haired woman’s neck.

“It’s poison!” someone was saying. “Run! We’ve been poisoned.”

She heard another voice. It was saying, “we’re all gonna die.”

It’s poison. Run. We’re all gonna die. It’s poison. Run. We’re all gonna die.

The woman stepped over the fallen man, and tried to break into a run. But before she did, she saw something glitter suddenly before her eyes. *A bug?* Someone shoved at her back. A fat woman tumbled and fell close by. A mass of bodies stampeded over her ruthlessly.

This is Hell. I have to get out of here—quickly—right away. Unconsciously pressing a hand to her own neck, the woman leapt over the bodies strewn on the ground, and broke into a desperate sprint.

THE HOLY CELEBRATION DAY, 2017.

7:02 AM — LOST TOWN

Karan was baking pastries. Cravats, in fact. She twisted the dough, which had powdered almonds in it, into the shape of a necktie. She fried it, flavoured it with orange curacao, and sprinkled it with icing sugar as a finishing touch.

"It looks delicious," Lili said as she swallowed hungrily.

"And it is. Let me set aside ones I won't put out for the shop, and we'll eat them together with some tea. Or would you prefer some warm milk with that, Lili?"

"I want cold milk. I like cold milk better."

"Alright, we'll do that. Some nice iced milk, but not too much, or else it'll give you a tummy-ache. But remember Lili, before that—"

"I have to help with the store, right?" she finished. "I'm gonna do a really good job. I love being able to help with your store, ma'am. It's exciting."

"Today's the Holy Celebration, so it'll be very busy."

"I know. First I say 'hello and welcome' right, and then I put the rolls and muffins in the bag."

"Mm-hmm. And make sure to tell them, 'please feel free to use the trays on the table by the entrance. You can put your items on them.' And if the customers are children, or can't use their hands or legs, ask them, 'may I get that for you?'"

"Hello, and welcome! Please feel free to use the... the..."

"Trays on the table, by the entrance."

"Trays on the table by the entrance. You can put your items on them. May I get that for you?"

"Brilliant, Lili! That's the spirit. And don't forget to smile."

Lili's nostrils flared appreciatively. "It's easy to smile when it smells so good. My cheeks just melt, like this." As she cupped her own cheeks, a shadow flitted across Lili's eyes. Her tone dropped slightly too.

"Ma'am?"

"Yes, darling."

"Can I take some of these pastries back to Daddy?"

"Of course. I'll leave some for both your Mommy and Daddy—why, Lili, what's wrong? Has something happened to Renka?"

Karan had heard that Lili's mother Renka was pregnant with her second child. Perhaps something had happened. Residents of the elite residential area of Chronos would be promised thorough and meticulous aid and treatment from specialized medical staff, from conception to birth. However, a Lost Town resident could only dream of receiving medical care at the level of Chronos residents. The mortality rates of invalids, the elderly, and children were manyfold compared to Chronos.

Karan was not discontented with her life in Lost Town. But numerous times, she found herself forced to face the fact that they were at the very bottom of the rigid hierarchy which the city had created.

She felt her spine freeze.

She felt a chill not from the realization that they were at the bottom, but at the very reality that people were dominating over other people and reigning over them in this way. She also felt a chill at herself, for not realizing this sooner.

Oh, how careless she had been.

Lili shook her head. Her fine, flaxen hair swished.

"It's not my Mommy. It's about Daddy."

"Getsuyaku-san? Has something happened to him?"

"He had to go to work, even though it's the Holy Celebration Day."

The Holy Celebration was one of No. 6's most revered holidays. Education institutions and government organizations were closed as a matter of course, as well as most city shops and offices. The majority of citizens gathered in the square in front of city hall to listen raptly to the mayor's speech, and to celebrate the birth and proliferation of No. 6. Participation had been moving more toward mandatory since last year. By making citizens pass through gates into the square, the city could tell instantly if they did or did not participate in the ceremonies. Any citizen who did not have a valid reason for not participating that fit the criteria laid out by the authorities were investigated in detail. Rumour said they were more like interrogations.

Karan felt that this city was becoming more suffocating by the day. But still, many citizens participated in the festivities not because they were forced, but because they wanted to. They gathered of their own will, and waved their gold-embroidered flags of white cloth. *Of their own will* — was this really so?

"Ma'am, the pastry." Lili was blinking. Karan realized she had been clenching a cravat in her fist.

"Oh, dear, I've let one go to waste. So," she hastily resumed, "Getsu-yaku-san couldn't take the day off?"

"Nope..."

The Holy Celebration was a large event, but there were still many people who went to work as usual, or else had no other choice but to go to work. Karan was one of them. She could not live if she didn't work. Cakes and sweet buns sold exceedingly well on celebratory days. On these days "the cash came rolling in", to be vulgar about it. Karan had planned to use this reason not to participate in the ceremonies this year. On her Application for Non-Participation, which had to be submitted beforehand, she had to fill in her job description, monthly profits, and the predicted earnings if she opened her shop during the

holiday. She was also required to submit it in person to the reception counter of the city. Although it was extra hassle, and although it would have been much easier to just close her shop and participate, Karan chose not to.

I can't let myself be pushed along down the easier path.

She had always let herself be pushed into making the easier choice. She had gotten out of practice of swimming against the current. She had let her heart go numb, and been swallowed all too easily in the flow. Hadn't she learned the hard way what the result of that had been?

Her son had been snatched away.

Her son's best friend had been snatched away.

Her most important things had been snatched from her suddenly and unfairly. She would not let herself be washed away anymore. She had to dig her heels in, or else she would be ashamed to look Shion or Safu in the eye again. She would not be able to throw her arms around them unreservedly when they came home. That was the last thing she wanted to lose.

"Lili, are you lonely because your Daddy's not here? But I guess we can't help it if it's his job, huh."

"No," Lili protested. She shook her head again. "Mommy already said we can't help it. But that's not it. I'm not lonely because of Daddy. I get to help you with your shop, ma'am, and it's exciting. All my friends were jealous when I told them I got to work at a bakery—so I'm not lonely, I'm just—I'm... I'm worried."

"About your father?"

Lili nodded.

"Why? Has something happened that's making you worry, Lili?"

"Not really," she said hesitantly. "Daddy always gives me a kiss on the cheek before going to work. He said it makes him feel all happy

inside. He said it's kind of like a good-luck charm."

"My, isn't that nice of him."

"Yeah. He's the best. But today, he forgot. He went to work without kissing me. He left by himself, while Mommy and me were talking in the kitchen... he didn't even say he was leaving. He just left."

"Maybe he was busy."

