

# My dress for you

Evan de Vosh

# **Contents**

<b>Chapter 1. Celestial</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Chapter 2. Fifty four</b>	<b>17</b>
<b>Chapter 3. The King of Trees</b>	<b>50</b>
<b>Chapter 4. Family business</b>	<b>78</b>
<b>Chapter 5. The Ferris Wheel</b>	<b>101</b>
<b>Chapter 6. Spider's hairpin</b>	<b>125</b>
<b>Chapter 7. My shooting star</b>	<b>154</b>

## **Chapter 1. Celestial**

The endless blue desert crushed me from all sides, and icy gusts swept golden sand into my dry hair. The tiny particles showered down from my skull into an eternal hourglass while my slow footsteps left long trails on the thousands of familiar roads.

At the same moment, silver threads bound my limbs in the darkness. I lay in the heart of the web, then stood up and moved on. Only one star in the sky flickered day after day, guiding me along.

I put on my brown hood, scratched my prickly cheek, and my back disappeared behind the glowing horizon.

How funny that was. Even between the worlds, I stayed put.

During the break, I sat by the window and erased the word "psycho" that had appeared on my desk. The usual bustle of recess occurred in the classroom, but to me, it was just a barely perceptible noise in the background.

In order not to feel my presence, my classmates sitting next to me moved their desks a little farther away. They whispered behind my back, and their gazes slid over me, filled with confusion and hidden fear.

The identical walls became a fortress of disapproval and judgment day after day. I didn't choose to be an exile. I was actually forced to.

Nevertheless, my thoughts already were far from here, immersed in the world of magic and arcane knowledge that I sought to understand and master. The dark waters of the

ocean, like boundless voids, swallowed the last point of light.

Like a needle weaving through cloth, the disgusting sight of Akane's face permeated my body from head to toe again.

"What would you do if your significant other passed away before your eyes?"

A pink pen with white kittens in it rolled under my chair. Speaking in hushed tones, three girls stood side by side and directed their gazes toward me. I picked up the pen and handed it to a person with long black hair.

Eventually, after a moment of silence, the nervous girl blinked and pressed her palm against her leg. A silver bracelet with a small butterfly charm sparkled.

"I don't need that one," she stammered and turned away.

She didn't even look at me. Could taking something from a mentally unstable person tarnish your reputation? How expected, lucky rich daughter.

The needle of my compass scratched a pentagram on the desk. Meanwhile, the girls approached the blackboard. In addition to discussing the last summer clothing collection from various French fashion houses, one of them suddenly jumped and exclaimed.

"Have you ever heard of spider silk?"

"So expensive... They're making one cloak out of it for years," one of her friends complained.

"Yeah, they don't sell it in stores. Spider silk clothing cures diseases."

"Fairy tale..."

"No, that's not true! I've even heard a legend that the bodies of dead kings were once dressed in spider silk clothes so their souls would return to our world."

"...Come on."

"Why don't you believe me!"

The smell of death and the sharpness of the scythe piercing my girlfriend's heart had changed my perception of reality. As a result, I had gone from sewing clothes in my family's atelier to becoming a legends and rituals fanatic. I had abandoned any morality in pursuit of my goal.

Most of my friends had stopped hanging out with me. In fact, I hadn't walked down the streets waving the grimoire around and screaming:

"I made Frankenstein! Uh-huh-ha-ha-ha."

I wasn't an ordinary school student. I wasn't that dumb.

Without a doubt, I left the classes early and spent my night in a clearing hidden deep in the woods, away from buildings. There, I researched various legends that I'd found on the Internet or in books in the school library.

Magic runes carved into the trunks of trees surrounding me. Under the roots, where light could hardly penetrate through the dense green foliage, my memories blossomed like a firefly and lit the way in my own inner labyrinth.

A knife's blade pointed at the brightest star in the sky.

"My heart for yours. My soul for yours. Return from the world of the dead to the world of the living!" my scream echoed throughout the forest.

The silent night covered the forest in a dark blanket, and the moon's glow engulfed every tree. While forest

creatures rustled in the darkness, the leaves whispered secrets, and the grass swayed with anxiety.

While the reality around me became increasingly blurred and unclear, the book pages lying on the cold grass drew me into their world of ancient magic. I lost track of time, completely consumed by the obsession of resurrecting someone long gone from this world.

A crazy smile formed on my face. The knife came close to my chest, and then I heard it. Could someone explain what happened here?

In the beginning, carrying a damp odor, the wind intensified, and I experienced an auditory hallucination. Again, my girlfriend's voice rang out from behind the trees.

So, I examined every bush to find the source of the sound. My previous attempts to use magic had failed. Furthermore, that new and unfamiliar experience held promise. When a cool breeze brushed against my neck and sent shivers down my spine, my legs pumped, and my hands shook.

Was that a new someone's silly prank that would be posted on the internet to make fun of me? I anticipated the headings: *"Young exorcist gone mad."* Although I wasn't very good at coming up with titles.

Nevertheless, Akane stopped talking to me. I knelt and picked the damp grass with my hands.

"I can't... can't go on," I whispered while a tiny tear rolled down my cheek. "What am I even doing this for? Magic only works in fairy tales and movies."

Thoughts flooded my head and replaced each other. What actions would you take in my situation? Would you cry on your pillow all night and then move on?

It was not a teenage love. In other words, she ignited a spark in me after my parents passed away. The only one who could help me overcome that depressing period of my life...

"I'll never see you again. You're dead, you know? Not sick, not gone abroad to study, you don't exist anymore. You'll never talk to me again..."

A bright light blinded me and appeared to be the source of salvation. A blue crocus bloomed. The petals of the flower resembled soft waves in the night sky and formed a glass-like shape. Besides, illuminating the grove like a magic lantern, the shades changed smoothly from a pale azure to a deep sapphire.

Crocuses were more beautiful in person than in pictures. Nonetheless, I came here every evening, and there were no flowers before. Especially glowing ones. Could flowers even glow?

Some white, shimmering threads intertwined with each other and created a large web connecting each flower. Suddenly, they flared with a bright yellow light.

The desire to touch the threads consumed my mind. I was on my way to the flowers. Holding my breath, I grabbed them, and Akane's voice rang in my ears afterward.

"Shin! Look!" the girl called to me, getting louder with each step.

Their divine shape possessed my body. A glance was enough for me to savor their smooth texture. In addition, the web was strong and non-sticky.

From head to toe, a mix of emotions flowed through my body after my gentle touch: fear, joy, anger, calm, love, and hate. All the moments of my life spent with Akane appeared before me.

I bounced back. The shimmering threads grew brighter and drew me in like a bug. At the same time, the trees around me dissolved into the darkness.

"Real life is always full of many colors," came a deep voice out of nowhere.

"Satoshi? Is that you?" I gasped and looked around, gritting my teeth.

"First you dare touch my web, and then you ask who it belongs to? How rude, young man!"

I didn't question the presence of the sound. It answered me! The bass notes sounded right inside my head, but I was sure they were coming from outside.

The brightly colored flowers swayed up and down, hypnotizing me. Lots of small white dots flashed in the distance like brilliant stars. Did I summon a ghost? After countless rituals of trying to communicate with spirits, I finally succeeded.

"...Hey, uh... Which soul are you?" I stammered.

"Are you so interested in my personality? I'm flattered. We could get to know each other better," the voice teased me.

"Answer my question, ghost!"



"Ghost?" it laughed and couldn't stop for long. "You need not fear me, boy. If my thoughts were impure, you would realize it at once, wouldn't you? I am the creator that weaves together fate, time, life and death."

"And, and then what?"

"What do you mean by what?! What an incomprehensible boy..."

"Where did these flowers come from?"

"Oh, so you liked them?" the spirit's speech changed immediately. "My web is unique. You won't find one like it anywhere else."

"A web... a spider web. Like, spider silk?" I recalled today's conversation between those girls at the blackboard.

"Ha-ha-ha..."

A slight tremor occurred when I leaned toward the web.

Could my ongoing conversation with this supernatural personality help me find answers to my questions? After many years, I made progress. Such an extraordinary opportunity could not be lost.

Even hidden behind the green foliage, the distant light of the star became a beacon for me. In most cases, I would not try to achieve an impossible goal, but I was sure that Akane showed me the way to fulfill my selfish dream.

"I've heard a legend about our ancestors sewing clothes out of spider silk to resurrect souls. Is that true?" I ventured to ask after a moment of hesitation.

"Waste of my threads..." it sighed.

"So it's not just a legend?"

"A legend is a legend. The only question is how much truth is in it."

Eventually, a horrible thought crossed my mind. The dewdrops fell from the web onto the blue petals and caused a sharp pain in my heart.

"I know what you're thinking. Wanna take them, boy?" the confident voice stated and waited for my response.

"Answer the question: can they really bring a person back to life?"

"Under certain conditions - yes. You must come and get them yourself."

"Come where?"

"A place no living person is destined to go." it giggled.

My breathing quickened, and my chest tightened. I couldn't believe that wasn't a joke, but the possibility of me going mad loomed.

The spirit's persuasive words kept me alert. Something inside me suggested there had to be a catch.

However, the sweet promises clouded my judgment. I had a lot of arguments against it, but I always came back to the fact that I would not have the opportunity to bring Akane back to life. On the other hand, if I had completely lost my ability to think straight, it made no sense for me to refuse.

I carefully chose my words before answering, "If you deceive me, I will cast you out!"

"You won't believe this, but I knew you'd agree," suddenly, the voice hushed, and the flower's light dimmed.

The trees vanished. Only the glowing blue lights of the flowers stayed with me. Out of a black silhouette, my friend's face emerged in front of me. Akane tried to get

closer, but water engulfed me. My body was unresponsive while bubbles rose to the surface.

Taking in a deep breath of fresh air, I landed on a soft grass blanket. Sharp stones pierced my palms.

"Where am I?" I shouted, shaking my head and grasping my neck.

While comets whirled through space in the blink of an eye, the colorful stars ignited one by one. The enormity of the Earth overwhelmed me. Surrounded by the waves of starlight, a whisper of that dazzling night brought me to a clearing forgotten by the ordinary world.

"Welcome to my residence," came from behind my back.

A second ago, there was no one around me, but now someone revealed his presence.

Slabs of earth floated above orange clouds, and yellow spikelets fell to the ground with water currents. In the end, isolated from each other, white sakura trees dotted the horizon.

I stepped back, and a flower screamed under my foot.

"Are they alive?" I wondered, looking down.

"They're flowers," a delicate female voice sounded.

"Show yourself, ghost!" I bellowed and twitched.

"I am not a g-h-o-s-t. What a rude person you are, Yoshizawa Shin."

As if reaching for the sun, several flowers stretched upward in front of me. Their stalks intertwined and formed the semblance of a human body. Therefore, the petals turned into the snow-white skin of a dead person, with

cyan hair resting on her shoulders and extending to her elbows.

A woman with pink eyes, approximately twenty-five years old, stood in front of me completely unclothed. Standing tall and self-assured, she breathed deeply through her nose. A wooden crown made of thick roots with spikes on the edges reached up to her ears and the back of her head.

The Milky Way shone behind her, and pink space dust in the shape of a warm filled the sky. The stranger adjusted a single strand of black hair, leaned back, and an unseen force lifted her up. Resting on the intangible couch, she crossed her legs and yawned a few times.

The concept of lucid dreaming came to mind. It reminded me of the works of Austrian philosophers.

*"Our dreams are often manifestations of our subconscious desires."*

I didn't remember anything related to space and a naked woman. Nonetheless, I visualized my home, specifically the room with the messy bed and the closed curtains.

"You can stop," the woman declared and scratched her dark eyebrow. "Can you hear me, boy?"

With one eye open, I stood in front of her. Blue veins showed through her smooth arms, and sharp, translucent claws grew from her fingers. Eventually, she came to me and leaned her breast against my right arm.

"Ah, uh, excuse me," I inquired, trying to free myself from her embrace. "And where am I at the moment?"

"In the place between life and death. Didn't you hear me?" She walked toward the black horizon, moving her hips from side to side. "Oh, dear. Heaven your way."

Was Heaven like an abandoned MMORPG? The servers were running with no sign of life.

"Seems nice..." I mumbled.

"Reality is full of disappointments, isn't it? Heh-heh," she giggled and staggered off somewhere.

"And who are you?"

"You don't recognize me? Behold, before you the weaver of space and time. Celestial Spider! That's my nickname," the stranger whispered in my right ear.

No way... That distorted sound, leaving a deafening echo, did not match the young lady's soothing voice.

"...Uh-huh. I get it. Sounds cool," I replied, and she lowered her eyebrows without looking away. "I really think so. Celestial Spider...Um...Unique?"

She approached me and took my hands. A wide smile appeared on her face, and her cheeks turned pink.

"I'm finally not alone," she gushed.

When I stepped forward, a chorus of flowers erupted beneath my feet again. I jumped onto a beige gravel road.

"I would advise you to be careful where you walk," she warned me.

"They're like people," I moved my index finger closer to one of the flowers.

"You're a pretty smart guy, aren't you?"

After my scream and the jerking of my hand away, she put her right palm under the petals of a flower.

"Every soul in its place. Man, beast, insect. The dead and the unborn," the woman said and closed her eyes.

A yellow neon thread materialized in her grasp, reaching the black sky. The dense clouds separated and revealed a tree that towered above us.

"The connection between life and death..." I whispered. "Would they help me get Akane back?"

"I know what you're thinking," she wheezed. "It's not as simple as it may seem. You don't think you can just pack them up and walk out of here, do you?"

"I'm here to do this, whatever it takes."

"Each flower is an individual soul, and the thread connects it to the world it belongs to. You can't interfere with one destiny to change another."

"Then tell me what to do. You are the one who brought me to this place."

"You have agreed. And you need to find the right soul."

I needed to find Akane's soul? Wait, wait, wait! There were thousands of them, no, there must be billions. With such a limited amount of time, how could I do that? Even a century would not be enough time to discover the flower with Akane's soul.

"You're not the smartest ghost, I see. Are you kidding me?" I complained.

"You don't need to yell at me, human. I already let you get in here. Not many mortals have been able to behold this place with their own eyes," she replied and ran her fingers over her lower lip.

A beautiful woman's appearance attracted me like a magnet and prevented me from considering whether she was trustworthy or not.

She stood tall with her back straight and pulled in her stomach when a seamless, white dress draped over her body and highlighted the hourglass figure. Furthermore, the garment covered her shoulders while the fabric gathered at the waist, closer to the right hip.

The woman placed her foot on a gray stone next to her. To be honest, the attempt to display her superiority did not have the intended effect on me. Well, at least she had her clothes on.

"That's what a guide like me is here for!" she chuckled. "Surprised?"

She gave me a small rhombic medallion with a blue crystal in the center. It recalled some artifacts mentioned in my grimoires.

Talismans, pendulums... Exactly! As you approach something, a pendulum oscillates from side to side. It could be possible to find Akane's soul in this boundless field! Then her words drove me into despair and despondency.

"Wear it around your neck. It will allow you to see the memories of the souls you touch," the guide of this world explained to me.

"And what am I supposed to do with it?"

"By seeing memories, you can find the soul of your dead girlfriend in this field."

"There are billions of them! If I examine even half of them, several centuries will have passed in the world."

"Oh...You apparently don't quite understand how time works in this world. You can't die of old age here."

The woman came up behind me and put her hands on my shoulders.

"We've got centuries," she smirked.

The shadow of an unknown challenge awakened in my heart. These lands, unknown and foreign, would be my home for years. As my gaze drifted over the horizon, the arrow of time paved the eternal road, leading to unforeseeable distances. Impatience became my companion, and the anticipation of new chapters of my life sounded like a melody, quiet but full of mystery and hope.



## **Chapter 2. Fifty four**

"Which one is it?" I asked my companion.

"Two million fifteen thousand seven hundred and two."

As soon as I brought my slender arm to the stigma of a flower, it guided me through the memories of a dead man. From the dawn to the sunset of his life, the series of cold moments flashed through my mind.

The baby's cries drove me crazy. From his birth, lavish luxury became an invisible but ever-present part of his life. Surrounded by the care of lazy governesses, he spent his childhood in wealth.

Wealthy neighborhoods and private schools full of social inequality opened their doors to him. The desire for greatness and high standards made the rich heir antisocial and paranoid.

My parents had owned their own bustling business, a hub of constant activity and noise. However, my childhood had been a quiet one, steeped in the tranquility of lonely afternoons and the quiet pages of sewing books. For example, the wooden floor and the flimsy walls had shaken from the constant bickering over crippling payments in the kitchen.

They had died in poverty. For now, their souls rested somewhere in that endless azure graveyard, just like the soul of that lecherous pig.

I sat down on one of the many beige gravel paths and wiped my sweaty palms while flying islands hovered above us. Crumbled golden ears of wheat littered the roadside, and, in the midst of cosmic silence, heaven was my new home.

The roads and the views were no longer magical and enchanting. A little dark, but not bad. Walking through the clearing, you wondered after every step. Was I walking? Nothing special, though.

When, a few meters above the ground, a three-headed raven flew toward a dense forest on the horizon, a black feather fell on my shoe. I scratched my thick black beard and twirled the feather in the starlight.

"A bad omen," I said while the orange clouds rolled in.

"A gray hair?" my traveling companion asked and pulled it out.

"I won't die of old age, Mortha."

She lay down on a large gray stone at the side of the road.

That name sent shivers down my spine every time I called her. It fit her dead appearance perfectly and reminded me that I was alive. Each letter echoed in my brain and inspired thoughts of eternal life in the eternal desert. The undead couldn't have names. Nevertheless, the question of who she was still plagued me.

The meadow covered with a blue carpet stretched behind me. I took out a brown wooden mortar and poured gray powder from a small white bag into it. The black feather fell to the bottom of the mortar.

When my fingers snapped, the red tongues of flame burst from the tip of my index finger. A black ball formed in the heated mortar, and I folded it into a deep pocket of my brown cloak. My gaze was lost in the field of sapphires with no end in sight.

"Not bored yet?" Mortha asked and yawned.

"I'm here again. And I have no answers."

"It's here somewhere, in this place, like a grain of sand in a vast desert," I fixed my hood. "Should I stop?"

"You can stay here and enjoy my company at any time."

Looking back, we searched two hundred kilometers. Mortha's explanations about time being different here didn't help me much. Only my body showed the passage of time. I was more muscular and stronger. Simply put, I had grown up. All that remained of the seventeen-year-old boy were the memories and the goal I pursued to this day.

"Her soul won't run away. What about a break? You promised me a walk under Orion's belt," she rose from the rock and glanced at me.

I stretched my neck and stood up. My knees cracked, and I took a long root that curved like a snake. The top of it split in two and stretched upward, forming a circle with a translucent crystal in the center. That wooden staff was a true magic artifact. The world's gift!

"Shin, look out!" Mortha shouted and ran forward.

A gust of wind hit me in the back, sweeping across the blue field to the tall, colorful trees in the distance. My teeth bit into the inside of my cheek, and a sour taste formed on my tongue.

A second after Mortha's scream, a horn sounded overhead. The flowers around us faded and closed. A sandy haze enveloped the space around me and made clear vision impossible.

In the beginning, huge asteroids began to fall from the sky, leaving a trail of fire behind them. The fallen boulders

landed with a clatter and coalesced into great stone giants with runes scratched all over their black bodies.

I had read in magic books that it was possible to create golems for various purposes. Be it defense or more mundane things, but they were clearly designed to kill me.

Even after falling from the sky, not a single trace of these giants remained on the ground. It was a clever system. Otherwise, such a hailstorm would cause hundreds of souls to suffer. I, on the other hand, didn't even have a wet spot on me.

The golem's fist slammed into the ground and caused an earthquake. I tapped the staff on the ground and teleported back ten meters. My decrepit legs trembled, and I gripped the staff tighter with my cold hands.

"I won't get caught this time."

I pulled the self-made ball from my pocket and threw it at the golem in front of me. A black veil formed around its stone face. The golem stomped his foot a meter from me. Stumbling with each step, I ran to Mortha.

"Will they ever stop?" I asked.

"The peculiar immune system of this world is trying to get rid of the foreign object," her voice came from behind while she tried to keep up with me.

We didn't look back. Meanwhile, the yellow mist squeezed us harder and penetrated our lungs while a square bag on my shoulder hit my kidneys and caused a sharp tingling sensation with each blow.

A golden star burned in the black sky among thousands of white lights. The rays of heaven always reached me, wherever I was.

"Soon, very soon," I prayed.

Before I got killed, we had to get to the forest as fast as possible.

Another boulder landed a few meters away and threw me back with a shockwave. The golem was about to crush me like an insignificant bug. I knelt and tried to grab the staff that had fallen to the hard ground.

The golem raised his fist higher and opened the three-fingered hand. The mist stung my eyes, and particles of dirt rising from the ground stung my face.

With a groan, I crawled forward, "Just a little more..."

A wind rolled the staff away from me, and my fingers weren't long enough to grab it. At that moment, my arms and legs shrank several times, and the wooden artifact became gigantic. I had no chance to lift it with my tiny arms.

When the stone palm shadowed me, I squinted and clenched my teeth. Luckily, a centimeter from my hair, the golem stopped. A sticky substance formed around his arm and pulled him away. To my left, Mortha stood, both hands encircling the gray thread. The strong chain tightened around the enemy, and she pulled it on like a rope.

The monster fell to the ground and disintegrated into several black blocks. They turned to soot and scattered to the wind.

"Ten points, dude," I yelled and jumped.

"Get up! We're almost there!" Mortha screamed and grabbed my arm.

Another equally ferocious stone beast wanted nothing more than to impale me with his devil horns. I fixed my

hair, and we teleported. The stone head hit the ground and got stuck.

The road ended, and the thick, tall trees surrounded us. By the way, they resembled ordinary oaks. Only one difference, the color of their trunks and leaves was purple, blue, and crimson.

The angry stalker walked in circles and searched for me. A blind spot had formed on the line that separated the sapphire field from the Twilight Forest.

"Ha-ha, you stone-headed idiot! Who is the loser? You are the loser!" my words hit the transparent barrier and bounced back.

I froze and didn't move. My mouth went dry, and an invisible needle pierced my left leg. When I caressed my knee at the place of the alleged injury, a sharp pain went through my whole body.

