

君の名は。 your name.

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Translated by fgiLaNtranslations

Chapter 1: Dream

[The author uses two different pronouns for 'I', *watashi* and *ore*, to indicate whether Mitsuha or Taki, respectively, is narrating. Since there are no equivalent words in English, I will use an italic *I* and a bold **I** to indicate Mitsuha and Taki, respectively.]

A nostalgic voice and smell. A lovely light and warmth.

I am pressed right up against a very precious someone, with almost no gap between us. Inseparably connected. Not a single fragment of anxiety or loneliness lingers in me, as if *I* were a young infant again, simply drinking milk in the comfort of my mother's breasts. A very sweet feeling, the feeling of not yet knowing loss, fills my body.

Suddenly, my eyes open.

Ceiling.

Bedroom.

Morning.

Alone.

Tokyo.

-- *I* see.

It was a dream. *I* get up out of bed, and, in those mere two seconds, the warm feeling that had enveloped my body already disappears. It leaves no trace, no lingering comfort. At the suddenness of it all, leaving no time to think, tears begin to flow.

I wake up in the morning, and for some reason *I* am crying. This kind of thing sometimes happens to me.

And **I** can never remember what **I** had been dreaming about. **I** stare at my right hand, the hand which had just wiped my tears away. Only a small droplet still sits on my index finger. The tears that dampened my eyes just moments ago have already dried up, along with my dream.

Once, in this hand...

Something very important...

-- **I** can't remember.

Giving up, **I** get out of bed and head for the sink. As **I** wash my face, **I** feel like **I** had once been surprised at the warmth and flavor of this water. **I** look into the mirror.

An unsatisfied face stares back at me.

I do my hair as *I* gaze into the mirror, then pass my arms through the sleeves of a spring suit.

I fasten my tie, which **I** have finally gotten used to knotting, then put on my suit.

I open the door of my apartment.

I close the door of my apartment. In front of my eyes...

The cityscape of Tokyo, which / have finally gotten used to seeing, spreads out in front of me. Just like / used to naturally memorize the peaks of mountains in the distance, / can now name a few of the skyscrapers before me.

I pass through the crowded ticket gates of the station and go down the escalator.

/ get on a commuter train. Leaning against the door, / watch the scenery as it flows by. In every building, in every window, in every car, and on every pedestrian bridge, the city is overflowing with people.

A faint, hazy white sky looms above. On a car carrying a hundred people, in a train carrying a thousand people, in a city carrying a thousand trains, I gaze.

And while gazing out at the city, like always,

/ realize.

/ am searching for someone, a single, specific person.

I realize.

Chapter 2: Beginning

An unfamiliar ringing.

That thought drifted through my still fast asleep head. An alarm clock? But I'm still sleepy. Last night, I had become so absorbed in my drawing that I didn't end up going to bed until dawn.

"... kun... Taki-kun."

Now someone was calling my name. A girl's voice... a girl?

"Taki-kun. Taki-kun."

The voice was filled with a sharp sense of urgency, as if its owner were on the verge of crying. The voice quivered, like the lonely twinkling of a faraway star.

"You don't... remember me?" the voice asked uncertainly.

I don't know you.

Suddenly, the train stopped and the doors opened. Oh, that's right, I'm riding a train. The moment I remembered that, I realized I was standing in a train car packed full of people. In front of my eyes were another pair, a girl's, open wide, staring straight back at me. As passengers exited the train, her school uniform figure started to get pushed farther and farther away from me.

"My name... is Mitsuha!" screamed the girl, then she undid the string tying up her hair and held it out to me.

Instinctively, I stretched out my hand. The band was a vivid orange, like the slender rays of the evening sun shining into the dim train car. I thrust my body into the crowd and firmly grasped it.

And then, I woke up.

The echoes of the girl's voice still faintly lingered in my eardrum.

... name... Mitsuha?

An unfamiliar name, and an unfamiliar girl wearing an unfamiliar school uniform. She seemed so desperate. I remember the look in her eyes right before the tears started to fall from them. It was a serious, solemn expression, as if she gripped the very fate of the universe in her delicate hands.

But, well, it was just a dream. A meaningless dream. I already can't even remember clearly what her face looked like. The echoes in my ears have disappeared too.

But still.

Still, my heart is beating unnaturally fast. My chest feels strangely heavy. My body is covered in sweat. To start off, I took a deep breath.

"...?"

Did I catch a cold? Something feels wrong with my nose and throat. My windpipe is a little narrower than usual. My chest feels strangely heavy. Like, physically heavy. I glanced down at my body and saw my cleavage. **My cleavage.**

"...?"

The morning sun reflected off those bulges, causing the smooth white skin to shine. In between the two breasts, a deep shadow had gathered, like a blue lake in the valley between two mountains.

Well, I guess I'll give them a feel, I thought suddenly. The idea sprung up so naturally and automatically, like how an apple falls to the ground under the force of gravity.

.....

...

...?

...!

I was impressed. Oooh, I thought. What is this? Taking it very seriously, I continued to fondle them. It was... how to put it... girls' bodies are amazing...

"... onee-chan? What are you doing?"

Quickly turning towards the direction of the voice, I saw a small girl standing next to the opened sliding door. While still moving my hands about, I offered my honest thoughts.

"Oh, you know, I was just thinking how real this feels... eh?"

I looked at the girl again: a cheeky looking kid of about ten years old with twintails and slanted eyes.

"... onee-chan?" I asked the child, pointing to myself. That means... this girl is my little sister?

"What are you doing? Get up! Hurry, it's time to eat!" the girl said with a thoroughly disgusted expression, then slammed the door shut.

While thinking she seemed like quite a violent child, I got up out of the futon. Now that the girl mentions breakfast, I realize I'm hungry. Suddenly, I spotted a dresser in the corner of my eye. After walking a few steps on the tatami, I stood in front of the mirror. I slipped the loose pajamas off my shoulders, leaving me naked, and began to stare intently at the body reflected in the mirror.

Long black hair like a current of water, with strands sticking up in various places from the previous night's sleep. On a small round face, large curious eyes and lips that looked somewhat cheerful. A thin neck and deep gaps above the collarbones. A healthy bulge at the chest. The gentle curves of the stomach and hips, stretching down from below the shadow of the faintly protruding ribcage.

I had never seen it in person before, but it was unmistakably a woman's body.

A woman's?

I am... a woman?

All of a sudden, the hazy drowsiness that had enveloped my body since waking up lifted completely. In an instant, my head became clear, and, in the next, fell into confusion.

And then, not able to bear it any longer, I screamed.

"Onee-chan, you're late!"

As I slid open the door and entered the living room, Yotsuha confronted me with that aggressive tone of hers.

"I'll make breakfast tomorrow!" I said in place of an apology.

This child has a bad habit of thinking she's more reliable and grown up than her big sister, despite the fact that not even all of her baby teeth have fallen out yet. Must not show any weakness by apologizing! I thought as I opened the rice cooker and piled the sparkly fresh grains into my bowl. Ah, did I get too much? Meh, whatever.

“Itadakimaasu.”

After pouring plenty of sauce on my fried egg, I stuffed a bite of it into my mouth along with some rice. Aaah, delicious. Perhaps this is true happiness... hm? I feel a pair of eyes watching me.

“You’re normal today, huh?”

“Eh?”

I looked over and noticed that Grandma was staring at me chewing my rice.

“Yesterday was really bad!” Yotsuha, also staring at me, said with a smile. “Suddenly screaming and stuff...”

Screaming? Grandma continued to stare as if she were carefully inspecting an unknown suspicious object, and Yotsuha continued to make fun of me with that grin.

“Huh? What, what? What is it!?”

What’s going on... both of them acting creepy and all--

Ping pong pang pooong.

The speaker by the door rang with a sudden, almost violently loud burst of volume.

<Good morning, everyone.>

The voice belonged to my best friend Saya-chin’s older sister, who works in the community life division at the town hall. Here in the sleepy little village of Itomori, population about 1500, most people are either acquaintances or at least acquaintances of acquaintances.

<Here are the morning announcements.>

Speakers like these are set up outside throughout the town as well, so the broadcast echoes off the nearby mountains, creating a sort of round as the sounds all pile on top of each other. Twice a day, once in the morning and once in the evening, without fail, this broadcast on the wireless disaster warning system can be heard in every home and every street of town, faithfully announcing things like the schedule for sports day, or who’s on snow shoveling duty, or who was born yesterday and whose funeral is today.

<First, an announcement from the Committee for Election Administration about Itomori’s mayoral election to be held on the 20th of next month-- >

The speaker by the door abruptly fell silent. Since she couldn’t reach the speaker itself, Grandma, over eighty years old and always wearing an old fashioned kimono, had simply unplugged it in a silent display of anger. Slightly impressed, I followed up by grabbing the remote and turning on the TV. A smiling NHK anchor started talking in place of Saya-chin’s sister.

“In just one month, a comet which only visits once every 1200 years will at long last draw close to Earth. It will be visible to the naked eye for a period of a few days. Research agencies around the world, including JAXA, are busy preparing to observe this celestial show of the century.”

Displayed on the screen were the words ‘Tiamat’s Comet: Observable with the Naked Eye in One Month’ and a blurry picture of a comet. Eventually our conversation stopped, leaving only the sound of us three eating, a quiet rustling like whispers sneakily being exchanged during class, mixed with the NHK broadcast.

“... get over it and make up already, okay?” Yotsuha ordered suddenly.

“This is a grown up problem!” / shot back sharply. That’s right, this is an adult problem. Mayoral election? Don’t give me that crap.

Pii-hyororo. Somewhere off in the distance, a black kite chirped lazily.

Ittekimaasu. Yotsuha and / synchronized our voices, saying goodbye to Grandma before we stepped out of the foyer.

The calls of the summer mountain birds rang loudly throughout the air as we walked down the narrow asphalt path running along the slope. After descending a few flights of stone stairs, we lost the protection of the mountains’ shadows, and the sun’s rays began to bear down directly on us. Spreading out beneath my eyes was a round lake, Itomori Lake. The calm surface of the water, reflecting the morning sun’s light, sparkled relentlessly. Above the mountains, which rolled out in a jagged chain of dark green, the blue sky, spotted with white clouds, loomed. Next to me, a young girl sporting twintails and a red backpack was skipping along for no particular reason. And then there was me, the high school girl with dazzling bare legs. In my head, / tried putting on a grand strings track as BGM. Ooh, now it feels a little like the opening of a Japanese movie. In other words, we live in a very Japanese-like, old fashioned rural town in the middle of absolutely nowhere.

“Miitsuhaaa!”

Some time after / had parted with Yotsuha in front of the elementary school, a voice called out to me behind my back. Turning around, / saw Tesshi peddling his bike with an unpleasant face along with a smiling Saya-chin casually sitting in the luggage basket.

“Hurry up and get off,” Tesshi complained.

“It’s fine, party pooper.”

“You’re heavy.”

“Hey, rude!”

The two seemed to be starting out the morning with a comedy act, like an arguing couple on a TV show.

“You two sure are close.”

“No!” the two screamed back in harmony.

I burst out laughing at their synchronized denial, my internal BGM changing into a melodic guitar solo. The three of us have already been best friends for ten years now: me, petite Saya-chin with her straight bangs in front and twin braids hanging down in the back, and lanky Tesshi with his out of fashion buzzcut. Saya-chin and Tesshi always appear to be arguing, but their conversations flow perfectly, and, secretly, I’m convinced that they would make a good couple.

“Hey Mitsuha, your hair’s normal today,” Saya-chin said with a smile while touching the area around my hair string.

/ always have the same hairstyle, which / learned a long time ago from Grandma: a triple french braid with my hair string wrapped around it and tied behind my head.

“My hair? What do you mean?”

/ recalled the mysterious conversation from this morning. *You’re normal today, huh?* First Grandma and now Saya-chin... was / acting weird yesterday or something? As / tried to remember what happened yesterday...

“Yeah, did you get your Grandma to exorcise you?” Tesshi asked with a worried face.

“Exorcise?”

“You were definitely possessed by a fox spirit!”

“Whaa?”

As *I* struggled to keep up with Tesshi’s sudden accusations, Saya-chin covered for me with a disgusted face. “You always try to turn everything into some occult nonsense! Mitsuha’s probably just really stressed, right?”

Stress?

“Eh? W-Wait a second, what are you guys talking about?”

Why is everyone so worried about me? Yesterday... *I* can’t really remember what happened, but it should have been just a normal, non eventful day.

-- Huh?

Am *I* sure about that? Yesterday, *I*...

“And more than anything!” A deep voice amplified by a megaphone interrupted my thoughts.

Across the street, next to a row of greenhouses, in the unnecessarily large town managed parking lot, a crowd of about a dozen people had gathered. And in the center of the crowd stood a conspicuously tall man confidently holding a megaphone: my father. Proudly displayed on the sash he wore above his suit were the words ‘Incumbent - Miyamizu Toshiki’. He appeared to be giving a speech for the mayoral election.

“More than anything, in order to continue building and improving our community, we must stabilize our financial affairs! Once we accomplish that, we will be able to fully focus on the safety and comfort of our town. During my years in office, I’ve been able to come this far, but I want to finish the job and bring even further polish to this town! I will lead this land with unprecedented passion and build a society in which everyone, from children to the elderly, can live a fulfilling, worry-free life! That is my mission...”

His speech, delivered so expertly it was almost overwhelming, reminded me of the politicians on TV and felt extremely out of place in that parking lot surrounded by vegetable fields. *I* started to feel uneasy. The whispers *I* heard among the audience made my mood even worse. *It’s gonna be Miyamizu again this time anyways. Looks like word’s spread pretty fast.*

“Hey, Miyamizu.”

“... good morning.”

This is the worst. A group of three classmates *I* don’t particularly like very much came up and started talking to me. These people, who belong to the cool and flashy class at the top of the hierarchy, bother us, who belong to the plain, normal category, every chance they get.

“The mayor and his contractor,” one of them said, then turned to look at my father delivering his speech. Beside him on the platform, Tesshi’s father stood with a broad smile across his face. His jacket displayed the name of his own construction company, and around his arm was a band that read ‘Miyamizu Toshiki Support’. The kid then turned back around to look at me and Tesshi. “I see their kids are also always sticking together. Did your parents order you to?”

Stupid. Without bothering to respond, *I* started walking faster. Tesshi also managed to keep an expressionless face; Saya-chin alone seemed annoyed.

“Mitsuha!”

Suddenly, a loud voice cried my name. *I* almost stopped breathing. *I* can't believe it. My father had put down his megaphone and was calling me. The audience listening to his interrupted speech all at once turned to look at me.

"Mitsuha! Won't you walk proudly!?"

My face turned bright red. At the absurdness of it all, *I* felt like *I* might cry. Desperately fighting the temptation to sprint away, *I* continued walking.

Harsh even to family... that's the mayor for ya. *I* can hear the hushed whispers of the audience.

Ouch! Kinda feel sorry for her. *I* can hear my laughing classmates' remarks.

This is the worst.

The BGM playing in my head since *I* left home had stopped sometime amidst the commotion, and *I* am reminded that without any BGM, this town is no more than an oppressive, suffocating place.

Ka ka ka. The blackboard produced a scratching sound as the teacher wrote something that looked like a *tanka*. [a type of short classical Japanese poem]

Ta so kare to (Who is he?)

Ware wo na tohi so (Do not ask me that question)

Nagatsuki no (September's)

Tsuyu ni nuretsutsu (Dew dampens me)

Kimi matsu ware so (As I wait for my beloved)

"*Tasokare*. This is where the word *tasogaredoki* comes from. You know what that means, right?" Yuki-chan-sensei asked in her clear voice, then wrote '*tasokare*' in big letters on the blackboard. "Dusk. A time which is neither day nor night. A time when silhouettes begin to blur, and you can't tell who's who anymore. A time when you may meet things which are not of this world, such as demons or the dead. That's where the word '*oumagatoki*' comes from. Even further back, they also used the words '*karetasodoki*' and '*kawataredoki*'."

[All of these words are either current or archaic ways to refer to dusk. '*Oumagatoki*' means a time when you meet demons. '*Kawataredoki*' and all the ones that sound similar to it mean a time when you ask 'who is he?'. '*Toki*' or '*doki*' means time, '*tare*' means who, and '*kare*' or '*ka*' means he.]

Yuki-chan-sensei now scribbled '*karetaso*' and '*kawatare*' on the board. What is that, some kind of pun?

"Sensei, question. Isn't it supposed to be '*katawaredoki*'?" someone asked, and *I* agreed silently in my head.

Of course *I* knew '*tasogaredoki*', but the other word for dusk that we learned as kids was '*katawaredoki*'. Hearing the question, Yuki-chan-sensei laughed softly. This classics teacher seemed too pretty to be working at this high school in the middle of nowhere.

"That's just the dialect around here. You know, sometimes the elderly of Itomori still talk like the guys that wrote these poems."

Someone followed the teacher's answer with a joke about how we're in the middle of nowhere, and the class started laughing. It's true that sometimes when I listen to Grandma talk, it's like 'is that even Japanese?'. Like, she uses 'wash' [pronoun for 'I' typically used by elderly males] to refer to herself. I flipped through the pages of my notebook as I pondered this point and discovered a message written in big letters on a page that should have still been blank.

Who are you?

... Huh? What is this? The sounds around me suddenly grew quiet, as if they had been sucked up by the unfamiliar handwriting in front of my eyes. This was not my handwriting. I haven't lent my notebook to anyone. What does this mean?

"... san. Miyamizu-san!"

"Ah, yes?" I panicked and stood up.

"Please read from page 98," Yuki-chan-sensei said, then, looking at my face, she added, "Miyamizu-san. Glad to see you remember your own name today."

The class burst into laughter. HUUUH? What? What is she talking about?

"... you don't remember?"

"... no."

"Really?"

"I'm telling you, no," I answered, then took a big sip of banana juice. Yum. Saya-chin is eyeing me like I'm some strange object.

"I mean... yesterday you forgot where you sit and which locker is yours. Your hair was still messy from sleep and wasn't tied how you normally do it, your uniform didn't have the ribbon on it, and you were in a bad mood the whole time."

I tried picturing all that in my mind. Eh?

"Ehhhhh? No way! Really!?"

"It's like you had amnesia."

Thoroughly confused at this point, I once again tried to think back to yesterday... something's definitely off. I can't remember anything about yesterday. Wait, no. I can faintly recall a few things.

I was... in an unknown city somewhere?

In the mirror was... a boy?

I tried to make sense of the fragments. A black kite somewhere nearby chirped as if mocking me. *Pii-hyororo*. It's currently lunch time, and the three of us are sitting in the corner of the school garden, chatting with juice boxes in hand.

"Hmm... I feel like I had a really long, weird dream. It was like... another person's life? Ugh, I don't really remember."

"I get it!" Tesshi exclaimed suddenly, causing me to flinch. He stuck an occult magazine 'Mu' into our faces and started explaining a bit too excitedly. "It must be memories from your previous life! Well, you guys are probably going to say that's unscientific and all, so let me phrase it differently. What probably happened is that your subconscious connected to the multiverse, as described in Everett's many-worlds interpretation--"

"You just keep quiet," scolded Saya-chin.

"Ah! Were you the one who wrote in my notebook?" I screamed accusingly at Tesshi.

“Huh? What are you talking about?”

I guess not. Well, Tesshi isn't really the type to pull that kind of stupid prank, and he didn't have any motive to.

“Ah. Nothing. Never mind.” *I* tried to take back my question.

“Come on, what is it? You think I did something?”

I said, never mind.”

“Wow, Mitsuha, so mean. You hear this Saya-chin? False accusations! Call a prosecutor... or is it a lawyer? Which one is it in this type of situation?”

“But Mitsuha, you really were kinda strange yesterday,” Saya-chin said, completely ignoring Tesshi's complaints. “Are you not feeling well or something?”

“Hmm... that's weird... maybe it really is stress...”

I thought about all the evidence *I*'ve heard today. Tesshi was once again absorbed in his occult magazine, as if our whole conversation had never happened. That's one of his good points: he doesn't drag things out.

“Yeah, it's definitely stress! You've got a lot going on recently, Mitsuha.”

Tell me about it. On top of the stupid mayor election, tonight is at long last that dreaded ceremony! In this tiny little town, how could it be possible that my dad is the mayor and my Grandma is a priestess at the shrine? *I* buried my head in my knees and groaned loudly.

“Ugh, *I* just want to hurry up and graduate and move to Tokyo. *I*'m tired of being stuck in this stupid place!”

Understanding my struggles, Saya-chin nodded repeatedly in agreement.

“My family has had three generations of town emergency broadcasters. The old ladies next door have called me ‘broadcast girl’ since I was a little kid! And now for some reason *I*'m in the broadcast club! I don't even know what I want to do anymore.”