"I dunno. But he didn't eat much breakfast either. Just half a slice of bread and coffee. He was sighing, too. Like this." Lili slumped her shoulders, and let out a huff of air.

Karan felt an outpouring of love for her.

Lili was concerned about her father, in her own way. 'Maybe he's troubled about something, maybe he's tired'—she noticed these little changes in her stepfather, her mother's second spouse, with a sharp eye. And she was concerned about him. Lili had the experience of losing her father right before her eyes at a young age. Did this kindness of hers come from this experience?

"Lili..." Karan felt love for this tiny little soul. She crouched down at eye-level to Lili, and stroked her flaxen hair. "Keep smiling. Your smile is my good-luck charm. It makes me sad when I see you with that frown, Lili."

"Ma'am... Daddy didn't kiss me today, but that's okay, right? God will protect Daddy, won't He?"

"Of course. I know: why don't you give your Daddy a kiss this time when he comes home, Lili?"

"Sure, I'll do that."

"Alright, let's open the store, shall we? Can you line the cravats on the tray and put them out on the rack?"

Cheep-cheep. She heard squeaking.

“Mr. Mouse! You’re still here?” Lili chirped happily. A brown mouse was twitching its nose from underneath the table. It placed its front paws together, and bobbed its head up and down. Karan realized quickly that it was a farewell gesture.

“You’re going back to your master, then?” *And back to my son?* Karan broke off a piece from the pastry she had crushed in her fist earlier, and placed it in front of the mouse. The mouse picked it up in its front paws, and began to nibble at it without hesitation.

“Ma’am, look, the pastry and Mr. Mouse are the same colour.”

“Oh. Come to think of it, they are. You have the same colour of fur as a cravat.”

Cheep cheep cheep. The mouse raised its face and fixed its gaze on Karan. It had beady grape-coloured eyes.

“Cravat... is that your name? Cravat?”

Cheep-cheep. The mouse squeaked back as if to say, ‘yes it is’.

“Cravat. What a nice name. Goodbye, then, Cravat. Please tell your master that I’m thankful. That his words give me so much support... I’m very, very thankful. Please tell him that.” *And if you can, please tell Shion too. That I’m waiting—that Mom will always be waiting, and she’ll never give up. So tell him to come home alive.*

Reunion will come. *Nezumi*

The short letter she had received from Nezumi. How much courage those words had given her.

Reunion will come. *Nezumi*

What a firm and valorous message it was. It had supported her crumbling heart all this time. *Nezumi, would I have the chance to embrace you? Would I be able to take you in my arms along with Shion? I could keep waiting, couldn't I, and believe that I can someday?*

Cravat finished his last morsel, touched his front paws together, and bobbed his head. Then he scurried off into a corner of the room, and quickly disappeared out of Karan's sight.

"There he goes." Lili frowned. "Is he gone forever?"

"No, we'll see him again. Certainly some other day. Right, let's open the shop. It'll get busy, and I'm counting on you, Lili."

"Yes, Ms. Shopkeeper! Leave it to me." Lili swept into a theatrical bow. Karan laughed as she opened the door of her shop. She could see the sky. Its clear blue made her eyes water. The wind was freezing, but it looked like it would be a sunny day. *It looks like the weather will be great—*

She felt a chill. Goosebumps formed on her skin.

What? What is it?

She clasped her hands together instinctively. It was cold. She felt like her whole body was growing cold from the inside. It was only for a split second, but she felt her face tense, and her hands and feet turn rigid. The hairs on her body stood on end.

She felt her skin bristle. Again, and again. Something was closing in on her, something she couldn't see.

A crowd of chattering people passed alongside her, city flags in hand. They were participating in the walking rally from the Lost Town gates to city hall. She saw several familiar faces. There were those who nodded at Karan in acknowledgement; those who gazed at Karan curiously; those who paused in their step to smell the aroma of fried pastries which was wafting out onto the street. There was a father

holding hands with his child; young couples; an old woman with a hat perched upon her snowy head.

They would walk to city hall, and from there take part in the ceremonies. Midway through the route, all participants were supposedly going to receive boxed lunches from the city bureau. Each and every face bore a relaxed smile, like they were enjoying a picnic on a day off. Karan could only stand still.

Shiver.

She could feel the goosebumps rise on her skin like fizz. She shivered as she looked up at the sky. It was clear and blue. The winter sky, like a blue pane of glass, stretched out above her head. But there was something there, in that sky. She could feel it.

She couldn't see it, or hear it. She could only feel.

Something was there.

Something was coming.

THE HOLY CELEBRATION DAY, 2017.

UNKNOWN TIME

A ROOM IN THE RUINS, WEST BLOCK.

Inukashi awoke. He had fallen asleep without realizing it. How rare. *I wonder when I last slept like this.* It might even be when he was still a baby, suckling on his mother dog's teat.

Death was always close by in the West Block, and violence and armed robbery were daily occurrences. Thieves could come sneaking into the ruins with weapons at any time. Even with his dogs there, he couldn't relax. Inukashi had a good sense of the horrid environment in which he lived, and the terror that lurked in it. That was why he never slept deeply. His nerves were always honed to pick up any approaching danger immediately, whether it be midnight or dawn. He was like a small wild animal.

But he had fallen into a deep sleep just now. He couldn't believe himself, that *he* of all people had nodded off unawares, if even for a short time.

Am I just tired? He raked his bangs up. *I'm just worn out from what's about to happen—what I'm about to do. That's gotta be it. Even my stomach started to hurt from nerves.*

I'm exhausted because of you guys, you know that? You good-for-nothings. More unwanted than the plague.

He tried hurling complaints at illusions of Shion and Nezumi. Nezumi remained expressionless, but Shion hunched his shoulders apologetically. Inukashi raked his bangs up again. He gave a great stretch, and swung his neck around.

Hmm?

His body felt lighter than he expected. He was famished, but not painfully. He had slept well, and he felt like energy was coursing

through his body. *So my body wanted sleep not because it was dead tired, but because it wanted to store energy.*

Geez, self, you're serious about this, aren't you? He clicked his tongue unconsciously. The more he associated with Nezumi and Shion, the more confused he became about where his honest opinions lay. Feelings that he had kept at the very, very bottom of his heart simply slipped out. It made him annoyed enough to click his tongue. Yet he welcomed it at the same time.

So I'm pretty serious about this, then. He tried whistling. The black dog at his feet gave a twitch of its ear.