No one answered my cries. Only the trees, whose leaves occasionally fell to the ground, listened to me. I stood there for a minute. Once the pain subsided and everything returned to normal, I breathed a sigh of relief and walked deeper into the forest.

"Where have you been?" the relaxed girl asked.

"Decided to pick mushrooms."

Mortha lay in a spider web hammock between two trees while the white dress accentuated the curves of her slender waist. The warmth of the campfire barely reached her.

The tip of a twig dug into loose soil, and the slight movements of her hand drew a messy picture.

"Oh, I love them! Wait...Stop it!" she said and didn't understand my sarcasm.

"Twenty-seventh year gone, my friend," issued a voice from the burning fire, whose red tongues of flame wriggled like the tails of kites.

"Years of searching and hope," I sighed.

I plopped down on a hard log across from Mortha and threw some woodchips into the fire. While years of my life burned in the red flame, I pulled my phone out of a cloak pocket. Predictably, the frozen screen didn't respond to the touch of my fingers, and the time stopped at 20:34.

A photo of Akane and me lay behind a transparent cover.

"What about me?" Mortha inquired, fluttering her eyelashes.

"And a little bit of a headache and some fun. Why do you catch flies with your mouth?" I spoke.

"I am a pre-da-tor. You know what it means?"

"Now you look like a frog..."

"You are only a human being. It's beyond your understanding."

Many fireflies gathered around me and landed on branches, logs, my head. While they soared into the sky and danced, their flight created swirls and whirlpools of light. The rabbit ran past and hid under the thick bark of the trunk.

The tree rings hypnotized me. More than twenty circles pressed tightly together. At the same time, crimson leaves with sharp points crunched beneath my feet.

I pulled a pearly fruit from my pocket and took a bite. The pink juice dripped onto my boots. Its round shape, small size and long-lasting softness made it perfect for

long journeys. The slightly sweet, moderately sour taste was conflicting but perfectly satisfying.

In the mysterious atmosphere, darkness and light became part of a magical spectacle of nature. A living picture warmed my hands, my feet, and my heart.

Most of the inhabitants of the forest were souls reborn in the bodies of insects, small animals, or inanimate objects. At first, Mortha said, they weren't very talkative, but they had welcomed me, fed me local fruits, and never left me alone. For some unknown reason, the birds and beetles stayed away from her.

The local weavers made me that cloak without a single stitch. It protected me from all kinds of misfortunes: cold, heat, blows.

An eternity was a moment for them, a drop in an endless ocean that pulled me into an abyss of despair and helplessness.

"Not tired yet?" a butterfly with blue wings asked me and sat on my shoulder.

"My body is tired, but my mind is ready to go all the way. I've lost track of time."

I drew a map with a charcoal and made the necessary notes in my handmade notebook. A sturdy ribbon bound the pages together.

My new world was a flying island whose gigantic size hid its edges. The Twilight Forest served as a shelter from the golem attacks and an only place to rest. The most distant, where I spent the most time, I called the Azure Garden.



In fact, I navigated better than Mortha. I didn't know why, but the stars showed me the way on my journey.

"I've waited twenty-seven years for this moment."

I opened the very last page of the notebook. Plenty of vertical bars I'd been drawing for 9854 days filled it. One bar every day.

"If Idrifol hasn't helped, we're all the more useless." the butterfly said.

Mortha raised her back. She pricked up her ears and burned the insect with a predatory stare.

"I haven't gone there yet," I confidently declared.

"You haven't? What's the reason?"

"Hey, Shin, look at this!" Mortha pointed at her drawing.

"Later!" I interrupted her. "The gates are closed until tomorrow."

All the insects flew away, and the fire turned bright blue. The nightingales scattered through the forest as Mortha came toward me.

Mortha's white hand clenched the blue wings, "Stop listening to all the insects, they're as useful as a lying stone."

"Idrifol is the point of connection between life and death. It brings all souls together and knows where each soul is located. There you can find out where the flower you need grows," the fire began.

"And they open once every hundred years. I know it," I replied and rolled my eyes.

"The last star was extinguished, and the Black Gate closed."

"I record every time the star of Eden flared in the sky."

"The cycle is eternal and unchanging."

Mortha released the butterfly, and the insect fluttered into the right pocket of my cloak.

The vertical bars merged into each other. My eyes darted from side to side, counting them. I ran my right hand through my hair and squeezed it.

Mortha stomped on the burning flame with her bare foot. She kicked at it again and again, but it only got hotter and burned her smooth skin.

"Shut up!" Mortha yelled.

The silhouettes of the trees blurred. The colors blended. Chaos filled my head as I stared deep into the forest.

Mortha turned to me with her ridiculous smile with a hint of madness peeking through, "Just don't worry about it, okay?"

When the staff hit the ground, the rocks underneath it jumped. Every vein, every muscle tensed to the limit. My blood boiled with disbelief.

"You knew?" I snapped and gritted my teeth.

"I didn't have to go there; how could I know that? I've always been with you, haven't I?" she tried to justify herself.

Mortha fell backward and avoided my angry gaze. Her hand passed over the drawing, and only a little stickman remained untouched. I threw my cloak back with a sharp flick. The air currents fueled the red fire even more. My

fingers clenched into fists, and my palms bled from the uncut nails digging into the skin.

"I don't believe you, liar!" I yelled at the campfire.

A shadow fell across Mortha's face. I pulled the hood over my head and stepped over the fire. An orange trail appeared beneath and led to my destination. Tapping the staff on the ground, I ran through the forest. A trail of holes stretched behind me.

The leaves and the grass rustled behind me while the woman with cyan hair and skin as pale as a dead man's followed me.

"Where are you going?" she asked.

"To the place I've been going for twenty-seven years!" I gasped with a tremor in my voice.

"There's no need to go there, you know that."

"You think checking on every dead soul is easier?"

"It's safer. I don't want you to get hurt. And did you do regret everything we've been through together?"

She looked at me as if nothing had happened. It didn't bother her at all. I'd spent most of my life away from home.

The huge planet above my head rotated clockwise. White clouds hung over the land where I was born.

Satoshi, Sakura...

They had experienced the same things. They had gone through the same problems and struggles. However, only one of us still carried the corrosive pain. I had given up the peaceful life.

"Twenty-seven years," I said, and the butterfly flew out of my cloak pocket. "Didn't you offer me help yourself? "

"Yes, but..."

A wind whistled. Mortha shivered and clenched her fist. The thin twig snapped in her hand, and she bit her lower lip.

My goal towered above me, beyond the thick clouds. The goal I'd been chasing most of my life. The anticipation drove me mad. I would reach the Black Gate in a few human days.

"Shin! I'll come with you," her voice sounded behind me.

The road was over, and hundreds of red trees formed an insurmountable wall in front of me.

While I broke the long branches that stabbed me in the face, the grass crunched underfoot. The dense treetops covered the Idrifol, and a golden source of light blinded me. Akane's voice echoed in my head.

As soon as I broke free from the spiky embrace of the Twilight Forest, any hint of ground beneath my feet disappeared. A pink mist obscured the view of Idrifol's dark purple trunk.

The air flowed around me from the bottom up. Was that the end of my journey? Was it all in vain? Akane, wasn't it you?

My loud scream flew away from me into the sky, "Waaaaaaaah!"

Before I died, a golden harp played, and my feet stepped onto a white circular staircase. While maple leaves

flew up around me, golden gates slightly opened and let in streams of warm air.

"Shin! Shin!" Akane shouted.

The girl with wavy blond hair squeezed through the small gap. A pair of caramel-colored eyes blinked.

Tears of joy streamed down my face, and my cheeks burned. The warmth flooded my entire body as a drumbeat pounded in my chest.

Yellow chains wrapped around my left arm. They held me down and pulled me to the ground.

"Let her go!" I groaned and fought the growing numbness and heaviness. "Akane..."

I wouldn't let them. I had to move forward. The edge of the cliff moved away from me. My left hand grasped a stone knife. I found myself in a vertical position. Meanwhile, the point of the knife sank into the ground, slicing through the roots.

Pieces of dirt flew into my face. A bright white star lit up the sky, and her light reached me, went under my skin and gave me strength. The wooden handle of the knife splintered off, releasing a blob of energy.

"Idrifol!" my screaming gave me goosebumps.

I swung the staff. When it struck the ground, the earth shuddered. Panting Mortha squeezed through the trees with disheveled hair and leaves stuck in it.

"Shin, let's talk about it some more. Maybe we can find a solution," Mortha said.

The scream I let out reached her. She threw herself forward towards the edge and fell on her stomach. The clatter of my staff formed a long crack, and the ground

splashed downward. Mortha rolled across the grass as the trees fell. The space in my eyes narrowed, and the staff moved me to the very top.

I hovered over Mortha. She lifted her head and blew a strand of hair from her nose. The solid ground appeared, and the grass tickled my ears. We both rolled over onto our backs and gulped air with our mouths.

A little butterfly landed on my nose, and a sneeze came out of my mouth. In front of me were the tall colorful trees of the Twilight Forest. The staff's force caused a fissure in the ground. Mortha formed a star with her arms and legs while her cyan hair spread across the grass in different directions.

I missed her nonchalance. Did my life mean so little to her? My heart beat several times faster, and my jaw dropped. I stood on the edge of the cliff while the wind blew me around on all sides. A stone's throw from me was a deep crater, at the bottom of which the great Idrifol, the tallest tree in the world, spread its roots.

I threw off my hood. The purple trunk was at least a kilometer in diameter. It stretched upward, spreading long, curved branches covered with dark purple leaves. Each leaf was ten times larger than normal and cast a black shadow.

The lavender neon moon to the right of Idrifol turned the foliage pink. Birds circled around, unable to get closer. Idrifol burned like the sun, or like a neon sign.

"Akane, can you see it?" I whispered and pressed my palm to my heart.

Inside me, every organ trembled. No grass grew underneath. The ground was scorched and blackened and

resembled the result of a mysterious storm, unimaginably powerful and leaving nothing alive. Around that majestic tree rose a mighty wall of ornaments. The impregnable fortress protected the king of all trees.

A prison. But which one of us was the prisoner and which one the warden? That wall was probably there to keep the twisted local souls away from Idrifol.

From the explanations of Mortha and the other residents, I learned that some souls were turning into giant creatures. They lost control of themselves and ran toward the tree. They became mad with the desire to destroy both Idrifol and all the creatures along the way. I was not told why they did this, or why some souls changed, and others did not.

However, these guys kept getting in the way of my search all the time. Their faces were elongated, their eyes burning red, and their bodies covered in soot.

"There's nothing for us to do here," Mortha said, rising from the ground.

"I have to make sure they're closed."

"The most important thing is that we are together. We will search for Akane's soul together. Just you and me," she took my hands in hers and pointed her nose at the huge cloud-covered tree.

"I've been here for almost thirty years!" I rebuked her.

My scream wiped the smile from her face. Mortha stepped back and bit the nail of her finger. Her breathing quickened, and she took her time to answer me.

"Keep quiet from now on. Then I'll get there myself."

Looking for a way down, I wandered along the cliff. There had to be a stairway or an elevator somewhere. Maybe even a magical portal. The further I went, the less optimistic I became. It couldn't be! Was I supposed to jump off?

"Don't leave me!" she continued to follow me.

"You're still here? You seemed like you wanted to come back. So come back and stay out of my way," I told her. "Wait, is there a descent here?"

"Uh...uh...yeah, but!"

If there was a way down, I would find it. My cloak hit Mortha in the face and threw the crown from her head.

"Ouch..." she squealed and opened her mouth.

"...I... I didn't want to."

I froze. Mortha knelt and ran her fingers over the long wound that stretched from the lips to the ear. In a second, it tightened and left no scar.

I didn't want to hurt her again. At that moment, I was like a large wine jug that drunks filled to the brim, despite the red liquid running down their legs in excess.

"There's no point in discouraging him," the blue butterfly said, fluttering in Mortha's face.

"I don't need more of your advice, insect," Mortha snarled.

"If you care about this man, you should stop resisting and help him."

"I'm already trying to help him! Does he hate me that much? Not much time passed, but every second was filled with joy and happiness. Just the two of us and no one else."

"Does he feel the same way?"



Mortha sat on the ground at the edge of the cliff. She bent her legs at the knees, wrapped her arms around them, and gazed up at the tall tree in the center of the crater.

The years had passed like weeks. She got used to their walks under the starry sky, to falling asleep and waking up together. That tiny man with his short life had become her hope for the happiness.

The white dress fluttered behind her, and a red comet hit the invisible dome over Idrifol and shattered into many pieces while my hunched back moved away from her.

"If he doesn't get it, he will be disappointed. Both in this world and in me," Mortha murmured.

"Would his death upset you any less?"

The edge stretched for miles. A sharp snap of fingers came from behind me, and the trees rustled. Gray stone steps came out of the ground along the cliff and led directly to the bottom of the crater. Mortha crossed her arms over her chest and put one bare foot forward, tapping the ground.

"Still think you can manage without me?" she smirked.

"I have no choice," I squinted my eyes and replied.

"Try to turn away all your living soul desires, but I'm coming with you."

Mortha took a few short steps in my direction, lifted her chin, and smiled. She had known this world longer.

I was hesitant to go with her and accept her help. However, her supernatural abilities had solved most of my problems. The importance of the goal paralyzed my reckless desires.

Through clenched teeth I tried to squeeze out something, but no words came out of my mouth. I rubbed my neck, and our stiff shoulders made contact with each other.

The pulsating star signaled me and drew me in like a magnet. There was nothing left of my teenage body, but I was still devoted to my egocentric desires. Without knowing why, how, or what, I followed my fallen star.

I lost count of the stone steps. Going down was easier than going up. The endurance marathon had begun.

"You're going to have a hard time," Mortha gasped, lifting the edges of her dress with her hands.

"Then why don't you stop blowing my mind?"

"Stop blaming me, I'm doing this for your own good."

Goodness, salvation, protection. When she spoke of such things, an insincerity reeked a mile off. The thing that bothered me the most was that I had to somehow get over that huge wall. Of course, I couldn't be one hundred percent sure, but the words of the fire planted a seed of doubt in my mind.

"Hey, are there any options to get over the wall?" I asked.

"If I say you can't, will we come back?" she started again. "Wait, Shin!"

"The cycle is eternal and unchanged. Idrifol will not wait for us," I reminded her.

What a tenacious spider. I turned my head. Mortha flew down the stairs. When her forehead hit mine, I lost my balance. The sharp corners of the steps dug into my

back. We curled up into a ball. She clung to me and didn't let go until we reached the bottom.

The stairs ended. I just lay, unable to get a word out. Lumps of air clogged my throat, and the picture before me blurred. Mortha's head rested on my chest, and she hugged me tightly with both arms. An inappropriate smile spread across her face while I tried to catch my breath.

"Stop squeezing..." the hiss escaped my mouth.

I threw her motionless body away from me and took a deep breath. When Mortha fell to the dry, scorched ground and stretched out, a snort came from her mouth. I grabbed the staff and stood up. My left leg hurt with the slightest movement.

"What the hell is this?" I stumped and rubbed my tense neck.

A silent forest appeared before me. The trees reached a height of thirty meters or more. Leafless branches framed the surrounding void like endless bony arms.

The real test was ahead. However, that tiny forest was ridiculous compared to what I was about to go through. Only one thing made me cautious - the cold under my skin told me that it wasn't so harmless.

The skinny trunks resembled human faces smeared on a wall. They stretched upward and turned into many capillaries that penetrated the sky. Leaving dusty footprints on the ground, the bark crumbled. To rephrase, the breath of life had ceased centuries ago.

A thick fog hiding past events and dark secrets shrouded the forest. In the silence and the faded beauty, that place bore witness to a harsh time.

"Hey, Akane, I see it!" I clenched my fist slightly.

The wall, made of black bricks, rose up from behind the forest. The Idrifol shone through the fog and forced me to keep going. It was best to deal with problems as they came.

Here was the beginning of my leisurely journey into the depths of a dead and unknown place.

I lost sight behind the black branches and fog. The atmosphere of grayness spread around me. Like a chronic illness, it infects the body and drains a person's vitality.

The ground was paler than Mortha's skin. Lots of deep fissures with sharp edges separated the trapezoidal blocks of earth, and, like veins, small cracks spread across the ground.

I snapped the fingers of my left hand, and just above the tip of my index finger a tongue of flame burst out. The fog around me dissipated. Still, it wasn't enough to move freely. My stomach rumbled, and I had to take a break.

"Do you see a good place to rest?" I asked Akane.

No living creature except worms that crawled on the ground had ever stepped foot here. It was a perfect place for a graveyard.

When I breathed, the sooty air dug into my throat and scratched my nose from the inside out. The smell of wet and moldy earth wafted in.

Something crunched. It wasn't mud. My shoes didn't get dirty. Fluffy dark green moss crumpled under my feet.

With the current wind, the cloak didn't help much. The cold pierced every inch of my body and covered it with goose bumps. Apart from the fog ahead, an empty open space suitable for resting peeked out between the trees.

My shoulder broke a branch. The barely audible crack drew the attention of crows. They scurried and flapped their wings. The wooden stick vibrated and sent impulses through my body. All the organs inside twitched.

"...What was that?" I stammered.

Could it be comets hitting the dome? Not likely either. The ground didn't shake at all.

To my left, the trees fell like dominoes, and the chain reaction came closer to me. The hairs on my arms and on my neck stood up. At the same time, a huge oblong tree fell on top of my head and forced me into teleportation.

Since the wooden staff needed time to recover, I tried not to use it in vain. Nevertheless, the current situation required quick decisions.

A long roar came out of the dense fog, like someone being cut alive, and made me shudder. A huge black silhouette ripped trees from their roots, and two red lights flickered.

Was that such an unfunny joke? It was expected, though. Mortha had me completely confused. I'd always tried to stay away from such dangerous places. Today, I had to face it alone and without experience.

The black distorted soul with a bird's beak stared at the only human in the middle of the forest. Because of the large chest and small limbs, his body was disproportionate.

I hid behind a tree and clutched the staff to my chest. At the approach of that monster, the white stones on the ground trembled. When he let out a loud roar and caused an earthquake, I went deaf for a moment.

The air currents tore the bark off the tree, and the branches came crashing down. My top peeked out from behind the black trunk.

The white light filled half of the transparent crystal in the staff, and I came up with a plan B, "Run! Waaaaaaaah!"

The tree trunks whizzed past me, and their thorny branches stabbed me in the face. I had to figure out what to do, because Mortha wasn't around this time. I'd decided to go it alone, so I should be able to handle it. While the overgrown crow chased me, I rummaged through my bag.

"Runes, moe rues, meicial erbs," in the rush and danger, I began to forget the letters.

Why had I been collecting garbage? Why did I need poisonous mushrooms? Well, they were beautiful, and beautiful things couldn't be useless. Before he found me, I could boil soup and die. The careless way of living was my enemy.

At the bottom of the bag was a small red pouch tied with a rope. When I pulled the knife from my pocket and cut it, smoke came out of the bag and stained my cloak. Three black rhombs with red circles in the center spilled out onto my palm.

"Only one minute or even less," I hypothesized and swallowed them one by one. "Disgusting... My stomach would not digest it."

The rhombs traveled down my throat, leaving a metallic taste, I coughed the sharp black particles out of my mouth. Suddenly, the whole forest blurred, and red triangles appeared in my brown irises. At the same time, a black crust spread over my pinky.

At first, the color of the ground was a delicate shade, more like pink. Then the trees became red. A thin white outline around the trunks helped me distinguish them. Finally, the stars dissolved in the sky, and the Earth turned into a blood moon.

"Where are you..." my eyes darted sideways.

A large gray silhouette appeared in the distance. Pushing through the tall trees, the huge humanoid came toward me. His short claws dug into the scorched earth and left three long black lines on each side. The monster squeezed between the trees and howled. Soot flew from his beak into my face while the crows flew over the forest, silencing me with their cries.

My right leg couldn't move, and sweat beaded my forehead. I sank into some kind of thick brown puddle that clung to my clothes and sucked me in.

Mortha awoke from her short nap. She yawned and rubbed her sleepy eyes. Except for one important detail, the sight before her didn't seem new or surprising.

"Hey, Shin! What about a dinner with a beautiful spider?" Mortha called me and looked around.

Searching for her only friend, she wandered alone through the misty forest. A recent situation shattered their warm relationship, which had been building for nearly thirty years, into a thousand shards. Each one pierced Mortha's heart and left a deep scar.

The treetops fell one by one. Her ears, covered in cyan curls, picked up vibrations from the ground. Mortha ran toward the source of the sound.

She pushed at sharp branches with her hands. The root of the tree clung to Mortha, pulling her backward.

Consequently, her dress ripped and exposed her long leg. When Mortha fell to the ground, a thorny branch stabbed in her left eye. Blood stained the cloth and turned it red.

She groaned in pain. Shin's voice flickered on the horizon. Gritting her teeth, she found the strength to stand up. There was nothing in this world that would push her through the suffering to keep going. Nothing but him.

The mud puddle stopped swallowing me down when solid ground appeared beneath my feet. The sharp tip of my hairy chin reached up.

The quicksand pressed against my neck and chest, making it hard to breathe. However, the crystal inside the teleportation artifact finally filled with white color.

The beaked monster grabbed the two trees, ripped them out of the ground, and jumped at me. The black paws came overhead, slicing through the air.

Eventually, I pushed the staff to the ground. Blood rushed to my feet, and, above the tops of the dead trees, I stood on the floor of air.

A sudden pain spread through my body like a plague and slowly drove me mad. The side effects she talked about. Mortha always worried too much about me. It was beyond reason, but that devil thing was killing me from the inside.

"I've got about thirty seconds left," I counted.

The beast landed in the center of the puddle, and the brown mud flew out to the sides. When he let out another scream, four huge black wings burst from its back. Then he took off, and the sharp claws scratched the thin tips of the treetops.



The curse spread through my poisoned heart; a loud heartbeat hit my eardrums. Suddenly, the crows fell silent, and the monster with his open beak froze in the sky.

The blood moon first rose above my head. Shadows enveloped the staff and transformed it into a long, sharp scythe.

"Now let's see who's the hunter and who's the prey," I threatened him, and the mysterious power filled my body.