“Saya-chin, once we graduate let's move to Tokyo together! In this town, even once we become adults the dumb high school hierarchy's going to carry over! We must break free from this cycle! Tesshi, you're coming too, right?”

“Hmm?” Tesshi sluggishly lifted his head up from his occult magazine.

“... were you even listening?”

“Ah... *I* was just thinking of staying here and living a normal life.”

Saya-chin and *I* sighed deeply. This is why he can't get any girls. Well, *I*'ve never had a boyfriend, but that's beside the point.

I followed the wind blowing past with my eyes, and it lead me to a view of Itomori Lake, sitting down there peacefully, indifferent to our troubles.

This town has no book store, no dentist, there's only one train every two hours and only two buses per day, there isn't even a weather forecast for our area, and the pictures of this area on Google Maps are just a blur of pixels. The convenience store closes at nine and sells vegetable seeds and high grade farming equipment...

On the way home from school, Saya-chin and *I* entered anti-Itomori complaining mode. We don't have a McDonald's or Mos Burger, only two snack bars. There are no jobs, the daylight hours are short... the list goes on and on. Usually, the town's isolation is actually refreshing and *I* even feel proud to live here, but today we are filled with genuine despair.

“You guys!” Tesshi, who had been pushing his bicycle quietly behind us the whole time, suddenly raised his voice angrily.

“... what.”

Then, he looked at the pair of us with a creepy smile. “Anyways, want to stop by a cafe?”

“Eh...”

“Wha--”

“Cafe!?” we screamed in unison.

Gachan! A metallic clashing sound rang briefly before melting into the chorus of evening cicadas. Tesshi held out the juice can that he just pulled out of the vending machine. On the road, an electric scooter hummed as it passed by, carrying on it an old man returning home from the fields. Also passing by was a stray dog, who, apparently deciding to grace us with his presence, sat down nearby and yawned.

The ‘cafe’ was not really *that* kind of cafe. In other words, it was no Starbucks or Tully’s, or a pancake or bagel or gelato selling dreamland which surely exists somewhere in this world. Instead, it consisted of merely a bench with a thirty year old ice cream sign stuck to it and a vending machine. In other words, it was just a neighborhood bus stop. The three of us were sitting lined up on the bench, with the stray dog at our feet, gulping down our canned juices. Rather than getting mad at Tesshi for tricking us, *I* simply gave up, realizing how stupid *I* was to believe that there would actually be a proper cafe in this dump.

“It feels a degree cooler than yesterday.”

“No, to me it feels a degree hotter.”

“Alright, *I*’m going to head home,” *I* told the other two after *I* had my share of canned juice and meaningless conversations.

“Good luck tonight,” said Saya-chin.

“I’ll come by to watch you,” said Tesshi.

“You don’t have to come! Actually, definitely do NOT come!” As *I* shot Tesshi down, *I* internally said a little prayer for them. *Good luck with your relationship!* After climbing a few flights of stone stairs, *I* turned around to see the pair still sitting on the bench with the sunset colored lake in the background. I tried a little lyrical piano music to go with the scene. Saya-chin and Tesshi really are perfect for each other. I’m about to have a very unhappy night of work, but you two at least should enjoy your youth, okay?

“Aw, I want that one too,” muttered an unsatisfied Yotsuha.

“It’s still too early for you, Yotsuha,” Grandma replied. The sound of iron weights clashing together rang ceaselessly throughout the six tatami mat sized work room. “Try listening to the voice of the thread,” Grandma continued, never once resting her busy hands.

“If you keep coiling threads forever and ever like that, you’ll start to get feelings for them.”

“Eh? Threads can’t talk.”

“In our *kumihimo*...” continued Grandma yet again, completely ignoring Yotsuha’s protests.

The three of us are all in our traditional clothing, finishing up the *kumihimo* to be used in tonight's ceremony. The *kumihimo*, a traditional craft passed down from long ago, consists of many thin threads tied together to form one cord. A finished *kumihimo* can have various designs and patterns woven into it, making it colorful and cute, but to make one requires a fair amount of expertise. Accordingly, Grandma was in charge of making one for Yotsuha, who was forced into doing grunt work as her assistant, simply wrapping thread around weights.

"In our *kumihimo*, a thousand years of Itomori history is carved. You kids' schools were originally supposed to teach this kind of town history, but, anyway, listen up. Two hundred years ago..."

It's starting again, *I* thought with a wry smile. Ever since *I* was little, *I*'ve had to listen to Grandma's special little history lesson here in this workroom.

"A fire started in the bathroom of *zouri* [traditional Japanese sandal] maker Mayugorou Yamazaki, and this whole area burned to ashes. The shrine, the archives, everything. This event is known as--"

Grandma looked over at me.

"The Fire of Mayugorou," *I* answered, completing her sentence, and Grandma nodded contently.

"Eh? Fires have names!?" a surprised Yotsuha exclaimed. "I feel bad for Mayugorou-san, having his name live on for this."

"The meaning behind the pattern on our *kumihimo* and in our dance was lost with the fire. What remained was merely the form. But, even though we no longer know the meaning, we must not get rid of the form. For the meaning carved into the form will one day rise again."

The way Grandma talked had a sort of ballad-like rhythm to it, and *I* quietly repeated her words while braiding my *kumihimo*. The meaning carved into the form will one day rise again. That is the important duty that we--

"That is the important duty that we have at Miyamizu Shrine. But despite that..." Grandma's gentle eyes became instilled with sadness. "Despite that, that idiot son... not only abandoning his priesthood and leaving the house, but trying to be a politician..."

Blending in with Grandma's sigh, *I* also sighed lightly. Whether *I* like this town or hate it, whether *I* want to go off somewhere faraway or stay here forever with family and friends, *I* really don't know myself. *I* took my finished *kumihimo*, woven beautifully with vivid colors, and removed it from its stand, making a lonely clattering sound.

Hearing the sound of the *yamatobue* [type of traditional flute] flow out of the shrine at night, *I* imagined that if a city person were here, they might think it was something out of a horror movie. Like a brutal murder in some small village, or a mysterious family, or some other ominous happening. And then we have me, dancing my shrine maiden dance, wishing that Sukekiyo or Jason or someone would just come and free me from my misery.

The leading roles of this annual Miyamizu Shrine Harvest Festival are, unfortunately, given to us sisters. On this day, we get the privilege of putting on snazzy shrine maiden outfits, smearing on dark red lipstick, wearing head decorations with jingling bells on them, standing in front of an audience on the *kagura* [type of dance performed in shrines or courts] stage, and dancing the dance we learned from Grandma. A dance performed by a pair, whose meaning

was apparently lost in that fire, it involves us holding bells with colorful cords hanging off of them, ringing said bells noisily, spinning around, and waving the cords around in the air.

The last time I spun around, I spotted Saya-chin and Tesshi out of the corner of my eye, making me even more depressed. For coming anyway even when I specifically told them not to, I decided that I would curse them with my shrine maiden powers and spam them with curse stickers on LINE. This dance, though, is not even the bad part. I mean, it's a little embarrassing, but I've been doing it since I was a kid so I've gotten used to it. The real trouble is the ceremony that comes after this, the one that only gets more embarrassing as I grow up. That cursed thing, that thing which is nothing but a disgrace to a girl.

Agggghh!!

Dreadful thoughts passing through my mind, I continued doing my thing until, before I knew it, the dance was over. At long last, the time had come.

Om nom nom nom nom.

Nom.

Om nom nom nom.

I am simply chewing rice. And chewing. And chewing. Trying my best not to think of anything, closing my eyes in an attempt to block out any sight, taste, sound, or color, I chewed. Yotsuha is beside me doing the same thing. We are kneeling on the floor side by side *seiza* [way of sitting] style, and in front of each of us is a small box placed on a table. And of course, beyond that is the audience, men and women, old and young, observing us.

Om nom nom nom.

Nom nom.

Ughh.

Om nom nom.

It needs to come out soon.

Nom nom.

Agh.

Nom.

I gave up and took the box sitting in front of me, brought it to my mouth, and at least tried to hide it with the sleeve of my *chihaya* [part of the shrine maiden uniform].

And then, ahh.

I opened my mouth and vomited all the rice I had been chewing out into the box, leaving a gooey, white liquid substance consisting of rice mush and saliva dangling from my lips. I hear whispers going around amongst the crowd. Ahhh. I cried on the inside. Please, I beg you, don't look.

Kuchikamisake [literally mouth chew alcohol].

Japan's oldest kind of *sake*, made by chewing rice, spitting it out, and leaving the saliva infused mixture alone until it ferments, creating alcohol. And then we offer it to the gods. Long ago, it was apparently made in many different regions, but whether or not any other shrine still does this in the 21st century is questionable. I mean, come on. This is absolute madness, with the shrine maiden uniforms and all. Who exactly is benefitting from this!? Even while complaining internally, I valiantly grabbed another handful of rice and stuffed it in my mouth. And chewed. Yotsuha followed suit, looking entirely unconcerned. We must continue doing this

until the little box is full. *Blargh*. *I spat out another batch of saliva and mushy rice. I cried on the inside again.*

Suddenly, a familiar voice drifted past my ears. Waves of uneasiness came over me, like ripples growing larger and larger. *I raised my eyes just a bit.*

-- Ah.

What *I saw* made me want to blow up this whole shrine. Of course, there they were: the cool and flashy group of three classmates. They were looking at me with smirks on their stupid faces and talking about something that must have been very amusing. 'Ick, I definitely couldn't do that' or 'kinda obscene' or 'doing that in front of people... I guess she can't become a wife anymore' or something like that. *I feel like I can hear exactly what they're saying, despite it being physically impossible at this distance.*

I strongly, strongly made up my mind.

When I graduate, I'll leave this town and go far away.

"Onee-chan, cheer up! It's not a big deal, being seen by some people from school. Besides, you had to expect it, right?"

"Being a prepubescent kid must be so nice..."

I glared at Yotsuha. We had changed into T-shirts and just stepped out of the shrine office. After the Harvest Festival, as the grand conclusion to the night, we had to attend a banquet for all the old men and women around the neighborhood that helped out with festival preparations. Grandma was the hostess, while Yotsuha and I got the job of pouring alcohol and holding conversations.

"How old are you now, Mitsuha-chan? Eh, seventeen! Having my alcohol poured by such a young and cute girl, I feel young again."

"Please, go all out! Feel young again! Drink more, more!"

I had been desperately serving our guests and about ready to collapse, when Grandma and the adults finally decided it was about time for the kids to go home and released us. They were still in the office having a grand old time.

"Yotsuha, do you know what the average age in that office was?"

The lights along the main path leading up to the shrine had all already gone out, leaving only the moonlit darkness and the refreshing voices of the insects to fill the area.

"Don't know. About sixty?"

"I calculated it in the kitchen. Seventy-eight years old. Seventy-eight!"

"Hmm."

"And now that we're gone, it's ninety-one! They're practically dead already! I wouldn't be surprised if an escort from the underworld came up to the shrine to get them right now!"

"Hmmm."

I was trying to convince her that we needed to hurry up and get out of this town as fast as possible, but Yotsuha's response to her big sister's ranting was a bit lacking. She seemed to be thinking about something else, so I gave up. In the end, the child could not understand her big sister's troubles. I gazed upwards. Stars filled the entire sky, shining transcendentally, free from earthly worries.

“... that’s it!” Yotsuha exclaimed suddenly as we walked down the long stone staircase out from the shrine. With a proud face, like she had just found a hidden cake or something, she explained, “Onee-chan, you should make a ton of *kuchikamisake* and sell it for money to go to Tokyo!”

For a moment, *I* was at a loss for words.

“That’s an... interesting idea.”

“You can even include a ‘making of’ section with pictures and videos of the process. Call it ‘A Shrine Maiden’s *Kuchikamisake*’ or something! It’ll definitely sell!”

While worrying about whether or not Yotsuha will be okay, having this kind of outlook on the world at nine years old, *I* realized that it was just her way of looking after me and was reminded once again how cute she is. Alright, maybe *I* will look into this thing, a *kuchikamisake* business... wait, is it okay to just sell alcohol like that?

“Hey, what do you think of my idea?”

“Ummmmm...”

Hmmm. After all...

“No good! Violation of the Liquor Tax Law!”

Huh? Was that the problem with it? *I* thought to myself, and, next thing *I* knew, *I* was running at full speed. A myriad of memories and feelings and hopes and doubts mixed and jumbled together, making my heart feel like it was about to explode. *I* skipped every other step dashing down a flight of stairs and then applied the emergency brakes, coming to a stop underneath the *torii* [the gates seen at shrines] of the dance hall. *I* sent a throatful of the night’s cold air into my lungs, then exhaled with all my might, expelling the mess in my heart along with the air.

“*I*’m tired of this town already! *I*’m tired of this life! Please let me be reborn as a handsome boy in Tokyo!!”

Tokyo Tokyo Tokyo Tokyo.

My wish reverberated amongst the mountains a few times, then simply disappeared, as if sucked in by Itomori Lake below. At the stupidity of the words *I* had instinctively blurted out of my mouth, my head grew cold along with the sweat running down it.

Ah, but still.

God, if you really are there.

Please--

If the gods really did exist, *I* still don’t know what *I* would truly want to wish for.

Chapter 3: Days

An unfamiliar ringing.

That thought drifted through my still fast asleep head. An alarm clock? But I'm still sleepy. Anyways, let's sleep some more. Eyes still shut, I felt for the smartphone which should have been beside the futon.

Huh?

I extended my hand even farther. This alarm is really getting annoying... where the heck did I put it?

"Ow!"

With a thump, my back made a full force collision with the floor. Apparently, I just fell out of my bed... eh? Wait a second... bed?

Finally opening my eyes, I raised the upper half of my body.

Huh?

A totally unfamiliar room.

I am in a totally unfamiliar room.

Did I spend the night somewhere?

"... Where am I?" As soon as those words left my mouth, I noticed that my throat felt strangely heavy. Instinctively, I put my hand against it. My fingers felt a hard, protruding lump. "Hmm?" My voice sounded oddly deep. I dropped my glance down to my body.

... gone.

An unfamiliar T-shirt stretched straight down to my stomach. Gone.

My boobs... are gone.

And right smack in the middle of my lower body, there was *something*, emitting such a strong sense of presence that it overshadowed the unnaturalness of my boobs' absence.

What... is this?

Slowly, I moved my hand closer to that thing. It felt as if skin and blood from my entire body were being sucked up into that one point.

... Is this.... Could it be...

.....

....

....

My hand made contact.

I very nearly lost consciousness.

Who is this guy?

Standing in front of the mirror in an unfamiliar bathroom, I stared intently at the reflection of an unfamiliar face. The slightly sloppy hair coming down to eyebrow level had about a 6:4 ratio of not trying to trying. The eyebrows themselves gave an impression of stubbornness, but the pair of eyes below them, which were a little on the large side, looked like those of a kind person. Farther down were rough lips that seemed to be completely isolated from the concept of moisturization, and behind all this was a stiff neck.

For some reason, on one of the cheeks a large bandage had been stuck on, and, upon gently touching it, a dull pain ran throughout my face. It hurt, yet still I did not wake up. My throat was severely parched. I twisted the faucet on and gulped down water collected in both my hands. It was uncomfortably warm and smelled like pool water.

"Taki, are you up?"

Hearing a man's voice suddenly from afar, I let out a little yelp. Taki?

"... You were on breakfast duty today, weren't you? What the hell are you doing?" As I peered timidly into what looked like the living room, a middle aged man wearing a suit glanced at me briefly before dropping his gaze back to his meal and tossing that question my way.

"S-Sorry!" I apologized reflexively.

"I'm going to head out. There's some miso soup, so help yourself."

"Ah, okay."

"Even if you're late, make sure you go to school," the man said as he quickly gathered his dishes, put them on the small kitchen counter, walked past me standing frozen at the entrance towards the foyer, put on his shoes, opened the door, stepped outside, then shut the door. It all occurred in a flash, faster than a black kite could get out one chirp.

"... What a weird dream," I said out loud, then looked around the room once more.

All over the wall, pictures of designs of bridges or buildings or various other structures were posted. On the floor, magazines and paper bags and cardboard boxes lay messily scattered about. Contrasted with the Miyamizu household, which boasted cleanliness on the level of a venerable *ryokan* (although that was all due to Grandma), it gave off the impression of a lawless wasteland. The room itself was rather small, so I guessed it must have been an apartment.

I don't know where all the source material for this dream came from, but it seemed pretty realistic. My imagination must be great. Maybe I could be an artist or something in the future?

Pirorin!

As if responding to my musings, the electronic ding of a message being received rang from down the hallway. Panicking, I gulped and dashed back into the bedroom. A smartphone had fallen beside the sheets, and on the screen a short message was displayed.

Are you still at home? Run! - Tsukasa

Eh? What what? Who is Tsukasa?!

First things first, I need to go to school. I looked around and spotted a boy's uniform hanging by the window. But the moment I took it, I realized an even more urgent issue.

Ahh... why does it have to be now?

I need to go to the bathroom!

I let out a sigh heavy enough to make my entire body collapse. What is it with boys' bodies?! I somehow finished my business with the toilet in one piece, but my body was still shaking from anger. Why is it that the more I tried to pee, the more I tried to adjust aim with my fingers, the harder and harder it got to let anything out?! Am I dumb?! Or is this guy just weird!? Ahh, I had never even seen one before! Despite all my complaining, I am still a shrine maiden!

Hanging my head at the unbearable disgrace and holding the tears back, or rather failing to and spilling a few, / changed into the school uniform and opened the apartment door. Anyways, let's just get out of here, / thought, and raised my eyes.

-- And then.

By the sight before me,
My breath was stolen away.
/ gulped.

/ was standing in what seemed to be an elevated corridor of an apartment building. Beneath my eyes lay the green expanse of a park. The perfectly untainted sky was uniformly painted a vivid cerulean blue. And on the border where the green from below and the blue from above clashed, buildings of all sizes stood lined up, almost like rows of neatly folded origami. In every one of those buildings were detailed, elaborate windows, carved into the sides like stitched patterns. Some windows reflected the blue of the sky, some carried the deep green of the trees, and some glittered in the rays of the morning sun. The small red pinnacle visible in the distance, the rounded silver building somewhat resembling a whale, and the shining building which looked like it was cut out of a block of pure obsidian were surely all famous, sitting vaguely somewhere in the back of my memory. Also faraway, seemingly toylike cars formed into an orderly flow, weaving between the buildings.

The scene before me was far more beautiful than what / had imagined, or anything that / had seen on TV or in movies. Or perhaps / had never seriously tried to visualize it, but there it was: the cityspace of the largest metropolis in Japan. Deeply moved, / could do nothing but utter a single word.

“Tokyo.”

/ took a deep breath and squinted my eyes at the dazzling, radiant world in front of me, as if / were staring straight into the sun.

“Hey hey, where did you buy this?” “In Nishi-Azabu, on the way home from lessons.” “On the opening act of their next concert...” “Hey let's skip practice today and catch a movie...” “About tonight's party...”

W-What are these conversations? Are these people really modern Japanese high school students? Not just reading celebrity Facebook posts or something?

/ was half hiding myself behind the door, observing the classroom and waiting for the right timing to enter. By the time / got to school, after hours of getting hopelessly lost despite using my smartphone's GPS the whole way, the chime that signaled the start of lunch break had rung.

But seriously, this school building... with its entire walls made of glass and colorful iron doors with little round windows in them -- what is this, a world's fair or something? That's how modern and stylish it looked. So this was the world that this Tachibana Taki fellow, who was the same age as me, lived in. The name / confirmed in the class roster and the nonchalant face on his ID photo popped into my mind. Somehow it pissed me off a little.

“Taaaki!”

“!!” My shoulders having been suddenly grabbed from behind, a little whiff of air that failed to become a yelp escaped my lips. Turning my head, / saw a boy with glasses and a neat

appearance characteristic of a class officer grinning broadly, his face so close that our bangs almost touched. Ahh! This is the closest I've ever been to a guy!

"Coming to school during lunch, huh? Let's go eat," the glasses boy said, then walked with me down the hallway, his hands still locked onto my shoulders.

Whoa, whoa, too close!

"Ignoring my texts..." he mumbled.

Ah, that's right. "... Tsukasa-kun?"

"Haha, kun? Is that your way of apologizing?"

Not knowing how to respond, for the time being I wriggled my way out of his arms.

"... you got lost?" a largely built and kind looking boy named Takagi asked, unable to hide the disbelief on his face. "How the heck do you get lost on the way to school?"

"Um..." I fumbled for words. The three of us were sitting in the corner of the school building's wide roof. Perhaps because everyone wanted to avoid the hot summer sun's rays, even though it was lunch break there was hardly anyone around us. "Uh... *watashi*..."

"*Watashi*?"