I've made the decision to fight the battle with them. And that meant believing. *I guess it means... somewhere inside, I'm trying to believe in them, in the future, and more than anything, in myself.*

An irritating guttural noise wrenched Inukashi away from his thoughts. Rikiga was curled up in a blanket, snoring loudly. Several empty liquor bottles were littered around him. It felt like every time he breathed out, he released liquor-smelling fumes. It made him feel ill.

"Jesus. He's like the prime example of the adult you'd never want to be." Inukashi sniffed disdainfully. He glanced at a corner of the room. A purple blanket peeped out from between the sprawled dogs. Rikiga had given it to him for the baby. Rikiga had proudly said he had picked it to match Shionn's eyes, but Inukashi thought it was a garish, vulgar shade of purple. Not even close to the colour of Shionn's eyes. He had taken it gladly though, of course, since baby blankets were luxury items that you couldn't exactly just "come across" in the West Block. "Shionn?" The baby was silent. There wasn't even any sound of breathing. Inukashi's heart began to palpitate.

Oy, come on...

It was unusual for babies or toddlers to survive in a harsh environment like the West Block. Starvation, hypothermia, disease, accident, and

infanticide. Sudden death, too. Death always wandered in search of prey, changing form and shape each time. Powerless babies were prey to the cuckoo bird of death.

“You’re not dead, are ya? You gotta be kidding me.” He scooped up the blanket whole. Dark purple eyes, much like Shionn’s, sparkled at him. Inukashi felt like he had glimpsed a deep darkness. It was a colour of darkness that flashed momentarily from within the layers and layers of black. Shionn blinked. His plump lips puckered as if he were demanding milk. Inukashi eased his racing heart.

“Shionn, you’re alive. Don’t scare me like that.”

The set of purple eyes shifted its gaze aside. Shionn twisted in Inukashi’s arms. Inukashi hastily readjusted his arms to avoid dropping him. The baby neither laughed, nor cried—it only looked straight ahead at something. Inukashi felt like he was holding a strange creature in his arms.

“What’s wrong? What’re you looking at?”

Shionn’s gaze was not directed this way; it was somewhere else, somewhere far off. Inukashi didn’t know where his gaze led.

“Shionn...” *What’s gotten into you? Why are you making eyes like that? What can you see out there, Shionn?*

Fraught with uncertainties, Inukashi embraced the baby fiercely.

The wind made noises as it whistled past the ruins above.

5

IN MY LUSTS

*Who am I? A man seeking happiness.
I sought it in my lusts and did not find it.
And all who live as I did fail to find it.*

TOLSTOY, WALK IN THE LIGHT WHILE THERE IS LIGHT

“IT WAS summer, and I had just turned twenty when I was chosen as a core member of the rebirth project.

When I was born, this planet was already in the midst of danger. Due to numerous wars, pollution, and environmental destruction, over half of the territory on earth had been devastated to the point of becoming inhabitable for human life.

Global warming had sparked a spread of whole new contagious diseases; weather patterns were abnormal and unpredictable; wars between nations and tribes were neverending; nuclear weapons were being used.

By the time we realized it, humankind had driven itself to the verge of extinction. We survivors only realized after being this close to the edge that we had to reflect on the foolishness of our actions.

Our national framework had long crumbled away. So we thought, why not live life over again? This time, let's live our lives proper, and not make the same mistake.

The people who had managed to survive on this planet crossed the borders of race, nationality and ethnic origin, and vowed to live humbly upon the foundations of peace and harmony.

And so six cities were born.

There were not many regions left which were suitable for human life. Half of humankind had died out. People gathered in those limited regions, and gradually began to build their own cities.

There was once a city here as well. It was a beautiful city. There was an almost miraculous amount of abundant nature still left intact on this stretch of land. Admittedly, there was no ocean—but there were deep forests, lakes and marshes, and plains. Yes: it was indeed miraculous. It was a place of miracles, like the rose that blooms in the midst of blasted pieces of rubble.

The city was established, and the people lived quietly, abiding by their vow. I was born in that city. I was born, I grew up, and I became a researcher. So did your mother, Shion.”

Having said so, the elder smiled.

“My mother?”

“Yes. Karan grew up in the same town, and she lived there too.”

“What kind of relationship did you have with my mother?”

The elder's smile widened. It carried a hint of boyishness. “We were childhood friends.”

“Huh?”

“Karan and I were childhood friends. I was much older than her, but we often played together. Karan was very skilled at climbing trees, and she could scramble up any of them, no matter how big. It often made

me nervous, how daring she could be sometimes. Yes, I remember. She was a beautiful and free-thinking girl. To think she is now a mother with a grown son . . .”

“I don’t care about Shion’s mother,” Nezumi interrupted. “Or did you and Karan fall in love, and was Shion born? Is that how it’s gonna unfold? That would be an interesting twist.”

“Nezumi!” Shion said sharply.

Nezumi shrugged, throwing a glance at him. “Third-rate plays are usually written like that. Rou, I want you to speed it up. You said so yourself: we don’t have time. There was a city, and you were born and raised there, and became a researcher. Then you were chosen as a member of the rebirth project. From there . . . things started going haywire.”

The elder drew a breath. “Is that what you think?”

“I do. Just look at the name, ‘rebirth project’. It sounds phony already. What are you gonna rebirth? What were you planning on reviving, anyway? No wait, I already know the answer. The city got repaired, albeit only barely. Life was getting back on track for most people. They were freed from their days of being bedmates with death and extinction. Then after a few more years down the road, you were ready to forget your past mistakes. You wanted to abandon your vow, and dominate over the land again. That was what the project was for. They were probably gathering intelligent young people. It was the start of a project to become more developed, more powerful, more wealthy. Am I right?”

Nezumi knitted his brow. Hatred and loathing were chiseled into his refined profile. He spat the words from his mouth.

“Fools.”

The elder’s body trembled and grew rigid as if the word had struck him like a whip.

“Repeating your past mistakes: it’s the epitome of foolishness. But you wanted to dominate. You contrived to make yourselves more plentiful by using the people and things around you as stepping stones. As a result, a hideous monster was born in a land that was once like a rose in the ruins. That was No. 6.”

More developed, more powerful, more wealthy. Was No. 6 what towered at the end of this desire? Shion also felt himself tremble.

“It was in a blink of an eye,” the elder sighed. “The city grew at astonishing speeds. Sometimes I wonder if it hadn’t all been a nightmare.”

“It’s reality. It’s unmistakable, and you guys created it. Rou, weren’t the people at the centre of the rebirth project the same people who are at the administrative core of No. 6 right now?”

“They were all there. Everyone was young and intelligent. Each one of them had his own strong ideal.”

“All the faces in this photo?”