I had already dealt with this kind of thing before. Only once, and Mortha had helped me. Nonetheless, magic pervaded this world. Not magic, but the energy that bound time, space, life and death. Hey, Mortha, I finally got it!

Firstly, I grabbed the scythe with both hands and swung, slicing the air. White flames followed the blade. Subsequently, my breathing stopped, and the world froze.

"The chaos that did not obey the laws of the tree did not obey the laws of space. It distorted time and wandered through billions of similar universes," with the blood boiling in my veins, I continued. "The power in my hand was the quintessence of blackness and disorder."

The triangles in my eyes turned white while the tops of the trees swayed. Only once a raven cawed in the sky, and I spread my arms to the sides.

The bird's blood splattered my cloak. The beast in front of me howled in pain; one clawed paw fell to the ground.

"No way..."

I literally stopped time. Did he react enough to fend off my attack?

My feet soared through the air. I swung the scythe and drove it into his right shoulder. The blade went deep.

When I tried to pull the scythe out, the black hand grabbed my neck. The sharp tips of the fingers dug into my skin, and black blood spurted from my throat.

I ripped out the scythe, and the giant hand that had been choking me fell to the ground and turned to dust. The air barrier above the trees kept me from falling.

We stood twenty meters apart. Sooty smoke billowed from his shoulder. The black liquid oozed from my neck, and I choked on my own blood.

Such a simultaneously long and short distance. I needed to play big. I had to go all in. Otherwise, Mortha's cemetery would have a new permanent tenant.

Our eyes met. Besides, that dude wasn't afraid of death, even though he felt pain.

Long raven wings grew from my back. Many thin red veins formed on my left arm and traveled to my heart under the brown sleeve of the cloak.

"One."

My internal dialogue mingled with the dozens of voices that began the death countdown. The plague engulfed the heart and caged it. The thorns dug into it with every beat. Meanwhile, amidst the noise, a girl's voice sounded.

Akane. Was she here, beside me? I couldn't disappoint her. She relied on me and slept the eternal dream. Akane waited for me. I knew it.

"Two."

Dozens of horned demons gathered around and grabbed my legs and cloak. They climbed me like a mountain of fragile skulls and scratched at my brain with their claws while my black wings were turning to white dust slowly.

You wanted to take my heart in exchange for power?  
Well, guys, you had to wait.

"Three."

The blade of the scythe stretched out and transformed into a spear. I stood at the edge of the worlds. A man went to heaven in his lifetime. They would send me to an asylum for sure.

My consciousness split in two when I became an observer. One of us stood on the ground while the other watched from the side.

The pain was so intense that after ten seconds I stopped feeling it. To be precise, I stopped feeling anything. My bones disintegrated, and the black fluid filled my veins.

"Four."

The triangles in my eyes spun around. The forest appeared above me, and the monotonous sky was beneath my feet. Ready to fall like a hail of arrows, the sharp treetops dangled downward.

I needed a little more time.

"Five."

Five seconds. My stomach twisted. The white veins appeared at the base of my neck and extended to my chin. I aimed the spear at the monster, and my wings flapped faster. The blood moon in the sky was half white.

"Six."

The world around me changed color. All objects lost their shape while the glowing gray silhouette came closer.

Akane's face appeared in front of me. Like an angel, she came down from the sky. Her arms embraced me from behind, and her white wings shone, driving away all fear.

"Seven."

My life meant nothing, but Akane must live.

I threw my transformed staff forward. My lion's roar scratched my throat, and my jaw crunched. The spear pierced through the space. With a deafening roar, a smooth black line flew like an arrow.

"Eight."

In the beginning, the trees disappeared. The Twilight Forest also vanished. The sky and the ground merged, turning the world into a blank canvas.

They moved toward each other, and the moon took on its natural color. My shoulders slumped; my wings completely disintegrated.

"Nine."

My game was over. I hung by a thread of imminent doom. Akane left me. I had chosen that path myself a long time ago.

The hood of my cloak caught on the top of a tree that bent under my weight. The spear transformed into the staff and fell to the ground.

"Ten."

That distorted soul fluttered about with his torn beak. The black snake tongue moved when he screamed in pain. The view of the purple trees appeared in a huge hole in the monster's head.

"...My bad," I groaned.

The Earth in space took on its familiar appearance. The Blue oceans spread across the enormous globe, washing over the green continents. White, fluffy clouds floated above them and hid the peaceful lives of the people.

The monster's sharp black claws gleamed while saliva rolled down my throat. A hot drop of blood fell from the sky onto my face and ran down to my lips.

"You'd better not hurt my marshmallow," Mortha's voice came out of nowhere.

The soot wings clung to his body while the claws tried to tear white threads. The threads squeezed every limb and prevented him from moving.

Unexpectedly, the white clouds became gray and covered Idrifol completely. They cast a solid shadow over the entire forest and formed four long spider legs on either side. Then a gray spider's head appeared from the center of the cloud mass, and the puffy creature bore down on us.

The thunder rumbled. Such power belonged to her? She was just an ordinary spider and caught flies with her mouth. What else did she hide from me?

The color of Mortha's enemy turned red, and his body burned through the white cocoon. Leaving a trail of ashes, the blood wings took on a dragon-like appearance.

Obviously, he was uncomfortable with the current situation. The fire in her one eye flared more intensely.

Nevertheless, the great moment of crucifixion was not long in coming. Red liquid spilled over the inner walls of the body when the strong but soft threads wrapped around his black heart.

The creature exploded in the sky and broke into small pieces. Leaving behind a smell of smoke, they vaporized. The blood-colored liquid became rain while the thunder rumbled in my ears, followed by a squeal. And then I vomited on the white dirt.

Invisible hands lifted me up and dropped me to the ground next to the puddle of mud. I landed on my stomach and coughed from the sharp particles of soot in my mouth.

"Shin, are you alive? "Why did you go without me?" Mortha shouted and jumped on top of me.

"Should I have taken you with me? Right now, was not a good time to annoy me with your questions, Mortha."

I stood up, and she threw my arm around her neck. The pain in my leg made it hard to move, and Mortha dragged me in the direction we came from.

"We need to get out of here, let's go," she said.

"Get off me! I would not retreat," I freed my hand and grabbed the staff.

"If I let you go, you'll get into more trouble."

"Lightning doesn't strike twice in the same place."

I wouldn't face too much trouble and possible death. Especially since I was sure that Mortha's performance had scared away all the monsters around.

My sore leg couldn't stand up, so it just lay behind me while I jumped deep into the forest.

"Ow!" I screamed in pain.

"Sit still. Your broken leg is a big problem," Mortha demanded.

She was right. I needed more speed to dodge. The distorted souls were more dangerous than the golems. However, they were rare. At the same time, the rain appeared once a day, sometime after noon, between the flashes of the star of Eden.

Mortha squatted down in front of me and tried to heal me. She wrapped a web around it, and a white cocoon covered the broken leg.

The blood baked her forehead and the left side of her face. The right eye twitched. In addition, her tattered dress dried and turned a dark maroon color.

"If you hadn't gone here, you'd be fine," Mortha whispered.

"Didn't you offer to help me yourself?" I heard her words and replied.

Mortha gathered a handful of black twigs and built a small fire to warm her bloody hands. There was plenty of food for termites, but not for humans. So, the only source of satisfying hunger was my modest supplies in the woven bag.

In the middle of the undead-ravaged forest, the common food became tastier.

To my right, a flower of the Sapphire Field flew from the branches. When the flying blue creature came closer, the white eye in the center of the wings revealed the small insect.

"Want some?" I asked and pointed to the juicy fruit in my hand.

The butterfly landed on my arm and stuck its proboscis into the fruit.

"By the way, as I know, souls like you don't leave the Twilight Forest. Why are you here?" I wondered.

"There's something I need to see. I don't know why, but I must," the creature replied.

"Do you have a name?"

"I don't remember who I was in my past life."

In the overcast black sky, some clouds formed silhouettes of animals. I saw an eagle and even the face of a cow. It reminded me of an English cartoon that my parents used to show me when I was a child.

"Mr Butterfly! What do you say?" I shouted and jumped from the fallen tree.

The sharp pain in my leg stifled my fervor.

"What a wonderful combination of sounds," he said.

"I know. I know."

We ate the juicy flesh of this unearthly fruit while Mortha sat by the fire and moved her finger across the ground, drawing a picture of two people, a boy and a girl, holding hands. Suddenly, a long, loud rumble came from the front.

The fruit split open from the impact of my fingers and uncut nails, and the juice flowed, soaking the black earth. Holding out half the fruit, I called to her.

Mortha pricked up her ears and straightened her back. The spectacle began: she stood up; her torn dress hung down her leg. Mortha fixed her disheveled hair and ran to me. Dust rose behind, and the ground near the fire became smooth and flat and left no trace of the drawing.

Nonetheless, she did not rush to take the fruit I offered. For a while she acted very resentful.

But at the end of the day, Mortha sat beside me and licked her fingers. I rummaged through the bag and pulled out a package of round green leaves. Then I crushed three of them in the mortar and added five drops of the fruit



juice. My fingers mixed the ingredients and applied the resulting ointment to Mortha's left eye.

My face burned while I healed her wounded eyelid. The decades we'd spent together piled up in rows behind me. She saved me again.

"It stings!" Mortha cried.

"I know. Shut up. Do not leave these wounds unattended," I said and took my hand away.

"You know that's not necessary... Promise again that we'll go for a walk."

"First of all, we have to finish this case."

"Promise! Otherwise, I'll wrap you in a web all over!" she muttered and smiled.

We always went to bed and woke up together. Every time grass and twigs got in her hair.

"She listened to my life stories with genuine interest."

"What did you say?" Mortha jumped and asked.

"Uh, nothing," I said and lowered my head. "Did I say that out loud?"

The next day, I limped through the forest on one leg. Mortha's healing web had acted as an anesthetic, but I was still vulnerable.

I squeezed through the thorny branches and finally broke through the thicket. Soot particles formed a small tornado and hit the high stone barrier. A wind blew the hood off my head, and my neck went numb.

It was not fear. Those feelings were not mine. A dark aura wrapped itself around me and made the blood in the veins freeze. I shrugged my shoulders and then dropped to my knees. The wall certainly detected my presence.

Eventually I got there, but why did it turn out that way?  
"Akane, help me."

### **Chapter 3. The King of Trees**

"Why is it so dark?"

That was my first thought. The darkness pounded into my head, trying to assault all my senses. It left no room for light and hope.

It had to be this way. Time froze here. Endless pain and confinement were the foundation of my of life.

"Did I really need to be here? Who was I? What was I living for?"

Sometimes I had dreams. Every time I drifted off to sleep, I had soft skin on my arms and legs. My tongue allowed me to taste. A whole range of fragrances became available to me.

My tears streamed down my face while plates and cups shattered on the floor. Warmth embraced my heart. Hoarfrost covered my eyelashes.

I ran on the green grass while my father stood at the goal waiting for me to kick the soccer ball. My pink lips might get a white stain from the vanilla ice cream. My feet crunched on the wet streets.

They all had one thing in common: I lived a human life. But a solid line separated our worlds.

Hundreds of different colors of human life affected my mind. I wanted to live my life full of color and sensation. The desire to feel joy, to experience anger, to love someone overwhelmed me from within, bursting from my chest.

I broke the cocoon of loneliness and opened the way to the light. I wriggled left and right, trying to tear through a small hole. My arms and legs didn't want to move. I couldn't move something I never had.

I would give anything to make the darkness go away. There was a crack in my consciousness. I was about to fall and die as a sentient being. That obsession, which made my heart stir and burn, plunged me to the bottom of my fears.

Helplessness and fear held me back and broke through the floor on my way to my dream. What power had condemned me to suffering?

"I would never leave this place."

Suddenly a warm ball approached me. The sun that came to illuminate the darkness.

A shadowy arm reached out and crunched through the small hole. Blood trickled down my fingers as bits of nail flew apart. The bark scratched my cheeks. My body and mind tore toward the freedom I desired, to gain what had been taken from me.

I hurried outside. The air mixed with the smell of dry bark and leaves. The smell of real life permeated everything around me. The rustling of twigs broke the eternal silence.

I was no longer going to simmer in this stuffy cave. Leave tufts flew in front of my face. Birds came from the south, bringing with them the scent of warmth and comfort.

"Uh..." I made my first sound, which turned into a shrill scream.

Goose bumps appeared all over my body. The hair on my head stood on end. My voice traveled through the white-skinned bones.

I wanted to keep screaming. I wanted to tell the world that I was here. I was alive.

Out of nowhere came a long horn. The liquid suddenly enveloped me and pulled me down. The clear water submerged my face. The bubbles around me rose to the surface. The heaviness in my stomach pulled me down. The light barely reached me.

My life ended. I relaxed my body. Did I really not deserve to live?

The current swept up my back and pushed me upward. Bright light shone. I took a deep breath. The blue water stretched out in every direction.

"I will live!" my scream came out of my throat and drifted into the sky.

Whispering voices came from the wall.

"Leave..."

"...Leave!"

My fingers stabbed through sooty circle runes. Unconsciously, thoughts of suffering came to me. The screams of men and women deafened me. Yellow leaves lay at the base of the wall, crunching under my feet. A few of them were stuck in the doorway, swaying from side to side.

All fervor vanished, leaving me alone with the defensive object looming in front of me. It was two times as tall as the trees behind it. The Black Gate waited to be opened.

The day began and ended according to the golden star. The Star of Eden flickered and faded from day to day. My only salvation from madness.

"Nine thousand eight hundred and fifty-six. No! Nine thousand eight hundred and fifty-five. Fifty-five," I said.

A small light flickered above my head. The small dot emitted its brief yellow rays throughout the universe. A huge golden explosion struck the unhurried asteroids, setting off a chain reaction. A drum roll sounded as they hit the transparent dome.

I clenched my staff tighter. A gust of wind blew through the crack in the Black Gate near my ear.

I stood in the same spot and shivered. My hand shook. The staff fell to the scorched ground. I ran to the door and hit it with my right fist. The skin rubbed off, leaving only red spots at the base of each finger.

"Open...open. Come on. You are a liar!" I denied the reality.

I pulled out my notebook and opened the last page. The cursed fingers crumbled on the scribbled pages. I searched for a mistake. I tore off the beige page and crumpled it up. The sharp corners of the sheet made my skin tingle. I clenched my teeth, and my nostrils exhaled hot air. The notebook hit the wall, and the pages flew apart.

I fell to my knees. The spikes of the cage pierced my heart. Akane stood right behind the wall. Her laugh came through holes in the stone blocks.

The closed gate required me to leave that place. The cycle was unchangeable. Behind me was the same silent, dead forest, covered in a blanket of fog and black dust. The dark bark flew through the air and stuck to my wet cheeks.

"Why...did you leave again..." Mortha gasped.

She burst through the branches with Mr. Butterfly on her head. She coughed up particles of soot and took a deep breath. Mortha left the forest and fell face down. Mr. Butterfly flew over to me and sat on my shoulder. I hid my calloused hand, dripping with blood, in the pocket of my cloak. [OBJ]

"Why...did you leave again..." Mortha gasped.

"I should go back. I can keep searching for Akane's soul flower. I shouldn't have come here," I refused and turned my head.

"Exactly! Let's go back, you shouldn't have come here!"

Time for pause. I had stiffness in my legs. I adjusted my cloak, which clung to my sweaty neck.

"What's the plan, my friend?" Mr. Butterfly asked. "Have you come all this way for nothing?"

Mortha approached the Black Gate and picked up my staff from under a pile of leaves. Her nose caught a new scent. Mortha sniffed at the stone slabs, then took a step back. The staff hit the ground. Nothing happened. She blew away a black strand of hair from her nose.

The Earth waited for the moment when I would pass through the gate and get the answer. However, I disappointed everyone. I disappointed you, Akane.

"You can never get back the time you wasted," Mr. Butterfly remarked.

"Instead of concentrating on finding the flower, I enjoyed my new life. Compulsive daydreaming replaced real life for me."

"There are many difficulties in the world, my friend, if you stop in front of every closed door, you will get

nowhere. You have to look at the situation from a different angle."

"You're a good speaker."

"I would say I love to listen. Sounds around us say more than words."

A small ant ran down a tree trunk. The falling bark did not stop it. Slowly but surely, it made its way upward.

I took the bag from my shoulder and set it on the ground. At the bottom was a large wooden spool of silver thread.

"If it doesn't open, we'll climb over it. But how will we get the thread over the wall?" I asked myself. "To look at it from another angle..."

Black gargoyles, equidistant from each other, sat at the top of the wall.

"If there's anything I can do to help, just say the word," Mr. Butterfly said.

"Would you be able to fly up there and tie a string around one of the gargoyles?"

An onslaught of positive feelings piled on top of each other, forming a sweet cake. My brain ate it up and chased the fear away.

I unwound the right length of the thread and handed it to Mr. Butterfly. He grabbed it with his little legs and flew to the top of this wall. The butterfly flapped its patterned wings. After some time, he vanished from my view.

"Where the hell is that pesky insect?" Mortha groaned, lying on the ground. "Hey! You're not going to talk to me anymore?"



Four hundred and twenty seconds. My feet led me back and forth. I rubbed my neck. A small black dot peeked through the sky and grew. A familiar circular pattern appeared on either side.

"You're back! How did it go?" I greeted him.

"I've never flown that high before," he sighed.

Either way, the thin silver thread stretched from the spool on the floor to the top of the wall. It passed the strength test and didn't break when I pulled hard on it. The knot on the wall satisfied me. How could such a tiny creature be more useful than Mortha?

"Stay away from it!" a man's voice rang in my head.

"Are you ready, my friend?" Mr. Butterfly asks me one last time.

"What if the thread breaks? It's okay if it happens at the beginning of the climb, but what if it happens in the middle? It was a one-way ticket. My aging body couldn't take it," I babbled.

I turn and look back at the forest behind. I had one chance to stop now. Mortha rose from the ground and stared at me.

"Akane, look at me," I whispered.

I grabbed the thread with both hands. My first foot hit solid rock. I pulled myself up and put my other foot down. Once off the ground, I hung in the air.

The ground moved away from me. I climbed higher, and the energy left me. My arms stiffened. Gravity pulled me down, and the skin rubbed off my palms.

Mortha looked like a little ant crawling under my feet. She put her ear to the stone structure and bent her knees.

Her hand struck the wall. Several symbols lit up with a maroon flame.

"I will live..." my joyful voice finally formed.

However, I hadn't realized the price I would have to pay for the right to say my first words again.

I found myself on the shore and wrapped my arms around myself. The green grass tickled my wet toes. Heavy hair hung down my back and shoulders as drops of water dripped from it. My footsteps left a damp trail on the grass, and I shivered from the cold.

A stick-carrying ant, a mossy gray rock, a yellow leaf with a long green caterpillar crawling on it. So much life.

The rustling of the golden forest made my back arch and pushed me forward. The water on my body turned into a cold crust. Curiosity picked up the guitar and danced around me to the energetic song, warming every step.

I crouched under the golden crown of one of the trees. The hard and sharp texture of the bark scratched my back. My hands were not able to reach the bleeding wounds. A few leaves fell on my head and sank into my cyan hair. And then the searing pain went away.

I examined my new body: hands, fingers, feet, and pinched the soft, warm skin on my cheek. My long tongue licked the wet, salty lips. A dirty taste appeared on my tongue when I put my finger in my mouth. New emotions and colors filled every moment.

Little beetles came closer to me. Sounds came from all directions. Colorful bunnies jumped out of the trees. Butterflies and birds flew up from above. They surrounded me.

We played in the lake by the tree I'd fallen from. The lightness of my body allowed me to jump into the sky. I splashed in the water and laughed as they danced around me. Tears of joy mixed with the river water.

Several birds flew to me as I came out of the water. They gave me a wooden crown. Was it a gift for my birthday?

Warmth flowed through my body. I wanted to share it with others. I wanted to stay here forever. The once distant wishes, made of other people's memories, took shape and came true. I found my home, and not a day went by without a smile on my face. My heart was free from the hands of darkness.

"But times change, and the past is forgotten."

Thunder roared in the sky. The fallen angels wanted to take away my new life and imprison me in the tree cage. They fell from the sky like a flock of crows flying over a piece of cheese.

I ran through the golden forest. The leaves flew in my face and blocked me. Cries for help and screams filled my head. They reached into the deepest recesses of my mind.

I gasped. The dozens of creatures suffered and screamed while the water turned red. They didn't deserve their fate. My palm covered my mouth, and my feet carried me toward purple trees in the distance.

I coveted happiness for myself, breaking the laws of this place. My selfish desires defied the eternal order maintained here for millions of years. My mistake turned the ground white and stripped the trees of their leaves.

"And then they ran to the top of the tall tree," I murmured. "They had a lot of fun and lived together under the golden tree."

A thin wand drew animals, clustered around a little girl with a spiky crown on her head. Strands of cyan hair and bits of fingernail lay on the picture.

The wand scrawled across the picture, and a bare foot stomped on it.

No matter how much time passed, I found neither peace nor death. What saved me from eternal boredom was the opportunity to immerse myself in the human world. But the humans did not appreciate what they had.

Anger and hate poisoned my heart. My head hit the ground, and I was pierced by an electric pulse. Someone spoke to me, breaking the endless silence. He spoke to me. My cheeks burned as the heat spread throughout my body. My legs wanted to run and not stop. With every note of his voice, drums pounded in my chest.

"I won't let the world take you from me," I glowered.

I swayed from side to side, trying to hold on to the thread. The loud sound of rusty gears making contact came from the wall.

"What's wrong with that?" I asked, climbing up the wall.

Loud noises from within sounded like thunder. All the runes glowed red one by one. I was shaken harder, unable to rest against the wall.

"Hang on, Mr. Butterfly!"

I couldn't go down; I had no threads left.

"Don't look down, don't look down," I said and closed one eye.

I had about half the way to go. From above, the silhouette of a gargoyle with a thread wrapped around its neck appeared. A copy of it stood nearby.

Why was there a gap between the second and the fourth? A wind blew behind me and pulled me to the side. I dangled like a hook on a fishing line.

The sound of a newborn bird's cry filled my ears. I prayed my eardrums wouldn't burst. One of the gargoyles twitched.

"Can statues move?" I inquired of Mr. Butterfly.