Takagi and Tsukasa eyed me suspiciously. Oops. Right now, I am Tachibana Taki.

"Ah, um... *watakushi*!"

"Huh?"

"*Boku*!"

"Haa?"

"... *Ore*?"

Finally, the two nodded, although the suspicion didn't leave their eyes. I see. *Ore*. Got it! [Here Mitsuha was testing out different pronouns to refer to herself, trying to see which one Taki uses.]

"... It was fun. Tokyo's so lively and exciting, kinda like a festival."

"... Are you talking with an accent?" Takagi asked. [I could not think of a good way to convey Mitsuha's rural dialect.]

"Ehh!" Accent? My face flushed red.

"Taki, where's your bento?" Tsukasa continued the interrogation.

"Ehhhh!" I don't have one!

"Are you sick or something?" Watching me frantically search my bag with sweat streaming down my face, the two laughed. "Tsukasa, you have anything?" "Egg sandwich. Put your croquette in with it."

"Thanks..." I said, slightly impressed with their instant makeshift egg croquette sandwich. Who knew guys could be this stylish and kind? Ahh, wait wait Mitsuha, I can't fall in love with both of them at the same time! Well, I won't... but anyway, Tokyo is too amazing!

"So, want to stop by that cafe again after school?"

Upon hearing Takagi speak those words, my gaze became frozen on his mouth, which a bite of sandwich was about to enter.

"Ah, sure sure," Tsukasa said, then took a sip of water.

Eh? What did he just say? Stop by... where?

"Taki? You coming to the cafe too?"

“Eh!?”

“The cafe...”

“C-C-Cafeeee!?” Paying no attention to the ever growing suspicion in their faces, *I* couldn't stop myself from screaming in excitement. Now was the time for revenge for that bus stop cafe!

Two small dogs wearing idol style clothes were sitting in chairs nearby, staring at me with their beady eyes and wagging their tails lazily. There was an unusually wide space between each table, an entire half of the customers were foreigners, a staggering third were wearing sunglasses, three fifths had a hat on, not a single person was wearing a suit, and *I* had no clue what the professions of any of them could possibly be. Seriously, what is this place? A cafe where adults gather on weekday afternoons with their dogs?!

“The wood framework on the ceiling is nice.”

“Ah, looks like a lot of work was put into it.”

Showing no signs of fear at the awesomely stylish environment, Tsukasa and Takagi casually shared their opinions of the interior design. Apparently, these children had an interest in architecture and were going around looking at different cafes. What kind of hobby is that!? Aren't high school boys into reading 'Mu' or stuff like that?!

“Taki, you decided?”

Urged on by Tsukasa, *I* interrupted my observations of the room to look over the massive leather bound menu.

“...!! *I* could live on the price of this pancake for a month!”

“What era are you living in?” joked Takagi.

“Hmmm...” An internal debate raged for a moment, then *I* realized that this was all a dream. In that case, who cares? It's Tachibana Taki's money anyway, *I*'ll just eat whatever *I* want.

Ahh... what a nice dream. Finished eating my heavyweight pancake, which looked kinda like a fortress surrounded by blueberries and mangos, *I* let out a deeply satisfied sigh and sipped my cinnamon coffee. Just then, a chime went off on my smartphone... a lot of angry emojis in this message.

“... Ah! What do *I* do? It says *I*'m late for my job! Someone that looks like my boss is angry!”

“Oh, was your shift today?”

“Then hurry up and go.”

“Got it!” *I* stood up in a rush, then...

“... What's wrong?”

“Where do *I* work again?”

“... Haaa?”

The pair's expressions had surpassed astonishment, bordering on anger. Not fair! *I* don't know anything about this guy!”

“Um, excuse me, where’s my food?” “Taki! Get table 12’s order!” “I didn’t order this...” “Taki! I told you we’re out of truffles!” “Where’s the check?” “Taki! Get out of the way!” “Taki! Take your job seriously!” “Taki!!”

It turned out to be a rather high class looking Italian restaurant. A sparkling chandelier hung from the two story tall ceiling, along with a big, slowly spinning propeller fan that looked like something out of a movie. Tachibana Taki worked as a bowtie wearing waiter, and by evening the restaurant was hellishly busy.

I messed up orders, messed up table settings, got scolded by the customers, and got yelled at by the chefs, but somehow *I* was still managing to stay on my very confused feet. *I* mean, come on, this is my first time here! *I*’ve never even had a job before! Wait a minute, this dream is starting to become a nightmare! Agghh, when am *I* going to wake up!? This is all your fault, Tachibana Taki!

“-- Wait a second, young man over there.”

“Eh, ah, yes?” *I* turned around hurriedly after passing by the owner of the voice (how the heck am *I* supposed to tell who you’re talking to by ‘young man’?)

Eek. Sitting there was a man wearing a collared shirt with a gold necklace wrapped around his neck and many large, shiny rings on his fingers. Very obviously a gangster. Well, you can see some of these people in front of the station in the city next to my hometown. In that sense, maybe *I* was closer to him than the shiny celebrity looking customers.

With a faint forced smile, he said to me, “There was a toothpick in my pizza.”

“Eh?”

Mr. Gangster held up his last slice of basil pizza, showing me the toothpick that he clearly stuck in himself. Maybe he was joking, but even so *I* had no idea how to respond.

“This would be dangerous if I ate it now, wouldn’t it? I’m lucky I noticed, but... what are you going to do?” he said, with that smile still pasted onto his face.

“Eh...” *I* believe you put it there yourself, is that right? Of course, there was no way *I* could say that. At a total loss for words, *I* tried my best to put on a friendly smile. Immediately, the smile on the gangster’s face disappeared.

“I’m asking you what you’re going to do about it!” he yelled suddenly, banging the table loudly with his knee.

The ambient noise throughout the restaurant instantly froze, along with my body.

“-- Sir! Is something wrong?”

A waitress appeared and pushed me out of the way, telling me to back off as she passed. Another waiter, probably one of Taki’s senpai, then grabbed my arm from behind and dragged me away from the scene.

“You’ve been really weird today, you know?” he said with a worried face.

Out of the corner of my eye *I* spotted the waitress bowing deeply and apologizing to the gangster guy. Then, as if someone had twisted the volume dial, the background chatter in the restaurant once again returned.

The restaurant’s operating hours had finally come to an end; the chandelier’s light had been shut off, and the tables had been stripped of their cloth. Some polished glasses, some

checked the inventory, some were on the computers by the register. As for me, I was pushing a giant lawn mower like cleaning machine across the floor.

I still hadn't gotten a chance to talk to the woman who saved me earlier, who was now wiping the tables one by one. Her long curly hair obscured the side of her face, leaving me unable to read her expression. The one thing I could tell, however, was that her glossy lips were curved into a kind smile. She had slender arms and legs and a thin waist, yet also had fairly large breasts. Passing by, I managed to read 'Okudera' from the nameplate sitting on top of them. Ok, here we go!

"-- Okudera-san." As soon as I mustered the courage to call her name, I felt a poke on the back of my head.

"Senpai!" The man who just poked me scolded me in a joking tone as he passed by on his way to the kitchen, a bundle of menus in one hand.

Ah, I see. Senpai, huh? Alright, one more time!

"Um, Okudera-senpai! About earlier..."

"Taki-kun. Today was a disaster." She turned around and looked me straight in the eye as she said that.

Her long eyelashes, curled up towards the ceiling, her beautiful almond eyes, and her sensual voice that gave me tingles up my back made me instinctively want to confess my love for her then and there. Feeling my cheeks redden, I panicked and lowered my gaze to the floor.

"Ah, um..."

"He was definitely lying. Well, I still gave him his meal for free like the manual says." Not seeming particularly angry, she turned over her cloth and began wiping a new table.

As I started to speak again, another waitress came by and butted in.

"Ah! Okudera-san! Your skirt!"

"Eh?"

Upon twisted her body to look at her bottom, Okudera-senpai's face grew bright red. A little above her thighs, a deep cut ran horizontally through her skirt. She let out a little yelp and quickly covered up the gash with her apron.

"Are you hurt?" "Wow... was it that customer?" "This kind of thing happened before, didn't it?" "Bullying?" "Do you remember what he looked like?"

A few other employees had gathered around senpai, raising voices of concern. Okudera-senpai remained silent with her gaze on the floor, and I stood beside her looking like an idiot, the words I had tried to speak still stuck in my mouth. Her shoulders began to shake slightly. I thought I could see a few tear droplets welling up in her eyes.

This time it's my turn to save her. The thought hit me suddenly, and, before I knew it, I had grabbed Okudera-senpai's hand and started walking off, ignoring the 'hey, Taki!' calls behind me.

Green for an open field. Orange for flowers and butterflies. Hmm, I want one more motif. Let's make brown... a hedgehog. And cream for its nose.

Pinching senpai's skirt, I sewed on a pattern over the rip. For some reason, the sewing basket in the changing room had various colored embroidery threads, so I decided to use them

to make a rather elaborate repair. After being drilled by Grandma my whole life, needlework was a specialty among specialties.

“Finished!” After five minutes of threading, I handed over the repaired skirt to Okudera-senpai.

“... Eh, is this...” Senpai’s expression gradually changed from one of suspicion and anxiety at being dragged by me to the changing room into one of surprise. “Wow! Taki-kun, this is great! It’s cuter than before.”

The cut was an about ten centimeter long straight, horizontal line across her skirt. I had sewed the two parts together while also creating a pattern of hedgehogs playing in a field. The rest of the skirt was plain dark brown, so I thought it would stand out in a good way, bringing a cute aspect to senpai’s beauty. Her face, which looked like it belonged to a model in some magazine, changed into the warm, friendly smile of a neighborhood girl.

“Thank you for saving me today.” I finally managed to get the words out.

“Hehe.” She laughed softly. “Truth is, I was a little worried then. You’re quick to get into fights, even though you’re weak.” Senpai tapped her left cheek as she spoke. Ah, I think I can guess how this band aid on Taki’s cheek got here. “You’re a little better today,” she finished jokingly. “Oh, also, you’ve got a surprising amount of feminine charm.”

My heart leaped. Her smile at that moment, which made me want to immediately offer all of my belongings to her for free, was the most valuable thing I had laid eyes upon today in Tokyo.

The train on the ride home was empty.

It was at this time that I noticed how Tokyo was filled with such a variety of smells. The convenience stores, family restaurants, people passing by, parks, construction sites, stations at night, insides of trains; almost every ten steps brought a new scent. Until now, I didn’t know that humans produced such strong smells when they gathered into one place. And in this city there was unmistakably human life, as evidenced by the lights in the windows flowing past my eyes. At the overwhelmingly countless number of buildings, lining up until the very ends of my field of view like a mountain range, my heart grew restless.

And Tachibana Taki was one such human living here in this city. I held my hand out to the boy reflected in the glass window of the train. It annoyed me a little, but maybe his face wasn’t so bad after all. I started to feel a certain familiarity with this boy, as if he were a comrade who fought alongside me through this exhausting battle of a day.

“But still, this is a really realistic dream...”

When I arrived home, I threw myself onto the bed which I had woken up in this morning. I imagined how I would tell Tesshi and Saya-chin all about my amazing dream the next day, and how I would brag about the superior power of my imagination. Maybe I could become a manga artist... or no, I’m not too good at art, so maybe an author? I could definitely make enough money so that we could all get a place in Tokyo.

Smiling at my thoughts running wild, I rolled face up and grabbed Tachibana Taki’s smartphone in my hand. As I swiped through it with my fingers, I noticed that he kept a diary of some kind.

9/7 Ate at KFC with Tsukasa and Takagi

9/6 Movie at Hibiya

8/31 Architecture tour; bay coast edition

8/25 Job payday!

I scrolled back in time through the numerous headings, slightly impressed at his dedication. Next, I tapped on the photos icon. Most of them were scenery shots, with pictures of Tsukasa and Takagi coming in second. Eating ramen and going to parks together... they looked really close. A gyuudon place, a train station soba stand, a hip hamburger joint. The road home from school, the sunset peeking through the gaps between buildings, the backs of friends, the trail of an airplane through the clouds in the sky.

"Ahh, must be nice... living in Tokyo." As I spoke, a yawn came out. Feeling a little sleepiness coming on, I flipped to the next photo. "Ah, Okudera-senpai." The picture showed senpai's back as she cleaned a window at the restaurant; it looked like it was taken secretly. The next picture showed her noticing the camera and posing with a smile and peace sign.

.... Maybe this guy has a crush on Okudera-senpai, I thought. But it was probably a one sided love. She was a college student; a high school boy was still just a kid to her.

I sat up on the bed and created a new entry for today in the diary app, then started typing in all the experiences I had been through. How I messed up a lot, but in the end I became closer to Okudera-senpai. How, on the way home, she walked with me from the restaurant to the train station. Half wanting to report to Tachibana Taki, and half just wanting to brag, I wove those stories into the diary. As I finished writing, another yawn escaped me.

Who are you?

Suddenly, for some reason, I remembered those words I found written in my Japanese notebook. I imagined Tachibana Taki in my body, in my room in Itomori Village, writing those words in my notebook before he went to sleep. It was a strange image, yet it held an unusual sense of credibility. I took a sharpie lying on the nearby desk and, on my palm, wrote **Mitsuha**.

A third yawn. It was only natural how tired I was. The day had been an exciting and colorful one, like I had been bathing in a rainbow or something. The entire world had sparkled, even without any BGM. Imagining a surprised Tachibana Taki reading the words written on his palm, I smirked a little as I fell into a deep sleep.

"... What is this?"

I couldn't help but ask out loud as I looked at my palm. Underneath the letters scribbled there, I saw my uniform and tie, all wrinkled up. ... So I slept without changing?

"... W-What is this!?"

This time, I screamed. My father looked at me for a moment, then quickly lost interest and returned his focus to the rice bowl in front of him. Meanwhile, I stared at my phone incredulously. A diary entry that I had no memory of writing went on and on.

**... And on the way home from work, I walked to the station with Okudera-senpai!
All because of my feminine charms <3**

"Taki, want to go to the cafe again today?"

"Ah sorry, I have work after school."

"Haha, do you remember where you work?"

“Huh? ... Oh, it was you, wasn't it? Tsukasa,” I asked accusingly, raising my voice a little. Actually, I really hoped it was Tsukasa's doing. Unfortunately, his questioning look said otherwise. There was no reason a random person would go through that much trouble just for a stupid prank. I knew that much.

“... Never mind. See ya,” I said reluctantly as I stood up from my chair. About to leave the classroom, I heard Takagi's voice behind me: ‘he's normal today, huh?’. A chill ran through my feet. Something very strange was happening to me.

“... What is it?”

I had just changed into my work uniform and opened the door of the changing room, only to discover three of my senpai standing there blocking my way. One regular employee and two college part timers, all guys, were glaring at me with ominous bloodshot eyes. As I gulped in fear, they started talking to me in threatening voices.

“... Taki you bastard, trying to steal her?” “Explain yourself!” “You guys walked home together yesterday, didn't you?”

“Eh... wait, seriously!? Me? With Okudera-senpai!?” Which meant... the stuff in that diary was true!?

“What did you guys do after that!?”

“Um... I really don't remember very well...”

“Don't screw around with me!”

As one of them was about to grab me by the collar, a calm voice rang throughout the hallway.

“Okudera, reporting for work~”

With her shiny long bare legs and shoulders poking out of her top, Okudera-senpai came walking over. Stepping heavily in her high laced sandals, she greeted us with a smile.

“Good work, everyone~”

“Good afternoon!” Unable to withstand the dazzling presence of Okudera-senpai, who was basically like an idol in the restaurant, the four of us guys unintentionally returned a greeting in unison. For a moment, I forgot about the trouble that was about to occur; then, she turned around and looked at me.

“Let's do our best again today, Taki-kun~” senpai said with a tone so sweet I could sense a heart emoji at the end of her sentence. She then winked at me so hard it almost made a sound and disappeared beyond a door.

My face turned bright red; I almost felt steam coming out of my head. I suddenly got the urge to polish all the windows in the restaurant until they were sparkly clean.

“... Oi, Taki.” The dark voices of the three men, which sounded like they were resonating up from the very bottom of the Earth, brought me back to reality.

-- This is bad. While receiving the brunt of their wailing interrogation, I thought. What in the world could be happening? Did everyone get together and decide to pull one big prank on me? Could I have really done something without remembering a thing about it? And what the heck was ‘Mitsuha’?

Outside, the birds chirped their morning melodies as lively as ever. Pure rays of warmth and light born from the newly risen sun crept their way into the room through the thin paper walls. An ordinary, peaceful morning. Despite that, upon waking up I discovered on my hand unfamiliar handwriting, written in a way that looked like someone had infused irritation itself into the pen.

Mitsuha??? What are you? Who are you????

Extremely bold, violent letters were written with sharpie all the way from my palm to my elbow.

“Onee-chan, what is that?”

Looking over, I saw Yotsuha standing in front of the opened sliding door. I gave her a look that said ‘that’s what I want to know’. In response, she made a face that said ‘well, whatever’.

“At least you’re not fondling your own boobs today. Breakfast! Hurry up and come!”

I remained sitting in my futon as I watched her close the door and go off like always. Eh, boobs? Not fondling them today? Huh? An image of myself joyfully groping my own breasts popped into my head... what a pervert!

“Good morning~”

As soon as I stepped into the classroom, everyone’s eyes all focused on me at once. Eek. W-What? Walking timidly over to my seat by the window, I heard quiet whispers being exchanged between my classmates. *Miyamizu was so cool yesterday. Maybe I need to rethink my opinion of her. But didn’t her personality change a bit?*

“I-I feel everyone staring at me...”

“Well obviously. You sure did stand out yesterday,” Saya-chin said.

“Yesterday?” I asked as I sat down. Saya-chin peered at my face with a shocked yet worried expression.

-- You know, in art class yesterday, when we were doing still life sketches. Eh, you still don’t remember? Are you okay Mitsuha? We were in the same group, drawing some flower vase and apple. But instead you were sketching some kind of scenery. Well, anyways, behind us Matsumoto and the others were doing their usual gossip. -- Eh? About what? You know, the usual talk about the mayor election. Eh? More detail? Like town politics is just handing out grants and anyone could do it. Worthless talk like that. Then, when you heard them, you asked me ‘they’re talking about me, right?’. I answered ‘yeah, probably’. And then what do you think you did? You really don’t remember? You kicked the whole desk with the flower vase and everything on top of it over towards Matsumoto and them! While laughing! Matsumoto and his friends were scared out of their minds, of course the flower vase broke, the whole class fell silent, and even I was frightened!

“... what?”

My face grew pale. As soon as school ended, I dashed home. I passed by Yotsuha and Grandma having a leisurely tea party in the living room, sprinted up the stairs, shut myself in my bedroom, and opened my classics notebook. **Who are you?** I flipped to the next page.

A chill ran throughout my entire body. In the same handwriting, a full two pages had been buried. First, there was a giant **Miyamizu Mitsuha**. Surrounding it were numerous question marks and pieces of my personal information.

Second year class 3 / Friend: Teshigawara - occult maniac, dumb but nice guy / Friend: Sayaka - on the quiet side, a little cute / Living with grandmother and younger sister Yotsuha / Middle of nowhere / Dad is mayor / Shrine maiden? / Mother seems to have passed away / Dad living separately / Not many friends / Has boobs

And lastly, again in huge letters: **What is this life?** As I stared at the notebook, my body trembling, images of Tokyo flickered into my mind faintly, as if trying to peek out from behind a curtain of haze. Cafe, job, guy friends, walking home with someone... A corner of my brain began to grasp the tail of an absurd conclusion.

“Could this.... Could it be...”

“Could it... could it really be...”

Holed up in my room, I stared at my phone incredulously. Some time ago, my fingers had started shaking violently on their own, as if half being controlled by someone else. With those fingers, I scrolled through the entries in my diary app. Sandwiched between the ones that I wrote were unfamiliar headings, now more than just a few in number.

First time Omotesandou <3 Panini heaven! / Odaiba aquarium with the two guys <3 / Viewing platform tour and flea market <3 / Visit to Father's work place <3 Kasumigaseki!

A corner of my brain began to grab hold of an inconceivable conclusion.

Could it be--

In my dreams, this girl and I--

In my dreams, this guy and I--

Are switching bodies?!

The rising morning sun peeking through between the mountains. The sunlight illuminating the lakeside town building by building. The morning birds, the silence of noon, the calls of the evening insects, the twinkling of the night sky.

The rising morning sun peeking through between the skyscrapers. The sunlight illuminating the countless windows one by one. The morning crowds, the bustle of noon, the scent of life in the evening, the radiance of the city at night.

Each scene, each moment, held us in fascination time and time again.

And eventually, we came to understand.

Tachibana Taki -- Taki-kun -- was a high school student of the same age living in Tokyo.