“Yes. However, they are not the entire group. That—is from when Karan came to visit my lab. I remember, the person who took this photo was a young journalist who was here to do research. He also had his own ideals and sense of duty as a journalist.”

“Well, he’s just an alcoholic geezer now. He probably has less sense of duty left than the dirt under his nails. But even he’s a hundred times better than you people. He let the alcohol get to his head—but not his ideologies. Each had his own strong ideal, huh? And this is where it took everyone in the end?”

“Nezumi—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 . . .”

Nezumi laughed scornfully. “People can’t become God. Humans can’t create Paradise. You guys thought you could be God, an almighty Creator. You thought you were all-powerful. That moment is when you

fell. You began to corrupt. The cogwheels started turning backwards. You stopped paying heed to people's feelings, and their suffering and brutality were no longer in your line of sight. All you had was your greed to satisfy your ideologies—no, your own selfish desires. In order to achieve that, you thought you would be forgiven for doing anything. You didn't even need to beg for forgiveness—begging was below you. What *Paradise*? All you did was create an arrogant and ruthless monster surrounded by alloy walls, and turn everywhere else around it into Hell.”

There was no heat in Nezumi's words. They rang out coldly, and at a measured pace. But Shion could perceive the stormy emotions whipping about inside Nezumi. He could hear the inferno raging.

“By the time I had realized it—” the elder said, “the change in No. 6 had already begun. The walls were built, which isolated it from its surroundings. It leached the wealth of everything around it, and tried to sustain itself solely within its walls. An absolute authority was born, and organizations to support that absolute authority sprang up and established themselves.”

“Were you too engrossed in your experiments to notice anything? That doesn't make you any less guilty.”

“Of course. My crime is grave. I was, after all... on the side which massacred your family and friends.”

“*What?*” Shion sat up without thinking. He looked back and forth at the faces of Nezumi and the elder.

“So it's true,” Nezumi murmured. His tone was almost the opposite of before, somewhat frail and uncertain. “So it's true. That's how it is, then. I knew that you'd been exiled from No. 6 and become part of the underground people. I had a sneaking suspicion that you played a central role in the birth of No. 6. But to think you were part of that massacre... I didn't want to think that could be true.”

“Massacre? Nezumi, what’s this about?”

“The history of No. 6. The Mao Massacre. Over a hundred people were murdered.”

“Mao Massacre...”

“Bet you’ve never even heard of it.”

“No, I haven’t... this is my first time.”

“Nothing to be embarrassed about. No one knows about it, except for the perpetrators and the victims. It’s probably the incident in which No. 6 revealed its hideous rearing head for the first time. That’s why it was covered up. There are no records. But it’s in my memory, and it’ll never fade. It’s burned an image that’ll never disappear.”

“When did it happen?”

“Twelve years ago.”

“Twelve years! So I was already born.”

“Long born. You’d already been certified as an elite, and you would have been living in your mansion in Chronos by that time. What an active and adorable little boy you must have been.”

Shion found himself grabbing Nezumi’s arm.

“Tell me. What happened? Who got killed? Is it the Hunt? Is it something that happened in the West Block?”

“No.”

“Then, where?”

“In the forest.”

“Forest? You mean the woods that spread to the north?”

Nezumi brushed Shion’s fingers away. At the same time, he turned his body and dug his own fingers into Shion’s arm.

“Listen.” Nezumi’s breath was on his earlobe. It was cold. “I’ll tell you.” His fingers drew away from Shion’s arm and pressed against his throat, slowly tracing the red mark that snaked around it.

“You have a red scar, a gift from the parasite wasp, right?”

“Not a gift I was happy to get.”

“I have one too. A gift from No. 6, if you will.”

“Huh?”

Nezumi cast off his shirt. He half-turned to show his back. Shion felt his throat close up. His breath caught.

“Nezumi, this—”

There was a raised scar on the smooth skin between Nezumi’s shoulders and hips. It was about the size of an adult palm. That spot was coloured pale pink, and was taut like a burn scar. It looked even more out-of-place because of the smoothness of the skin around it. It looked like a gigantic spider was splayed over his back.

“Keloids, huh...”

“Yeah. Graciously given to me twelve years ago.”

Shion stretched out his hand to touch the spot which looked like it could be the spider’s head. He slid his fingertip along the scar as if to trace its outline. Nezumi did not resist. He stood like a statue as if to give in to the movement of Shion’s fingertips.

“I never... noticed.” Shion let out a sigh almost without thinking. Not once four years ago, when he had treated the graze wound on Nezumi’s shoulder, nor in these past few months they spent together, did he notice. Had Nezumi skilfully hidden it from him?

“Of course.” Nezumi crouched suddenly, and retrieved his shirt. “What reason do I have to show you? I’d have to get naked. You wouldn’t wanna be stark naked in front of me either, would you? Even though I’ve had the privilege of seeing it once already.”

“Well... but...” He wished Nezumi would have revealed it. He wished Nezumi had revealed this scar earlier. He wanted Nezumi to speak about the past which surrounded it. Shion didn’t have the right

to accuse him of why he had hidden it up until now, and why he had said nothing. But that was why he wanted Nezumi to open up and tell him. If only he had earlier...

Shion knew he would have done so. He would expose his body, his mind, his scars, and where his heart lay. He had done so before. *Nezumi doesn't trust me completely. He hasn't acknowledged me as someone who is worth exposing everything to. What can I do to bridge this barrier between us, this chasm?*

He gritted his teeth.

That's enough. This isn't the time to be wallowing in my emotions. This isn't such a forgiving situation, I know that much.

Keloids. Abnormal raising of the scar. Due to a burn?

"We were burned," Nezumi said, as if he had seen right through Shion's heart. His voice was brittle. It became a force of impact that slammed into Shion.

"Burned?... What do you mean, burned?"

"That's what happened. One day, some soldiers came in with firearms, and cleared us out by burning us down."

Raging flames swirled before his eyes.

They cleared us out by burning us down.

Nezumi stood in front of Shion, and began to speak. His tone was regular and emotionless.

"My people, Shion—we were once called the Forest People. Even before No. 6... no, even before the Town of the Rose, which would become the beginnings of No. 6, we lived in the forest, and it was our home. We were in harmony—true harmony with the wind, the earth, the water and the sky, and with animals and plants. For all of that time."

The elder raised his hand shakily.

“Yes, Shion. The Forest People used to inhabit this land. That is why so much nature has managed to remain miraculously intact.”

“What kind of people are the Forest People?” Shion’s heart raced; he was about to step further into Nezumi’s truth.

“They are born in the forest, and they lived there,” the elder said.