"Depending on what kind of statues," he replied.

"Are you kidding me?"

The petrified shell cracked and fell over my head. The black stone cracked, and the gargoyle soared into the sky. It tore toward the stars, but suddenly hovered in place. The creature flew toward me. A black tear of soot stretched behind it.

"Oh, man..."

I swayed in place in an attempt at a dodge. The gargoyle crashed down beside me at high speed, miraculously not impaling me with its claws. Another stone bird flew to my right.

I was very lucky. They were quite stupid. However, I couldn't dodge forever. I had one last dash to make.

"Oh no, no, no!"

The gargoyle holding my thread moved. It tried to free itself from its stone shell, but instead of screaming, it made a strange hissing sound. The thread around its neck

prevented it from breathing. My weight caused the gargoyle to fall headfirst, convulsing against the stone floor. The stone creature flew into the sky, taking me with it.

"Ouch!" I yelled, slapping the wall in front of me a few times.

We vanished behind the clouds. The trees of the dead forest merged into a blurred image of an overgrown area. A golden forest sprouted at the base of Idrifol.

"Ha-ha-ha!"

Mortha flew after me. Her forehead hit something hard. An impenetrable transparent barrier prevented her from flying over the wall. She banged the staff against the transparent wall and tried to get inside. The wooden stick, which was of no use to her, flew forward and went through the barrier.

"Oh, how dare you!"

She stood before the Black Gate. Her only eye turned blue, and the dirty white dress fell to the white ground. A tiny cyan spider crawled through the doorway.

A narrow dark room surrounded it. The small legs tapped the stone like needles. It moved in the direction of the golden light on the other side of the wall.

The figure of a girl with cyan hair and a black strand caught in her mouth emerged from tall green grass.

When Mortha snapped her fingers, the white dress appeared on her body. She stretched out her arms and yawned.

A male scream came from the sky. Many miles away, her white ear picked up sound vibrations in the air.

At that moment, all the grayness around me disappeared and the golden light blinded me. That sight was like a spark that told me I was doing the right thing. My path was right. The statue broke free from the thread's trap and ascended, flying towards Idrifol.

The final gasp came from its stone mouth. Its wings froze and scattered into thousands of small pebbles that fell on my head. I wrapped my arms around Mr. Butterfly. Millions of stars moved away from me, and the skin on my weakened arms tore away with blood.

"Falling again with no answers."

If this was my final fall, I hoped that at least among the billions of souls like me, I would find peace and leave the shadows of the past behind. The blue glow of the colors would be the light at the end of the tunnel. I would find my eternal rest with you, dear Akane.

The night sky drew memory after memory. A picture of the day I couldn't forget emerged.

After the unexpected phone call, I drove to the local hospital. The air rushed around my cheeks and ruffled my hair. A humid smell wafted up from the ground. Raindrops covered my head and dripped down my shoulders. The wheels of the bike slipped on the wet pavement.

"Hurry, hurry," I begged.

The rain dripped onto my lashes, causing me to blink more frequently. Around the corner appeared the brick walls and square windows of the local hospital. I left my bike and ran toward the entrance. Some people sat outside a hospital ward.

"Where is she?" I asked her parents.

"Shin," the mother said. "We were asked to wait."

I swallowed a lump of air and sat down on the chair behind me, opposite the door. Drops of rain fell from my cold face. The mother covered her crying face with her hands. The father's hands trembled.

Thirty minutes later, the door opened, and a man in a long white medical gown and square glasses came out.

"You may come in," the doctor invited us.

We went to bed by the window. The EKG machine beeped. Akane turned her pale face with a slight smile toward us. The harder she pulled, the more her eyes closed.

" Mom..." she whimpered.

The mother took Akane's hand. Darkness her bad. Bony hands emerged from under her bed and clung to the white sheet. They crawled up to her and grabbed her arms and legs.

Cold sweat beaded on my forehead. My cold hands clutched at my pants. Air stuck in my throat.

Our secret place became my personal lair where I studied all kinds of magical things. Every day, the ghosts of the past invaded my mind and caused sudden panic attacks. Akane's death haunted me.

I lay alone on the ground, watching the flight of the shooting star with one eye. The green grass pricked my ears and cheeks. The clouds covered my home, whereas only the snow-white moon accompanied me.

Something solid and resilient pressed through my back. I bobbed up and down. Slight vibrations traveled from my back to all my limbs.



A few tears ran down my cheeks. A strange, thick liquid appeared on my tongue. It moistened my lips and flowed out of my mouth. There was a sound as if another drop of water had fallen to the bottom of the filter.

"...In!...Shin!" the high-pitched tone rang in my ears.

Thousands of bells synchronized like yin and yang.

"Shin, are you okay?" Mortha's voice sounded and had a warming effect.

It broke my cold shell of loneliness and gave me strength. Twenty-seven years later, I had never spent a day alone. She had never tried to argue.

Maybe she didn't want me to leave her alone.

I opened my eyes. Mr. Butterfly sat on my nose and flapped his wings. My saliva, mixed with something thick, splattered in different directions. The drops of my blood dripped from the silver web onto the surface of the clear lake.

"Phew, you're alive..." Mortha said, sitting down under a golden tree.

"How did you—?"

"It doesn't matter. The most important thing is that you're okay!"

As the web attached to the tree trunks sprang up from my weight, I kneeled and flopped down on the fluffy green ground. The golden leaves reflected the light right back into my face, creating a semblance of sunlight.

Mortha crawled up to me. Her face towered over me, casting a shadow over me. Forming a cage around my head, her long cyan hair hung down.

"I'm sorry. That was my fault," she blamed herself.

"You saved me again," I soothed Mortha and stroked her head.

Mortha nodded and dropped her head onto my chest.

Powerlessness stiffened my movements. I ran my fingers through her silky hair. She hugged me tighter, and we lay still for a while.

"Hey, stop..." I spoke.

She jumped up and sat down beside me. Mortha's pale cheeks turned red. She wrapped the black strand around her index finger.

Through the golden crowns, the majestic purple tree revealed itself. Its branches reaching out in all directions. It held the whole world in its woody hands.

We had traveled such a long way. The forest surrounding us differed from the forests beyond the wall. Its beauty was unlike anything I had seen before. The grove was devoid of any sound or movement. No creatures, no rustling of leaves.

The small drops of blood sank to the bottom of the clear river, leaving bright red trails. Mortha's face twitched and turned snow-white. Her face looked deader than usual. Mortha's breathing quickened.

"Let's go faster," she said and covered her mouth.

"What's wrong with her?" I asked.

"Her ghosts from the past," Mr. Butterfly replied.

Mortha had no ghosts. She was just a spider. A fly-eating spider. Okay, a very powerful fly-eating spider with supernatural powers. But what had happened in her life? She had fooled around every day.

We walked on through the dense trees toward the base of Idrifol. I turned my head, trying to find Mortha. Was a predator so frightened at the sight of blood?

Silence engulfed this place. There were many claw scratches on the barks. The branches of some trees were very short and without leaves.

"Such old guys have such young hands."

Grass crunched behind a thick trunk in front of me. She sat on the grass. Mortha's crown lay beside her. The hoop became a wall for the white spider lily that grew alone in the middle of the forest.

"I've never seen these flowers before." I told her.

"There used to be more of them."

"When you say 'before,' I can't even imagine when that was."

Mortha lifted the head and peered through a gap in the golden foliage. The long trunk of Idrifol blocked the black sky. She gave me a wink.

"What is that? A gray hair?" I asked, pointing at the tip of her black strand.

"Shall we dance?" Mortha jumped up and pulled me by the arm.

"Wait, what? I can't dance."

I ran after her, and Mr. Butterfly left us alone. She grabbed my hand, which was hidden in the pocket of my cloak. Only two of the five fingers remained: the index and the thumb.

Mortha raised her eyebrows and opened her mouth, "I told you to get rid of them!"

She pulled up my sleeve. The curse consumed my entire wrist and forearm. Mortha tore off a piece of white cloth from her dress and tied it around my arm. The cage was no longer crushing my heart. My blue skin took on its familiar yellow hue.

"The disease will go away, but your fingers won't grow back," Mortha explained.

"At least my throat won't get sore," I laughed.

I wrapped my left arm around her waist. The sharp nails of Mortha's fingers gripped my shoulder. We danced between the tree trunks. The wind created by our movements lifted golden leaves into the air. They flew up and fell on our heads, then crunched under our feet.

Mortha blew away a strand of black hair that tickled her nose. Fresh, warm air entered her lungs through her mouth. With every step we took on the soft grass, warmth flooded my body.

We held hands, and I drowned in her pink eyes. A pink spot appeared on the white skin of her face. Sharp but short fangs protruded from her mouth. Standing on her toes, Mortha put her hand on my dry cheek, and I stepped back.

She froze like a wax sculpture. As a single tear ran down the right cheek, long black lashes fluttered.

A stag beetle appeared from the total darkness of a hollow trunk. It stuck its head out as a warm wind blew the red horns.

The white spider lily grew alone under the thick canopy of the tree. The flower stretched higher, trying to warm itself under star rays.

The woven crown landed on her cyan disheveled hair with sharp spikes pointing upward. Mortha raised her eyebrows. The tips of her forefingers linked and bounced together. Releasing the hair that had been pressed, I adjusted the crown on her head.

"We should go," I said.

Mortha crept forward. She searched the grass for the beetle. It moved along the mighty roots of a nearby tree. A shadow falling from her head stopped it. Trying to get a good look at the stag beetle, Mortha put her hands on the grass.

The observer hoped to remain unnoticed and avoid startling the stag beetle. However, the beetle quickly detected her presence. It turned around and stared at Mortha. They stood there for a minute.

"You're not afraid of me?" Mortha asked.

The stag beetle moved its legs and crawled on her hand. When they had emerged from the trees, she put the small insect on the ground, closer to the blue water.

"It's even bigger..."

"Were you expecting something else?" Mortha answered.

"I've been walking here for twenty-seven years."

There was another body of water in front of us. The river surrounded the tree like a moat that protected medieval castles. The reflection of my face was in the water: an old, wrinkled face, and a thick black beard.

I ran my hand over the surface. Ripples formed on the water. The sight of the huge tree growing out of the center of this crater filled all the space. Infinite greatness...

Ideas of going back attacked me. Goosebumps ran down my skin, and my mouth went dry. No, no, no.

"Gotta keep going, I promised myself I'd make it to the end."

We had to cross the river. It was deep enough. At least the distance from shore to shore is short. I took off my cloak and threw it on the ground.

I hated swimming and thought it would suffocate my movements and then slowly swallow me. While I swam the river, the thought of dying at the bottom, where no one could find you, didn't give me a second's peace.

My white shirt squelched and stuck to my body. The staff... It stood on the opposite side of the river.

"Did you decide to leave me at such an important moment?"

Staring at the ground, Mortha sat alone.

"What's wrong with her all of a sudden? Doesn't she want to stop me anymore?"

Huge brown roots, covered in moss, went underground. I took out two sharpened stone knives. They were much sharper than the ones on the Earth. And when I say "sharper," I mean so sharp that it hurts me to look at the blade.

I plunged the first knife into the hard bark. The runes on the blade glowed blue.

"Climbing again... Do I need to go to the top?"

The hands went numb. My pace slowed. Idrifol was much taller than the wall surrounding him. At least no one wanted to kill me.

"...M-Mr. B-butterfly, what are we looking for?" I asked him.

"There must be a passageway in somewhere. Just my thoughts," he answered.

"Just your thoughts?"

What if I climbed on the wrong side, what if I got so tired halfway up that I couldn't even hold on? I almost lost my enthusiasm. One knife flew to the bottom of the river. One knife remained.

I had climbed to a considerable height. Descending was no longer the most comfortable choice. The next branch was unimaginably far.

With every movement, my foot twitched with fatigue. Each upward movement caused friction against my palms, making me bite my lip until it bled.

My fingers went deep into the wood. Small pieces of wood flew into my face. My foot hit the wooden wall with a scraping sound. The torn bark fell into the water, splashing Mortha in the face.

The opening was spacious enough for me to pass through. Inside was an empty room, plunged into darkness. A beam of light shone through the hole behind me.

While I unraveled Idrifol's secrets, Mortha sat on her feet, picking at the ground with a small branch. She blinked rapidly.

"I won't leave you, and I'll stay with you forever!"

"Do you promise?"

"My word is my bond!"

Suddenly, a beam of yellow light shone down on her head, revealing a thin thread. A small floating island

caught her attention. The branch remained on Mortha's flooded drawing.

The cool scent penetrated and stirred my inner self. A small stump with roots spreading outwards stood in the center. A cage?

With each small step forward, more unfamiliar voices echoed in my head. They laughed, cried, shouted, and cheered. Thousands of sounds rushing past me. Grabbing my shoulders, they pulled me back. I freed myself from the intangible grip that kept me at a distance from the wooden sphere.

"What am I supposed to do now?" I pondered.

"Maybe try to put something that belonged to the deceased in there?" Mr. Butterfly said, keeping his distance from the cage.

I tapped my pants pockets. The sharp corner of the rectangular object stabbed my leg. From underneath the cover, I pulled out the old photo.

We took it at a photo booth. Akane suggested that we each choose one and exchange them. That silly idea had left a warm impression on me.

I placed our photo on the stump and took a few steps back. We waited for something to happen. The darkness didn't dissipate. The location of Akane's soul flower remained a mystery to us.

Silence filled the small room. The old photo caught fire in the upper left corner.

"What the hell's going on?"



I extinguished the burning picture that had been consumed by the fire. The only reminder of her might be gone.

A wooden staircase came out of Idrifol, leading to the very top. Hoping that it would lead me to Akane's whereabouts, I hurried up.

We stepped onto one of the large branches of the tree. I followed yellow lights along Idrifol's wooden arm. Each tree beneath me had its own golden crown, which Idrifol had nurtured under its purple leaves.

The narrow tip of the branch extended to a small patch of floating land covered in swaying ears of wheat. The vast wheat field was sparsely dotted with blue flowers. The tall wheat stalks obstructed the view, but the yellow light emanating from the ground provided guidance.

Mortha knelt in the center where no grass grew. Her spine stretched along her hunched back. Small torn strands of her hair lay around her. Six lines of blood stretched from Mortha's feet in all directions and spread slowly across the ground.

"I did everything I could to keep him here. Damn insects. If they hadn't opened their mouths, he wouldn't have even noticed," Mortha mumbled and shook, coughing after each word. "I will not stand for it anymore; I will not be alone!"

A shiny object lay in her hands, and her trembling fingers gently caressed it. Mortha accessed the pulsing thread linking Idrifol branch.

"..Farewell..."

"Wh-what are you doing?!" I shrieked in horror.

Mortha's skin was pale, and her damaged eye changed color from pink to red. The right side of her face twitched, causing the corners of her lips and cheek to lift. Feeling a shiver run through my entire body, I took a step back.

"...Me? Nothing...Nothing!" she squeaked.

"What's in your hands?"

"Nothing. Absolutely nothing. Please step back."

She covered something on the ground. A blue light shone from between her fingers. Only one thing glowed blue: a flower containing the soul of a human being.

Her voice rose and echoed in a piercing scream, and the wheat ears shook. She had a crazy look on her face. The nails of her right hand dug into her cheeks, leaving bloody marks.

"Show it to me! I want to know whose soul it is!" I demanded.

"There's nothing special in it! Ha-ha. Just an ordinary human like always, right? I've already checked it. Don't waste your time."

"I want to see for myself."

"No way" Mortha shouted and picked the flower from the ground. "Nothing is ever going to keep us apart."

Trembling nervously, Mortha stood at the edge of the cliff. The wooden crown fell from her head.

I fell on her and grabbed her arm. Mortha laughed and struggled with me.

"You will not find what you're looking for. I won't let you hate me," she snarled.

That wasn't Mortha. I didn't know a mad creature standing before me. What was the reason for her behavior? Akane? Was she just jealous of me?

The way she acted made me shiver. Her heart, beating at a tremendous rate, pounded out of her chest. She kicked me with her foot and crawled to the edge of the cliff.

I ran up to her and snatched the flower from her palms before Mortha ripped the thread away.

"Give it back, you don't understand! You don't understand anything. I won't let her take you away from me. I won't be alone anymore..." Mortha begged me.

I pushed her away from me. A fanatical fire burned in her eyes, forming a horrible image of Mortha getting angry.

The white hands pressed against my chest and pushed me backward. Mr. Butterfly, flying nearby, followed me. The last thing I could see was the flower burning with blue light before a yellow thread wrapped around my left arm, and the pendulum plunged me into the memories of that soul. Involving all my old feelings, every detail, every blade of grass, every pebble in the ground formed a scene from my past.

After school, Akane and I went to our clearing. We sat there all day. Silence surrounded us. Only the grass rushed against our backs while Akane and I counted the endless bright points in the sky.

"How beautiful!" she said.

"Yeah, I wish I could transfer the whole starry sky onto cloth."

"Could you do that?"

"Let's see, if you use navy blue fabric as the main color and some bright glass stones for the stars, you could."

"Shin..."

"What?"

"Can you sew it for me?" Akane jumped and asked. "A stupid idea, you have better things to do. Forget about it."

A fire ignited in my chest for no reason. The longer I stared at her, the more heat spread through my body.

Then the image took shape by itself. The sky and the stars merged into a silk dress, and Akane laughed and danced. Consequently, I found inspiration and a desire to work in her burning green eyes.

"I'll make it for you," I promised.

The island and Mortha moved away from me when the world sank into darkness.

"Did she really push me?"

My head hurt, and my whole body was numb. The white thread caused a compression injury on my left wrist while Mr. Butterfly sat on my forehead. I jumped up; goose bumps ran down my skin.

"We're still alive, aren't we?"

No matter how long I waited, I got no response from him. He just kept sitting on my finger and flapping his patterned wings.

"Hey, friend?"

The night enveloped me. Grasshoppers chirped, and grass tickled my ears. To my right several books with brown covers lay on the ground.

Something vibrated in my pocket. I pulled out my phone. The time on the screen was 02:21 a.m. A huge stack of messages piled on top of each other with only one sender: my older sister Sakura. Air got stuck in my mouth. A slight tingle ran down my back.

"That's not possible..."

Tall green trees surrounded me while rain drops dripped from their leaves. The moon shone white in the sky, and the dewy green grass swayed beneath my feet.

Mr. Butterfly hid in my short brown hair. The feeling of smooth, soft skin on my face made me shiver. Moreover, my knees bent and unbent freely, and my back no longer emitted the crunching sound.

## **Chapter 4. Family business**

Searching for an answer to what had happened, I crawled on the ground with my back arched. The soft, wet grass crunched beneath my knees, and my hand crumpled the hollow object on the ground. Because I lifted a tattered sun hat, the brim came off and hung down. My mouth opened but made no sound.

My back fell to the grass. The rhythm of my breathing slowed, and drops of sweat dripped down my entire body. While the thread tightened around my wrist, I picked up a white t-shirt from the grass and wiped my back.

Because of the cold wind, I put on the wet T-shirt. Moreover, when small raindrops fell on my face, I pulled the hat over my head and clutched the brown books to my chest. I climbed over the fence and stepped onto the black asphalt.

Blinding me with the bright light of its headlights, a red car stopped in front of me. The driver's side window rolled down, and I saw my wet face through the square glasses of a forty-year-old man. A loosened black tie lay atop a crumpled blue shirt.

"What are you doing here, boy?" the driver asked.

My open mouth made inarticulate sounds while thoughts came too fast, and my head went blank.

"Need a ride?" he offered, sticking his head out of the window.

I nodded and clutched the books tighter.

Because of the car heater, the raindrops on my face dried. I leaned my forehead against the window. We drove past deserted and dark storefronts. Along with a few men

coming out of a convenience store, there was a huge purple tree in the windows of the stores.

"You're with me," I whispered.

The golden light filled my eyes, and the rays spread through the vast space like thousands of snakes.

I snapped my fingers, but nothing happened. The fire no longer warmed me or dispelled the darkness around me.

A thick fog filled the car while my sleepy eyes closed. I tried to clench my hand into a fist, but the strength had left me long ago. Had I ever been strong? All attempts were unsuccessful, and the world brought me back to the beginning.

The view of the empty night sky brought me back to reality while the driver watched me in the rearview mirror.

He dropped me on a sidewalk of a poorly lit street lined with private residences. Houses surrounded an abandoned brick workshop with dirty windows and a brith light inside. My parents' little atelier, where I had once lived with my older sister, finally stood before me twenty-seven years later.

A wooden sign hung behind the transparent door and shouted: "*Closed*".

I straddled the handle and then pulled down my shirt sleeve to cover the coiled thread. The door opened and the sound of some elongated metal bells jingling overhead made me jump.

I entered a spacious hallway with scraped brown wallpaper. The floor creaked under my feet. Covered in a layer of dust, broken sewing machines lined the tables. Along the walls, no one's sewing supplies filled brown

drawers. The once creative atmosphere fell into a gloomy seclusion. Besides, behind a work area was a small passageway covered with translucent curtains.

Overall, the house wasn't big, but enough for a small business family.

A red-haired woman's foot peeked out from under a worn blue couch while she slept and sniffed her nose. Next to a white cellophane bag on the table lay a rectangular box of headache pills.

Incidentally, one of the books fell out of my hands and clattered to the ground. I crouched down and held my breath. My right hand reached for the thick book lying on the wooden floor. With my head down, I tried not to make a sound.

I pulled back the white cloth blocking the passage into a small kitchen with white walls. Overhead, one of the two lights was on. A sink full of dirty black water contained a pile of dirty plates and cups. A fly got caught in the web of a tiny brown spider sitting on the small, half-open window near the ceiling.

Near a straight staircase leading to the second floor on the right, a brown locker stood with three burning candles in front of a photo in wooden frames. The wax melted and dripped onto a blue porcelain platter.

My cold, dirty fingers left a mark on the glass. An embracing married couple looked at me while a brown Australian terrier sat on the grass next to them.

I opened the door of the locker and turned pale. The dust and cobwebs covered two blue rubber bones and a few rusty red sewing pins.



Not things filled it, but my memory. The hourglass started again. Every rusty gear inside me moved. The mechanism worked, and the memories spread out through my bloodstream all over my body.

The forgotten were not forgotten. I'd always known that, but I'd been living under an illusion.