Miyamizu Mitsuha was a girl living in the middle of nowhere. Our switching occurred irregularly. It could come twice or three times a week. The trigger was sleep. The cause unknown.

Our memories during a switch became blurry soon after waking up the next day. Almost like we had merely been having a vivid dream.

But there was no doubt that we were switching. The reactions of others in our lives clearly proved that.

And ever since we realized that this phenomenon was occurring, we've been able to remember more and more of our dreams. Even while awake, I know that there exists a boy named Taki living in Tokyo.

I know that a girl named Mitsuha is living in a village somewhere in the countryside. I have no reason or logic to back it up, but I am sure of it.

And we've started to communicate with each other. On days when we switch, we leave each other messages as diary entries or scribbles in a notebook.

We also tried calling and texting, but for some reason neither worked. But at any rate, it was fortunate that we had some method of communication. We needed to protect each other's everyday life as much as possible. And so, we decided on rules.

<To Taki-kun: Forbidden Actions 1>

Absolutely no baths

No touching or looking at my body

Don't open your legs when sitting down

Don't become any closer with Tesshi than necessary; he should be with Saya-chin

Don't touch any other guys

Don't touch any girls either

<To Mitsuha: Forbidden Actions Ver.5>

I told you not to waste money, right?

Don't be late to school or work; remember the way already

Don't talk with an accent

Are you secretly taking baths? I feel like I smell some kind of shampoo...

Don't act so close with Tsukasa, you'll make him get the wrong idea idiot

Also don't act so close with Okudera-senpai

But still, reading the diary entries Mitsuha leaves behind, I can't help but get frustrated.

Reading Taki's diary, I can't help but feel anger. Seriously, that guy!

Seriously, that woman!

Made big plays during basketball in P.E.? I'm not that kind of person! Also, jumping around in front of guys!? I got scolded by Saya-chin for not properly covering my chest and stomach and legs! Watch out for your skirt and looks from guys! Fundamentals of life, right!?

Mitsuha! Stop pigging out on stupidly expensive cakes! You're weirding out Tsukasa and Takagi. Also, that's my money!

Technically you're the one eating them! Also, technically I'm working at that restaurant too! Anyways, you work too many shifts! I can't go out to play at all!

That's because of your spending! Also, making those kumihimo or whatever with your grandma, that's impossible for me!

On the way home, I had tea with Okudera-senpai! I was about to pay for her, but then she paid for me! She said 'treat me once you graduate high school'! I played it cool and answered 'I promise I will'. Your relationship is going great, thanks to me <3

Mitsuha, what the hell are you doing!? Don't go around changing my relationships like that!

Hey Taki-kun, what is this love letter!? Why did a random guy / don't know confess to me?! And why did / answer 'I'll think about it'?!?

Haha. You're selling yourself short. If you let me take control of your life you'd be way more popular.

Don't be so full of yourself! You don't even have a girlfriend!

You don't have a boyfriend either!

/ just haven't bothered to get one yet!

I

Mitsuha's alarm.

Another day of the rural life.

Those thoughts drifted through my still fast asleep head. That means I get to continue building the cafe with Teshigawara after school. Oh yeah, and after that--

I sat up in the futon and looked down over my body. Lately, Mitsuha's pajamas have been heavier than usual. Before, it was just a dress with no bra underneath, but this morning there was tight underwear covered by a very securely buttoned shirt. Of course, she did this in preparation for the switch that could occur any day. I can get that, but still, you know...

My hands started to gravitate towards my chest. Today this is my body; there shouldn't be any problem with me touching my own body, right? Or at least, that's what I had been telling myself every time. Hm. But, I guess...

I stopped my hands. "... That would be unfair to her."

Just then, the sliding door opened. "... Onee-chan, you really like your own boobs, don't you?" Yotsuha said, then walked off again.

I watched her shut the door and leave as I fondled my breasts... just over the clothes should be okay, right?

"Grandma, why does our *shintai* [object of worship believed to contain the spirit of a deity] have to be so far away?" complained Yotsuha.

Without bothering to turn around, Grandma answered, "Because of Mayugorou. I don't know either."

Mayugorou?

"... Who's that?" I asked quietly to Yotsuha, who was walking beside me.

"Eh? You don't know? He's famous."

Famous? Maybe to these people...

The three women of the Miyamizu household, me, Grandma, and Yotsuha, had been walking along a mountain path for almost an hour. Apparently, today we had to pay a visit to our *shintai* on top of this mountain and leave an offering. The world that Mitsuha lived in really did seem like something out of an ancient folktale.

The bunches of maple leaves hanging on the nearby trees, illuminated from behind by the sun's rays, carried such a vivid red they almost seemed artificially dyed. The air was dry and crisp, and the wind whistling by brought the scent of dead leaves past our noses. October. Somewhere along the way, autumn had descended upon the village.

By the way, exactly how old is Grandma? I wondered as I gazed at her tiny back. Even on this trek through the mountains, she remained in her traditional clothing. She was a surprisingly good walker, but her back had that stereotypical curve, and she used a walking stick for support. Considering my lack of experience living with an elderly person, I was in no position to take a guess at her age or overall health condition.

“Hey, Grandma!” I ran up in front of her and crouched down a little, offering my back. This small, delicate woman raised Mitsuha and her sister, and always packed them delicious bento. “I’ll give you a piggyback ride, if you want.”

“Oh! Well then.” Grandma’s face lit up as she leaned her body weight onto my back. Suddenly, I smelled a strangely familiar scent, one that I felt like I had smelled long ago at someone’s house. For a moment, a warm feeling of *deja vu* came over me.

“Grandma, you’re really ligh--”

As soon as I tried to stand up, my knees buckled under the weight. Yotsuha scolded me while coming in to support. Now that I think of it, Mitsuha’s body is also really thin and light and fragile. How is she even alive?

“Mitsuha, Yotsuha.” On my back, Grandma started talking. “Do you know *musubi*?” [literally ‘connection’ or ‘ties’]

“*Musubi*?” Yotsuha asked in return, carrying my backpack against her stomach.

Below us, through the gaps in the trees, I could see the entirety of the round Itomori Lake. We’ve come pretty high. Sweat had begun to drip down my body as I continued climbing with Grandma on my back.

“An old name for the god of the land is ‘Musubi’. This word also has other deep, deep meanings.”

God? Where is she going with this? But Grandma’s voice, which sounded like a narrator’s from *Cartoon Tales of Old Japan*, had a mysterious quality in it which made me want to know more.

“Do you know?” she asked again. “Tying threads together is *musubi*. Connecting people together is *musubi*. The flow of time is *musubi*. All of these phenomena use the same word: the name of a god, and also his power. The *kumihimo* that we make is also the craft of the gods, expressing the very flow of time itself.”

My ears picked up the faint murmuring of water. There must be a mountain stream somewhere, I thought.

“Gathering and taking shape, twisting and entwining, sometimes returning, sometimes disjoining, and connecting again. That is *kumihimo*. That is time. That is *musubi*.”

I pictured a flow of clear water. Hitting a stone in the stream and splitting up, mixing with new substances, then once again joining back together, connected as one whole entity. I had no idea what Grandma was saying, but I felt like I had just learned something very important. *Musubi*. I’ll have to remember this word once I wake up. A drop of sweat on my chin resounded loudly as it hit the ground and quickly became absorbed by the dry mountain soil.

“Drink up.”

As we took a small break in the shade of some trees, Grandma handed me a bottle. It was simply tea with sugar mixed in, yet it was surprisingly delicious. I gulped down two whole cups before Yotsuha demanded a turn. It might have been the best drink I’ve ever tasted.

“That also is *musubi*.”

“Eh?” Handing over the bottle to Yotsuha, I turned towards Grandma, who was sitting on the roots of a tree.

“Did you know? Water, rice, sake... the act of putting something into your body is also called *musubi*. What enters your body connects with your soul. The offering we will make today is part of an important custom tying together man and god, continued by the Miyamizu family for hundreds of years.”

As we continued up, the trees lining the path eventually disappeared, and the lakeside village below us, which was now about the size of a sketchbook, had become half covered with clouds. The clouds above us no longer had any volume to them; thin and transparent, they simply drifted away with the strong winds. All that was left around us were moss covered rocks. We had arrived at the summit.

“Hey, I can see it!”

I caught up to the excited Yotsuha and followed her gaze. Before my eyes was a giant, caldera-like depression in the ground. It was as if someone had come by and scooped out the top of the mountain. The green of a grassy wetland covered the interior of the basin, and in the center of it stood a single large tree.

I stared with eyes opened wide in awe at the unexpected sight. It was a natural garden in the sky, something I would never be able to see back home. I had really begun to admire the countryside.

“Beyond here is the *kakuriyo*,” Grandma said.

We had climbed down to the bottom of the basin. Immediately before us a small stream flowed by; the giant tree was still a little ways away.

“*Kakuriyo*?” Yotsuha and I asked in unison.

“*Kakuriyo*. The *other* world.”

The other world. Grandma’s narrator voice sent chills up my spine, like a biting gust of wind. My feet froze a bit. Sacred mountain or power spot or whatever you want to call it... there was unmistakably an otherworldly air floating about the place... it’s not like once I step in, I won’t be able to go back or anything like that, right? Right?

“Oooh, the other world~!” Meanwhile, Yotsuha raised a cheer as she crossed the stream with a hop and a skip.

Kids are really something: dumb but bursting with energy. Well, the weather was really nice and the wind and stream seemed really gentle, so maybe I was the odd one out here. Holding hands with Grandma so she wouldn’t get wet, I carefully stepped across the stones to the other side of the stream.

“To return to our world,” Grandma said suddenly in a mysterious voice. “We must exchange something very important to you.”

“Eh!!” I unintentionally let out a shriek. “W-Wait a minute, tell us that before we cross!”

At my desperate protests, Grandma merely laughed. Her cackling smile with gaping holes where teeth were missing only made me more scared.

“No need to be frightened. I’m talking about the *kuchikamisake*.”

Prompted by Grandma, Yotsuha and I each took out our bottles from our backpacks. They were shiny white porcelain vases, like the kind often found in *kamidana* [miniature shrines

put in homes], with a pedestal attached to the spherical bottom and a *kumihimo* wrapped around the lid to keep it shut. I could hear the liquid inside sloshing around.

"Underneath that *shintai*," Grandma began as she looked at the giant tree. "There is a small shrine. You will leave the offering there. That sake represents half of yourself."

-- Half of Mitsuha. I looked at the bottle in my hands. Within was the *kuchikamisake* that she made by chewing up rice. Sake made by forming a connection between this body and this rice. And I was the one offering it. Feeling a strange mix of embarrassment and pride, like I just scored a goal on a pass given to me by a teammate I had been quarreling with, I started walking towards the tree.

This might be the first time I've ever truly heard the cries of the evening cicadas. I recognized it immediately because I've gotten used to hearing it as a sound effect in movies and games. Actually hearing those cries resounding all around me, however, felt more movie-like than any actual movie.

Suddenly, a group of sparrows flew out from a thicket in front of me, making loud rustling sounds as they went. Used to thinking that birds were always found in trees, I was a little caught off guard, but Yotsuha chased them round and around excitedly. The village must have been getting closer: a faint scent of dinner came mixed in with the wind blowing by. Once again, I was surprised at how distinct the smell of human life could be.

"It's already dusk," Yotsuha said in a refreshed voice, like she had just gone through a long day and finally finished her homework. The spotlight shaped rays of the evening sun shone upon Yotsuha and Grandma's faces beside me, forming an almost too perfectly picturesque scene.

"... Wow." A sigh of admiration escaped my lips as the view of the village below started to reveal itself. There, spread out in front of me, was a bird's eye view of the entirety of Mitsuha's village and the lake surrounded within. The village had already been swallowed up by the violet shadows of evening, but the lake alone stood out in the center, reflecting the scarlet red of the sky. From the slopes of nearby mountains, pinkish evening haze had begun to rise up. From the houses, a different kind of haze, the smoke of supper being cooked, trailed high into the air like signal fires. Sparrows danced around above the village, shining erratically like the dust in an empty classroom after school.

"I wonder if we'll be able to see the comet soon," Yotsuha said as she searched the sky, blocking the sunlight with her palm.

"Comet?"

Oh, that's right. I remembered the news casters talking about that during breakfast; soon enough, a comet would be close enough to view with the naked eye. Apparently, it'll be visible a little above Venus.

"Comet..." I repeated the word out loud. All of a sudden, I got the feeling that I was forgetting something. Squinting my eyes, I joined Yotsuha in searching the western sky. I found it immediately: above the conspicuously bright Venus, the glittering blue tail of a comet. I could feel something trying to dig its way out from the bottom of my memory.

That's it. This comet...

I had,

Once before...

"Ah, Mitsuha," pulled back out of my thoughts by Grandma's voice, I found her peering into my face. I could see my reflection in her deep black pupils.

"-- You're dreaming, aren't you?"

!

Suddenly, I jolted awake. The sheets jumped up, then fell silently beside the bed. My heart was beating so violently it could lift my ribs -- or it should have been, but I couldn't hear my heartbeat at all. That's strange, I thought, then abruptly the sound of my blood pulsing became audible again. The morning songs of the sparrows outside the window. The engines of cars. The rumble of trains. As if my body had finally remembered where it was, my ears started to pick up the sounds of Tokyo.

"... Tears?"

A droplet sat on top of the fingertip I had touched to my cheek. Why? Confused, I wiped my eyes dry with my palm. As I did so, the evening landscape I had just been viewing, along with Grandma's words that I had just been listening to, began to disappear, like water seeping into sand.

Ding.

Beside the pillow, my smartphone beeped.

I'll be there soon~ Looking forward to today <3

A LINE message from Okudera-senpai. Be there? Where? Wha? Wait a minute...

"Mitsuha!"

I rapidly scrolled through my phone, looking at the memos she left.

"Date!?"

I leaped out of bed and got ready at full speed.

Tomorrow you have a date with Okudera-senpai in Roppongi! Meet in front of Yotsuya station, 10:30. I want to go, but if it ends up being you, make sure you enjoy it. And be thankful to me.

Fortunately, the meeting place was nearby. I checked my phone while trying to catch my breath. By sprinting the whole way, I managed to make it there ten minutes before the arranged time. Senpai probably hadn't arrived yet. Despite it being a weekend morning, a sizable crowd bustled about the station.

I wiped the sweat off my face, fixed the collar of my jacket, and muttered 'stupid Mitsuha' three times under my breath before starting to look for Senpai, just in case she was already here... a date with Okudera-senpai? On top of that, this is my first date ever. Having my first date with idol-like actress-like Miss Japan-like Okudera-senpai... isn't that a bit too much?

Please can we switch right now stupid Mitsuha!

"Taaki-kun!"

"Ah!" I let out a pitiful yelp at the sudden voice from behind. Flustered, I turned around.

"Sorry, did you wait long?"

"No! Ah, wait... yes! Wait, no..." What is this question!? If I say I waited then she might feel bad, but if I say I didn't then it makes it sound like I was late! Aggh what's the right answer!?

"Umm..." Already starting to panic, I somehow managed to look up. In front of me stood a smiling Okudera-senpai. "...!" My eyes opened wide. Black mules, a white flared skirt, and a

black off shoulder top. The monotone clothes left her exposed shoulders and legs dazzling in comparison. A few gold accessories were also placed carefully to bring out the full charm of her skin. Her small white hat had a mocha ribbon tied around it. There were simply no other words to describe her: extremely stylish, and extremely beautiful.

“... I just got here.”

“Oh, good!” Senpai giggled.

“Should we get going?”

She grabbed onto my arm... ahh, for a moment, just one moment, my arm grazed against her chest. I suddenly got the urge to polish all the windows in the city until they were sparkly clean.

“I can’t hold a conversation at all...”

Standing in the bathroom, wanting to smash my head against the mirror, I hung my head very, very deeply. Three hours had passed since the start of the date, and I was already the most tired I’d ever been in my entire life. I never would have guessed that my lack of girl interaction skills was this serious. Wait no, that’s wrong. I want to believe that it’s wrong. It’s all Mitsuha’s fault, throwing me into this situation without any time to prepare. And more than anything, it’s because senpai’s so pretty that I can’t do anything.

Literally everyone we pass by stops to gape at her. Then they look at me walking beside her and make a face that says ‘why the hell is she with this kid?’. Or at least, that’s what it seems like to me. Well, they’re not wrong to think that. Even I know she’s way out of my league. I didn’t even invite her though! Every time someone passes by I want to grab them by the shoulder and tell them all my excuses. Anyway, as a result of all that I have absolutely no idea what to talk about. Senpai’s been good about starting little conversations, but I can’t stand it. And then I become even more unable to string together words. It’s a vicious cycle.

Damn it, Mitsuha! What kind of things do you normally talk about with her!? Desperately searching for help, I got my phone out and started scrolling through Mitsuha’s memo.

Well, I figure you’ve probably never even been on a date before. Luckily for you, I have gathered here a careful selection of links to study up on!

“Whoa really??” My goddess! I praised my savior Mitsuha as I opened the links.

Link 1: Man With Social Anxiety GETS Girlfriend!

Link 2: Conversation Tips for Those Who Have Never Been Popular a Second of Their Lives!

Link 3: Never be That Annoying Guy Again! How to be Loved: Special Collection

... I feel like Mitsuha’s really underestimating me here...

Anyway, I left the bathroom and was finally able to relax a little as I walked around the art museum. I wasn’t the least bit interested in the photo exhibition titled ‘Homesickness’, but I was thankful for an environment where it wasn’t awkward to not talk. Okudera-senpai walked about two meters in front of me, leisurely gazing at the pictures.

Furano, Tsugaru, Sanriku, Rikuzen, Aizu, Shinshuu... the exhibition was split into different sections based on region, but they all looked like the same generic countryside to me. Of course I don’t know the finer points of photography; about the only differences I could see were whether the background was a mountain or the ocean, or whether it was taken during the

summer or the winter. The houses, train stations, and people all bore a strange similarity. Rural Japan must have this kind of scenery wherever you go, I thought. To me, the different neighborhoods of Tokyo, Shibuya and Ikebukuro, Akasaka and Kichijouji, Meguro and Tachikawa, had much more distinct characteristics.

When I came to the area marked 'Hida', however, my feet stopped automatically. Here was different. The scenery in the photos still looked the same as all the others, but I *knew* this place. The shapes of the mountains, the curves of the roads, the scale of the lake, the appearance of the *torii*, the positioning of the fields. Just like when you magically instantly find your own shoes among the pile after gym class, I just *knew*. It was like it might have been the place in the countryside where I visited my relatives every summer break -- I've never actually done that, but a mysterious, strong sense of familiarity struck me. It was...

"Taki-kun?"

Turning towards the voice, I found senpai standing next to me. For a second, I had completely forgotten about her.

"Taki-kun," she said with a smile. "It's like you're a different person today." She turned around with model-like beauty and elegance, then started to walk off, leaving me behind.

I failed.

The whole day, I had simply carried out the motions of Mitsuha's date plan, like trudging through some boring homework. I spent the whole time just coming up with excuses in my head, not thinking about senpai's feelings at all. I was the one who invited her. I should have been happy to spend time with her. I had always dreamed that one day, a miracle like this would occur.

From the pedestrian bridge where we stood, I had a clear view of the flock of buildings making up Roppongi, where we had just been a little while ago. Countless windows reflected the evening sun's light, shining with a brilliant gold. I turned my eyes back to senpai, who walked silently in front of me. The sparkling hair, the new looking hat and clothes... she probably went through the trouble of preparing those just to show off to me today. Thinking about that, my chest tightened with guilt. It became hard to breathe, as if the oxygen in the air had suddenly grown thin. I desperately groped for words.

"Um, senpai." She didn't turn around. "... uh, are you hungry? Want to get dinner somewh--"

"Let's call it a day," she said with the soft, gentle voice of a teacher.

"Okay." My stupid mouth could produce no other response. Okudera-senpai's face, which she had finally turned towards me, became obscured by the sunlight.

"Taki-kun... if this is wrong, forgive me."

"Okay."

"You used to have a crush on me, didn't you?"

"Ehhhh!?" She knew!? How!?

"But now, you have someone else you like, right?"

"Ehhhhhh!?" Sweat started gushing from my face, like I had been warped into a tropical rainforest. "N-No!"

"Really?"

“R-Really! There’s no one!”

“Reeally?” Senpai peered into my face suspiciously.

Someone else I like? No way. *Her* long hair and soft boobs popped into my head for a second, but they soon disappeared.

“Hm, well whatever,” she said cheerfully, then drew her face back.

“Eh?”

“Thanks for today. See you at work.”

Senpai waved to me, then started walking off. For a moment, I opened my mouth. Then closed it. Then opened it again. But in the end, words failed to come out. All I could do was watch as senpai descended from the bridge and faded into the sea of people at the station.