“They made the forest thrive, treated it with respect, and protected it. They were able to converse with the wind, water, trees, and grasses, and align their hearts with them. They lived in a totally opposite manner from how we do. They did not wish for growth nor development; they only lived quietly within the laws of nature. This land has always been protected by these people . . . that is how it has been.”

The elder let out a long sigh, and lowered his head. As the sigh left him, his body seemed to deflate and shrink in size.

“It was a lush forest . . . there were all kinds of animals and plants, large and small. Seasons passed, flowers bloomed, fruits ripened, leaves thickened, and life pulsed as it was nurtured and passed on.”

“And No. 6 destroyed it all.” Nezumi’s voice was now reduced to a whisper. His beautiful murmur rocked Shion’s eardrums and heart.

“Shion, you probably had no idea it was happening, but No. 6 was still burgeoning when you were born. They tried to swallow every single piece of land which was suitable for their habitation and make it their own. They concluded that we were in the way. We were people of the forest—we obeyed the laws of the forest, but refused to worship anything else. We refused to become part of No. 6. Back then, the wall was finishing up at a considerable speed. Only those on the inside of the silver wall were to be treated like humans. As for those outside, they could invade it or destroy it however they liked—that was becoming No. 6’s stance. And in accordance with it, they invaded the entire forest, and stole it from us. You understand what I’m saying?”

“I do.”

“Can you imagine what I’m going to say next?”

Shion nodded. He could feel his neck creak. “No. 6’s army... invaded your village. They thought, if you weren’t going to comply... they would destroy you all...”

“Yeah. Nice, you’ve learned to see through things better.”

Shion clutched at his chest. His heart wasn’t just racing—it was palpating, and he couldn’t breathe properly.

“And then, that time... what were you doing...?”

“I was sleeping. It was nighttime. I was still young. I was too young... to remember a lot of things. I don’t remember my mother’s face, nor my father’s voice. I just remember it was hot. And the viciousness of the flames which devoured everything... I remember. I remember it, Shion.”

“They burned down... the whole village.”

“They burned it down and killed everyone off. Indiscriminately. They burned down houses with people still in them, and shot those who tried to flee. Can’t you just see it? You’ve already experienced the Hunt. No. 6 has repeated that Hell many, many times.”

He could see it. He could see vividly the scene of the massacre. Even though he himself had been captured in the Hunt, thrown down into darkness, come this far, always by Nezumi’s side; even though he had been amongst the abused, in the scene he watched now, Shion was on the side that was perpetrating the murder. He was pointing the flamethrower and the fire which spurted out of it at the elderly, children, men and women.

Sweat soaked his skin. He felt ill.

“But you were saved. You suffered burns... but you survived.”

“An old woman—I don’t know whether she was my real grandmother. But an old woman took me in her arms, and made a desperate escape. Thanks to her, I was able to survive.”

"Your family, were they—"

"None of them lived."

He swallowed the spit in his mouth. It was bitter. Very bitter.

"So No. 6 invaded your forest, destroyed it, and went on extending its territory."

"That's right. It was around where the airport is now. The woods that dot the place are the remnants of the forest. They must've wanted land to make a runway on. A few years after the massacre, No. 6's walls stretched out into the form they are today."

A bead of sweat rolled down his cheek. There was still a bitter taste in his mouth.

"There's more," Nezumi said. "It's about how I got imprisoned into this underground part of the Correctional Facility."

"Right—let's hear it."

Heh. Nezumi laughed without warning. It was a carefree, yet somehow ironic smile, unique to Nezumi only.

"You don't look like you want to. You've gone all pale. Like a sheet."

"I'll listen. I want to. Nezumi, I want to hear your story until the end. I think I have the obligation . . . to hear it."

Nezumi's fingers pinched Shion's chin.

"Is that how you really feel?"

"I promised. I said I would never lie to you again. I'll keep the promise. And—if it's possible . . ."

"If what's possible?"

"I don't want to lie to myself, either."

"A fine challenge."

The fingers retreated. A smile graced the face which had fallen somberly a moment before. There was no more irony or coldness in his face. Shion even thought it looked gentle. When he saw that smile,

he felt the strength suddenly leave him. He felt dizzy. He felt like the ground had disappeared under his feet, like he was floating in the air. His whole body grew cold.

He was fainting.

“Shion?”

“It’s nothing.” He spread his feet apart, and supported his crumbling posture.

I’m not gonna fall here. Everything’s starting. It’s only starting. I have to listen... I have to hear him say the truth. He closed his eyes. Just as he expected, the raging inferno was still swirling behind his eyelids. People rolled about on the ground, burning. He could even hear the bloodcurdling screams and smell the stench of burning flesh.

Am I on the side of the murderers?

Twelve years ago, I was in Chronos. In my comfortable room, I enjoyed sumptuous meals, and slept in a clean bed. Even while Nezumi was being burned and nearly killed, I was given everything, and was living a life I didn’t deserve.

Who could say that this wasn’t a sin? Even if I was a young child, I was still living in the same world as those who were doing the massacring. It’s an immovable truth: I was on the side of No. 6, not Nezumi. Could anyone say this wasn’t a sin? Could I—and I’m not anyone—I’m no one. The darkness wavered. Nezumi’s figure blurred. All sounds faded away. Then, a pair of arms slid underneath his armpits.

“That’s enough. Shion, this is as far as I’m gonna go.” Nezumi tightened his grip. The sensation brought Shion back to his senses.

“You’re—well, I am too—we’re both exhausted out of our wits. We’ve managed to drag ourselves through this gruelling experience, not to mention we were on our toes for the whole time. We’re probably both as tired as we can possibly get. It’s alright. Rest. Take some time to wind down. If you don’t, your heart’s gonna give.”

“... I can’t... hear any songs.”

“Huh?”

“Even if I start to lose consciousness, I can’t hear... songs, like you do...”

“Shion.”

“I can’t... do it.”

“Shion, look at me.”

He shifted his gaze, and looked up at the pair of grey eyes, which were calm and peaceful.

“I told you before. I’m me, and you’re you. We can’t do the same things. We can’t be the same. But we can support each other like this. Both of us. Back there, you supported me, and gave me water. You were probably thirsty as hell yourself, but you saved every little drop for me. Shion... you were born inside the walls, and I’ve been living outside of them. That’s the reality of it, and we can’t help it. No one can change the fact. But when the other is about to fall, we stretch our hand out without even thinking, and try to support him. We can’t help it. We give him water. We try to protect him. That’s another truth about us.”

“Nezumi...”

“I didn’t mean to make you feel guilty. I didn’t mean to accuse you of any crime. I—can’t even imagine wanting to hurt you. I’m sorry. I should have thought a little more about your situation.”