When I grabbed the splintered handrail of the staircase and put my foot on the first wooden step, a grown woman's voice sounded behind me with a note of displeasure and a wheeze. I stopped and froze.

A sleepy eyed, bitter looking woman stood behind me. She rubbed her eyelids, and the veins on her temples tensed.

"Where have you been? I found the pills in the middle of my room," my awakened sister asked.

Was the unfamiliar woman really my sister? Our first conversation started with a scolding. She had reason to be angry, but after all this time, I just couldn't answer her.

She stared at my forehead and didn't blink. My fingernails dug into the hard book covers. I caught the fragrance of an apple perfume, instead of cool freshness and summer sweetness, and it made me dizzy. I tilted to the side and gripped the handrail tighter.

"First the parents, then Axel, do you want me to die as well?" Sakura scolded me.

Silently, I turned around and climbed the next step. Sakura's hand yanked the hat from my head, and the flapping of wings passed my ear. The sound dissolved into the darkness of the second-floor hallway. And then the door on the second floor creaked open with a draft.

Sakura's words distorted and turned into a loud noise. While the books fell to the floor, I grasped my throat. Sakura and the kitchen behind her disappeared. The dead parents and the dog in the picture behind the glass overheard our conversation. Even the spider stopped its sweet dinner.

"Speak up!" she bellowed. "Do you feel sick? Stop performing! I'm the one who worked all the time so that we wouldn't starve here, I'm the one who feels sick every day, do you understand?"

Every day after school, Axel greeted me. I was an ordinary student, but I wanted to ease my sister's fate. As a result, his paw prints in a layer of gray dirt remained under the table.

I went to get a drink of water. Next the bells rang, and the door opened. Two bags of groceries fell to the floor. In the end of the sad story, Sakura stroked motionless and cried.

The dog let out his last gasp and stuck out his pink tongue. The shards of the fallen glass scattered around the atelier while my older sister screamed and threw sewing tools to the sides. The mannequin toppled over, and the tailor's scissors stuck in a wooden plank on the floor.

Leaving wet marks on my sneakers, two tears ran down my cheek. I picked up the tattered hat. We grabbed it and pulled it in different directions. The hat stretched and tore, thin threads fell on our shoes, and the brim ripped, leaving me no way to repair the hat.

"I lost track of time," I pleaded guilty and reassembled the pieces of the hat. "I returned home, sister."

The little spider cocooned the prey and enjoyed it. Sakura took a step back and relaxed her eyebrows.

That was not how I had envisioned our meeting. However, those words were the best. Apologizing would be pointless and insincere.

Our reunion ended, and I went into my room. The hat fell onto the head of a mannequin standing on the left. I collapsed onto my messy bed. Illuminating the closed door while my blank stare burned through the ceiling, moonlight streamed into the room through white curtains. The long thread continued to squeeze my left arm, leaving a red mark on my skin.

The next morning, instead of sunshine, knocking at the door woke me up. My body was hot, dripping with sweat. In the hallway, the sound of footsteps echoed with the two knocks on the door.

"Shin, I said bad things yesterday... Get up, please, you have to go to school," the older sister yelled behind the door.

My legs picked themselves up, and I ran forward. I tripped over a gray dumbbell weighing two pounds and stumbled into a hard, unstable object against the right wall. A human-sized figure covered in a dusty piece of cloth fell onto my chest. As a result, the hat fell from its head, from which Mr. Butterfly flew out and sat down on a desk next to the bed.

"I completely forgot about you," I said.

I picked up the mannequin and placed it against the wall while the old cloth-covered silhouette stared at me and didn't move. Goose bumps suddenly ran all over my body, and sweat ran down my face and back. The longer I stared,

the clearer her features became: a little girl's face, big green eyes, small soft lips, and long blonde hair.

Mannequins were not supposed to talk. Just before I could think about it, the cloth fell to the floor, and she spoke.

"Shin, promise me you'll finish it!"

In front of me, her ringing and joyful voice sounded. A sharp pulse ran through my entire body, making me clench my fist and tense my toes. The mannequin caught my attention, no, but what it wore. A long, navy-blue dress with a wasp waist, adorned with shiny white stone stars waited for its hour under the silk coffin. An hour that would never come.

When darkness had enveloped the walls of my room, the bright stars danced on. The mannequin under the dress transformed into a girl.

She jumped from side to side, spun around, laughed, and her dress fluttered to the side.

Bright colors replaced the gray shades of my life. The fragrance of her perfume, consisting of notes of lemon acid and iris, grew stronger. She was a blooming flower, illuminating my black and white world with her beauty.

"It's... It's so beautiful," Akane said.

"What's beautiful about it? It's not finished anyway," my voice changed significantly: it became harsher and colder.

"Hey, don't say that I like it!"

"I told you, it's not ready."

A sharp scythe pierced my heart and ripped from my chest. My icy hand did not sense the snow-white skin on her frightened face.

That little dress was my first work. I made that uneven dress for her. I dreamed that one day this gloomy, haunted atelier would once again draw crowds. From that moment on, I forgot about a needle again, and her dress. Unfortunately, Akane's dress was the last one I would ever make.

A small warm tear ran down my cheek, interrupting this brief illusion. Furthermore, no matter how much I ran away from reality, she would never come to me again and say: "Good morning!"

I picked up the crumpled white cloth on the floor and covered the mannequin.

"I've finally found the answer," I said, looking at my thread-wrapped hand.

The sun's slightly warming rays penetrated my skin through the clear glass. On my right, a girl with long black hair carefully listened to a lecture while a twenty-five-year-old teacher in a strict gray suit wrote down mathematical formulas. The sound of white chalk on the blackboard came from the other side of the class to the last desks, every time she finished writing. A square clock hung above her head, and its ticking caught my attention.

"What a bore."

Sitting idly, I occupied the last desk. My fingers twirled a pencil. The back of a student sitting in front of me twitched all the time.

People walked on the street outside the school. I lost myself in my thoughts when the desire to get out of here as soon as possible overwhelmed me.

At the end of the teacher's speech, a loud bell rang, drowning out the sounds of moving chairs. Most of my classmates made a ruckus, gathered their things, and headed for the exit while my smooth face rested on the hard wooden desk, and my arms dangled like lianas.

"Can't stop laughing at you," the student sitting in front of me shouted.

"I just had to go out," I told him, slapping my cheeks twice with my palms.

During the second lesson, my ears wilted from the abundance of math formulas and geometric theorems. As soon as I left the classroom, the teacher called me. He reprimanded me, told me about the rules, and then sent me off to write a letter of explanation.

Did I have to ask for permission to go to the toilet? We were the same age, and he taught me about life. Mortha was enough for me.

"Did you stay up all night again?" he asked me.

"Again?"

The annoying guy's name was Satoshi, my only best friend. The only person who didn't think I was crazy.

However, the people around me did not know that one night had lasted longer for me than their lives.

A huge gulf separated our worlds. I had the body of a seventeen-year-old, but my memory was still with me. My archives accumulated knowledge and experience for almost thirty years.

"Wanna join me?" Satoshi asked.

"Another day."

I got out of my chair and picked up the pens and pencils scattered around the desk. I slung my bag over my shoulder. Tripping over his untied shoelaces, Satoshi ran after me, and student voices came through the crack of the half-open door.

We left classroom 2-A. The students stood at the end of the corridor, pushing each other to get through and surrounding a little girl with round, black-rimmed glasses and black braided hair. She clutched books to her chest and stared down while boys and girls leaned close to her.

"What happened there?" I asked Satoshi behind me.

"Ahhh, don't you know? We have a new school idol from 2-B I think her name is Mori Kana."

Mori Kana...

The name was both familiar and unfamiliar to me at the same time. I didn't associate it with anything.

"What's wrong with her?" I wanted to know more and asked him again.

"Wrong? She's a talented artist, man."

"I would never have thought of that."

"So much for the others being shocked! By the way, Yamada is inviting everyone for a party, will you come?"

"Maybe another day."

"I'm not surprised at all."

I changed my shoes and headed for the exit.

"Wait, I have to go back," he shouted.

"Uh-huh..."

I exited the school, and a breeze swayed my tie from side to side. The crowd of students who had just left their classrooms and split into groups created the usual buzz that all schools had. Gray clouds gathered in the sky, and they all went to my house...

The morning was hot, so I didn't think to bring an umbrella. The classmates next to me talked.

"This stupid rain comes out of nowhere!" a short girl with long brown hair and a bright pink hair clip protested.

I tapped my foot on the ground, calculating the time it would take to walk home and pack. Anyway, my house was near the school, and I had my rusty bike with me. I dismissed my worries.

Satoshi, who stumbled every step of the way, called out to me.

He ran up to me, patted me on the shoulder and said, "It's going to rain. See you tomorrow."

I rolled out my bike and sat onto the sagging and scratched seat. My phone suddenly vibrated in the right pocket. Several overlapping messages came from my sister.

*I'm at the kennel, I'm late, make your own dinner.*

*Don't go out at night, got it? I'll never know where to find you!*

"How annoying..."

Firstly, I passed the private houses and reached the big dirty windows with wooden frames. When I'd picked up a mannequin and a black paper bag with Akane's dress, I headed for my new destination. A small black dot with a pair of tailor's scissors in its paws flew out of the window.



Glowing with a blue light, Mr. Butterfly gave me the scissors and then flew into the bag.

Only a bright white spark of hope in front of me showed me the way while most of the passersby were focused on the mannequin, I had both arms around. It was hollow inside, so only the wooden base pulled it down.

Still, they could stare at me as much as they wanted. However, there was a lot they didn't know. To them, I was just an ordinary kid. At times, I desired to share my story with others, but not with my reputation. Moreover, no one would believe me.

Window after window changed, reflecting the sun at its zenith. The crowd of people constantly entering the same place caught my attention. They stood behind the clear glass of the building.

"Hurry up, it's about to start," a girl said, running into the building with her boyfriend.

The sign on the transparent door read:

*"Contemporary Art Gallery. Contact Ms. Inoue for commercial offers"*

My feet led me inside on their own. I turned the mannequin and stepped into the studio. High ceilings, snow-white walls, and dozens of paintings hanging around the perimeter piqued my interest and compelled me to move inward while standing people blocked my way. In the center of the marble-floored hall stood a single wooden easel with a blank canvas, surrounded by whispering, enthusiastic people who filled every corner of the room.

At first, a person wearing a gray kimono and a carnival mask entered the hall. Around the edges of the mask were

long feathers of all the colors of the rainbow, and a tied belt revealed his thin waist.

To the left a woman with platinum hair and an austere suit stood, holding several large and small brushes and a palette. The audience fell silent when the artist dipped the first brush into the dark blue paint and with an exasperated gesture applied it to the large canvas.

The combination of sloppy and jagged strokes conveyed utter incompetence. Of all the people with their mouths agape, I was the only one to notice the inconsistency of his actions. The dark blue color slowly trickled down and then dripped onto the floor, leaving round spots.

The artist dipped another brush into the white color. In the center, a large circle formed with a line of small dots stretched to the left corner. In the end, he leaned forward to work out the details.

"What's this nonsense?" I laughed.

"Wait, look..." someone behind me put a hand on my shoulder and said.

While the artist's back hid his work and the thin brush connected the dots to form a solid image, a long neck peeked out from behind the kimono, and the black hair was pulled back into a ponytail. The artist lowered his hands, and for a moment the room fell silent. All the people in the back stared at the easel in the middle of the room.

"Wow..." the crowd murmured. "Look at that! It's incredible!"

I stared at the painting in the center of the gallery and held my breath. What was that nonsense? Is this just

another prank? How could this smear be so... So familiar and warm to my heart.

A shooting star flew across the sky. After the rustle of the grass reached my ears, the line between reality and memory blurred.

Once upon a time, the world was black and white to me, and for some unknown reason, the world became colorful only at night.

Stargazing was one of the few activities that allowed me to enjoy the natural beauty of the world. We sat on a hill, and thousands of bright stars shone before us. Some of them fell, leaving a long bright light behind them, then faded and turned to dust.

Mortha laid her head on my shoulder and sighed. The smooth, soft skin soothed my fears and anxieties, and the natural scent of her silky hair reminded one of wood.

From behind, like arrows from the sky, came applause and shouts.

"Masterpiece!"

"Amazing!"

I couldn't take a step for a long time. The artist bowed elegantly to all standing and fixed his black gaze on me for a second. The mask completely covered his face.

It was 19:01 on the clock, and I placed my mannequin in the center of the clearing and pulled out the dress. Mr. Butterfly flew out of a paper bag and sat on the mannequin's head. I smoothed the garment and took a few steps back.

"How are we going to work in the dark like this? Maybe we should have done this at home, what do you think?"

Mr. Butterfly remained silent as always. I pulled my phone out of my pocket to illuminate the clearing with a flashlight. My arm turned blue under the sleeve of my sweatshirt. Moreover, the thread squeezed my wrist so tightly that I could barely move my hand.

"Actually, I've been thinking about making a new dress," I said, glancing at the mannequin in front of me. "But I need a new roll of fabric, then I have to draw the patterns, prepare them, and a lot of other work..."

Firstly, I approached the dress from the left side. The old stitches were strong, though uneven. Sakura nearly broke the last sewing machine.

Akane's dress was made of natural silk. The thick fabric was not expensive because of its name, but because of its soft, smooth texture. I had made the most comfortable garment for human skin. I made it for her skin.

Secondly, I pulled the blue string over the dress and cut it with the scissors. The pieces of the dress came apart and fell on my face. As a result, little by little the dress lost its integrity.

"Do I have to sew all the way through, or could I just sew in some places?" I pondered. "More is better. I guess..."

I spoke to an insect that was incapable of responding. Thoughts of my madness crept closer.

Lastly, thinking of that gallery left my mind, I pulled the threads from the dress while the moon rose above me.

"Ta-ta-ta-ta-ta," I hummed a random tune and folded the cloth on the grass.

I rolled up all the pieces of the dress and put them in the bottom of the black paper bag. Unfortunately, the night limited my working hours because of my older sister, so the mannequin would stay there while I took the dress home.

Suddenly, leaves rushed, and branches twitched behind me. The rustling sounded like a stray cat in the trees. A dark figure moved along the ground, crushing the grass beneath it.

I had never seen stray cats around here before. Most likely it had gotten lost and walked into the light. However, that cat was too big.

I stared at the moving object in the shadows, and my back hit the mannequin behind me. The unknown creature with a black face loomed over me. A few golden patterns shone on its metallic cheeks, and sharp feathers protruded from its head, illuminated by the moonlight. From behind a gray robe, two white hands appeared.

"Those hands," I whispered.

It was her. Mortha? On the other hand, she had claimed not to be able to travel between our worlds. What was going on here? She had pushed me. Did Mortha want to destroy Akane's soul again? The body lying in the grass in front of me didn't move.

"I can see you!" I shouted at her. "Pretending to be dead?"

The moment I got a good look at her face, I fell and hit my head on the wooden mannequin stand.

"I-is that you?"

"Uh-huh," a muffled voice replied.

The carnival mask flashed on her face. A red feather slowly fell to the floor. Clutching the green grass in my hand, I sat on the ground and pulled down the sleeve on my left arm to cover the thread. There were more questions than answers. Rather than guess, I decided to ask.

"How did you get here?" I demanded answers.

The stranger stood up, clasped her hands and crossed her legs. When she took off the mask, a few strands of black hair hung down. Then her cheeks flushed, and the sounds of her rapid breathing reached me.

"I...uh..." she murmured under her breath. "I...followed you."

While the clearing around me collapsed, my eyes glazed over in shock. The moonlight revealed her ruddy face.

"Do you remember me?" her voice sounded and reminded me of that day.

That very day came to mind. The rain pelted the pavement. Out of nowhere, unexpected problems fell on my head, and a mysterious girl appeared outside my window. Staring at the screen of her cell phone, she stood on the sidewalk. The stranger was a little less than one hundred and seventy centimeters tall. She wore a woman's sun hat and a small beige dress that perfectly accentuated her waist and long legs.

"Where's her umbrella in this weather?"

A second later, a wind picked up her hat and carried it away. While shielding herself from the rain with her other hand, the girl's feet got tangled, and she fell to her knees. A slight smile on my face vanished. She was so wet, fragile and exhausted that I couldn't refuse to help her.

Who sent her to this place covered with a thick layer of dust and dirt? And why did the sign "*Closed*" act like a magnet? Eventually, I invited her in and let her take a shower.

She sat in a cocoon all the time, waiting for the moment when her wings would allow her to flutter like a butterfly. Why did I say that? Because she had everything she needed for a successful life: perfect white skin, pink lips, and silky black hair. From that moment on, I never saw her again.

She took a few steps forward and noticed my gaze on the thing in her hands.

"It's... a carnival mask," she pointed out and explained to me. "Here, look."

I nodded and tried to swallow a lump of air. Holding out two fingers in a V, the girl brought the mask up and held it to her face.

"How beautiful! It looks like my baby blanket," she admired, smiling broadly.

I remembered where I'd seen this mask and kimono. She was the artist from the gallery. It was her painting; it was her shooting star.

Gazing at the night sky above her, the girl stood still. She ran to the trees, touching the symbols carved into the wood. The scent of her citrus perfume wafted through the air.

"Wow, Fireflies!" she exclaimed, running closer to them. "This is so pretty."

Where did she find fireflies? The uninvited guest wrapped both arms around my mannequin and clung to it

from behind. I was at a loss for words and froze. Fortunately, she broke our awkward silence.

"Anyway, I... You came by our gallery with that thing, and I just wanted to, well..." she said. "To thank you for yesterday."

"I don't need your thanks."

"Well, I, uh. Anyway, thank you for helping me..." she mumbled.

The embarrassed girl removed her hands from the mannequin standing in the center of the clearing and stood like a tin soldier.

"Stop bothering me," I snarled.

"But!" she protested.

"Go away," I shouted in a raised tone, staring at her.

"Thanks again for everything. I don't know what I would have done if you hadn't been there." the girl whispered and bowed to me.

She walked down the path of stunted grass, putting on the mask.

"Why did you draw a shooting star?" my question came out of nowhere in my head.

Breaking the chains of hate and healing the wounds, her painting came closer to my past.

"Everyone thinks I'm gifted," she said, "But no matter how much I painted, I couldn't feel what I created."

"Why should you feel it? Just sit there and paint."

"No way!" she shouted. "When I paint, I feel only the brush in my hand. The flow of time is different. I felt like



I became a star, flying endlessly in the sky with no way to get back up."

The moments of my life that made me walk across the endless sapphire fields flashed through my mind after her speech. Among the thousands of stars, only one showed me the way. Not the star of Eden, but my star.

For no reason, her words ignited something in my heart. She spun around and clasped her hands to her chest while I exhaled and looked at her perfect straight back.

"So, what's next?" I asked.

"The sky, the grass, the stars, the little fireflies. I don't feel empty inside..."

"One day, I hope to paint such a beautiful place," she said. "Anyway, see you."

With every step she took away from me, I grew colder. The perfume slowly dissipated into the air while the bright light that blinded me faded. Importantly, it was the first time I didn't want to be alone. The glimmer of hope left me again. In other words, I couldn't quite understand the reason for all these mixed feelings. Just one more second of that sudden conversation would be enough. Maybe two seconds.

"So, you just want to paint?" I tried to figure out what she needed.

The girl nodded and put her head down. Out of nowhere, another flood of memories came and flooded my eyes.

"Hey, Shin!" Akane called me.

"Huh?"

"Look! Fireworks!"

We sat on a bench, eating caramelized apples and enjoying the festival. It was our last festival together. Akane's big green eyes always pulled me out of the abyss of despair while her laughter rang like thousands of bells.

Worry seeped under my skin. One way or another, she would paint the picture and then disappear from my life. She would never replace her.

I snapped back to reality while my phone's flashlight illuminated the dark clearing. Sitting in front of me was the girl with a slight flush on her cheeks. Her smiling face was close to mine, and my nose caught the scent of the perfume again.

"What's your name?" The girl asked.

"Does it matter? Yoshizawa Shin."

"Nice to meet you, Yoshizawa. I'm Mori Kana."

We remained motionless. Her steady breathing reached the carnival mask on her lap, tilting the feathers on it.

"It must be weird for you that I don't have my glasses on? It's called c-o-n-t-a-c-t-s!" Kana anticipated my question and pointed to her right eye with her finger.

As if I cared. Nevertheless, the images overlapped. The girl from school with big round glasses and a confused expression appeared in front of me. Was this the same Mori Kana I'd heard from Satoshi? The two of them were too different in appearance and behavioral pattern. One detail became clear in my mind. I stared at her, an inch from her face. My face flushed, and I abruptly turned away from her.

"Mori Kana is the star of the school. She's a talented artist," I reminisced, trying to make sense of it.

"I can't get a second's peace. It's kind of creepy."

It was more weird than creepy. A bunch of boys and the prettiest girls surrounded an unassuming nerd.

"Not happy with that?" I smirked.

"I imagined popularity in high school a little differently. They don't care about me."

"Yeah, you don't seem interesting. You better stop wearing those ridiculous glasses."

"Hey! It's insulting!"

She puffed up her cheeks. What a child...

"This mannequin... I've seen it in your house, all dusty and covered with a white cloth," she exclaimed and pointed her finger at it. "You lied?"

Her insistence made me fall backwards onto the grass. The question stunned me because I couldn't remember anything. That day was long gone. In that case, I had to formulate the most logical and plausible answer.

"Times change. I decided to give it one more try," I stated.

My answer was the truth. However, the only thing I didn't mention was why I picked up the needle. Her gaze settled on me, and we stared at each other for a few more seconds. Drops of sweat trickled down my forehead. Finally, she turned around and twirled a strand of her black hair around her index finger.

"So you want to draw my clearing?" I suggested.

"How did you find this place?"

"By accident."

"I have no idea what kind of accident it was."

At the age of eight, we played with Satoshi's ball and accidentally lost our way in the forest. Tall trees surrounded the area, resembling castle walls. In addition, a clearing as smooth as a knife blade opened before us.

"You are very lucky. The world is full of falsehood, and there isn't much real beauty left," she marveled.

"I don't know, your painting seemed really beautiful to me."

"Uh, well...When do you usually come here?"

"The sun's already going down. Around 7 or 8 pm to be exact."