Left behind all by myself, I gazed at the setting sun. Listening to the never ending stream of cars below, I began to feel like I was standing on a real bridge over a river. The sun began to hide behind a water tower, leaving only a faint glow like a flashlight’s to reach me. I stared intently at it, as if doing so would help me regain something.

There were probably other things I should have been doing, but I couldn’t think of any off the top of my head. All I wanted to do was go to Mitsuha’s village again. Becoming Mitsuha also meant talking with Mitsuha. As we switched bodies, we held a special connection between us. Exchanging experiences. Tied together. *Musubi*. I felt like I would be able to talk about today’s disaster with Mitsuha. ‘That’s why you can’t get a girlfriend’. ‘You’re the one at fault for making plans in the first place’. I wanted to joke and tease back and forth with her.

Opening my phone, I discovered that there was still more to Mitsuha’s memo.

Right about when the date ends, the comet should be visible. Ahhh, so romantic!
Looking forward to tomorrow <3 Whether it ends up being me or you, let’s do our best!
Comet?

I glanced up at the sky. All traces of the sunset had already faded away, leaving only a few stars and a single airplane visible on the vast canvas of black. As expected, no comet anywhere to be seen.

“What the heck is she talking about?” I muttered quietly.

In the first place, if there actually was a visible comet passing by, it would probably be pretty big on the news. She must have been mistaken.

Suddenly, I felt a throb in my chest.

Something was trying to get out of my head.

I navigated on my phone to Mitsuha’s number and stared at those eleven digits. I had tried calling a few times since the switching started, but for some reason I could never get through. I tapped the number. The phone rang briefly, then started speaking.

The phone number you have dialed cannot be reached at this time, either because the number is not currently in use, the phone’s power is turned off, or it is in an area where...

I pulled the phone away from my ear and pushed the hang up icon. As expected, calling didn’t work. Oh well. I’ll tell her about today’s misery next time we switch. I can also ask her about the comet. We’ll probably switch again tomorrow or the day after. Those thoughts running through my mind, I finally stepped down from the pedestrian bridge. Above me, a faint half moon sat all alone in the sky, as if it were someone’s forgotten luggage.

After that day, Mitsuha and I's switching never occurred again.

Chapter 4: Search

I moved my pencil intently. Particles of lead adhered to the paper, curves overlapped with each other, and gradually the previously white sketchbook became filled with gray. But still, I couldn't fully capture the scenery in my mind.

Every morning, I ride the train to school amidst rush hour. Sit through boring classes. Eat with Tsukasa and Takagi. Walk through the city, gaze up at the sky. Somewhere along the way, the blue of the sky had started to grow darker. The trees by the roadside had started to gain color.

At night, in my room, I draw. My desk is buried in heaps of encyclopedias borrowed from the library. I search for pictures of the mountains of Hida on my phone, looking for a ridgeline that matches the one in my memory. Trying to somehow capture it on paper, I move my pencil.

On days when asphalt scented rain falls. On clear days when the clouds sparkle in the sky. On days when yellow dust comes in with the strong winds. Each morning, I ride the crowded train to school. Go to work. Some days I have the same shift as Okudera-senpai. I try my best to look her in the eye, smile, and talk normally. I want to be fair and equal to everyone.

Some nights are as humid as if it were still the peak of summer, and other nights are cold enough to wear a jacket. No matter what kind of night it is, when I draw my head becomes hot, as if a blanket were wrapped around it. Beads of sweat drop loudly onto my sketchbook, blurring the lines. But even so, the landscape of that village I laid eyes upon as Mitsuha slowly but surely took shape.

On the way home from school or work, I walk the long distance instead of riding the train. The scenery of Tokyo changes day by day. Shinjuku, Gaien, Yotsuya, near Benkeibashi, on the way up Anchinzaka. Huge cranes had suddenly appeared one day, building towers of steel and glass that reached higher and higher into the sky. And beyond those towers lay the half gone moon.

Eventually, I finished a few sketches of the village by the lake.

This weekend, I'll go out.

As I made up my mind, I felt my tensed up body begin to relax for the first time in a while. Too tired to stand up, I put my head down on my desk.

Before I fell asleep, I made the same wish again.

But still, like always, I didn't become Mitsuha the next day.

For starters, I stuffed three days worth of underwear and my sketchbook into the backpack. I figured it might be cold over there, so I put on a thick jacket with a large hood attached. Tying my usual good luck bracelet around my wrist, I stepped out of the house.

Because I left a little earlier than I usually do for school, the train was empty. But still, as always, Tokyo station overflowed with people. After waiting in line behind a foreigner dragging his luggage along, I bought a Shinkansen ticket to Nagoya and headed towards the Toukaidou Shinkansen ticket gate.

Then, I saw something that made me doubt my own eyes.

"W-Why are you here!?"

Beside the pillar in front of me stood Okudera-senpai and Tsukasa.

“Hehehe, we came!” senpai said with a laugh.

... What are you, a character from some kind of moe anime?

I glared at Tsukasa. He returned the look with a nonchalant face that seemed to say ‘problem?’.

“Tsukasa you bastard, I asked you to tell my parents an alibi and to cover my shift at work, didn’t I!?” I yelled complaints to Tsukasa, who sat in the seat beside me, in as hushed a voice as possible. The free seating area of the Shinkansen was buried mostly with salarymen in their suits.

“I asked Takagi to cover for you at work,” Tsukasa responded casually. He held up his phone for me to see. ‘Leave it to me!’ with a big thumbs up, from Takagi. ‘But you owe me food.’

“God damn it...” I muttered bitterly.

Relying on Tsukasa was a mistake. I had planned to skip school today, which gave me three days, today and the weekend, in Hida. As an excuse, I asked Tsukasa to tell everyone that I had some urgent need to visit an acquaintance.

“I came because I was worried about you, you know?” Tsukasa said. “I can’t leave you alone now, can I. What if you get caught up in some sketchy scam?”

“Sketchy scam?”

What is he talking about? As I raised my eyebrow at Tsukasa, Okudera-senpai leaned over from the seat next to him and peered at me.

“Taki-kun, you’re going to meet an internet friend?”

“Huh? Ah, not really... that was just an easy way to explain it...”

Last night, Tsukasa wouldn’t stop bugging me until I told him who I was going to meet, so I vaguely said it was someone I met on social media.

Tsukasa turned to senpai and said in a serious tone, “I thought it might be a dating site.”

I almost blew all the tea out of my mouth. “No!!”

“Well you’ve been really strange lately.” Tsukasa made a worried face as he held out a box of Pocky to me. “I’ll keep watch on you from afar.”

“What am I, an elementary schooler?”

Watching my irritated reaction, Okudera-senpai gave a curious ‘hmm?’. She definitely had some kind of misunderstanding too. This can’t lead to anything good, I thought dreadfully. *We will soon be arriving at Nagoya.* A voice from the speaker resounded throughout the train car.

My switching with Mitsuha had begun suddenly one day, and ended suddenly another. No matter how much I thought, I couldn’t come up with a reason. As the weeks went by, my suspicion that it had all just been a realistic dream grew and grew.

However, I did have some proof. I would never believe that the words Mitsuha left in my diary app had been written by my own hands. Also, I would never have planned a date with Okudera-senpai just by myself. There was no doubt: the girl named Mitsuha existed. I had felt her warmth and her heartbeat; I had heard her breathing and her vibrant voice echoing on my eardrums; I had seen the vivid red lining her eyelids. She was so bursting full of life, I was convinced that if she was not living, then nothing could be. Mitsuha was real.

And because she was so real, when our switching abruptly stopped an extreme feeling of uneasiness had come over me. Maybe something happened to her. Like a fever. Or maybe an accident. Even if I was overthinking things, Mitsuha must be anxious at the situation too. That's why I decided to go meet her directly. But, well...

"Huh?? You don't know the place?" a shocked Okudera-senpai asked as we sat on the special express train 'Hida', stuffing our faces with station bento.

"Uh..."

"Your only clue is the village's scenery? You can't contact her? What is this!?"

Why was I the one being blamed when they just decided to follow me on their own? I looked at Tsukasa for some back up.

"Well someone's bad at planning," he said as he gulped down a miso katsu.

"I wasn't planning on you guys coming!" My voice involuntarily raised to a shout. This was all just a fun little field trip to them. Senpai and Tsukasa both looked at me with faces that seemed to say 'he's helpless' with a sigh.

"Well whatever," senpai said. Suddenly her lips broadened into a smile, and she stuck her chest out proudly. "Don't worry Taki-kun! We'll help you look."

"Ahh~ so cute~! Hey Taki-kun, look look~!"

Sometime past noon we had finally gotten off at a station on a local line, and senpai was busy admiring a stuffed animal of the local mascot character: a Hida cow wearing a station worker's hat. The shutter sound from Tsukasa's phone camera echoed like mad throughout the small station building.

"Useless..."

Examining a map posted to the wall, I confirmed by suspicion that these two would be of absolutely no help. Looks like I had to figure out things by myself. Since I didn't know the exact location of Mitsuha's village, the plan was to go by train until the scenery started to look familiar to what I had in my memory. After that, my only clues would be the backgrounds I drew in my sketchbook. I would gradually travel north along local lines, showing my sketches to locals and asking if they seemed familiar. The scenes in my memory included a railroad crossing, so searching along the train lines seemed to be the most effective choice. It was a rather uncertain method and hardly worthy enough to be called a plan, but I could see no other way. Also, villages by a lake probably weren't too abundant. I had confidence that I would find some kind of hint by nightfall, although that confidence was unfortunately not backed by any good evidence. Deciding to start out by asking the taxi driver stopped outside the station, I took a big step forward.

"No good, huh..."

Dead exhausted, I sat down on a bus stop bench and buried my head in my hands. The overflowing confidence I had when I started asking around was all already withered away. After getting an uninterested 'no clue' from the first taxi driver, I went to police stations, convenience stores, souvenir shops, hotels, restaurants, asking everyone from farmers to elementary school kids, and in the end came up empty. Getting around by local trains, which only ran once every two hours, proved somewhat unreliable, so I figured we could ride a bus and get some

information from the people on it at the same time. Of course, we turned out to be the only people on the bus, and, having lost the will to ask the driver, we simply rode until the last stop, which, as far as I could tell, was an uninhabited area of extreme countryside.

As for Tsukasa and Okudera-senpai, the whole time they had occupied themselves with *shiritori*, cards, Facebook games, rock paper scissors, or snacks, fully enjoying their field trip experience. Eventually, they both ended up sleeping peacefully on the bus ride with their heads leaning on my shoulders.

“Eeh! Are you giving up already, Taki!?” Hearing me sigh heavily, Tsukasa and Okudera-senpai asked in unison as they gulped down sodas in front of the bus station. “But we worked so hard!”

I let out another sigh, this one so heavy my lungs almost came out. Senpai’s strangely hardcore looking hiking outfit and Tsukasa’s leisurely walk around the neighborhood clothes were really starting to piss me off.

“You guys have done absolutely nothing...”

The two made an innocent ‘oh?’ expression.

“I’ll have a Takayama ramen.”

“I’ll have one Takayama ramen.”

“Well then I’ll have a Takayama ramen too.”

“Got it, three ramen!” The old lady’s voice rang throughout the restaurant.

On the barren path to the unusually far neighboring station, we miraculously discovered an operating ramen shop and had sprinted in. The smile of the bandana wearing old lady that greeted us upon entering was like a rescue squad finally arriving on the scene of a disaster.

The ramen was also delicious. Contrary to what the name suggested, it was just normal ramen (I thought it might have Hida beef in it or something instead of the usual chashu), but I could feel my body being recharged as I chowed down on the noodles and vegetables. After drinking all of the soup plus two full cups of water, I finally stopped to catch my breath.

“Do you think we’ll be able to make it back to Tokyo today?” I asked Tsukasa.

“Hmm... maybe. It might be close. I’ll look into it.” He looked a bit surprised, but still he got out his phone and started figuring out the way home.

“Thanks,” I said.

“... Taki-kun, is that really okay with you?” senpai, not yet finished eating, asked from across the table.

Not knowing how to respond right away, I gazed out the window. The sun still barely lingered above the edges of the mountains, faintly illuminating the fields beside the road.

“How to say this... I’m starting to feel like I’m not even close,” I mumbled, half to myself. Perhaps it would be best to return to Tokyo and think of another plan. It would be hard enough with pictures, but searching for a village with just these sketches alone? Maybe it was an unrealistic idea in the first place, I thought as I grabbed my sketchbook and looked at it. Houses surrounding a round lake: nothing more than a generic rural town. I really thought I felt something in it when I finished the drawing, but now it just seemed like any old countryside scene.

“That’s old Itomori, isn’t it?”

Eh? Turning around, I noticed the old lady in her apron, refilling my empty cup with water.

“Did you draw that young man? Could I see it for a little?” the old lady asked, then took the sketchbook from me. “It’s well drawn. Hey, dear!” The three of us watched with gaping mouths as the old lady called out to the kitchen.

“Ahh, it really looks just like old Itomori. Brings back memories.”

“My husband is from Itomori.”

The old man that came out of the kitchen examined the sketch intently.

-- Itomori?

All of a sudden, I remembered. I shot up out of my chair. “Itomori... Itomori Village! That’s it! Why couldn’t I remember before? Itomori Village! That’s close to here, right!?”

The couple looked shocked. They looked at each other with suspicious faces.

“You... you know, right? Itomori village...” the old man finally spoke.

Out of the blue, Tsukasa butted in. “Itomori... Taki...”

“Eh, the one with the comet!?” Even Okudera-senpai joined in.

“Eh...?” Confused, I looked around at everyone. They were all giving me strange looks. The shadow of something in my head, something ominous that had been struggling to get out this whole time, grew in presence.

The lonely cry of a single black kite lingered heavily in the air.

The barricade that forbade any further entrance stretched out for miles, casting a shadow on the cracked asphalt below it. By the Disaster Countermeasure Fundamental Law, we could not take another step. KEEP OUT. Reconstruction Agency. Any ivy covered sign bore those words.

And below my eyes was the village of Itomori, or rather, what was left of it. An enormous force had grabbed it and split it apart, leaving most of it to be swallowed up by the lake.

“... Is this really the place?” senpai asked me, her voice trembling.

Without waiting for me to reply, Tsukasa said in an overly cheerful voice, “There’s no way! I’ve been saying this whole time, Taki just made a mistaken guess.”

“... There was no mistake.” Peeling my eyes away from the ruins below, I looked at the others around me. “Not just the village. This high school, the surrounding campus, the nearby mountains... I remember them all clearly!” In order to get the words through to myself, I had no choice but to shout. Behind us stood a soot stained school building, with a few glass windows broken here and there. We were on the grounds of Itomori High School, from which you could look out over the entire lake.

“So this is the village you were looking for, then? The place where your internet friend lives?” Tsukasa asked loudly, half laughing at the ridiculousness of it all. “How could that be!? That disaster three years ago where hundreds died... you remember too, don’t you Taki!?”

Upon hearing those words, I finally looked Tsukasa in the eyes.

“... Died?” I was looking at him, but my gaze went straight through him, straight through the high school behind him, eventually being sucked up into nothingness. My eyes were functioning, yet I was seeing nothing.

“... Died... three years ago?”

Suddenly, I remembered. That comet I saw in the sky of Tokyo three years ago. The countless shooting stars in the west. That beautiful scene, like something straight out of a dream. The excitement of that moment.

Died?

-- No.

That couldn't be true.

I searched for words. Searched for evidence.

"That can't be... look, I have the diary entries she wrote." I took out my phone and frantically navigated to the diary app, as if the battery would forever die if I took even a second too long. The entries were there, as expected.

"...!" I rubbed my eyes in disbelief. For a moment, I thought I saw the letters move. "... What!"

One word, then another.

The words Mitsuha wrote began to deform into meaningless symbols, and then eventually, just as a candle does, they flickered for a brief second before disappearing. Just like that, the entries written by Mitsuha perished one by one. It was as if an invisible someone was standing right next to me, pressing the 'delete' button over and over. At last, not a single one of Mitsuha's words remained on the screen.

"Why..." I could do nothing else but mutter softly in despair. Far away, high in the sky, the single cry of a black kite rang throughout the air.

Tiamat's Comet, which revolves around the sun with a period of 1200 years, last came to its closest approach to Earth three years ago in October, right about the same time of year as the present. Its ultra long period blows Halley's Comet out of the water, which visits every 76 years, and its orbital semi-major axis stretches over an astonishing 16.8 billion kilometers. A visit from Tiamat's Comet truly is a grand event. Its perigee is estimated to be around 120 thousand kilometers away from the Earth; in other words, every 1200 years, it passes by at a distance closer than the moon, leaving behind a blue tail sparkling in the night sky above half the globe. The coming of Tiamat's Comet had put the entire world into a festive mood.

But no one could have predicted that the comet's core would split as it flew near Earth. And in addition, hidden inside that ice covered interior was a massive boulder roughly forty meters in diameter. The split off fragment of the comet became a meteorite as it passed through the atmosphere, hurdling towards the surface of the Earth at the destructive speed of thirty kilometers per second. Its point of contact was Japan -- and unfortunately, a place inhabited by humans: Itomori Village.

That day happened to be the day of the village's autumn festival. Time of contact: 8:42 p.m. Exact point of collision: the Miyamizu Shrine, then bustling from the festivities.

When the meteorite landed, a wide range of area centered at the shrine was instantly annihilated. The destruction didn't stop at the houses and forests; the impact dug into the earth itself, forming a crater of nearly one kilometer in diameter. One second after impact, five kilometers away, a magnitude 4.8 quake shook the ground. Fifteen seconds after, a blast wave swept the area, bringing even further destruction to the land. The final death count totaled in at

over five hundred, which was a whole third of Itomori's population. The village had become the stage of the worst meteorite disaster in recorded human history.

Since the crater had appeared next to the already present Itomori Lake, water flowed into its interior, eventually creating a single, double lobed New Itomori Lake.

The south part of the village suffered relatively little damage, but the roughly a thousand remaining citizens soon began to leave. Before a whole year had passed, the local government could no longer function properly, and within fourteen months since the impact, the town had virtually ceased to exist.

-- All that was already textbook fact, so of course I had known the general story somewhere in the back of my mind. Three years ago, I was a middle school student. I remember standing on a nearby hill and watching the comet with my own eyes.

But still, something was off.

The pieces didn't fit together.

Up until just last month, I had lived in Itomori Village as Mitsuha many times.

That meant the place I had seen, the place where Mitsuha lived, couldn't have been Itomori.

The comet and my switching with Mitsuha were unrelated.

That was the only natural explanation. It was what I wanted to believe.

But as I sat here in the neighboring city's library flipping through books, I couldn't help but doubt that conclusion. In the core of my mind, someone kept whispering to me: this is the place.

The Disappeared Itomori Village - Full Record

The Town that Sunk in One Night - Itomori Village

The Tragedy of Tiamat's Comet

I sifted through thick books with names like that from cover to cover. No matter how I looked at them, I was sure that the place depicted in those old photos of Itomori was the place where I had spent my time as Mitsuha. This elementary school building was where Yotsuha went off to every morning. This Miyamizu Shrine was where Grandma worked as priestess. The needlessly large parking lot, the two snack bars next to each other, the barn-like convenience store, the small railroad crossing on the mountain path, and of course Itomori High School were all ingrained clearly in my memory. Ever since seeing the ruined village with my own eyes, my memories were only becoming more and more vivid.

It hurt to breathe. My heart ran berserk, refusing to calm down.

It felt as if the numerous vibrant photographs laying in the pages were silently sucking up the surrounding air and even reality itself.

'Itomori High School - the Last Field Day.' A photo with that title depicted a group of high schoolers participating in a three legged race. A pair on the edge looked strangely familiar to me. One had straight bangs in front with twin braids hanging down in the back, and the other had her hair tied up with a bright orange cord.

The air around me grew even thinner.

I wiped with my hand what felt like drops of hot blood on the back of my neck, only to discover transparent sweat.

-- Taki." Looking up, I found Tsukasa and Okudera-senpai standing there. They handed me a book. On its hefty cover, gold letters in a solemn looking font read **Itomori Village Comet Disaster - Record of Deceased Persons.**

I flipped through the pages. The victims were listed by name and address, categorized by section of town. My finger followed along until, upon seeing a familiar name, it paused.

Teshigawara Katsuhiko (17)

Natori Sayaka (17)

"Teshigawara and Saya-chin..."

As I muttered those names, I heard Tsukasa and Okudera-senpai gulp. And then, I found them. The names.

Miyamizu Hitoha (82)

Miyamizu Mitsuha (17)

Miyamizu Yotsuha (9)

The two peered at the list from over my shoulders.