Something hot pushed at the back of Shion’s eyes. Even before he could vocalize it, tears streamed down his face.

How embarrassing. How pathetic, to be crying like this.

He clamped his teeth over his lip, and tried to hold the tears that welled up. But sobs managed to push their way through between his clenched teeth.

Don't be kind to me. Don't apologize. I wouldn't have minded if you blamed me, hurt me, accused me of any crime. If you didn't, I would keep taking advantage of it. I would lean on this reality you speak of, and I would keep excusing myself to no end. I'm still that weak.

He couldn't control his emotions. His nerves, which had been on-edge until now, had a hard time bounding back once they gave way. They ignored Shion's will as they let the tears fall freely.

"Don't cry." Nezumi's hand patted his back. "Don't you cry. You were just a tiny kid. You're not to blame for anything. The guys who should pay for their crime are the adults. The adults who gave birth to that creature and let it grow this large should be the ones to pay the penalty. Isn't that right, Rou?"

"Yes. The crime rests entirely with us."

"Then what's your personal crime? What have you committed?"

"I created the seed of the massacre."

It was like the air had frozen over. Nezumi's arms trembled softly beneath Shion's armpits.

"That massacre was not carried out to acquire land for a runway. It was to acquire Elyurias."

Elyurias. The great sovereign.

* * *

"We never had a sovereign, at least I don't remember there being one. I've never even heard of the name before," Nezumi said.

"Naturally. I was the one who named her. Your people did not give her a name, but you did revere her. You revered her as you did the other trees, the sun, and the moon, and you feared her. Yes—you feared her. She had power. She had a power that neither we nor you had—probably a power no human could possess. That is why No. 6

desired her. They desired her power. Nezumi—your people knew everything about her power, and you feared and revered her. You never thought of using her as a device for your own prosperity. That is the difference between your people and us. However, I was not directly involved in that massacre. Nevertheless, I know that is no excuse.”

“Let’s just hear the truth. What role did you play?”

“I—I met Elyurias in the forest, discovered her power, and reported it. You could say I was entranced by her. I was obsessed with her, and I submitted a massive research report about her. The upper echelons of No. 6 expressed a strong interest, and contributed generous research grants to me. They called me a rare gem of a researcher. I had grown giddy with fame and fortune. Oh—”

The elder’s words trailed off. Just for a moment, his gaze wandered in the air.

“What?”

“No... I remember Karan saying to me around that time. She said she was afraid of me. She said there was a frightening, dangerous sort of look on my face. She said she was afraid of me, and she didn’t know why... it was long afterwards when I finally realized why. Yes... I had not realized... the change in myself, nor in No. 6... I even laughed at Karan’s fear. I had not realized that I had thrown my ideals away, and that I had wandered off the path I intended to walk. But—by that time, the dominant organizations of No. 6 had already been formed, and they were fast becoming concrete. A military was being assembled discreetly, and a skillful system of controlling and dominating people was nearing completion. I never knew—I had not realized in the slightest. I had still believed... I had still...”

“... that No. 6 was a utopian city?”

“Yes. A pacifist city with hopes of eternal peace at its foundation,

interacting with the world, armed with no weapons whatsoever. A city that insured a humane life for each and every person; one that respected each and every person as a human being. No. 6 and the world, science and nature, ideal and reality would come together in harmony, with no contradictions. I believed in it. I believed it, immersed myself in my research, and... brought tragedy. I never imagined that No. 6 would have an army. I never imagined that they would mobilize their military and invade the surrounding realms. When I learned of the truth of the massacre, it was already a long, long time after the incident had occurred... but I panicked. It hit me with an impact enough to make my body go rigid. It was then that I finally realized the meaning behind Karan's words. I realized that I had been drunk with joy over the superficial successes of my work, and had become one who couldn't feel, one who was numb to the happenings around him, one who was more foolish and dangerous than anyone could be. I realized this, and I appealed to the uppers to clarify the truth of the massacre. It was my own way of protesting."

Nezumi let his shoulders shake, as if he couldn't find anything more funny about it.

"You thought they would listen to you?"

"I did."

"Naive."

"I had thought they were on my side. I had thought of them as my own friends, fellow partners who shared the hope and ideology of creating a utopian city—not politicians, not researchers."

"So you made a fiery objection. And the result of that was your arrest and imprisonment as a rebel."

"That is about right... they did not go so far as to kill me, however."

"Even they still had some pity left."

"No... not that."

The elder slid his hand across his lap. “They probably decided that there was no need to kill me after what my body had undergone. Shion.”

“Yes.”

“Look at this.” The elder stuck his arm out, and rolled up the garment covering it.

“...”

Nezumi shifted in his spot beside Shion. Shion also held his breath, and leaned forward. A red banded scar wound up the elder’s arm from his elbow to his shoulder. It meandered like Shion’s, but the colour was a little darker than his.

“This is... from the parasite wasp...”

“Now I can say so with certainty. Somewhere in my body, there are probably remains of a wasp that could not hatch. At the time, I was under house arrest by the authorities. I had collapsed suddenly in my room and gone unconscious. When I recovered fully, these marks were on my arm... and both my legs had lost all functionality.”

“Your legs...”

“You lost the colour of your hair, I lost my legs. As the cost of survival, I suppose. However, at the time, no one could grasp the exact cause of this, including myself... If the same thing happened now, I would have made a good experimental specimen, perhaps, but at the time, there was no such room for rational thought in the upper echelons. They were immersed in the work of building governing organizations. The Correctional Facility was still under construction. I managed to hang on by a thread, losing my legs in exchange, and was housed in the underground caves. And so they cast me off. Shion, I was the wasp’s first host, and one who survived.”

“Then, Rou—” Nezumi lifted his chin, and directed his gaze straight up at the elder. It was piercing, like an arrow.

Amazing.

Nezumi was still in full control of himself. He was able regulate his emotions and reason. Shion wiped his tears with the back of his hand, and clenched it into a fist. Nezumi had said that they couldn't be the same. Perhaps it was so. But he could still try to bring himself closer.

I want to be resilient like he is. I want to preserve myself. I want to stay as who I am.

I won't hope, or pray; I'm going to make a vow to myself. One day, I'll become strong. I'll have the kind of strength that will keep me from endlessly making excuses to myself.

Nezumi pointed a finger to the heavens.

"Then, Rou, aren't the higher-ups gonna summon you sometime soon? Maybe they've finally found out about the incidents occurring in the city, and have got no idea what to do about it. It's about time their arrogant gaze started seeing reality for what it is. Don't you think they'd come to you for help?"