"Then I'll come the day after tomorrow at that time?"

"I don't really care. Just don't interrupt me." I said, coughing and tapping my chest.

"Sure thing," she winked and nodded.

Kana spun in place and let out a scream of joy. She plopped down on the dry grass and grabbed a small white star in the dark blue sky. At the same time, I put the scissors in my bag.

"Leaving already?" Kana turned around and asked.

"Yes, very late, you'd better go home," I exhaled.

"You sound like an old man," she said, curling her lips into a tube. "Aren't you taking it?"

"I don't want to carry it around, let it stay here until I'm done."

Staring up at the moon, whose light fell on my back through the branches, Kana became my first guest after Akane's death. My first guest after such a long time.

## Chapter 5. The Ferris Wheel

I had a good night's sleep. The bike's wheels glistened in the sunlight while two schoolgirls walked side by side on the street and had a meaningless conversation. There was plenty of time before school started, but their constant exclamations made me speed up.

I didn't want to come here anymore. However, something told me that no one would believe that I was in my forties.

A large group of students stood near the entrance.

"Why didn't you take off your glasses before? You look great!" the voices of some girls from the middle of the crowd rang out.

Who were they hitting on this time? Boys from all over the school gathered.

"Hey Shin, good morning!" a girl shouted behind and stopped me.

She pushed her way through the crowd. I froze while the girl's voice grew louder. The others stood there with their jaws dropped. All my morning energy vanished.

Mori Kana tried to catch her breath. Her new appearance prevented me from coming to my senses.

Today, Kana was not an ordinary person who had become popular because of the hidden talent. She was a true school idol. I mean, her hair was pulled back in a ponytail, her back was perfectly straight. Most importantly, she wore no glasses.

"I took your advice and stopped hiding my face," Kana asked and turned in place, showing off her updated look.

I didn't remember giving her any advice. Yesterday, I tried to be as tactful as possible and not cause anyone unnecessary trouble. Oh, no...

Why would she take advice from the first person she met? Although I was no different from her. Similarly, I listened to Mortha in everything when we knew each other for a week at most.

"Caterpillar turned into butterfly," I mumbled, trying to distance myself.

The door to the school closed, and the crowd of students surrounded Kana again. I sat down on a bench and changed my shoes.

"Besides, you're early today. What's going on?" a male voice came from my left.

Satoshi stood up and leaned his back against a school locker. He crossed his arms and stared at me. The boy's gaze was precise, and he yearned for an explanation.

"Long story," I sighed.

"We'll have enough time," he declared.

Satoshi's mood changed dramatically, and a friendly smile appeared on his face. He patted me on the shoulder, and we walked to the classroom.

"Come on!" Satoshi shouted, slapping his palms on my desk. "Are you dating Mori Kana? You're a happy weirdo."  
"

"We're not dating," I covered my mouth and leaned toward Satoshi.

We waited at our desks in our classroom for the lesson to start. I continued to catch the slanted glances of my classmates, and an evil grin appeared on Satoshi's face.

The classroom dimmed, and the rays of sunlight no longer reached me. I put my head on the desk and covered my ears with my hands. I wanted to get out of here as soon as possible.

A girl with brown hair, less than one hundred and sixty centimeters tall, appeared in front of my desk. She chewed gum and stared at me. The stench of hairspray made Satoshi cover his nose and turn away.

"What's up with you and Mori?" the girl interjected, pointing her index finger at me.

A long pink fingernail with white star-shaped sequins glittered at its tip.

"Nothing, obviously," I rolled my eyes and replied.

She grabbed my tie and came closer. A long black eye shadow, painted on long eyelashes, and an abundance of matte concealer became visible on her little face.

"Don't lie to me, psycho."

Suddenly, the pink hairpin fell to the floor, and the strange girl let go of my tie. Lifting her chin, she fixed her hair and then turned away.

The bell rang after a boring lesson. Satoshi and I went to the roof to get lunch. My hope was that once he had the whole story, he would stop asking me. Consequently, I told him about what happened yesterday.

The fresh morning air filled my lungs when Satoshi opened the door to the roof. Clouds covered the blue sky, and a light breeze blew around my head. I took a sniff of the air with a strange, sweet odor.

"Uh, Shin," Satoshi interrupted my flow of thoughts.

It was freedom from others' opinions and oblique looks. The chance to be alone with myself without worrying about how to keep up with the class. Especially since they were all a bunch of juvenile idiots.

"Shin!"

"What?!"

My friend stood at the door, and to his left, a black-haired girl sat curled up in a ball. Mori Kana covered her face with her palms and ignored us. I leaned forward and took a closer look.

"Okay...I'll go..." Satoshi whispered and slowly stepped back.

"Wait!" I called him, but he closed the door and left the two of us standing under the sun.

She was definitely in a good mood this morning. School idols weren't supposed to be alone on the roof of the school. Instead of staring, I sat down next to her, and crossed my legs. In a black oblong box were cooked rice and three round chicken cutlets that my sister had prepared for me.

I had apple juice with me and held out a green box to her. After a sideways glance, she took it from me without question. Then I took the wooden chopsticks and started eating in the quiet company of Kana.

"Why are you here and not with the others?" Kana asked.

"That was my question."

"This woman stuff is really pissing me off."

Surrounded by a two-meter-high green fence, the white roof of the school was in front of us.



Kana's shoulders rose, hiding her head. She wrapped her arms tighter around her legs. The city spread out in front of us: high-rise apartment buildings and narrow streets lined with crowds of people in a hurry.

"I thought you wanted to make friends," I said.

"There's a difference between wanting and doing," she muttered and sipped my juice through a straw.

"Finally realized? They're all boring kids," I laughed.

Like thoughts in my head, the white clouds floated in the sky. This girl remained an enigma for me. What did she have in mind? Clearly, bees buzzed in her head. My face crumpled, and I scratched my chin.

"Keeping the people around me interested drives me crazy," Kana continued and looked up at the sky.

"You don't have to be interesting on purpose. Not everyone is going to like you anyway. So just be yourself. The right people will find you and you'll find them," I did my best to help her.

"Shin, what did you talk about with your first friend?"

What moments in my life could answer her sudden question? My first friend was Akane. What did we talk about the first time?

"It just came naturally," I answered. "The past is the past. It's worth trying to open up to the present."

I realized I couldn't say that. Likewise, I didn't get over Akane's death and burned up trying to fix the word.

"It's definitely not going to work that way for me..."

"Then just keep smiling. They'll love it..." I said and opened the door.

A wind blew across her wet lips and revealed her glistening forehead. Kana batted her eyelashes and brought her palms together, and said a kind of prayer.

"Bye, Mori Kana. Don't talk to me at school anymore."

At the end of the school day, I got my bike and went home. Some squealing voices came from a group of girls from two classes. Besides, smiling Kana walked in the middle of the row of five.

"Hey, Mori-san! Are you coming with us to the mall?"

"Yeah? I don't mind, but..." she answered, but was in no hurry to agree.

Kana left her friends and blocked my way.

"Hey, are you busy today?" she asked me.

"Don't talk to that exorcist!" A nasty voice sounded behind Kana's back.

The girl with the brown hair and the pink hairpin stepped out of the crowd. She stood on her toes and poked me with her manicured finger. The stench of her hairspray made me turn my head away.

"An exorcist?" Kana was surprised and stared at me.

"I mean, he's not normal! Everyone knows he broke up with his girlfriend and went crazy. He's also a stalker anyway."

The girl grabbed Kana's hand. Their group went to the mall, which was on the opposite side of my house. More and more noisy students came out of the school. While my lost teenage life echoed behind me, they laughed and fooled around.

On the way home, my bike slowed down by itself, and I put two feet on the ground. Did I bump into something?

Behind me stood a girl in a shirt and skirt. She grabbed hold of the rusty rear trunk and stopped me from riding.

"Shin! It's not true, is it?" Kana asked.

"Let me go!" I exclaimed and pedaled faster.

My foot slipped off the pedal, and I flew down. When the bike had fallen on the road, Kana bounced back and ran to me.

"If she's telling the truth, then what's next?" I continued.

"We may not know much about each other, but you don't look like a stalker or an exorcist..."

"That's a very facile judgment."

"Still, you've helped me out more than once. That says a lot."

"You know nothing, Mori Kana."

"There's a cafe that recently opened that sells croissants. I'll pay for it. Let me apologize for what they said."

While I thought about how to refuse her, Kana approached me and stated, "I missed going shopping with my friends for you!".

The words were shocking. Did she make me feel guilty? Two strands of hair hung down on each side. Kana waited for my answer, and her fingers intertwined. Honestly, I didn't want to upset her, but I wasn't going anywhere either.

"You know what—"

"Let's go for a walk, Shin!" Akane's voice pulled me out of my thoughts.

"We walk every day. Again? But not for long," I couldn't resist her sweet look and agreed.

"Yay!" Kana yelled and jumped into place.

"I-I... don't..."

Since the first day he flapped his wings, something had been scratching at his soul. Unfamiliar voices arose in his head.

They shouted, "Rock and roll!"

In the mass of shouts and exclamations sounded the soft voice of a crying girl. She sat on a chair in the darkness while a bright spotlight shone on her. Moreover, one detail always caught his attention: a silver bracelet glittered in her hand.

A purple haze obscured Mr. Butterfly's view, leading in an undiscovered direction. In Heaven, the trail had been cut off, but now it was denser and brighter. An unpleasant stench filled everything around him, and he could do nothing.

The longer Mr. Butterfly waited, the weaker he became. Something unknown kept him from living as a reborn soul. However, he knew nothing. No memory, no clues, absolutely nothing. Only the trail leading to the unknown.

Mr. Butterfly banged on the glass window of Shin's room and tried to get out. With his tiny but preternaturally strong legs, he pulled the white handle. The weight of the little butterfly wasn't enough to achieve his goal. Hence, he crouched down in the brown closet near the door.

Many thoughts ran through his mind. He scanned the messy room of a typical teenager and looked for a clue.

The door to the hallway was stuck and rarely opened without outside help.

An old rectangular box of white sneakers lay under the desk. Mr. Butterfly found a spool of yellow thread and wrapped the end of it around the window handle. Nevertheless, attempts to open the window were unsuccessful.

Mr. Butterfly pulled again, and the handle moved. The window opened, and fresh air filled the stuffy room. Suddenly, the door opened, and Sakura entered the messy room.

"How many times have I told him not to throw clothes around?" the older sister complained.

Mr. Butterfly hid under the bed, and the woman's feet passed in front of him. Sakura adjusted the curtains and closed the window.

Through the door, he flew out into the hallway and headed for the exit. Sakura grabbed her bag, stepped outside, and went to work.

Led by the long purple haze, Mr. Butterfly flew over the heads of students walking home after a long school day. After a few streets, he reached a large white house with a high brick fence.

Mr. Butterfly flew to a metal sign on the fence with the surname "Tanaka". He sat on a doorknob and sniffed. When a hand touched his blue wings, Mr. Butterfly flinched.

"Ouch!" a girl dressed in a familiar school uniform shouted, and a small metal butterfly sparkled on her silver bracelet.

Mr. Butterfly sat on her index finger and flapped his blue wings.

"What are you doing here, dear? Did you come to visit me?" she marveled and smiled. "Nice to meet you! I'm Ai."

They entered a large dark house with panoramic windows. Cellophane bags covered each chair in the kitchen. On a long white table waited a few wrapped dishes on plastic plates.

The schoolgirl went up to the second floor and entered her room. Posters of some rock band hung on the pink walls. To her right was a white desk and a bookshelf with an abundance of manga. To her left on the bedside table was a record player and a phonograph record: "My true desire" by FIY & ROCK.

Her quick gaze drifted downward, and she let her head fall to the side. After a short sigh, Ai opened the curtains, and the sunlight illuminated the room. Then she put down her bag and sat on a small bed. Holding Mr. Butterfly in her palms, the girl looked at the poster and took a deep breath.

"Tell me, why does everyone who gets wings tend to fly away?" the girl asked.

Mr. Butterfly flew up and sat on her head. She laughed afterward and fell back onto the soft pink blanket. At the same time, the bracelet dangled, and the girl raised her arm.

"Just like you, huh? Daddy gave it to me. It was his last gift."

Mr. Butterfly flew over to the bedside table and crawled across the wooden surface. As the cover's shadow fell, the girl picked up the record.

"He was a great musician. When I was little, he used to take me to his concerts," she bragged. "I've listened to this song a thousand times since his death."

Ai placed the record on a platter of her player and lowered the tonearm. After a brief hiss, loud drums played. They set a rhythm that was picked up by a bass guitar. Finally, a low male voice entered. The man's soft singing replaced his deep scream, while an electric guitar melody sounded the loudest.

The real rock and roll made Mr. Butterfly flap his wings, and, all of a sudden, the bright lights blinded him.

The singer grabbed a microphone stand, hundreds of hands went up. The sound waves made people's hair stand on end, and the tops of their heads jump up.

Nothing could replace the feeling of walking out on stage with the screaming of the fans. Nobody dared to stop you; you were the king that night. The music didn't just surround him, it ran through him.

"What does it mean to be a rock star?" the singer started. "You stood at the top while the speakers blew people away. You walked around the stage and did whatever you wanted to do."

He stopped for a second, and all the lights pointed to a girl with black hair standing in the crowd. Mr. Butterfly reached out to her, but the stage moved away from the audience. Thus, shadows covered her face, and the darkness covered everything.

As the music stopped, Mr. Butterfly caught the girl's attention. His little legs beat against the colorful cover, but she didn't understand.

"I didn't succeed then, so I must succeed now," Mr. Butterfly declared.

The resentment filled his little head. Every selfish desire burned his soul. How could he do that? The dreams became sins.

A tape glistened in the sunlight, and the girl slid a few fingers inside. For a second, her breathing stopped as she pulled out a white sheet.

*"For my only daughter."*

A stuffiness filled the teenager's small room. Ai tore off the rest of the tape and unfolded a large letter written by her father. Goosebumps ran down her skin, and the girl trembled.

Nonetheless, a ray of light broke through the wall of unforgiveness and regret and warmed her fragile wounded heart. Either hope or eternal sorrow awaited her in the letter.

"Listen, are you really into, you know, magic or ghosts?" Kana asked, stepping closer to me.

"In a way," I replied, rolling my bike at a leisurely pace down the new road.

"I used to read a bunch of fantasy books about wizards."

"Oh. I used to read, too."

"I didn't know you had that thing."

"You mean the bike?"

The thing? She couldn't not know what it was.



"Yeah," she nodded. "It looks really cool!"

"It's very old, you can't really call it cool."

"It looks cool to me anyway. I've never had a bike."

Without a bike, what would childhood be? I had a funny idea that might amuse me at that awkward moment.

"Would you like to go for a ride?" I came up with an idea that was crazy to her.

"Me? I can't, it's yours," she twisted her head and refused.

"If you're embarrassed to ride such a junk, then I won't insist."

"Uh, no! I just haven't..."

I put out the bicycle side stand and patted the old seat. Kana raised her eyebrows and definitely took my hint. When she put a trembling hand on the handlebar, a spark in her pupils warmed my young but petrified heart.

Kana rode ahead, balancing from side to side. She pedaled and bounced over the bumps in the road. The girl finally got used to the bike and stopped lurching.

"Hey, are you watching?" she called me.

"Yeah, yeah. Good job."

While a wind blew into her face, she straightened her back and took her hands away for a second. The dangerous maneuver ended. She removed the rubber band from her hair, and the wind fluttered her black hair.

Had the lack of glasses and the loose hair changed her so much? That was her journey from an ordinary student to the sweetest and prettiest girl in school.

Was it really a walk with a friend of mine? Even though we couldn't really be called friends. Anyway, it turned out to be a pleasant and not so silly life. The happy face of that carefree girl touched my innermost being.

The aroma of fresh baked goods and warm milk chocolate filled our nostrils. Kana stood nearby and licked her little finger. Then she pointed to a Ferris wheel peeking out from behind the tall office buildings.

"Do you want to have a ride?" she asked.

"The Ferris wheel?"

I pulled out my phone and checked the time.

"No time?" Kana got sad.

"Well...kind of...yeah," I replied.

"I can't keep you, especially since you already came here with me. If you want to leave, I can't object."

Kana put a mask of an understanding girl on her face. The changes in her mood were obvious after a long conversation. She made no eye contact with me, and her lips tightened. At the possible end of our walk, she handed me a bag of croissants.

"I promised," Kana told me.

What if she'd never been on a ride before? Right now, she was my only shining light in this world. I had a chance to live my life all over again. I might lose this moment forever. In addition, Akane's dress would not vanish.

"We've got less than an hour," I broke the silence.

"Really? Really? Really?" Kana shouted in my ear. "Hurray!"

"My bike." I said when she grabbed my hand and ran forward.

Wet stains covered the letter and blurred the text. The girl's feet rested against the wooden wall of the bed while she wiped her face.

The lead singer sat in a makeup room; his somber neck tattooed with a crimson rose reflected in a mirror. An acid green guitar stood nearby, and a poster of his band, FLY & Rock, hung on one of the walls. The rock star's gaze held not only endless fame and acclaim, but also a drop of guilt.

He took a pen and began to write. Lyrics for songs flowed by the river, but that writing proved to be overwhelming.

A high position in a big company after graduation? Never. The professors had convinced him to give up music. Everyone had. However, instead of lecturing, he had been playing rock and roll, ignoring their warnings and advice. An unassuming guy had become a legend one day.

"The four dreamers have become a dream for the thousands of people who come to their concerts," he chuckled. "Dreamers... What do they know?"

"The soundcheck will be over in a minute!" a manager called him.

"Send it" the singer said, holding out a phonograph record to the manager.

"Where?"

"Home."

"Now?"

"Yes."

When the singer raised his hand in the air, the crowd roared. The guitar riffs pierced the air, forming a strong

wave of sound that touched his soul. With each chord, the world of sound engulfed him, and each note reached deep into his being. And the audience, swaying excitedly to the rhythm, became a part of the magnificent moment created by his rock.

Meanwhile, the drummer looked over to the bassist.

"What's happened to him?" they whispered.

Absorbed in the performance, he took a breath and brought the microphone closer. For a moment, the people in the audience stood in a stunned silence.

"They said I was nothing. And they were right. Without rock, I was nothin'!" the singer yelled.

It was the last performance. The driver of his bus lost control on the way back from their tour. They just went over a cliff.

His face was all over the TV channels. Hundreds of fans came to his grave and left flowers. A small series of accidents left him without a life and a little girl without a father.

"Sometimes I forget where I am going and why. I thought nothing was more important than music. Forgive me for everything. I hope you can wait some more. I love you, daughter."

The girl wiped away her tears and smiled. She opened the windows, and air filled the room. Mr. Butterfly whirled around her, and the tears dried on her rosy cheeks. Ai stuck her head out and closed her eyes.

"Come on, fly! Don't worry about me," the girl repeated. "You must be tired of me by now."

The blue wings flapped in front of her face. Then the small black dot moved away from her and disappeared into the sky.

Maybe not in his lifetime, but he came here. The butterfly's little soul burst with anger and sadness. Now he flew away from her, his home, and his family again.

"That's it, give me your hand," the father smiled, standing on one knee.

A silver butterfly bracelet clasped on her slender hand.

"Daddy..."

Fluffy clouds drifted across the blue ocean. Standing at the window, Ai tried not to cry again, but tears flowed from her red eyes like a river.

The memories no longer bothered him. No more voices echoed in his head. The soul was free of the chains. The little girl stopped crying, and the purple haze in front of his face disappeared. Mr. Butterfly finally breathed fresh air.

Even though he was no longer Ai's father, which meant that those sins no longer belonged to him, he had set both himself and the lost dreaming musician free.

Kana ran ahead of me with her school bag on her shoulder and yelled, "Shin, hurry up!"

Cars lined the parking lot, leaving not a single open space. I parked my bike. Kana stood at the entrance and looked forward to me.

Gray roller coasters stretched across the amusement park. They went up, then left, twisting this way and that with no end. You could go up to the top and then down again without even noticing how much time had passed.

That thing completely robbed you of your perception of reality and absorbed you into a fortress of extremes and adrenaline. Suddenly, the red cabin whizzed by and only the squeals and screams could tell you whether it was fun or not.

The further we went, the more people there were. She disappeared from my sight into the backs of passing strangers.

"How could anyone get lost in the middle of a white day?"

I quickened my pace and headed for the Ferris wheel. That was where she wanted to go, right?

Sweat dripped from my forehead while I searched for the missing girl. I dug in my pockets and found two coins. Behind the glass of a vending machine were sweet juices and sodas whose price tags made me greedy. I was ready to die of thirst. After all, I chose the cheapest water and took a small sip. Nearby, two guys had a strange conversation.

"Hey, look at that girl over there!"

"Is she alone? Should I go over to her?"

A schoolgirl with black hair stood in the middle of the park. She had a bag slung over her shoulder and a small paper bag in her hands.

"Hey!" I yelled, and the guys forgot their stupid idea.

"Sorry," she whimpered.

Refusing to look at me, Kana hid her crying face and continued to stand. The Ferris wheel towered above us. The cabins rose up to the sun and then back down.

"Hey," I tugged on her shoulder. "This is where you wanted to go, right? Then let's go quickly."

I took her wrist and led the way, but Kana immediately let go of her hand. It was probably because my grip was too tight. Suddenly, our palms made contact, and the warmth of her skin sent an electrical impulse through my body.

The ticket agent opened the door to one of the cabins. The smell of sweet popcorn wafted through the small space, and sticky fingerprints covered every window. I just hoped that Kana wouldn't be disappointed.

We sat in front of each other on the old seats with holes in them. Fortunately, my fears were not realized.

The Ferris wheel moved clockwise, and the sudden start startled her. However, Kana came to her senses and put her nose to the glass while childish squeals came out of her mouth.

Outside the cabin, the city prepared for the coming night and experienced the busiest moment of the day. The windows of tall buildings reflected the setting sun, and the color of the sky changed from soft blue to bright orange.

Kana took a picture of the city bathed in warm hues.

"It feels like we're going straight to the stars," she marveled.

I wanted to capture the moment. So, I pulled my phone out of my right pocket and moved the camera closer to the window. The dirty smudge on the outside of the glass was in the frame and prevented me from taking a picture.