"Is this the girl? There must be some kind of mistake! This person..." Okudera-senpai said in a voice which hinted at tears about to flow. "This person died three years ago!"

In order to force back her ridiculous claims, I shouted. "-- Just two, three weeks ago!" I couldn't breathe. Desperately, I continued, my voice shrinking to no louder than a whisper. "She told me... I'll be able to see the comet..." I somehow peeled my eyes away from the 'Mitsuha' imprinted on the page. "So she can't... she can't!"

Looking up, my gaze was met by my own reflection in the dark window before me. Who are you? I thought suddenly. From somewhere inside my head, I heard a hoarse, faraway voice.

-- You're dreaming, aren't you?

Dream? I fell into deep confusion.

What in the world was I doing?

The noise of a banquet flowed over from the room next door.

Someone said something, causing a roar of laughter followed by thunderous applause. That happened again and again. Trying to figure out what kind of gathering it was, I focused my ears. But no matter how hard I tried, I couldn't pick up a single word. All I could understand was that they were speaking Japanese.

Suddenly a loud thud sounded, and I realized I had my face down on a desk. I must have hit my head; a dull pain came over me after a brief delay. I was dead tired.

As I pored over old newspapers and weekly magazines, eventually the words had stopped being absorbed by my brain. I also rechecked my phone time and time again, but not a single trace of her diary entries remained.

With my head still on the desk, I opened my eyes. And then, staring at the desk in front of me, I uttered the conclusion I had drawn over the past few hours.

"It was all a dream..."

Did I want to believe that, or not?

"I recognized the scenery because I had seen it on the news three years ago. And as for her..."

How could I explain her?

“... A ghost? No... it was all...”

All...

“... My delusions?”

Startled, I raised my head.

-- Her.

“... Her name, what was it again?”

Knock knock.

Suddenly, the thin wooden door opened.

“Tsukasa-kun said he’s taking a bath,” senpai said as she entered the room, wearing a *yukata* provided by the *ryokan*. The room had been a little cold, but her presence immediately filled it with a warm atmosphere. I felt somewhat relieved.

“Um, senpai.” I stood up and called out to her as she crouched down in front of her backpack. “Sorry for saying a bunch of weird things today.”

Gently closing the zipper on her backpack, senpai stood up. It looked almost like it occurred in slow motion to me.

“... It’s okay,” she said, shaking her head with a faint smile.

“Sorry we could only get one room.”

“Tsukasa-kun told me the same thing.” Senpai laughed. We were sitting across from each other at a small table by the window. “It’s totally fine with me. A big group just so happened to be here tonight, so there weren’t any rooms. The owner said it was a get together of a teacher’s union.”

She continued on about how the owner treated her to pears in the lounge after her bath. Everyone can’t help but offer something to senpai. The scent of the *ryokan*’s shampoo smelled like a special perfume of some far off country.

“Ah, Itomori Village made *kumihimo*. They’re pretty,” senpai remarked as she flipped through one of the books I borrowed from the library. “My mom sometimes wears kimono, so we have a few of these too... ah, hey.” She looked at my right wrist. “Is that a *kumihimo*?”

“Oh, this is...” I placed the teacup I was holding on the table and also turned my gaze to my wrist. My usual charm. A vivid orange string, a little thicker than a thread, was wrapped around my wrist.

... Wait.

This is...

“I think I got it from someone a long time ago... sometimes I put it on as a good luck charm.”

I felt a sharp ache in my head.

“From who...?” I murmured. I couldn’t remember. But I felt like if I used this bracelet as a hint, I might get somewhere.

“... Hey, Taki-kun.” Looking up at the sound of senpai’s gentle voice, I saw her worried face. “Why don’t you take a bath?”

“Bath...”

I quickly looked away again, turning my eyes back to the *kumihimo*. I desperately racked my memory, feeling like if I let go now it would be lost for an eternity. Some time ago, the banquet next door had ended. The cries of the autumn insects filled the room.

“... I heard from someone that makes *kumihimo* once.” Whose voice was that? Kind, hoarse, and gentle, like the narrator of a folktale... “They said, the cord is the flow of time itself. Twisting and entwining, returning and connecting again. That is time. That is...” Autumn. Mountain. The sound of a stream. The smell of water. The sweet taste of barley tea. “That is, *musubi*...”

All of a sudden, a landscape spread out in my head. The *shintai* on top of the mountain. The sake that I offered there.

“If I go there!”

I pulled a map out from under the pile of books and laid it out on the table. A three year old map of Itomori Village, covered in dust from sitting abandoned on the shelves of a small shop. It still showed only the original lake. The place where I offered the sake must have been far away from the meteorite impact zone. If I could get there. If I had that sake.

I grabbed a pencil and searched the map. It was far north of the shrine and looked like a giant crater. I scanned up and down desperately. I felt like I heard senpai’s voice sounding from faraway, but I couldn’t separate my eyes from the map.

... kun. ... Taki-kun.

Someone was calling my name. A girl’s voice.

“Taki-kun, Taki-kun.”

The voice was filled with a sharp sense of urgency, as if its owner were on the verge of crying. The voice quivered, like the lonely twinkling of a faraway star.

“You don’t... remember me?”

And then, I woke up.

... That’s right. This is a *ryokan*. I had fallen asleep with my head on the window side table. I heard Tsukasa and senpai sleeping in their futons across the sliding door. The room was unusually silent. There was no noise from insects outside or cars passing by. The wind was not blowing either.

I sat up. The sound of my clothes rustling seemed so loud I almost startled myself. Outside, faint traces of light had begun to appear. I looked at the *kumihimo* on my wrist. The voice of that girl still echoed fuzzily in my eardrums.

-- Who are you?

I tried asking the unknown girl. Of course, there was no response. But, well, whatever.

To Okudera-senpai and Tsukasa:

There’s somewhere I need to go. Please go back to Tokyo without me. Sorry for being so selfish. I’ll definitely come home soon after you guys. Thanks,

Taki.

I scribbled on a notepad, then, after a little thought, took a five thousand yen bill out of my wallet and left it with the note underneath the teacup.

You who I’ve never met. I’m going to look for you now.

He was quiet and blunt, but still a very kind person, I thought as I watched the aged hands grip the wheel beside me. Yesterday, the one who brought us to Itomori High School and to the library afterwards was the old man from the ramen shop. This morning, despite the very

early call, he listened to my request and picked me up in his car. If this didn't work out, I was planning to hitchhike my way over, but it was questionable whether anyone would be willing to give me a ride to the deserted ruins of a village. I really was lucky to have met this person at Hida.

From the passenger side window, I could see the edge of New Itomori Lake. Half destroyed houses and broken up pieces of asphalt stood submerged in the water. Further offshore, I could see telephone poles and steel beams poking out of the surface. Even though it should have been an unusual sight, I felt like it had just always been that way, perhaps because I had grown used to seeing it on TV or in photographs. So faced with the scene before my eyes, I didn't know what to feel -- should I be angry, should I be sad, should I be scared, or should I lament my own lack of power? The disappearance of an entire town was surely a phenomenon that surpassed any normal person's understanding. Giving up on finding any meaning in the landscape, I looked towards the sky. Gray clouds hung above us, like a colossal lid put over the world by a god.

As we continued north along the lake, we eventually reached a point where we could climb no higher by car. The old man put on the brakes.

"Looks like it might rain," he said, looking through the windshield. "This mountain isn't that steep, but don't push yourself too hard. If something happens don't hesitate to call."

"Yes, sir."

"And also, here." He held out a large bento box. "Eat it up there."

I accepted the heavy gift with both hands. "T-Thank you..." Why are you so nice to me? Oh, by the way, the ramen was super delicious. None of the words I thought of properly found their way out of my mouth, and, in the end, I could only mutter a quiet 'sorry'.

The old man squinted his eyes, took out a cigarette, and lit it. "I don't know anything about your situation," he began as he exhaled smoke. "But that picture of Itomori you drew... that was good."

My chest tightened. Far away, a small clap of thunder roared.

Walking on a narrow, unreliable path, I occasionally stopped to compare the marked up map and my smartphone's GPS. Looks like everything's going alright. The surrounding scenery seemed vaguely familiar, but it was just a mountain I had climbed once in a dream. I couldn't be so sure. For now, it was best to stick to the map.

After getting out of the car, I had maintained a deep bow until the old man completely disappeared from my field of view. As I held that position, Tsukasa and Okudera-senpai's faces popped into my head. The old man and those two had come with me all this way out of worry. My face had probably been ugly the entire time. I probably looked like I was about to cry. I probably looked so weak that, even if they wanted to, they couldn't leave me on my own.

-- I couldn't afford to make that face any longer. I couldn't rely on other people to offer their helping hands any more, I thought as New Itomori Lake began to be visible through the gaps in the trees. Suddenly, a droplet of rain fell onto my face. *Pitter patter*. The leaves around me started to make noise. I put on my hood and ran.

The downpour continued with such force that it seemed to be shaving the ground away. My skin could feel all the warmth in the air being sucked up by the rain.

I was taking shelter in a small cave, eating my bento while waiting for the storm to calm down. There were three *onigiri* as big as my fists, piles of side dishes, thick slices of chashu, and bean sprouts stir fried in sesame oil. Eating the very ramen restaurant-like bento, I could feel my shivering body begin to recover some heat. With every bite of rice, I felt it in my esophagus and my stomach.

Musubi, I thought.

Water, rice, sake... the act of putting something into your body is also called musubi. What enters your body connects with your soul.

That day, I had told myself to remember this even when I woke up. I tried reciting it out loud.

“Twisting and entwining, sometimes returning, and connecting again. That is *musubi*. That is time.”

I glanced at the cord on my wrist.

It still hadn't been cut. We could still connect.

As I continued along the way, the trees began to disappear and I was left surrounded by moss covered boulders. Below my eyes, thin slivers of the lake were visible through the gaps in the thick clouds. I had arrived at the summit.

“... There it is!”

In front of me lay the vast caldera shaped depression and the giant *shintai* tree.

“... It's really there! It wasn't a dream...”

The rain, which had reduced to a drizzle, slid down my cheeks like tears. Wiping my face with my sleeves, I began descending the slope. In place of the stream I remembered, there was now a small pond. The rain might have flooded it, or perhaps enough time had passed since that dream that the land had changed. Either way, the pond now lay between me and the giant tree.

Beyond here is the *other* world.

Someone had told me that before.

So that would make this the Sanzu River. [Japanese Buddhist equivalent of the River Styx]

I stepped into the water. *Splash!* A loud noise rang out, as if I had stomped into a filled bathtub, making me realize just how eerily quiet the place was. Every step I made trudging through the knee deep heavy water made another big splashing sound. I felt like I was dirtying something pure white with my muddy feet. Before I came, this place was in a state of perfect tranquility. I was not welcome. My body temperature once again began to fall, being sucked up by the chilly water. Eventually, I was submerged up to my chest. Still, somehow, I managed to cross all the way.

The huge tree stood with its roots entangled around a large slab of rock. Whether the tree was the *shintai* or the rock was the *shintai*, or whether the two of them together made up the object of worship, I didn't know. Between the roots and the boulder was a flight of stairs leading to a small space about four tatami mats wide.

It was in an even deeper state of silence than outside.

Undoing the zipper by my chest with my frozen hands, I took out my smartphone and made sure it hadn't gotten wet. I turned it on. Each one of those subtle movements produced a violently large amount of volume in the quiet darkness. An out of place electronic sound rang, and my phone lit up.

In that room, neither color nor warmth existed.

The small shrine illuminated by the light was a perfect gray. And on the tiny stone altar sat two ten centimeter tall bottles.

"The sake that we carried..."

I gently touched my hands to their surface. Somehow, I was no longer cold.

"This is the younger sister's," I muttered as I grabbed the left bottle, confirming its shape. As I tried to hold it up, it resisted slightly and made a dry scraping sound. Moss had started to grow on it. "And this is the one I brought."

I sat down and drew my eyes closer, using my phone for lighting. The originally sparkly surface of the porcelain was now covered in moss. It looked like a lot of time had passed. I put into words a thought that had been stuck inside for some time.

"... So I had been switching with her from three years in the past?"

I undid the *kumihimo* sealing the lid shut. Below the lid, there was also a cork.

"We were separated by three years? And the switching stopped because three years ago the meteorite fell and she died?"

I took out the cork. The faint smell of alcohol wafted out of the vase. I poured some sake into the lid.

"Half of her..."

I brought the light closer. The *kuchikamisake* was clear and transparent, with a few small particles floating about here and there. Reflecting the light from my phone, they sparkled inside the liquid.

"*Musubi*. Twisting and entwining, sometimes returning, and connecting again."

I brought the alcohol filled lid closer to my mouth.

"If time can really return... then one more time..."

Let me into her body! Finishing my wish inside my head, I dried the lid in one gulp. My throat rumbled surprisingly loudly. A lump of warmth passed through my body. It began to spread everywhere, as if it had burst open in my stomach.

"..."

But nothing happened.

For a while, I sat still.

My body temperature had risen a little at the unfamiliar sake. A faint lightheadedness had come over me. But that was it.

... No good, huh?

I started to stand up, when suddenly my foot slipped. My vision spun round and round. I thought I was going to fall.

-- That's strange.

I was surely about to fall flat on my back, but no matter how long I waited for it the impact never came. My field of view slowed its rotation, and gradually the ceiling became visible. I still held my phone in my left hand. Its light illuminated the ceiling.

“... Comet!” I shouted instinctively.

There, pictured on the ceiling, was a giant comet. It was an old, old drawing carved into the rock. A colossal comet, dragging its long tail across the sky. Red and blue pigments shone as they received light. And then, slowly, the picture began to float off the ceiling.

I opened my eyes wide.

The picture, the drawn comet, was falling towards me.

Gradually, it approached until it was right in front of my eyes. It started to burn up due to its friction with the atmosphere, and the hunk of stone turned to glass, sparkling like a precious jewel. The picture appeared in such clear detail to me.

My fallen over head finally collided with the stone floor, and simultaneously, the comet collided with my body.

Chapter 5: Memory

I fall and fall.

Or am I climbing?

As a vague floating sensation surrounds me, a comet shines bright in the night sky.

The comet suddenly splits, and one of the broken shards comes falling down.

The meteorite falls onto a village in the mountains. Many people die. A lake is created, and the village crumbles into ruins.

Time passes, and eventually another village pops up around the lake. Fish fill the lake. The iron from the meteorite brings prosperity. The village flourishes. After another long passage of time, the comet comes again.

The star falls once more. People die once more.

Ever since humans have inhabited the archipelago, that sequence of events has repeated itself twice.

People tried to keep that in their memory. Tried to somehow pass on knowledge of those events to the next generation. Using something that lasts longer than words. Represent the comet as a dragon. As a string. Put the splitting comet into the moves of a dance.

Once again, a long passage of time.

The crying of a newborn baby becomes audible.

"Your name is Mitsuha." The gentle voice of a mother.

And then, the umbilical cord is cut, severing the connection that held them together as one. Just like that, a new person falls into the world.

"You two are my treasures." "You're a big sister now."

The conversation of a young couple. Before long, a younger sister to Mitsuha is born. As if in exchange for the newfound happiness, the mother falls ill.

"When is mommy coming back from the hospital?" the younger sister asks innocently, but the elder sibling already knows that their mother won't be coming back.

People inevitably die. Yet still, it is not so simple to accept that.

"I couldn't save her..." the father laments deeply. There was nothing he loved more than his wife, and there never will be. The appearance of his daughters, which constantly grow to resemble her more and more closely, are both a blessing and a curse.

"What good will keeping up this shrine thing do for me?" "A son-in-law has no right to be saying that!"

The father and grandmother's quarrels grow worse day by day.

"The one I loved was Futaba. Not Miyamizu Shrine!" "Leave!"

Both the father and grandmother have passed the age where they can reorder the importance of those things precious to them.

Unable to bear it any longer, the father leaves the house.

"Mitsuha, Yotsuha, you'll be together with Grandma from now on."

With the sound of weights resounding throughout the house, the life of the three women begins.

The days go by peacefully, but the feeling of having been thrown away by her father remains inside Mitsuha as an uncleanable stain.

-- What is this?

-- Mitsuha's memory?

I had been caught up helplessly in a muddy flow, the flow of Mitsuha's time.

Then came the part that I knew: the days of our switching.

The Tokyo that Mitsuha sees carries all the vibrant excitement of a foreign country. Even though her eyes should be no different biologically than mine, the world she sees is entirely different.

"Ah, so nice..."

I hear her mutter.

"They must be together right about now."

The day of my date with Okudera-senpai.

"I'm gonna go to Tokyo for a bit," she says to her little sister.

Tokyo?

That night, Mitsuha opens the door to her grandmother's room. "Grandma, I have something I want you to do..."

Large bunches of Mitsuha's hair fall to the ground. I do not know this Mitsuha.

"It's supposed to be the brightest today."

Teshigawara and Saya-chin invite her to watch the comet.

No, Mitsuha! I yell.

From behind the mirror. As the sound of the wind chime. In the breeze that blows through her hair.

Mitsuha! Don't go there!

Run away from the village before the comet falls!

But no matter how I try to convey my voice, it fails to reach Mitsuha.

The day of the festival, Mitsuha and her friends gaze up at the comet, now closer than the moon.

The comet splits, and the fragments become an array of infinite shooting stars, sparkling as they trail across the sky. A single massive lump of rock becomes a meteorite and begins its descent.

They simply watch, spellbound by the beauty before them.

Mitsuha, run!

I scream at the top of my lungs.

Mitsuha, run! Run!! Mitsuha! Mitsuha! Mitsuha!!!

And then, the star falls.

Chapter 6: Reenactment

The moment I woke up, I *knew*.

I jolted up and looked at my body. Thin fingers. Familiar pajamas. A bulge at the chest. "Mitsuha..."

This voice. The slender throat. The blood and flesh and bones and skin. All of Mitsuha was here, warm and alive.

"... Alive!"

I hugged myself. Tears flowed. Like a broken faucet, Mitsuha's eyes let forth a stream of large droplets. The joy that the warmth of those tears brought me made me cry even more. The heart caged inside my ribs jumped excitedly. I rolled up my knees and pressed my cheeks against them. Wanting to embrace the entirety of Mitsuha's body, I curled up as tight as I could.

Mitsuha.

Mitsuha. Mitsuha.

It was a miracle, a miracle that had weaved its way through the vast realm of possibility and arrived here, now.

"... Onee-chan, what are you doing?" Yotsuha stood next to the opened sliding door.

"Ah... little sister," I mumbled in my sobbing voice. Yotsuha was also alive, staring dumbfoundedly at her big sister fondling her own boobs even as tears and snot ran down her face. "Youtshaaaa!"

I dashed towards Yotsuha, going in for a hug. Unfortunately, however, I was met with a door slammed shut right in front of my nose.

"Grandma, grandma!" I could hear yelling as a pair of feet rapidly descended the staircase. "Mitsuha's finally gone crazy! She's completely broken!"

What a rude little girl, complaining even though I've crossed space and time to come save this town!

When I got dressed and came downstairs, an NHK anchor was talking cheerfully on the TV. I stared at it, standing with a wide intimidating stance in order to shake off the cramped feeling of wearing a skirt, something I had not felt in quite a while.

"Tiamat's Comet, which has been visible with the naked eye for the past week, will reach its closest approach to Earth at about 7:40 tonight. It is expected that the comet will be its brightest at this time. At the long awaited climax of this celestial spectacle, which occurs only once every 1200 years, various celebrations..."

"... Tonight! There's still time!" My body started trembling in excitement.

"Good morning Mitsuha. Yotsuha left first today." Turning around, I saw Grandma standing there.

"Grandma! Looking great!" I instinctively ran up to her. Judging by the teapot she held on a plate, she was probably planning to have some tea in the living room.

"Hm? You..." Grandma took off her glasses and examined my face intently. "... You're not Mitsuha, are you?"

“Wha...” How!? A feeling of guilt came over me, like the one you get when something bad you did that you were sure no one would ever find out about gets exposed. But wait, this might actually be convenient. “Grandma... you knew?”

Not seeming particularly perturbed, Grandma sat down and said, “Nope. But watching you recently made me remember. When I was young, I remember I had a strange dream.”

Seriously!? Well this’ll be easy to clear up then. I’d expect no less from the family of Japanese folktales. As I also took a seat by the table, Grandma poured me some tea.

Sipping her cup, she continued speaking. “It really was a strange dream. Or, rather than a dream, it was more like someone else’s life. It was like I had become an unknown boy in an unknown city.”

I gulped hard. Exactly the same as us.

“But those dreams stopped suddenly one day. All I remember now is the vague fact that I had a strange dream. Who I became during those dreams or any details like that have disappeared from my memory.”

“Disappear...”

