

No. 6

No. 6

Part One

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Beyond

Side Stories

Afterwords

No.6

Part Two

A novel by
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Translated by
Nostalgia on 9th Avenue

Original published by
Kodansha

No. 6 is a nine-volume Japanese novel series written by Atsuko Asano and published by Kodansha between October 2003 and June 2011. 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.

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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?”

“Hm,” 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 over-privileged 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.*

“Goddamn it.”

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 wan 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.”

“Babhu.” 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.

Abbbb!!!

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.

Abbbb!

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 palpitating, 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.

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.