The phone accidentally fell out of my hand.

"I'll get it," she beat me to it.

Kana picked it up, and the small, burned photo under the transparent case caught her eye.

"Is that... your girlfriend?" Kana asked a question I didn't expect.

"My ex-girlfriend," I tensed up.

"Did you two have a fight?"

"It's none of your business!"

It was quiet in the cabin. Kana looked out the window and made no sound while the tie crushed my neck. Her fingers clutched the brown paper bag of croissants.

"You're awful..." she whispered and turned away.

"Pardon?" I asked.

"I said you're awful! And I'm fed up with you."

"You expect me to cry to you here?"

I scratched my head. The windows fogged up from our screams.

"She's dead," I said. "She's dead!"

I stood before helpless Akane. The scratches on the face, the cuts on her arms immobilized me. The broken bones made it impossible to move.

"Excuse me, can we talk?" a doctor approached from behind.

"Yes, of course," the father answered.

On their way out of the room, Akane had a look at me from her bed.

"Shin..." she called to me with her soft voice.

"How are you feeling?"



"Good. What about the dress? Promise me you'll finish and give it to another girl."

"What are you talking about! I made it just for you! You're going to be discharged and I'll have it finished by then."

"It's not necessary," she groaned.

"Hey, don't say that! I'll finish it and you can wear it! I promise!"

"Liar."

The beeping of the electrocardiograph interrupted her words, and the wavy graph became a straight line. The skin turned blue. In the end, her head dropped onto the pillow.

The nurse, the doctor and Akane's parents ran into the ward. Her mother's screams and cries turned into noise. I couldn't breathe. My stomach hurt for some reason, and the odor of antiseptic became pungent, vomit-inducing.

I kept looking at her slight smile. The raindrops covered the windows of the hospital, and the cloudy skies completely blocked out the sun. Akane's hand fell from the edge of the bed.

"Take them all," Kana sobbed, pointing to the paper bag of baked goods.

She sniffled, and a few tears fell from her cheeks onto the paper bag, leaving a wet trail.

We passed the highest point and went down. Kana pulled a white handkerchief from her bag and wiped her makeup. All the grayness and heaviness disappeared, and the rays of sunlight streamed through the window, illuminating our faces.

For no reason, I laughed. The sound echoed off the walls of the cabin. Kana bit her upper lip in misunderstanding.

The world around us went dark. Then some bells rang. Then I heard a piano and a violin. All these sounds merged into a single melody played by an orchestra, and a large purple star flew over our heads.

The void engulfed me, and I spread my arms out to the side. When the sun turned the sky yellow, the creaking cabin door opened. Eventually, I found myself in the real world.

An electric shock struck the tip of my finger. Kana screamed behind me and put her hand to her lips. Besides, my old, bearded face was in her eyes, and the sky turned black.

Those images appeared, like fragments of the old movie. Brown roots spread across the amusement park, and cobwebs covered the orange fence and the vending machine. All the people disappeared. Only a cold wind blew around Kana's bare neck and picked up soot from the ground.

Faces and scenes from long ago mingled with my current surroundings, causing an unexpected turmoil in my thoughts. I scrutinized each vision, attempting to rationally explain the unexpected flood of recollections. But when I looked further into my memories, more questions came.

The reflection of my face returned to normal after a yellow star exploded above us. For a moment, Kana winced and held her breath. We stood in silence for a while.

I persuaded myself that it was simply a random interweaving of old and new senses, the product of a passing connection.

"Are you okay?" I asked her, and she just nodded.

Our adventure came to an end, and we left the amusement park. Kana pulled out her phone and took a few steps toward me. Some kind of internet meme?

"Be my friend," Kana murmured.

"Excuse me?"

"Be my friend!" she shouted.

"A friend? You mean like you want me to add you to my friends list?"

"Well, yeah... All the girls have added me, so I thought..."

I unlocked my phone and dictated my nickname. A new and coincidentally fourth user appeared on my friends list.

"I'll go then. Don't want to keep you too long! Bye-bye!" Kana said.

I stared at her back, blinded by the sun, while she waved at me and ran off far away.

"It's been a strange day today."

Two croissants lay at the bottom of the paper bag Kana had given me. The aroma of milk chocolate wafted down the street.

Not as soft and warm as I wanted them to be. However, they had been made by a true professional.

"Mori Kana, you have a good taste. My first croissant after twenty-seven years."

A familiar face waited for me in the kitchen of our house. My sister sipped and then rattled the glass down on the table. Obviously, she freaked out because I hadn't answered any of her messages.

"So where have you been?" Sakura asked and frowned.

"You're welcome," I smirked and placed the small package on the table in front of her.

"What's it?"

"You're gonna love this."

Unexpectedly, Sakura didn't say a word. I fell onto my bed, and the unlocked phone showed dozens of messages from my older sister. Then I noticed a small number "1" in the upper right corner of the application icon.

I found no other messages from Sakura. Nevertheless, at the bottom of my dialog list was a new message from a user "Twilight Butterfly".

*"I had a great time today!"*

I stared at the ceiling and thought about my answer. Through the curtained window, moonlight streamed in.

There was a new update on Kana's page. Her picture of the city from the Ferris wheel had lots of comments.

"Wow, it's so beautiful!"

"A date?"

"A DATE? With whom?"

Mori Kana, you should reply to comments.

By now, she should be asleep, so I could write something like: "Yeah, it was fun!". I pressed the send button and fell asleep.

## **Chapter 6. Spider's hairpin**

Thick and sticky threads connected purple trunks, leaving no room to move. A wind swayed the branches. At the same time, insects got stuck and struggled to get out. Their wings and limbs clung to the silver web while a lullaby sounded in a blue mist.

Surrounded by the dark forest, a girl in a white dress with a brown cloak over her shoulders hummed the melody. A wooden crown pressed against her cyan hair as she lay under the sky.

"...La-la-la...La-la-la-la..." spewed from the lying girl's mouth, cooling the air.

When the moans and screams of the creatures had stopped, only a rustling in the branches kept her company.

"What a bore," Mortha sighed.

While the continents of the Earth, washed by the oceans on all sides, spun above her head, clouds of space dust floated across the black sky, blotting out the stars.

Screaming and flapping its wings, a black bird tried to fly away. In a moment, the crow's neck broke, and a single black feather fell from the tail and landed beside Mortha.

Comets flew before Mortha's unblinking eyes. No voice wanted to speak to her. The cries of the man who had

vanished and her thoughts took on the clear images of smiling Shin. However, she was used to be alone. Twenty-seven years flew by for her in a matter of months. Their fading trace filled the air around her and made her nauseous.

She grasped the brightest stars and crushed it to dust. The wind blew it over these lands, into her nostrils and ears. With every breath she exhaled, a crust of ice covered the leaves, and snow fell on the grass. The white flakes fell onto an entire graveyard beneath Mortha's feet.

Her ear shook and caught a crackling sound when a white line connected every star in the sky. One of Mortha's eyes turned pink. She hovered over the web-covered Twilight Forest while the white stars joined together to form a diamond.

"Eletnus Ikaro."

Mortha teleported higher and grabbed two stars with both hands. Trying to break the chain that bound them together, a loud scream escaped her mouth and created powerful air currents.

A sudden crackling sounded ahead. The stars lit up more brightly and burned the skin on Mortha's palms. A crack formed and shattered the sky like glass into many pieces.

Mortha opened her hands, and the energy that seeped through the crack threw her toward Idrifol. As the air swirled around her back, she flew backwards.

She crashed into the hard purple bark of the tree. Spitting a clot of blood, she plunged straight into the river that surrounded the base of Idrifol. Suddenly, the water froze.

The punishment she had to endure would never allow her to live in peace. No matter how far Mortha ran, darkness and loneliness followed her.

She sank to the dark bottom where no light reached her. A crystal shard of the sky fell into the water beside her and reflected on a seventeen-year-old young man kneeling as a giant stone came closer.

Mortha opened and closed her mouth. She tried to say something. She tried to call Shin, and her legs cramped. The heavy cloak sank to the bottom.

Mortha's head hit the thick layer of the ice that had formed above her, and the water turned red.

The ice crust broke, and she stuck her head out of the cold water. Her white dress was soaked and pulled her down. As the blood ran down her pale cheeks, Mortha flew toward a small floating island.

"Shin!" she shouted.

Awakened by the sound of the alarm clock under her pillow, Kana yawned in the early morning. The sun streamed in and illuminated a huge painting that covered the entire right wall. The bright morning rays lifted small particles of dust from the marble floor.

Kana sat on the expensive leather couch against the wall. A thin white blanket covered her legs. Easels were all over her square room. Drops of red and blue paint dried under them.

"Could I get any closer to the sky?"

Kana's cheeks flushed red. Her heart jumped out of her chest. She picked up her phone, and a stack of notifications from her new friends appeared on the screen.

"I'm gonna change everything today," she whispered.

Kana scrolled through the new messages. She fixed her eyes on the names of the people she texted last night. A new message from "Yoshizawa Shin" appeared at the very bottom. Bringing her finger closer, she clicked on the dialog, but didn't remove the finger. The thumb of Kana's hand turned off the phone.

Kana pursed her lips, and the gaze of a single person from the painting hanging on the wall caught her attention.

A tree's root was in the lower left corner and reached all the way to the edge, and then spread thick branches to the right side. The detailed texture of the bark was as realistic as a photo. The largest branch extending to the right, covered with green leaves, sagged under the weight of a little girl with blonde hair.

She wore a white dress and held a small book and a golden fan while her frail foot dangled from the branch. Held up by the tip of her toe, a brown shoe was about to fall off.

The girl's hair hung down, and her little foot swayed. The little beauty's face flushed, and she covered it with the golden fan while her emerald eyes mirrored Kana's half-shadowed face.

Kana mustered her courage and opened the dialog. Shin's reply consisted of one word that made Kana's heartbeat faster.

*"Surely."*

Kana couldn't stop staring at his short message. She jumped up from under the blanket and stood in front of the blinding window. When the sun illuminated her face, the



shadow of her silhouette, dressed in a white cotton nightgown, appeared on the floor.

There was a knock at the studio door. Kana hid the phone in her hands. A woman with short silver hair entered the room. She wore a tight suit, accentuating her figure. The woman stepped inside. Meanwhile, Kana sat on the floor in the middle of the square studio with her back to the window.

"Mori? What are you doing?" she asked, raising an eyebrow.

"Good morning, Mrs. Inoe," Kana replied.

Mrs. Inoe exhibited paintings by artists who were in high demand and the talented girl to live in her gallery. Furthermore, she was a true businesswoman and thought that everything had a price. Kana could stay with her as long as she wanted in exchange for new paintings.

"Good morning, isn't it time for you to get ready for school?" Mrs. Inoe wondered.

"It's Sunday, Mrs. Inoe," Kana corrected her, getting up from the floor and walking into the hallway, still smiling.

Mrs. Inoe pulled her day planner from her jacket pocket.

"Oh...I thought it was Wednesday."

After washing her face, Kana entered Mrs. Inoe's room and sat down in a black upholstered chair. Near the window, at the edge of a long black table sat the gallery owner herself.

Ms. Inoue read some documents after each sip of coffee. Dark blue bags had formed under Mrs. Inoue's sleepy eyes.

She often had to stay up until the morning to work. Twenty-four hours a day, six days a week. Moreover, the desire to make her gallery the most popular place in the city allowed her to recognize young, gifted artists.

While glazed corn flakes drowned in a lake of milk, Kana pushed a hot cup over closer.

"How's school going?" Mrs. Inoe asked, sipping her bitter drink with smoke coming out of it.

"I've made friends with the girls in my class," Kana replied.

"You're kidding!" Mrs. Inoe shouted and slammed her cup down on the table.

Her face was right in front of Kana's nose while a brown blob soaked into the paper.

"It's true..." Kana muttered and lowered her head.

Ms. Inoe leaned back and continued to sip her coffee, the aroma of which filled the entire room, and looked out the window. Two people stood on the sidewalk pointing at the closed door of the gallery.

The owner rarely went out and envied all her visitors. However, the sight of people's faces eagerly looking at the paintings she had collected gave her the strength to work harder.

At the same time, she worried about the always alone girl. It was good for the business, but Mrs. Inoue's heart ached. If what Kana had said was true, she was only happy for her.

Eventually, finishing her cereal, Kana got up from the chair.

"I have to visit my parents today, and then I'll go for a walk tonight," she said.

Mrs. Inoue relaxed without taking her glance away from the stained documents and read some text written in small print. When the door closed, Mrs. Inoue choked on her coffee and stained the white sheets even more.

"Walk?!"

The morning sun warmed the street. People woke up and filled the roads with their cars. Some students from her school walked in the opposite direction. For that reason, she lowered her head and waited for them to pass.

Kana passed another coffee shop, attracted by the aroma of freshly baked goods. While she stared through the window, her mouth became wet.

A girl dressed in a black apron put some chocolate croissants on the counter, and Kana licked her lips.

Kana stayed behind the window like a maniac, leaving traces of her breath on the clear glass. At the same time, the eyes of the customers became more intense. She turned away and hid her flushed face.

The tops of tall buildings pierced the sky. A woman in an austere dress, sunglasses, and high heels got into a black german car while the driver in a suit and white gloves held the door open. With every step, more signs of a wealthy neighborhood appeared.

She stood at the entrance and looked up. The sight of the tallest building made her dizzy.

Using the key card, Kana entered the apartment building where a beautiful woman in a white shirt sat in the reception area.

"Welcome, Miss Mori," the receptionist greeted her and bowed.

The gold interior created an atmosphere of pressurized inaccessibility, unique to the only social class in the world. The low heel of Kana's shoes clattered on the clear white floor. To the right stood a large grand piano while a sleepy man in a suit played Chopin's "Waltz No. 19 in A Minor."

Kana entered the elevator and pressed the twenty-third floor button. After a moment, a few white leather chairs and a growing bonsai disappeared behind the gray door.

She stepped out into a long corridor with abstract paintings on the walls. Kana finally reached the end and inserted the key card into the lock. The door to the apartment opened.

Panoramic windows greeted her with a view of the busy street, and two round mirrors hung on the white walls of the hallway.

In the center of a spacious room was a small table with a black stone top and two white leather couches with red cushions. A huge crystal chandelier loomed over the table.

A familiar voice greeted the girl and sent shivers down her legs.

"So, you finally decided to come home?" asked a man, sitting behind the bar.

He undid a button on his black shirt and sipped an expensive whiskey from a glass while a gold watch rattled on his hand.

"Mom's here?" Kana asked.

"Of course, she is. Where else would I be but at home?" a woman said from the stairs to her left.

As if a camera flashed each step she took, she moved lightly and precisely, slicing through the air, and a couture red silk dress stretched behind her. The mother didn't look at her daughter and took a seat on one of the couches in the middle.

"And what is the reason for your visit?" the mother yawned and asked.

"I hope you're not going to run away again," the father said, getting up from the barstool, and sat down on the couch across from his wife.

"I wanted to talk," Kana ventured to begin a speech she had been preparing for a long time.

"About what?" the dad asked.

"Next week, I'll be showing my work in the gallery. I hope you will be there."

"You are aware that all your work must have our approval," the mother protested.

"But!"

"No buts. It was our decision a long time ago," the father finished the conversation.

The lack of objections allowed them to shift their attention.

The emotional vampires sucked the confidence out of Kana. Since birth, the inability to cross her parents had been instilled in her.

Kana stood and trembled, and the salty taste of a tear appeared on her pink lips. The small but important path she had taken in her life kept her from turning into a silent icebox.

A shiver ran down her spine from feeling the icy paws of her parents sneaking up on her. Kana's heartbeat faster than usual while the cold hands choked her.

"I don't want to—" Kana wheezed.

Her parents chatted casually. Their voices grew louder, silencing the voice of her heart forever. The walls around her darkened. Mori Kana found herself alone again.

"Ha-ha-ha," someone laughed.

"What was that?" she asked and looked around.

"Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!"

"Shin? Why do I hear his laughter at a moment like this? It's so familiar and ringing. It warmed my soul and kept it from turning into a piece of ice. What would Shin have done in my place?"

"That time on the roof, he told me to smile. When I was open with him, I could be truly happy."

The ice that had covered her arms and neck melted, allowing her to speak. The light in her heart dispelled the darkness.

"Never again!"

A loud scream escaped her throat and interrupted the parents' dialogue. They turned their heads and showed an irritation on their faces.

The mother dug her long red fingernails into the soft pillow, and the bracelet on her leg jingled. Meanwhile, the father choked on his drink when the chandelier swayed slightly at her scream.

The ice box cracked and filled with hot air.

"We didn't decide anything. You were the ones who decided everything for me. Now I have friends and a fun school life. I love to paint. And I'll paint what I want!"

She finally finished her speech, which turned the faint fire of her heart into a blaze. Mom and Dad watched Kana with open mouths, not saying a word in response. Eventually, she headed for the exit and closed the door behind her.

A small family of three passed at the foot of the building behind the panoramic corridor window. The parents held their child's hands and laughed. A spark ignited in Kana's chest, melting the eternal cold and opening her to the future.

At the gallery, Kana took a shower, changed her clothes, and used the expensive cosmetics Mrs. Inoue had lent her today. She unpacked a box of citrus and bergamot perfume that evoked a sense of freedom and longevity. Preparing a wooden easel with a white packed canvas, Kana slung her bag over her shoulder and dragged it downstairs.

The sun was almost below the horizon, turning the sky a deep blue. Kana walked over to the old fence by the road. Throwing her easel and canvas over it, she climbed over to the other side and fell onto the green grass.

She rolled down the hill between the trees. Kana leaned against a tree and tried to get up. At the same time, Shin was on his knees in the center of the clearing.

I gripped the needle with icy bloody fingers. The edges of the dress parts came together, and the yellow pulsing thread wove into them.

A girl with blonde hair, wearing my navy-blue dress, stood with her back to me near the naked mannequin. The white stones on the fabric shone like stars. My breathing slowed when Akane stepped onto the cold grass with her bare feet.

"Ah-Akane, Akane, it's me!"

I ran to her and turned her around. Not a single moonbeam reflected off the blue matte skin while the disheveled hair fell to her shoulders. She was smaller than me, and her forehead rested on my shirt. I finally stroked Akane's head.

"You're back. Everything will be okay. I promise you," I reassured her.

"Shin!" Kana's voice came from behind me.

She stood by a tree and wore a beige dress. The leaves rustled because of a strong wind. When I let go of Akane's cold hands and ran to Kana, the grass went underground in a smooth line.

Under our feet the ground gave way, and the earthquake knocked me down. Akane floated above the clearing while pulsing threads wrapped around her body and reached up to her neck.

I tried to pull the threads away, but they held her tightly and squeezed every limb. The electric shock hit me, and I was thrown backwards.

Suddenly, all the stars around us disappeared. The clearing plunged into darkness that covered the sky. Akane's arms and legs stretched out to the sides. The cold wind kept me from breathing.



I was no longer in our world. The stars in the sky connected and formed a net over my head. Besides, the Earth floated in space instead of the Moon.

The yellow threads tightened around her neck like a noose. As a result, her hair turned white, and a purple circle appeared in her eyes. Akane's tiny foot finally stepped on the green grass.

"Souls are not toys, boy," Akane said.

"What are you talking about? Akane, it's me!" I shouted.

"Death and life balance each other. Do you really think you're worthy to upset the eternal balance?"

"I want to save you. We'll go home and start our lives over. Do you hear me?"

A long icy trail stretched behind her, and a yellow star shone in her eyes. I fell to my knees, and cold currents of air made it hard to breathe.

"Too many parasites have appeared in my world. You disrupt my order for your selfish desires and don't think about who is around you," Akane's voice echoed through the clearing. "Life belongs to no one."

The blue dress and hair fluttered behind her back. Akane's sharp fingernail was a millimeter from my wide-open right eye.

Then her finger turned into dark dust. Akane's pretty face also shattered into thousands of shards, and the dress fell on the ground.

Then a long horn sounded in the sky, and dark clouds obscured the stars. The thunder rumbled, and lightning

struck the clearing while black rocks landed on the flying island.

A golem with blue runes glowing on its body stepped on the dress and crushed it into the ground. When the stone monster came closer, a whistling sound rang in my ears. Someone grabbed my arm and pushed me back. The fist of the golem flew in front of me.

At the same time, Kana sat on the grass and didn't move. The stone arm hit and threw her back, and a long trail of blood stretched across the grass.

I rushed over to her and grabbed her shoulders. Fortunately, the quiet beating of her heart was in my ear.

"Why? Why is it so?" I panicked.

A girl with skin as pale as a dead man's stood in front of me. Her hair and clothes were wet. The crown from the top of her head fell to the ground.

"You must leave," Mortha said and breathed fast. "Take the girl and run."

I picked Kana up in my arms and ran forward. The edge of the island appeared in front of us. We hovered a few miles from the restless sapphire field. The flowers hid and clung to the ground as the clouds cast their shadows and blocked the light of Idrifol.

Mortha's pupils narrowed. She bared her fangs and tore away the dangling, dirty cloth. The threads of fate that bound the souls to Idrifol revealed themselves and connected to the giant purple branches. The flames covered the world.

A fiery hail pelted the ground, crashing into the transparent dome and shattering the Black gate. The creators were not happy, and their anger knew no bounds.

"I knew it. There's nothing worse than breaking their stupid rules. But I did," Mortha protested. "And I'm still alive."

The veins under her white skin glowed bright red. She charged forward, leaving the stone monsters no chance of survival. However, there was a difference between the stupid giants, who knew neither death nor life, and Mortha. The little spider wanted to live.

Her hand sliced through the black cobblestones like a knife through butter. After a second, some threads from her wrists bound the two golems at the sides, and they collapsed to the ground. Only crumpled silhouettes remained in the trembling clearing.

At first, Mortha ran and leaped forward. With her hands on the ground, her long legs soared upward. Her bare feet tensed and stretched perfectly forward. Then the girl pushed herself up and climbed onto the head of one of the golems.

Mortha sat on the giant's neck and ripped off its black head. Summoning an even more powerful rain of stones, she tore the monsters apart one by one.

"Forgive me, Shin!" Mortha yelled. "I deceived you. Souls cannot be returned to the human world."