I repeated that word, as if it were the fateful name of a grave illness. I, too, forgot Mitsuha’s name for a period of time. I had started to believe that it was all just a delusion. Grandma’s wrinkle riddled face bore a slight tone of loneliness.

“So treasure what you are experiencing now. No matter how special it is, a dream is still a dream in the end. Once you wake up, it will eventually disappear. My mother, your mother, and I all had a similar period in our lives.”

“Then... could that mean?”

A sudden thought popped into my mind. Maybe this was a duty passed down through the Miyamizu family. In order to prevent the disaster that rears its face every 1200 years, they were given the power to communicate through dreams with someone a few years in the future. The job of the shrine maiden. A warning system that leaped from generation to generation through the Miyamizu lineage.

“The dreams of all of those people from the Miyamizu family... they may have all been leading up to today!” I faced Grandma straight in the eye and spoke assertively. “Grandma, listen.” She raised her face. Her expression remained unreadable to me, yielding no hint as to how she was taking my words. “Tonight, a meteorite will fall on Itomori Village and everyone will die.” Now, her eyebrows furrowed in suspicion.

No one would ever believe that, Grandma had responded. It seemed like such a normal reaction, unbecoming of mystical Grandma, I thought as I ran down the path to school. Believing the bit about switching bodies during dreams, but not the part about a meteorite falling? What the heck, Grandma?

Since it had long passed the point of being tardy, there was barely anyone around. The voices of the mountain birds echoed back and forth. An ordinary, peaceful village morning. I had to take care of business on my own, it looked like.

“I won’t let a single person die!” I proclaimed to myself. I sped up my running. Only half a day until impact.

“Mitsuha, y-your hair!”

I had just taken a seat at my desk, and Teshigawara and Saya-chin were already gaping at me with astounded looks.

“Ah, my hair? Did it look better before?” I asked, brushing the edge of my shoulder length hair with my hand. Mitsuha had suddenly cut a good chunk of her long hair off recently. I like long black hair so it doesn’t sit too well with me, but anyways, now’s not the time for that! “Anyways!” I looked at Teshigawara, whose mouth was gaping so wide it was almost emitting sound, and Saya-chin, whose eyes seemed to be prying into my soul, then continued. “Everyone’s going to die tonight!”

Instantly, the ambient commotion in the classroom abruptly came to a halt. The stares of all my classmates poured onto me.

“M-Mitsuha, what the heck are you saying!?”

Saya-chin stood up, flustered, and Teshigawara grabbed my arm. As they dragged me out of the classroom, I finally came to the sensible conclusion that obviously they wouldn’t believe me. Just like Grandma said, suddenly telling people to believe such a ridiculous claim wouldn’t go too well. Carried away by the excitement of finally being able to switch again, I had thought it would all work out somehow, but maybe it might be a little more trouble than expected.

-- Or apparently not, at least with regards to Teshigawara.

“... Mitsuha, are you serious?”

“Yes, I’ve been telling you! Tonight, Tiamat’s Comet will split and become a meteorite, which will most likely fall on this village. I can’t say where I’m getting this information from, but my sources are reliable, I promise!”

“... This is big trouble!”

“Wait a second, are you taking this seriously Tesshi? I didn’t know you were *that* much of an idiot.” Saya-chin, however, wasn’t as easy to convince. “What sources could you possibly have, anyway? The CIA? NASA? Reliable? What are you, playing pretend spy? Mitsuha, what’s gotten into you!?”

Thinking desperately of some way to convince the logical, common sense following Saya-chin, I took out all the cash in Mitsuha’s wallet. “Please, Saya-chin. You can buy anything you want with this, just listen to me!” I put on my most serious face and lowered my head in a begging gesture.

Saya-chin stared at me, looking somewhat surprised. “For super stingy you to say such a thing...”

Huh? Mitsuha? Stingy? That’s funny, I recall Mitsuha throwing away heaps of my money like an idiot!

Saya-chin gave a sigh of resignation. “... I have no idea what’s going on, but I guess I’ll at least listen to what you have to say. Tesshi, give me the key to your bike.”

While complaining about how all of Mitsuha’s money could buy nothing more than a few pieces of candy, Saya-chin started walking towards the entrance. Well that’s good. The cash wasn’t enough, but it looks like at least my sincerity was conveyed to her.

“I’m going to the convenience store. Tesshi, watch over Mitsuha. She’s not too normal today.”

While Saya-chin was off at the store, Teshigawara and I snuck into an unused room and started creating an evacuation plan for the village. The overall goal was to relocate the roughly 500 people living in 188 houses within the destruction range to a safe area before the time of meteorite impact. The first option to pop into our heads was a mass evacuation broadcast.

Hijack the Prime Minister's residence, hijack the National Diet Building, hijack the NHK Shibuya broadcast center, no wait, wouldn't it be enough to hijack the office in Takayama? After a couple minutes of totally ridiculous suggestions, we realized that there wasn't even a guarantee that everyone in the town would have their TVs or radios on, especially since many people would be out for the autumn festival. Back to square one.

"... The wireless disaster warning system!" Teshigawara shouted out suddenly.

"Wireless disaster warning system?"

"Huh? Don't tell me you don't know. The speakers all around the whole town?"

"Ah... oh, the one that starts talking in the morning and evenings? Who was born and whose funeral happened and stuff."

"Yeah, everyone will definitely be able to hear that, outside or indoors. If we could get control of that!"

"Hm, but how? That's broadcasted from the town hall, right? Will they let us use it if we ask?"

"Of course not."

"Then what's the plan? Hijack the town hall? Well, that is a whole lot more realistic than hijacking NHK..."

"Hehehe." With a somewhat creepy laugh, Teshigawara started typing something into his phone. He sure does seem to be excited about this. "We can use this!"

I peered at the smartphone screen held out to me. An explanation of 'overlapping frequencies'.

"Huh... is this for real?" Teshigawara nodded proudly in response. "Why do you even know this stuff, Tesshi?"

"Well you know, I'm always thinking about this kinda stuff before I fall asleep. Destruction of the village, overthrowing of the school. Everyone else does stuff like that too, right?"

"Eh..." I was a little creeped out, but... "Anyways, this is great! It might work!" I said and, without thinking, wrapped my arm around Teshigawara's shoulder.

"H-Hey, don't get so close!"

"Huh?" He was red up to his ears. "Ooh~ what's with the blushing Tesshi, hm?" I laughed teasingly, looking up at his face from below. Looks like Mitsuha was doing better than I thought. I pushed my body into his a little more. The two of us were sitting on an old sofa, with Teshigawara right up against the wall, so there was nowhere to run.

"Hey, Mitsuha, knock it off!" Teshigawara twisted his body in resistance. He is a guy, after all. Well, I am too. Suddenly, he climbed up onto the back of the sofa and yelled, "Stop! It's not good to have a kid before marriage!"

"Huh..." Looking up, I saw that the red had crept all the way up to the top of his shaven head, sweat was dripping down from his face, and he looked like he was about to cry. "Hahaha! Tesshi..."

Unable to help myself, I broke out into laughter. This guy was definitely someone I could trust. I had always thought of him as a friend, but now I realized I wanted to meet him in person, as myself, and talk. Me, Mitsuha, Teshigawara, Saya-chin, Tsukasa, Takagi, Okudera-senpai... if we could all be together, without a doubt it would be fun.

“Sorry, Tesshi. I was just so excited that you believed me,” I told the sulking Teshigawara, trying to hold in my laughter. “Can you help me with the rest of the evacuation plan?”

Still red in the face, Teshigawara gave a serious nod in return.

When this is all over, I'll come visit this guy too, I thought to myself.

“B-B-Bomb!?” shrieked Saya-chin as she ate a mini shortcake in a plastic wrapper.

“Well, to be precise, water gel explosive. Something like dynamite.” Teshigawara, stuffing potato chips into his mouth, explained proudly.

Meanwhile, I was eating my snack of choice, Marble Chocolate. Spread out on the desk was the large amount of convenience store food Saya-chin had bought. It felt kinda like a party. And as we enjoyed our junk food, Teshigawara and I explained our carefully devised evacuation plan to Saya-chin using the map in front of us. Some sort of suspense building BGM would be perfect for our strategy briefing.

After gulping down a 500mL carton of coffee milk, Teshigawara continued. “There are a ton of explosives in my dad’s company’s warehouse for construction use. We don’t have to worry about anyone noticing, so we can take as much as we want.”

“And next,” I said while opening a melon bread wrapper. I was really hungry for some reason, and on top of that, anything I ate while in Mitsuha’s body tasted unusually good.

“H-Hijack?” Saya-chin screamed again in disbelief.

Teshigawara explained, this time while eating curry bread. “With the way this village’s wireless disaster system is set up, it’s easy to take over if you know the right frequencies. The speakers activate just by detecting a certain frequency overlapped with your voice.”

I took over, with my melon bread in one hand. “So basically, we can send evacuation instructions to the entire town from the school’s broadcasting room.” Pointing to the map, I traced my finger around a circle we drew in, representing an area roughly 1.2km in diameter centered at Miyamizu Shrine. “This is the expected blast zone of the meteorite. The high school is out here.” I tapped the position of Itomori High School on the map. “So we can make the campus our evacuation site.”

“This...” Saya-chin began to speak. “This’ll make us criminals!” she complained while popping the strawberry which she had saved for last into her mouth.

“If we don’t commit any crimes we won’t be able to move the people in this zone,” I responded coolly, sweeping aside the Marble Chocolates scattered across the map. Criminals or not, we just had to get the people within this circle outside of it by tonight.

“Mitsuha, it’s like you’re a different person...”

I laughed and took a big bite out of my melon bread. Whenever I’m in this body my speech turns a little more feminine, but I had already given up trying to copy Mitsuha’s behavior long ago. As long as these guys were safe, nothing else mattered. As long as they lived, everything else would figure itself out.

“Oh, by the way, you’ll be doing the broadcasting, Saya-chin,” I informed her with a smile.

“Why me!?”

“You’re in the broadcasting club, aren’t you?”

“Also, your sister broadcasts for the town hall. Just casually ask her for the wireless system frequencies,” Teshigawara added.

“Ehhh!?”

Ignoring Saya-chin’s protests, Teshigawara pointed to himself happily. “And I’m in charge of the explosives!”

“And lastly, I need to go meet with the mayor,” I said, pointing to myself.

Teshigawara explained to the once again speechless Saya-chin. “We can probably start the evacuation, but in the end the only way to get all 188 households evacuated is to have the town officials and fire department step in.”

“That’s why we need to convince the mayor,” I said. “If I play this right, I’m sure he’ll listen to his own daughter.”

Teshigawara crossed his arms and nodded repeatedly, praising his own perfect plan. I felt the same way. Although it may seem a bit wild, I couldn’t see any other way.

“Ah...” Saya-chin looked our way. Whether she was impressed with our plan or amazed at our stupidity, or both, I couldn’t tell. “Well it does seem like you guys thought all this out... but this is just hypothetical, right?”

“Eh?” Her totally unexpected question put me at a loss for words. “Ah... not really hypothetical, more like...” If Saya-chin wasn’t on board, this whole plan would fall apart. I searched for the right words.

“Look at this!” Teshigawara shouted suddenly, holding out his phone. “Do you know how Itomori Lake was formed?”

Saya-chin and I peered at the screen. On what looked like the village’s official website, a large heading read ‘Origin of Itomori Lake’. Along with it were the phrases ‘The meteorite lake from 1200 years ago’ and ‘extremely rare in Japan’.

“Meteorite lake! At least once before, a meteorite fell on this town!”

Hearing Teshigawara say those words made something inside my head click. Before I fully realized what that something was, my mouth was already moving. “T-That’s it! That’s why...”

That’s why there was a picture of a comet back there. It all became clear to me. Tiamat’s Comet, which comes every 1200 years. Itomori Lake was formed by a meteorite impact 1200 years ago. A meteorite comes every 1200 years with the comet. The disaster is predictable, and therefore avoidable. That picture was a warning. I felt like I had just gained an unimaginable ally. My excitement rendered me unable to sit still. Everything, everything had been in the making for over a thousand years!

“Nice find, Tesshi!” I held out my fist, and Teshigawara bumped it with an enthusiastic cheer. This could work. It would work!

“Let’s do it guys!” Teshigawara and I turned towards Saya-chin and harmonized so loudly our spit flew everywhere.

“... What are you talking about?”

A rough voice, like the feeling of cutting thick cardboard with scissors. I was really starting to panic. In an attempt to avoid being overwhelmed, I raised my voice in return.

“I’m saying that we should evacuate the people just in case--”

“Be quiet for a second.”

He said those words at a normal volume, yet they had enough force to immediately cut me off. Mitsuha’s father, Mayor Miyamizu, closed his eyes and leaned back in his office’s leather chair, looking rather annoyed. As he moved around, the thick leather made a creaking sound. After a moment, he took a deep breath and shifted his gaze to outside the window. Leaves shook about in the afternoon sun’s bright rays.

“A comet will break into two and fall on this town? Over five hundred people may die?”

He spent a while tapping his fingers on his desk before finally turning to face me. Sweat poured out from the underside of my knees. Apparently, when Mitsuha is nervous she sweats there.

“I know it’s hard to believe, but I have evid--”

“How dare you waste my time with such nonsense!” he yelled suddenly. “I guess delusions run in the Miyamizu family.” Frowning deeply, the mayor muttered softly, as if talking to himself. Then, he shot a piercing gaze straight into my eyes and said, “If you’re serious, then you must be crazy.”

“Wha--”

I failed to string words together. Not a single drop of all that confidence I had been brimming with just thirty minutes ago at our strategy meeting remained. The anxiety of going into uncharted territory without a plan grew worse and worse. Wait, no. This is not a delusion, and I am not crazy. I--

“I’ll arrange for a ride.” The mayor’s voice suddenly became filled with worry, and, as he dialed someone on his phone, he said, “Get checked by a doctor at the city hospital. After that, if you still have something to say, we can talk.”

Those words shook me with great discomfort. He was really treating me, his own daughter, as a crazy person. When I realized that, my entire body grew cold as if frozen. My head alone grew hotter and hotter, like something had just ignited: anger.

“-- Don’t give me that bullshit!”

I screamed. The mayor’s eyes opened wide. Before I knew it, I had grabbed him by his tie. The phone fell to the side of the desk, continuing to make a faint ringing sound.

“Ah...”

I loosened my grip. Slowly, our faces separated. The mayor’s mouth remained open, shaking slightly from surprise or bewilderment. We didn’t break eye contact. Every pore in my body had started to give off sweat.

“... Mitsuha.” Finally, he spoke. “... no... who are you?”

Those words forever remained in my ears with an unpleasant feeling, like a small bug that had ridden its way in on the wind and gotten stuck.

I could hear the faint ringing of a hammer coming from somewhere. During this time, the interval between noon and dusk, the extreme quiet of the town causes even the most far off

noises to be audible. *Clang, clang.* As I trudged up a sloping path overlooking the lake, I pictured nails being hammered into a piece of thick wood to match the noise. Iron nails, being pushed into dark and narrow holes in the wood, only to slowly rust away. They were probably getting ready for the autumn festival at Miyamizu Shrine, I thought as I gazed at the wooden lanterns lining the roads.

“Cya later then.”

From above, I heard a child’s voice. Looking up, I saw three kids wearing backpacks waving to each other at the top of the hill.

“Yeah, see you at the festival.”

“Meet up in front of the shrine.”

After parting with their friend, a boy and a girl started coming down towards me, both about the same age as Yotsuha.

-- The shrine. The place of impact.

“Don’t go there!” As the boy passed by me, I grabbed him by the shoulder. “Run away from the town! Tell your friends too!”

Fear began to show in the boy’s face. “W-Who are you?”

As he batted my arms away as hard as he could, I came back to my senses.

“Onee-chan!”

Yotsuha came running down with a worried look. The other two kids made a run for it. This is no good. I’m just a suspicious character.

“Onee-chan, what did you do to them!?” Yotsuha asked as she grabbed hold of both my arms.

-- But what should I do?

I looked at Yotsuha’s face. It awaited my response with uneasiness. If Mitsuha were here...

“If Mitsuha were here... could she have persuaded him? Did everything go wrong because of me?” Ignoring Yotsuha’s bewildered looks, I continued. “Yotsuha. Before dusk, take Grandma and leave the village.”

“Eh?”

“If you stay here you’ll die!”

“Eeeh? Onee-chan, what are you talking about!?” Yotsuha raised her voice, as if desperately trying to push back my words. “Get a hold of yourself!” Her eyes began to moisten. She was scared. Peering into my eyes, standing up as tall as she could, she said, “Suddenly going off to Tokyo yesterday... onee-chan, you’ve been so weird lately!”

“Eh...” A wave of uneasiness swept over me. Tokyo...? “Yotsuha, did you just say Tokyo?”

“Heey, Mitsuha!”

Saya-chin’s voice. Looking over, I spotted Saya-chin riding on the back of Teshigawara’s bike, waving to me. With an asphalt scraping sound, they came to a stop.

“How did your talk with your dad go!?” Teshigawara asked eagerly.

I couldn’t respond. I was completely lost. I didn’t know what to think anymore. The mayor didn’t believe my story one bit. Moreover, he asked his own daughter ‘who are you?’. I made

him ask that. Did it fail because I'm the one in Mitsuha's body? Where is Mitsuha now? According to Yotsuha, she went to Tokyo yesterday. Why? When, exactly, was yesterday?

"Mitsuha?" Teshigawara questioned suspiciously.

"What happened to your sister?" Sayaka asked Yotsuha.

Where is Mitsuha? Where am I?

-- What if.

I looked up. Beyond the sea of houses, contours of mountains piled densely on top of each other. And farther beyond that lay the ridgeline of a single mountain, obscured in a blue, hazy mist. The mountain I climbed. The *shintai* on the summit. The place where I drank the *kuchikamisake*. A cool breeze from the lake blew by, shaking Mitsuha's shortened hair. The strands, as if someone else's fingertips, gently caressed my cheeks.

"Is she... there?" I muttered.

"Huh? What what? What's over there?"

Yotsuha, Saya-chin, and Teshigawara all followed my gaze. Mitsuha, if you're there--

"Tesshi, give me your bike!"

Without giving him a chance to respond, I grabbed hold of the handlebars, straddled the seat, and kicked off the ground.

"Wha, hey Mitsuha!"

The seat was too high. Pedaling standing up, I dashed up the hill.

"Mitsuha, what about the plan!?" Teshigawara screamed.

"Do everything according to plan! I'm counting on you!"

My shouts echoed throughout the quiet town. Mitsuha's voice, cut off from her body, reflected off of the mountains and the lake, filling the air for a moment. As if trying to chase that voice, I pedaled as hard as I could.

Someone is tapping my cheek. The tapping is gentle, using only the tip of the middle finger, so as to not hurt me. The fingertip is very cold, as if it had been gripping ice just seconds ago. Who in the world is doing this to me in my sleep?

I woke up.

Huh?

Darkness. Is it still night?

Someone tapped my cheek again. No, it was water all along. Droplets of water had been falling onto my cheek. Sitting up, I finally realized.

"... I'm Taki-kun!" I said out loud.

After climbing up the narrow stone staircase, I was met by the piercing rays of the evening sun. Taki-kun's eyes started to water, maybe because he had been in the darkness for a long time. Stepping outside confirmed my suspicion: I was on the summit of the *shintai* mountain.

Why was Taki-kun here?

Confused, I left the shadow of the colossal tree and started wandering around the basin. Taki-kun was wearing a thick parka and trekking shoes with thick rubber bottoms. It must have rained just recently. The ground was soft and wet, and water droplets dotted the short blades of

grass. The sky, however, was a clear blue. Thin clouds sparkled with a golden light as the wind carried them off.

And, unlike the sky, my memory was hazy. *I* arrived at the bottom of the slope marking the basin's edge, still unable to remember a thing. *I* looked up the hill. Right now, *I* am standing in a large caldera like depression. If *I* climb up there, *I'll* be at the summit of the mountain. *I* started upwards. As *I* climbed, *I* scoured my memory. *I* tried to recall what *I* was doing before this. At last, *I* grasped the first few fragments.

Matsuribayashi [type of music played at festivals]. Yukata. My face and shortened hair reflected in the mirror.

-- That's right.

Yesterday was the autumn festival, and *I* went out with Tesshi and Saya-chin in a yukata. It was the day when the comet was supposed to be the brightest, so we wanted to watch it together. Yes, that's right. For some reason it felt like a memory from long in the past, but that was yesterday.

Tesshi and Saya-chin had been pretty surprised at my new hairstyle. Tesshi's mouth had gaped so wide it almost made noise. They were so shocked *I* almost felt bad for them. The whole way up to our viewing spot, they whispered things like 'maybe it's heartbreak after all' and 'what kind of guess is that... what are you, an old man from the Showa?' sneakily behind my back.