"That will not happen. All of my research was confiscated. They have probably analyzed all they could. My power is now next to useless. I have grown old. I will live the remainder of my life underground, and die—that is my wish. I have neither the power nor will to change reality. But I do know this much: what is about to happen in No. 6 is many times more fearsome and destructive than you presume. Many people will die. Neither I nor No. 6 can stop it. But you can."

"Stop it? The death and destruction? What do I have to stop it for? I couldn't wish for a more splendid outcome."

"Nezumi, the citizens will be the ones dying. Children and adults will die indiscriminately. Are you saying you will merely watch it happen?"

"What's wrong with that?"

“You said that Shion was not guilty of any crime. That is true. In just the same way, with what crime could you accuse the children inside the walls? If you will fold your arms and watch, knowing that children will die . . . if you will let it happen and do nothing . . . you, and any who do the same—”

The elder straightened his back, and returned Nezumi’s gaze steadily. “—are murderers.”

Nezumi made a small strangled noise in his throat.

“It is not something for me to say. However, I must say it. Nezumi, you are the survivor of a massacre. That is why you cannot stand on the side of the murderers. You must not let yourself become the same as those whom you hate.”

“Gh—”

Nezumi fell silent. Shion stepped forward.

“What should we do? What *can* we do?”

His mother was inside the city. There was also Lili, the girl from his neighbourhood. There was her family. There was the student who came to buy a roll every morning; there was the worker he exchanged greetings with on the way to his job.

A fleeting resemblance of Kalan—the girl he had met in the West Block—overlapped with Lili’s face. He didn’t know why.

I can’t. I can’t kill them.

“I do not know,” the elder said. “I cannot foresee what we can do to prevent this tragedy. Nothing presents itself to me. You must act as your hearts tell you to. You—your hearts—will be able to lead the people away from destruction to salvation. To me that is how it seems, and I cannot see it any other way. Shion.”

“Yes.”

“Take this.” The elder slid his hand along his armrest. A small drawer appeared. He plucked something small from it, and offered it to Shion, giving another one of his numerous sighs. He looked like he had rapidly aged. The boyish glint in his eye had faded.

“This is . . . a chip.”

“Yes. Almost the entirety of my research is in it. Parasite wasps, Elyurias, the Forest People . . . everything. After you have saved your friend, please try to decode it.”

“Me?”

“I entrust it to you. Now . . . I am a little tired. I have not spoken this much in a long time. I am tired. I wish to rest.”

I entrust it to you. You must find the answer. Please find an answer—one where no blood will be shed. Shion heard the elder’s unspoken words.

There were so many more mysteries: how this underground realm came to be; how Nezumi found his way here; his reason for leaving; all the things that happened which led up to their meeting—he itched to know, but for now, he would suppress those words of questioning inside his heart.

This was the time to act, not learn.

Cheep-cheep-cheep! Cheep-cheep-cheep!

The mice were suddenly buzzing with noise. A rat at Shion’s feet raised its voice in apprehension.

Screech, screech!

Shion had heard this voice before. It was—

“Tsukiyo. Nezumi, Tsukiyo’s here.”

“I know. Geez, how can you differentiate them like that?” Nezumi put his fingers to his lips, and whistled shrilly.

Screech, screech! A small black mouse came half-tumbling down the rocky wall.

Skrit, skrit. A sewer rat leapt up, and pounced on Tsukiyo.

“Stop!”

The sewer rat froze at Shion’s command.

“He’s not prey. He’s one of us. Let him go.” The sewer rat lifted its paws which had been pinning Tsukiyo down. The black mouse leapt to its feet as if on a spring, and scurried up Nezumi’s body.

“Good, you made it. A message from Inukashi?”

Tsukiyo nodded. There were wounds all over its tiny body, and they were beginning to bleed. Nezumi lent an ear to Tsukiyo’s squeaking, and swallowed.

“Looks like everything is ready to go above-ground. We have to act quickly. Rou, I would have wanted to hear a little more of your story, but it looks like we don’t have time for that. We’re gonna go.”

“Then go you shall. Do you wish for anything?”

“Water and food. I’m so hungry, I feel like I’m gonna pass out.”

“It will be prepared immediately. Sasori, give them whatever they wish.”

“Before that—” Sasori drew up beside Nezumi. “Nezumi, I want to ask you something.”

“What?”

“Surely you are not thinking of blowing up the door with a micro-bomb? If you do that, this place will collapse as well.”

Nezumi furrowed his brow and looked at him in exaggerated bewilderment. “Sasori, we’ve come through the back gates of the Correctional Facility here. An old bomb detector is still a bomb detector, and that gate’s got them. We could get knives or small firearms past them, but not micro-bombs. If we could, we would’ve sneaked in with at least a hundred on our backs.”

“Fine. As long as you do not bring us into this mess.”

“You doubting me?”

“Who knows what you will do. You are dangerous.”

“Hey, I thought Shion was the demon here?”

“Demons do not cry.” Sasori glanced at Shion. “Demons do not cry ... like that.”

Shion felt his face burnt up at the man’s words. He felt painfully embarrassed.

“I found it strange,” the man said. “To be able to cry so unreservedly ... very strange.”

“Well, no,” Shion stammered, “I—I was just really tired, and... my nerves—stretched thin—that was it, really, it’s not like I cry like that all the time—”

The air shifted.

Sasori had laughed. It was the first smile Shion had seen on him.

“You are interesting. You may be, perhaps... far more decent than Nezumi.”

A sewer rat sat on Shion’s shoulder and nudged him with its nose.

“He says so too,” the man said, indicating the rat. “He says you are more decent.”

“The hell is that supposed to mean?” Nezumi clicked his tongue. Then he jerked his chin slightly.

“Let’s go, Shion.”

“Yeah.”

“Rou. This is good-bye. It’s probably the last I’ll see of you. This time, I won’t come back.”

“That is for the best. You are one who must live above-ground. You are someone who must live in the light and wind. I pray that we will never meet again. Ah, but you are not in need of prayers, perhaps?”

“I’m not.”

“Oh—Rou, I’m going too,” Shion said. “I wish I could have heard more of your story.”

“I trust that the rest will come through your own hands. Thanks to you, I have been able to relive memories of Karan. But you do not need to tell her about me. You should also forget about me yourself. This is farewell, Shion.”

“Good-bye. Thank you for everything.”

They started walking.

When Shion turned around, the candle had already been extinguished. Darkness shrouded all that was behind him.

* * *

The emergency lamp flashed and the buzzer rang.