I stood with Kana in my arms. Blood dripped out of her mouth. Kana's fingers grabbed my shirt. Meanwhile, more rocks fell from the sky. Mortha ran up to me.

"We have to leave, Shin," she shouted.

Mortha put two fingers on the unconscious girl's bloody neck. Then she put her warm, soft hand on my cheek and fluttered her eyelashes.

"You're my shooting star," Mortha said.

Suddenly, she pushed me off the cliff. We flew down while the hateful tears streamed down Mortha's smiling face. Each time it started all over again. It was a never-ending cycle of life and death.

My hand stretched out, and time slowed down. While the white noise deafened me, I watched myself fall down the stairs I couldn't climb.

A stone fist pressed Mortha into the ground like a bug. Her white dress tore, and the fabric slowly fell to the grass. Only streams of her thick blood flowed down from the edge.

Empty space spread out around me, and the Earth, like a great round jewel, adorned the blackness along with the thousands of stars that moved away from me. The yellow threads in the sky fell and cut through the flying island like a sweet fruit.

In the middle of my fall into the void, the staff materialized out of nowhere, and my instant reaction allowed me to grab it. The trees of the Twilight Forest and the sapphire field below us were getting closer by the second.

"Come on..."

A small blue light approached me. Mr. Butterfly's silhouette flashed by at high speed and caught up with us. He sat on the tip of my staff, and the crystal glowed with a bright light and blinded me.

Our backs were ready to hit the ground. I squeezed Kana's bloodied hand tighter, and the trees and the black sky changed into an endless space.

Pink clouds drifted in the celestial ocean, soothing my mind and taking away my worries. The lack of a horizon made the place flat, with no edges or corners. The white light broke the stone in my heart.

A perfect silence reigned in this place and allowed thoughts to float freely. When I turned my head, a thin long object stood in the distance. My footsteps made no sound as I explored the boundless space and approached that strange thing. Surprisingly, my wooden staff stood vertically on the white ground.

"What did you think? He won't let you go," a familiar voice sounded.

That voice... Nothing but emptiness was nearby and kept me silent company. Those soft ringing tones filled the whole place. Each letter spoken in that voice took me back to the beginning.

We walked along the narrow beige path.

"Is it always this cold out here?" I asked my new companion.

"Cold can only be in the heart," Mortha replied, running forward. "I, on the other hand, feel warm."

She stood in front of me and clasped her hands behind her back. The rosy eyes reflected my dazed face while a light breeze ruffled her hair.

"I'm not sure it works that way," I said.

"You just have to trust it! And if you get cold again, just call me and I'll come to you wherever you are."

"And why are you here alone?"

"Because in the pursuit of a dream you can lose more than you gain. Especially if that dream was never yours. However, I am not alone anymore!"

A huge rock fell on my heart and the ground pulled me down. My veins froze when my eyes closed. Feeling the darkness, I threw my head back.

Nevertheless, the voice refused to be silenced and found the way into my mind through the water. Then my eyes opened.

Out of nowhere, a smirking face appeared in front of me, and I jumped back.

"Boo! Ha-ha-ha," she laughed and crossed her arms over her chest.

The silky cyan hair covered her eerily pale face. She tapped the crystal in the staff, and it flickered more brightly.

"You..." I choked.

"Thought I was dead?" Mortha chuckled.

"I didn't..."

"He-he. Just relax. You got it right."

A new navy dress covered her shoulders and arms, and a golden hairpin depicting a spider with eight sharp legs adorned her long hair. The hem of the dress fell to the white floor and stretched back. Mortha turned in place, lifting the edge of her silk outfit.

"What do you think? Divine beauty, isn't it?" she asked and smiled.

She ran to me and wiped my face with her hands. My heartbeat faster while sweet tears dried up.

"What happened?" Mortha asked.

"It's all my fault," I sobbed.

"Don't blame yourself for what happened, Shin."

"None of this would have happened without my selfish desires!"

"You think you were the only one who had them?" she said. "My whole life is selfish desire. I deserve what happened to me. But you don't. You're a human being. A living, breathing human man. And you can move on."

"I will not go without you!"

Mortha stroked my hair, then grabbed my shoulders.

"Stand up straight and look ahead. My time is over. Yours is just beginning."

Mortha's palm made contact with mine, and I placed my other hand on her waist and led us to the right.

"One, two, three. One, two, three," she whispered.

Our feet moved in time for her counting. We danced around the staff, and the strand of black hair fell over her nose and made Mortha laugh. The beats of our hearts synchronized, and then we stopped abruptly.

"Time's up," she said.

"I'm here. I'll stay with you!"

"Our worlds were not meant to collide, but I thank you for giving me the feeling of being alive."

Mortha's eyes reddened, and she smiled. Standing on her toes, she wrapped her arms around my neck and closed her eyes. Suddenly, her wet but soft lips touched mine, leaving a slightly bitter taste. My grip on her waist tightened.

Time stopped in that moment. It couldn't end like that. All the hard years we had spent together flashed before my eyes. I refused to believe that her warm breath would never reach me again.

The warmth of her pale body left me. I squeezed her tighter, but her body had already turned to air. I closed my eyes and visualized her pale face. The worst part was not being able to see her in front of me.

"Thank you for being with me," her sweet voice sounded in my head one last time.

"No, don't say that. You can't!"

In that second, I stopped feeling her presence. A cold breeze blew, and her hairpin fell into my palm.

Mortha was gone, and she remained only as a memory in the mind of a sick boy. Our fairy tale finally ended.

The staff stood in front of me and waited for the right moment. I didn't blink and clutched the hairpin in my hands with a few fine cyan and black hairs stuck in it.

Some water drops fell on my forehead. The white emptiness turned gray, and my tears mixed with raindrops. I grabbed the white glowing staff and took one last look back.

"Goodbye, Mortha."

A small insect appeared on my head. Kana lay on my chest while a panting sound came from her mouth. The crimson crown of a tree cast a shadow over us. Tiny, sharp pebbles stabbed me in the back and under the armpits. I sneezed and blood dripped from my nose onto the beige ground.

"Kana!" I yelled and grabbed her shoulders. "Kana!"



Holding her head, I put Kana down on the green grass. A sticky web connected all the trees around us. Many animals tried to move, but the strong threads held them back.

Thick, dark clouds hung over us, and raindrops fell on our faces, washing away the blood. After a minute, the rain stopped. The clouds parted to reveal Idrifol above us.

The neon purple light became a beacon, whose light shone through the Twilight Forest. The webs turned into small particles and fell to the ground, releasing the creatures from the suffering.

Their breath spread throughout the forest, and the song of the nightingale marked the rebirth of life. In the beginning, many colorful bunnies and fireflies surrounded us. Then lots of birds flew toward us and perched on the branches, and a pack of white foxes approached us silently.

All the souls raised their paws, wings, and heads, and their bodies glowed with a blinding blue light. At first, crimson leaves flew into the air and formed a swirl around Kana. Subsequently, air rushed through her blood-stained lips and raised the hairs on my arm, goose bumps ran down my back. In the end, all the scars on her collarbone and neck disappeared. Her little fists unclenched, and she coughed.

"You'd better have a look at this," Mr. Butterfly called me and took off.

"I won't leave her," I stated.

"Don't worry, they'll take care of her."

After all, I followed him, and we walked along the yellow road through the thick trees. Beyond the foliage wall, the Black Gate and Idrifol appeared.

The ground shook beneath our feet. Because of that white smoke rose behind the dead forest. The black wall crumbled into blocks and then completely disappeared.

Moreover, the skinny and diseased trees turned brown, and buds sprouted on the long branches. The scorched white earth turned black and allowed the short green blades of grass to grow. Eventually, the golden light of the trees at the bottom of Idrifol reached us.

"What does all this mean?" I marveled and opened my eyes wide.

"The birth of the new Tree Keeper. The Lady Spider will be reborn within Idrifol and will maintain eternal order," Mr. Butterfly said.

"Mortha? Is she still alive?"

"She will have to go through this ordeal again. In a new shell. That is the eternal cycle."

"This is nonsense. It's not fair."

"We cannot understand the Creators' design. We have to move on and hope that she will find her peace."

We went back to unconscious Kana. I sat down beside her and took her hand. Her warmth transferred to me and calmed my worries.

"What do we do now?"

"You can go home," Mr. Butterfly replied.

My gaze was lost in the depths of the Twilight Forest while the creatures sat obediently on the ground and waited for my answer.

"I have to get her back," I said.

"Mistress Spider left you a gift, didn't she?" Mr. Butterfly hinted at my pocket.

"A gift?"

A beetle with a single red horn crept up to Kana's black hair and stared at me. I patted the right pocket of my pants and then pulled out the spider-shaped hairpin. In my hands, the smooth metal glistened.

"Even now you were with me."

Well, Mortha had left more than just a memory.

"Will you come with us?" I asked him one last time.

"I am dead, but you, my friend, are alive," my friend said and laughed at the end.

I took one last look at the small space free of the thick tree trunks. Mortha's hairpin glittered, and the darkness swallowed the trees and Mr. Butterfly.

I awoke in the ward, dressed in a surgical gown. An IV was attached to my arm while the sunlight streamed through the hospital window and fell on my legs, covered by a white blanket. All the beds nearby were empty and neatly made.

"...Kana?" I groaned.

I pulled the needle out of my arm and got up from under the blanket. Then I slipped and fell because the wet floor.

I opened the door of every ward in search of her. At the end of the corridor, four girls in our school uniforms stood at the door and talked.

"What are you doing here?" a nurse came around the corner and asked me.

I followed the girls and entered a ward without answering. The familiar scent of antiseptic filled my nose, and the familiar beeping of the heart monitor reached me. On a white bed under a blanket lay a girl with black hair.

At the same time, a tall man in a gray business suit and a woman in a tight brown dress sat by the window. Kana's friends stood in front of me.

A doctor with square glasses entered the room, breaking the general silence, and a tattered pocket dangled from his medical gown.

"Mori Kana is in a coma. The condition is stable for now," the doctor began.

"Stable? What are you talking about?" the mother screamed.

She jumped up with a crying face and grabbed the doctor's arms, and then pulled him down.

"Please calm down, Ms. Mori." he said and adjusted his glasses. "Despite the lack of external and internal injuries, it will be necessary to perform surgery and send the patient to rehabilitation to fully recover."

"Alright, do what you have to do," the father said, looking at his daughter's pale face.

"The thing is, we don't specialize in this. Right now, a private clinic in Germany can take care of her. Rehabilitation would take about two years."

"My daughter... Do whatever it takes."

"As you wish, Mr. Mori."

The doctor's last words about the necessary rehabilitation went through my head. How much money would it take for a private clinic in Germany? On a white blanket lay Kana's left hand, connected to the IV. Her fingers twitched for a second, but she remained still.

"Bye, Yoshizawa," the girls' voices came from the door.

Kana's friends left my ward. Why were they so friendly? Was it some kind of memory loss or something? I lay on my bed while the life of the city did not stop outside the window. At such moments I realized that I was not alone in the world.

My older sister's face appeared from behind the door. Sakura smiled and picked up a white cellophane bag with plastic wrappers from a restaurant.

I didn't ask any questions about how I ended up here, and no one asked me in return. And a week later I was released.

After school, I walked over to some of the tables and tossed aside the dusty cloth that covered the sewing machines. I pulled up one of the chairs stacked in the corner, sat down at the table, and threaded the machine.

I tried to sew. Unfortunately, only a faint clattering and lurching sound filled the room.

"Well, that was to be expected," I said.

The machine made a hole in the fabric with its needle at regular intervals. With each stroke, the sound became louder and the speed faster. A real war broke out in the atelier, and guns shot from all sides.

"Come on, it's working!" I shouted and continued making meaningless stitches. "Ha-ha-ha!"

After twenty minutes, I was done having fun.

There was a paper bag on the glass table with muddy cup stains, and the smell of chocolate increased the salivation in my mouth. At the bottom of the bag were three large croissants. I pulled one out and jumped on the couch in the middle of the room.

"When did I become a fan of French pastries?"

I finished my light snack and took one last look around the atelier. The old curtain covered the dirty windows and blocked the sunlight.

"Well, let's get started."

I went around every corner, sweeping the cobwebs from the walls while the little spiders scattered in fear. I took out a bucket, filled it with water, and used an old mop with a gray, tattered rag on it. The layers of dust and dirt disappeared from the wooden planks.

The table and couch took their usual places. I cleaned up the room and returned it to the decor of a real working workshop. The tables glistened, and the engraved name of the manufacturer's company showed up on the sewing machine.

I finished cleaning the windows on both sides and pulled back the curtains to let in the sunlight. A man in his forties wearing a sweatshirt and jeans walked by. He stopped right in front of our atelier.

"Excuse me, is anyone there?" the man knocked on the door and asked, ignoring the closed sign.

What was wrong with him? I stood with a rag in my hands, and water dripped on the floor. The man's shadow shone through the doorway, and the eerily familiar man with the square glasses entered the atelier.

"Good afternoon," I welcomed him.

"This is an atelier, isn't it? Are you working today?" he asked and adjusted his glasses.

"We're closed."

"Then I'll come to you on Monday?"

I was about to give away my sentence that turned dozens of people away from me, but then I inquired, "Did you need something?"

The man handed me his medical gown, and I unfolded it. The right pocket hung down with white threads sticking out. The sewing machine, which turned out to be a working one, flashed.

"Have a seat," I asked him.

"Are you here alone?" the man sat on the couch and inspected every corner of the workshop.

"Uh-huh. Yeah."

I pulled several spools of white thread from the drawer.

"You and I have met before, haven't we?"

"Sorry, I'm not sure."

Sitting down at the table, I straightened the pocket and ripped it open. Then I placed the gown under the needle of the sewing machine and banged the pedal. As a result, the mending took less than ten minutes.

"It's done," I said and took a deep breath.

"How much is it?" the man inquired.

"You don't have to pay."

I was embarrassed to ask for money. After I gave him my answer, he rolled up his gown and threw it in the bottom of his bag. Before he left, I recalled where I'd seen those square glasses. Kana was supposed to spend two years in Germany, and I hadn't even had a chance to apologize in person.

"Excuse me, do you know where Mori Kana is being rehabilitated?" I asked him.

"I can't reveal such details to outsiders. What's your relationship to her?" the doctor stopped at the door.

The thick glass of the glasses prevented me from seeing his eyes. What exactly did he want to know? Were we related? No, but I couldn't let him go without the answer.

"We are just friends."

"I'm sorry, boy."

The bells rang above his head when he stepped over the threshold.

"My life wouldn't have changed. I didn't get a chance to thank her. And... I don't want to lose her. I don't want to lose anyone else."

My cheeks flushed, and I looked away. While the sun shone down on his back, the doctor paused and then turned around. The man lifted the corners of his lips and gave me the exact address of the private clinic.

"Still, I have to pay for the work," the doctor said and left the atelier.

Two months later, I sat at a clean, new table, and sewed several pieces of black fabric together. Threads and scissors littered the table, and on the floor lay a tailor's chalk and rolls of fabric. At the end, the finished garment waited on a white mannequin.

I folded the newly sewn item into a white paper bag.

"Don't be long, I'm making miso soup for dinner," Sakura declared.

"Sure," I nodded and went to the nearest post office.

After filling out the documents, I gave them the shipping address and the package.



Walking along the sidewalk past storefronts, I stopped at the glass door of a tall building. The visitors were on their way to the center of the white room. I moved along the marble floor past the white columns and paintings.

In the darkness of the hallway stood Mrs. Inoe, whom we had met during one of my visits to the gallery. She only winked at me and disappeared into the shadows.

Little children sat on white chairs while a crowd of people stood a few feet from the left wall. Except for a few screams of running children and their mothers trying to calm them down when visitors held their breath, a perfect silence filled the gallery.

A single painting occupied the entire floor-to-ceiling space and caught their attention. A little girl lay on a large branch and read her book. Besides, she seemed to be looking at me, looking right through me. Then her face flushed, and she covered herself with her golden fan.

In the lower right corner of the painting was a signature.

*"Mori Kana"*

"Time to go home," I said, looking at the cracked screen of my phone.

My insomnia was over. It turned out to be convenient to be awake in the morning.

By the way, I knew why people kept coming to our atelier. One of the visitors, before I started chasing everyone away, had marked our workshop on an online map.

I decided not to remove the marker. If people came to us, they needed us. Nothing special, just supply and demand. After a conversation with Sakura, we prepared

for the reopening of the family business. But with our current financial situation, that was impossible. The only option was to get a loan.

The metal bell rang above my head. My sister waited for me in an apron, standing by the stove. Sakura put bowls of miso soup on the table.

Even after all this time, it still felt like something new and strange to me. Our little family had overcome all hardships.

Don't let the past affect the future. It could change our actions in the present, but only we decided what would happen tomorrow.

We sat down at the table and looked at each other. I was home, sis.

"Bon appetite!"

## **Chapter 7. My shooting star**

I woke up early in the morning. The sun shone in my face while the alarm clock under my pillow rang throughout the room. A huge number of emails from clients that came a few minutes ago waited for my response.

"Things are going well," I said, rubbing my sleepy eyes.

I opened the door, and Robert greeted me with a loud bark. The tricolor beagle stood on his two hind paws, sticking out his pink tongue.

"And you get up before me," I said and stroked both his dark head and white belly.

After my morning shower, I put on a brown suit and went down to the kitchen. Three candles burned at the altar of my parents and Axel. I bowed and sat at the table. A cup of hot coffee and porridge awaited me. I inhaled the aroma wafting through the kitchen and started breakfast.

The sun streamed through the windows and illuminated the hall. Sakura stood behind the counter and sent messages to the clients while two loud girls ran and screamed through the atelier.

"Give it to me!"

"I won't! Leave me alone..."

"What's the reason for the fight?" I asked.

"I have no idea," Sakura replied, typing messages.

While the exuberant girls continued to ignore me, I sneaked up behind them.

"Boo!" I yelled.

They jerked and jumped away, completely unaware of what they had just done. The two sixteen-year-old girls, dressed in sweaters and pants, fell silent, and scissors fell to the floor.

"Good morning, Mr. Yoshizawa."

"Explain to me what's going on?"

The girls stood with their hands folded behind their backs.

"O-she...s-she's taken my s-scissors and won't give them back."

"Hey, shut up! My scissors are gone! You must have hidden them!"

"It's n-not true..."

"Stop it," I tried to calm them down with my floating hands. "There are other scissors, there's no need to fight over such a trivial thing."

I took a new pair of scissors out of the drawer and handed them to the girls.

"Now get to work! Or I'm gonna fire you!" I commanded.

"Very funny, Mr. Yoshizawa," one of them snickered.

They sat at their tables and took the pieces of future dark-blue trousers. The sewing machines rattled.

"I'm getting used to it," I sighed, resting my elbows on the counter.

"Today is the last day of vacation, they won't be able to come in the morning," Sakura mentioned.

"Come on. We'll figure it out."

"I wish I had your optimism."

The bells above the door rang and someone stepped inside.

"Mrs. Tanaka, our regular customer. We've been waiting for you," I welcomed her.

At the end of the workday, I sat on the couch. I unbuttoned my jacket, loosened my tie, and sighed. The last customer had left a few minutes ago. Only the pungent fragrance of her perfume never disappeared.

Robert sat next to me and looked at me with his black eyes. Meanwhile, the sun faded below the horizon and turned the sky orange. When one of the girls with brown hair approached me, I stood up and straightened my trousers.

"Mr. Yoshizawa, I'm done!"

"Met too," the other girl shouted.

"Good, you can go home," I said and stroked their heads.

"Mr. Yoshizawa, would you like to go to the amusement park with us?"

"An amusement park?"

"Please come with us. It's our last day!"

"Sakura?"

"No way," Sakura replied.

"Okay-Okay. But not for long!" I agreed.

They grabbed my hands and dragged me outside. Refreshing me after the day's work, a light breeze blew through my face and hair while the schoolgirls led the way for me. It made passersby take their eyes off their phone screens and wonder what was going on.

The girl pushed me forward in every way possible.

"I wish you would work so enthusiastically," I said.

"Wait for a minute, please!" they asked me.

They left me outside and both went inside a bakery. A few minutes later, they handed me a warm paper bag with the odor of chocolate wafting out of it.

"We didn't know what you like, so we took a little bit of everything!" one of them told me.

I picked up a cherry scone and took a bite while they munched on some chocolate croissants and licked their fingers.

"I've seen this somewhere before."

We reached the amusement park. They took my hands and ran inside. A lot of laughing people went around.

The park pulsed with the laughter of dozens of screaming children. They pulled at their parents' hands, eager to plunge into a world of fun and joy.

It was a totally different world with no place for sadness and mourning. The main reason why it was my favorite place. Perhaps there was another reason.

Meanwhile, the screams of the people on the roller coaster mingled with the winding music coming from the loudspeakers of the souvenir shops. Only the dark shadow of the Ferris wheel at a height of tens of meters accumulated peace and silence.

After an eternal hour, I left the last attraction. The restless girls ran away without warning me and gave me no chance to find them in that crowd. After five minutes of unsuccessful searching, I decided to quench my thirst. I tossed in a few coins and chose a bottle of water. More and more people passed by.

Walking in the park, I studied people's clothes to catch the current trends. Among the passersby only one girl with black hair looked up at the Ferris wheel. Her wide sun hat hung down a bit while the black dress fluttered in the breeze.

The skinny girl stood still. I put my hands in my pockets. At the same time, the wheel went up to the stars

and then down to the ground. The two familiar panting voices sounded behind me.

"Mr. Yoshizawa, there you are!"

"W-we lost you..."

They lowered their guilty faces and approached me. One of the girls snorted and pulled out a red handkerchief. The anxiety was gone, leaving only a pleasant aftertaste of fun and mischief.

A tear dripped onto my lapel and then fell into the paper bag when I turned around. That girl a few meters away from me held the hat with her right hand and smiled. Besides, a long-wet line formed on her cheek.

The pink clouds formed an image of a spider while a bright shooting star left behind a long blue trail and blinded us both. The last rays of sunlight glistened off the golden spider hairpin in her fluttering long hair.

"Do you still remember me?"

After a journey of twenty-seven years, I finally realized that not all dreams were meant to come true. Especially when these dreams were never true. Despite all this, my only star shone and guided me all the time.