The door to the Correctional Facility rolled up slowly in front of Getsuyaku. He set a foot inside. White walls and a white hallway spread before him, the picture of cleanliness itself.

“*What* in the world is this, eh?” Getsuyaku was met with a torrent of abuse as soon as he entered the monitoring room. “What’s wrong with these cleaning robots? They’re spouting odours and strewing trash everywhere instead of cleaning it up. Have you even maintained them properly?” The man was practically a giant, almost one-and-a-half sizes bigger than Getsuyaku in height and berth.

“I’m sorry. They’ve been acting up. I didn’t even imagine something like this would happen.”

“Enough excuses. Clean it up, and quickly.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Oh, it *stinks*,” said a woman with long hair, grimacing as she pinched her nose. “I can’t work in this stench.” She left the room, her voice congested. She trampled Getsuyaku’s toe on her way out, though

whether she had meant to do it or not, he didn't know. She gave him no apology, nor did she even spare him a glance.

The room was divided by transparent walls into several sections. The sections were arranged in accordance to priority level, and the higher priority rooms were placed further in. Getsuyaku was in a space near the door, commonly called the Mannequin. This section dealt mainly with monitoring ventilation. It was a department relatively low on the priority scale, and that was probably another reason why he had been let in without much trouble.

"I'm very sorry." He went around with a vacuum, sucking up the trash scattered over the floor.

"You're utterly useless. I can find a dozen replacements for janitors like you, you know. Next time you mess up, you're fired on the spot. Ugh, it smells horrible. I can't stand it. Hm? What are you looking at?"

"Nothing, sir." Getsuyaku lowered his eyes.

"Do you have something to say? A complaint? A Lost Town resident acting high and mighty now, eh?"

Getsuyaku felt a firm kick in the shins. He staggered, and struck his hip hard on a corner of a desk.

"Well? Don't just stand there. Hurry up and work!"

A wind was dancing inside his head. No, it was whirling fiercely. It was whipping up a tremendous noise.

Damnit. He was mumbling. *Damnit, damnit, damnit, damnit.*

What makes him think he can be so arrogant? What have I done to be insulted by him? I'm just doing my job. I've done my job all this time—honest and hard work. —Well, I might've done a little smuggling, but still, I haven't caused anyone trouble. You guys would've been buried in trash if it weren't for me. Don't like the smell? Dirty, you say? It's all stuff

you guys have produced. Don't give me this shit. Treating me like a dog. It doesn't matter where I live; I'm still a human. I'm no mongrel.

His injured pride swelled into anger, and wiped clean from Getsuyaku's breast any hint of uncertainty that had lodged itself there.

He saw a fleeting image of Inukashi's tan face.

They go around acting cocky like that, and they've got no idea how hard your work is, and how much it's worth. They're looking down on you. So? How about you give those cocky guys a piece of your mind? Not a bad idea, is it?

You're absolutely right, Inukashi. It's not bad at all.

He threw a glance at the digital display on the wall. Within No. 6—and this building was no exception—time passed by with not so much as a 0.1-second delay.

A capsule lay on the floor at his feet. It had not disintegrated.

Damn it all to hell.

He stepped on it softly with his right foot. There was another one. He did the same—

"What in the world—" The man stood up. His face was contorted. "What is this horrid smell?"

"I have no idea..." Getsuyaku replied vaguely, "it smells like rotting meat... I think it must've been mixed in with the garbage..." He was right. The smell was horrid. It wasn't an overpowering odour, but it was enough to grate on his nerves. Even Getsuyaku, who was used to smelling decay, felt ill.

"I can't stand it. Ugh—out of the way!" The man covered his mouth and exited the room. He trampled Getsuyaku's foot on the way out, just like the woman had.

"That hurts, what was that for?"

"Shut up. Move it!"

The man shoved his hand against Getsuyaku's chest. He staggered, and bumped into the control panel.

Stop. It was the designated time.

Getsuyaku pretended to hold his hip and groan in pain, and pressed the green button on the far right. While he was at it, he pressed the changer switch. Now, this stench would travel through the air ducts and waft into the Facility. Getsuyaku didn't know what the green button was supposed to do. He had only followed Inukashi's directions. He raised himself unsteadily, and picked up the vacuum. He began to clean.

He was breaking out into a cold sweat.

How had he looked to the surveillance camera positioned in the middle of the ceiling? Did his move seem unnatural?

I've done it.

There was a melting capsule underneath the desk. Fumes rose up thickly.

Getsuyaku strengthened the grip in his trembling fingertips, and kept hold of his vacuum hose.

* * *

Shion.

I feel it. You're close by.

Shion.

I can feel you.

Don't come. Please, don't come.

I don't want to be seen by you.

*Don't come, Shion.
I really
really
want to see you.*

* * *

Another casualty. Over thirty in total, now. Social class, wealth, history of illness, residence, sex, age, build, lifestyle, all unrelated. Who was next—?

Fear, uncertainty, and agitation mounted inside No. 6.

“What are the authorities doing?”

“Investigate and disclose the causes.”

“Why aren’t you taking any effective measures?”

“Dispatch the medics, hurry.”

“Mayor, your emergency press conference.”

What has happened to our No. 6? Our city, our No. 6, what—

* * *

Nezumi’s fingers tapped the door connected to the Correctional Facility. Safu was beyond this door.

“It’s almost time. We’ll be launching the flashy fireworks soon, Shion.”

“Yeah.”

“You nervous?”

“No. I’ve been thinking.”

“What could you *possibly* think of at a time like this?” Nezumi said incredulously.

“I was thinking about Safu. I want to see her.”

“No need to jump the gun.”

“And—I was wondering, just for a tiny instant.”

“What?”

“Whether it was possible to know everything about you.”

“Idle thoughts, huh.”

“You think so?”

Nezumi’s fingers yanked at Shion’s earlobe. A sharp pain shot through it.

“Shion, listen. From here on out is your stage. Once the door opens, we’ll be inside the Correctional Facility. Get that brain working full-throttle. I’m gonna be acting on your orders. You’re my lifeline. Don’t you dare break.”

“Of course I won’t. You don’t even need to say so.”

Nezumi smiled wryly, and stretched his hand out palm-up. Shion placed his own hand on top.

Click.

There was a sound.

Click click click.

The automatic locks were being released.

“Perfect. I need to give Inukashi a reward later.”

Click click click. Creak.

“Let’s go, Shion.”

“Right.”

The door opened.

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.

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. Getsuyaku 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 shrunk 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 snout-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 antiseptics, 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 bitinglly. “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. Damn it, 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 preciousely, preciousely 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 29, 2019.