As we reached the top and turned around the final bend, straight ahead of us in the night sky, a giant comet suddenly appeared. The tail trailing behind it sparkled with a dazzling emerald green, and the front was more radiant than the moon. If *I* strained my eyes, *I* could see fine particles of dust dancing around it. The three of us completely forgot about conversation and simply gazed at the spectacle, utterly spellbound.

At some point, *I* noticed that the head of the comet had spilt into two. Of the two giant, bright pieces, one of them seemed to keep moving closer and closer. After a while, thin shooting stars began to sparkle as they flew alongside the head. It was as if stars were raining from the sky. Or not as if. That night, stars truly did rain from the sky. The night sky held within it incredible beauty, like a scene straight out of a dream.

Finally, *I* arrived at the top of the slope. The chilly wind bit into my skin as it blew by. Below my eyes, clouds spread out every which way, forming a glittering carpet in the sky. And below that was the faint blue shadow of Itomori Lake.

Huh?

That's weird.

I was shivering furiously, as if *I* were surrounded by a block of ice.

Somewhere along the way, *I* had grown frightened.

I was so scared, anxious, forlorn, hopeless that *I* felt something might happen to my head. Cold sweat poured out of my skin, as if a cork had popped loose.

What if.

I might be going crazy. *I* might have broken some time ago without realizing it.

Scared. Scared. *I* tried to scream, but the only thing that came out of my throat was sticky air. Against my will, my eyebrows began to open wide. My dried eyeballs could do nothing but continue to stare fixed on the lake. *I* knew. *I* noticed.

Itomori Village was gone.

Covering Itomori Lake was a new, larger, double lobed lake.

-- It was obvious this would happen, some part inside of me thought. If something like that fell. A lump of rock that hot and that massive.

That's right.

At that moment, /.

As if my joints had silently broken, / suddenly fell onto my knees.

/... at that moment.

The air that spilled from my throat barely became sound.

"... at that moment, /..."

All at once, Taki-kun's memories flooded in. The comet disaster that destroyed a village. Taki-kun, who actually lived in Tokyo three years in the future. By the time we started switching, / was already gone. The night the stars rained from the sky. At that moment, /...

"Died..."

Where do memories reside?

In the synapse wiring of the brain? Do our eyeballs and fingertips also contain memories? Or is there a formless, invisible cluster of spirit somewhere which holds them? Something like what people call the heart, the mind, or the soul. Can you remove them, like a memory card?

A little while ago, the asphalt had ended, leaving me pedaling and pedaling the bike up an unpaved mountain path. The low lying sun blinked on and off in the narrow gaps between the dense trees. Mitsuha's body emitted an endless flow of sweat, causing her bangs to stick to her forehead. As I pedaled, I wiped my hair away and the sweat with it.

Mitsuha's soul. It must be inside my real body. And my soul is here, inside of Mitsuha's.

But even now, we are together.

Mitsuha, or at least the fragments of her spirit, are here. For example, Mitsuha's fingertips have memorized the shape and textures of her school uniform. When I put on that uniform, it just feels natural. When Mitsuha's eyes spot a friend, they become relieved. Happy. I can tell who Mitsuha likes and who she doesn't just from that feeling. When I look at Grandma, memories I should have no knowledge of float vaguely into my head, like a movie being played on a half broken projector. Body, memory, and emotion are all inseparably *connected*.

-- Taki-kun.

I heard Mitsuha's voice coming from somewhere inside my body.

Taki-kun. Taki-kun.

Her voice was filled with a sharp sense of urgency, as if she were on the verge of crying. It quivered, like the lonely twinkling of a faraway star.

The blurry picture began to take shape.

Taki-kun, Mitsuha called.

"You don't... remember me?"

And then I remembered everything: Mitsuha's memories from that day.

That day, Mitsuha skipped school and got on a train.

Her first destination: a large station which had connections to the Shinkansen line to Tokyo. The local trains on the way were empty, despite it being the morning commute rush.

"I'm gonna go to Tokyo for a bit."

After leaving the house in the morning, on the way to school, she had suddenly told Yotsuha that.

"Ehh? Now? Why!?" Yotsuha, in shock, asked.

"Umm... a date?"

"Eh! You have a boyfriend in Tokyo!?"

"Umm... not *my* date..." Unable to come up with a good explanation, Mitsuha started running off. "I'll be back by night, so don't worry!"

Gazing at the scenery flying past the windows of the Shinkansen, Mitsuha thought. What do I want to do if I go to Taki-kun and Okudera-senpai's date? Of course all three of us can't just hang out together. In the first place, I've never been to Tokyo before, so will I even be able to meet Taki-kun? Even if I do find him, maybe it would be weird to suddenly go up and talk to him. Would he be surprised? Annoyed?

Oblivious to Mitsuha's troubles, the Shinkansen undramatically slid smoothly into Tokyo station. Struggling to not be swept away by the waves of people, Mitsuha tried calling me. The phone number you have dialed cannot be reached at this time... She hung up. As expected, it didn't work.

I'll never find him, she thought.

Still, she tried her best, studying the map of the surrounding area as if it were a problem on a test before heading out into the city.

But, she thought, if I *do* meet him...

She rode on the Yamanote Line. Rode on the city buses. Walked. Rode the trains again. Walked again.

What should I do? Maybe I would be a nuisance after all. It would probably be awkward... or maybe--

A television on the streets displayed the words 'Tiamat's Comet: Closest Approach Tomorrow'.

Or maybe, if we do meet, maybe, just maybe...

Tired of walking, Mitsuha stood on a pedestrian bridge and gazed at all the shiny buildings as she thought, or rather, prayed.

If we do meet, maybe Taki-kun will be at least a little bit happy.

Mitsuha set out again, and thought some more.

If I keep walking around aimlessly like this, I have zero chance of ever finding him. There might be no chance of me finding him, but one thing I know for certain. If we meet, we'll know instantly. You were the one inside me. And I was the one inside you.

That alone she was absolutely convinced of, like a simple addition problem that anyone would 100% get right.

The flashlight-like evening sun, visible through the gaps of the train station's roof, sunk lower and lower. Mitsuha was sitting on a bench, resting her aching feet. The sunlight, much dimmer than it would be in Itomori Village, reflected hazily in her eyes. A musical chime sounded, followed by an automated voice: soon, a local Chiba bound train will arrive at the

fourth line. A yellow train slid to a stop in front of the platform. The slight wind caused by its arrival shook Mitsuha's hair gently. She stared blankly into the windows of the train.

Suddenly, she gulped.

She jolted up.

In one of the windows that just went by, *he* was there.

Mitsuha broke out in a sprint. The train stopped, and she soon caught up to that window. She had a hard time spotting him amidst the evening crowds. With a noise like the exhaling of a giant, the doors opened. She faltered for a moment at the waves of people spilling out from the train, but soon gathered the resolve to push herself through the masses, sweat dampening the underside of her knees as she went. With another giant's breath, the doors closed. The train set out in motion. Mitsuha inched forward slowly, repeatedly muttering 'excuse me'. Then, at long last, she stopped in front of a particular young boy. All the noise seemed to disappear from her surroundings.

Before her eyes was me from three years ago, still a middle school student.

I can't climb any farther by bike.

As soon as that thought passed through my mind, the front wheel bumped into a tree root and slid out of control. Instinctively, I grabbed hold of a nearby tree trunk as the bike fell away from my body, landing on the ground about three meters below with a loud crash. The wheels were all bent out of shape. Sorry, Teshigawara, I mumbled as I started running up the path.

Why did I forget? Why couldn't I remember all this time?

As I ran, I concentrated on the memories welling up from within me.

Mitsuha. Three years ago, on that day, you--

-- Taki-kun. Taki-kun. Taki-kun.

Mitsuha repeated my name silently to herself. She didn't know how to approach me, who was sitting right in front of her yet failed to notice. What kind of expression should she approach me with? She thought and thought with a desperate seriousness. And then, putting on her best smile, she spoke.

"Taki-kun."

Middle school me, surprised at having my name called out of the blue, looked up. We were about the same height. Straight in front of my eyes were another pair, open wide and starting to water.

"Huh?"

"Um, I..."

Maintaining her smile of desperation, Mitsuha pointed to herself. I remained confused.

"Eh?"

"... you don't... remember me?"

"... who are you?"

A faint shriek escaped her lips. Her face grew red. She cast her gaze down and, in a barely audible voice, mumbled, "Ah... sorry..."

The train shook violently. All the other passengers managed to keep their balance, but Mitsuha alone stumbled and crashed into me. Her hair made contact with my nose, transmitting a faint smell of shampoo. Sorry, she mumbled again. What a weird girl, middle school me thought. Mitsuha desperately racked her brain, which had fallen into a state of chaos. You are Taki-kun, yet why? Why don't you recognize me? An awkward silence fell between us.

The next station is Yotsuya, the announcer said, and Mitsuha felt somewhat relieved yet incredibly sad at the same time. But she couldn't stay there any longer. The doors opened, and Mitsuha disembarked the train along with a few others. Watching her back move farther and farther away, a thought suddenly occurred to me. Was this strange girl someone I should know? Moved by an unexplainable yet very intense urge, I yelled out, "Wait! Your name?"

Mitsuha turned around, but the waves of people continued to carry her farther away. She undid the *kumihimo* tying her hair together, held it out to me, then screamed.

"Mitsuha!"

Instinctively, I stretched out my hand. The band was a vivid orange, like the slender rays of the evening sun shining into the dim train car. I thrust my body into the crowd and firmly grasped it.

"My name... is Mitsuha!"

That day three years ago. You came to meet me.

I finally realized that.

A stranger talked to me on the train. This whole time, I had pushed that off to the side as just a slightly abnormal occurrence. But Mitsuha had approached me that day with a whirl of emotions in her heart. And she returned home to her village deeply hurt inside, causing her to cut her hair.

My chest tightened. There was nothing I could do about it now. I simply ran and ran like a madman. Sweat and dirt caked my face and body. All of a sudden, the trees around me were replaced by moss covered rocks, and below my eyes the clouds spread out like a golden carpet in the sky.

At long last, I had arrived at the summit.

I took a deep breath of the chilly air. Then, as if spitting out all the thoughts and emotions welled up inside me, I screamed at the top of my lungs.

"Mitsuhaa!!"

I heard a voice.

Standing up, I scanned the surrounding area.

I was standing in the field of rocks which encircled the basin inside which the *shintai* stood. The sinking evening sun stretched out the shadows of all that sat on top of the mountain. The world had temporarily been divided into light and shadow. But the figure of a person resided in neither of those realms.

"... Taki-kun?" I whispered. Then, taking a deep breath of the chilly air, I screamed.
"Taki-kuun!"

I heard her.

She's here. Mitsuha is here.

I broke out in a dash, climbing up the slope until I stood on top of the caldera's edge. I looked all around, but found no one. She had to be somewhere though. I could feel it. I screamed.

"Mitsuhaa! You're here aren't you? In my body!"

It's Taki-kun!

I was certain of it. I screamed to the sky.

"Taki-kun! Where are you!? I hear your voice!"

I started running along the basin's edge.

Her voice. I hear her voice, but nothing else.

Was that voice, my voice, and Mitsuha's voice at the same time, physically vibrating the air, or did it only resound with my soul? I didn't know. We were in the same place, yet three years apart.

"Mitsuha, where are you!?"

But still, I screamed. I couldn't not scream. If I keep running around the caldera's edge--

Then eventually I'll catch up to Taki-kun. That delusion drove my steps.

Ah!

I let out a little yelp, then stood still.

I stopped, then hurriedly turned around.

Just now, we passed each other.

I can sense a warm presence somewhere right in front of me. My heart started beating wildly.

I can't see him, but Taki-kun is right there. I'm sure of it.

My heart started throbbing out of control.

He's here. I held out my hand.

She's here. I held out my hand.

My finger touches only the air.

"... Mitsuha?"

I waited for her response, but it never came.

Maybe it's impossible after all. We can't meet. One last time, I looked around me, only to reconfirm that I stood on top of the mountain all alone. I let out a sigh of despair.

A sudden gust of wind lifted my hair up. My sweat had all dried some time ago. The temperature seemed to drop abruptly. I looked over at the evening sun and found that it had sunk behind a cloud. Released from the last remnants of daylight, the realms of light and shadow began to melt together. The silhouettes of the world began to blur. The sky still maintained some of its former brightness, but the ground was already completely enveloped in faint shadows. Only a dim, pink indirect light remained around me.

That's right. This time period has a name. *Tasogare*. *Tasokare*. *Kawatate*. A time when silhouettes begin to blur, and you may meet things which are not of this world. An old word.

"*Katawaredoki*."

Our voices overlapped.

Could it be...

I turned my eyes away from the clouds and looked straight ahead.

And there stood Mitsuha, staring at me, mouth and eyes gaping wide.

Rather than show surprise, my mouth slowly twisted into a smile at the sight of her amusing yet endearing dumbfounded expression.

"Mitsuha." I called to her, and tears began to well up in her eyes.

"... Taki-kun? Taki-kun? Taki-kun? Taki-kun?"

As she repeated my name over and over, her hands reached out to grab my arms. I felt strength enter her fingers.

"... It's Taki-kun!"

She barely managed to get those words out; large tears spilled endlessly from her eyes.

We met at last. We really did it. Mitsuha as Mitsuha, and me as me, facing each other in our own bodies. I truly felt relieved. A sense of comfort warmed the bottom of my heart, as if I had stayed a long time in a country where I didn't know the language and finally returned home. A gentle happiness filled my body.

"I came to meet you," I said to the sobbing Mitsuha. Her tears almost looked like small transparent marbles rolling around. I laughed and continued. "Man, that was rough! Do you know how far away you were?"

She really was far away, farther than either of us could have ever imagined, in both space and time. Mitsuha blinked in confusion.

"Ah... but how? Back then, I..."

"I drank your *kuchikamisake*," I said, looking back on all the trouble I had been through.

All of a sudden, Mitsuha's tears stopped. "Eh..." She was at a loss for words. Well, I guess that makes sense. "Ah... ah..." She slowly backed away from me. "Ah... you drank that!?"

"Eh?"

"Idiot! Pervert!"

"Eh, ehh?!"

Her face beet red, Mitsuha was apparently very angry. Why now of all times!?

"Yeah that's right! Also, you touched my boobs, didn't you!?"

"Wha -- how do you know..." Oops.

"Yotsuha saw it all!" She said with both hands on her hips, as if scolding a child.

"Ahh, my bad..." Damn that little girl. My palms grew sweaty. Excuse... must come up with excuse... "It was just one time!" That's not an excuse!

"... Just once? Hmm..."

Huh? Mitsuha seemed to be considering something. Does that mean just once is forgivable? For a moment, it looked like I managed to get out of my pickle, but Mitsuha soon reached her conclusion.

"... It's the same no matter how many times you did it! Idiot!"

No good, huh. Giving up, I clapped my hands together and bowed in apology. Wasn't about to tell her that I really did it every time we switched.

"Ah, that..."

With a sudden change of mood, Mitsuha pointed at my right hand, a surprised look on her face. I glanced over at my wrist.

"Ahh, this."

The *kumihimo*. The one I received from Mitsuha three years ago. I unfastened the fixture holding it together, and, while unwrapping it from my wrist, said to Mitsuha, "Next time don't try and come to meet me before I even know you... how am I supposed to recognize you?" I handed the cord over to her, remembering all of her emotions that moment in the train. "I've had it for three years. Now it's your turn."

Mitsuha looked up from the braid she held in both hands and answered with a cheerful nod. When she smiled, I noticed for the first time. The whole world seemed like it was smiling with her.

She wrapped the *kumihimo* around her head like a hair band, fastening it with a little knot above her left ear. "How does it look?" she asked, slightly blushing.

"Ah..."

Not very good, I thought. It looks a little childish. Well, in the first place she shouldn't have cut her hair so short. Doesn't she know I like long black hair? But anyways, even I knew that the right answer was to compliment her. According to the 'Conversation Tips for Those Who Have Never Been Popular a Second of Their Lives!' article Mitsuha sent me, as long as you keep complimenting a girl you'll be alright.

"Hm... it's not bad."

"Hey!" Mitsuha's expression suddenly darkened. Wha? "You're thinking it doesn't look very good, aren't you!?"

"Ehh!" How'd she know!? "Ha... haha... sorry."

"Hmph!"

She turned her head away in disgust. What is this... talking with girls is too hard...

Then, all of a sudden, Mitsuha broke out in laughter. What's with this girl? Crying, getting angry, and now laughing? But as I watched, whatever afflicted her began to spread to me. I covered my face with my hand as I started chuckling uncontrollably. She was still laughing hysterically. For some reason, it was starting to get fun. We laughed and laughed together, like two small children standing at the edge of the faintly glimmering twilight world.

Slowly but surely, the temperature had begun to drop. And slowly but surely, the remaining light had begun to fade.

"Hey, Mitsuha." As I called her name, I remembered those childhood feelings of playing long hours after school and having to go home, despite still wanting to play with my friends forever and ever. "There's still something we need to do. Listen up."

I explained the plan Teshigawara, Saya-chin, and I came up with. Seeing Mitsuha listening to me with such a grave expression, it occurred to me that she remembered. That night when the stars fell and the village disappeared. That moment when she died. She remembered it all. To Mitsuha, tonight was a reenactment.

"It's here," she said in a quivering voice, looking up at the sky.

Following her gaze, I spotted the faint silhouette of Tiamat's Comet starting to become visible in the darkening western sky.

"It's going to be okay. We can make it in time," I asserted, half to myself.

"I'll do my best. Ah... *katawaredoki* is already..."

As she spoke, I noticed that Mitsuha's body itself had begun to fade.

“Already over,” I said. The last traces of the evening sky had almost all disappeared from the sky. Night was almost upon us. Trying to push back down the anxiety that suddenly began to well up within me, I put on a smile and spoke to Mitsuha in as cheerful a voice as I could manage. “So we don’t forget each other when we wake up.” I took a marker out of my pocket, grabbed Mitsuha’s right hand, and wrote on her palm. “Let’s write our names, like this.” I handed Mitsuha the marker.

“... Good idea!”

She broke out in a smile, like a flower blossoming. Then, following my lead, she grabbed my right hand and wrote.

Suddenly, I heard a small clattering sound by my feet.

Looking down, I saw that the pen had fallen on the ground.

“Eh?” I looked up.

In front of my eyes, was no one.

“Eh....?”

I looked around.

“Mitsuha? Hey, Mitsuha?”

I raised my voice to a shout. There was no response. Starting to panic, I walked around frantically. Everything around me had sunken into a bluish black darkness. Below me were flat, dark clouds, and even further in the darkness beyond lay the blurry outline of Itomori Lake.

Mitsuha was gone.

Night had come.

I was back in my own body, three years in the future.

I glanced at my right hand. The *kumihimo* was gone. On my palm there was only a single, thin line: the beginnings of a word that the writer never got the chance to finish. I gently touched my fingers to that line.

“... I was going to tell you,” I said quietly to it. “No matter where you are in the world, I’ll find you again.”

I looked up at the sky. There was no sign of the comet, only a few stars beginning their nightly twinkling.

“-- Your name is Mitsuha.” Trying to reaffirm my memory, trying to engrave that name permanently in there, I closed my eyes. “... I remember!”

My confidence boosted, I reopened my eyes. The white half moon sat faraway in the sky. “Mitsuha, Mitsuha... Mitsuha, Mitsuha, Mitsuha. Your name is Mitsuha!”

I yelled her name out to the moon.

“Your name is...!”

All of a sudden, the word that I wanted to say slipped my mind. Alarmed, I grabbed a pen and wrote the first letter of that name on my palm. Or, I tried to.

“...!”

But after drawing just one line, my hand stopped. The pen began to shake violently. Trying to stop it, I put all of my strength into my fingers. Sticking the pen into my palm like a needle, I tried desperately to engrave that name. But the pen now refused to move a millimeter more.

“... who are you?”

The pen fell from my hand.

They're disappearing. Your name. Your memories.

"... why am I here?"

Trying to connect the pieces together, trying to gather the fading fragments of my memory, I spoke out loud.

"I'm here... I'm here because I came to meet her! I came to save her! Because I wanted her to live!"

Gone. Such an important thing, gone. All gone.

"Who? Who? Who? Who..."

Everything had fallen out. Feelings and emotions which should have been there were gone.

"Someone important, someone I must not forget, someone I didn't want to forget!"

Despair and affection alike all disappeared together. I didn't even know why I was crying anymore. All my emotions crumbled and disappeared, like a sand castle crashing to the ground.

"Who, who, who..."

After the sand had all collapsed, one lump still remained. And in that moment, I knew its name: loneliness. In that moment, I understood. All that I would have from here on was that single emotion. I would forever carry only loneliness, like a piece of heavy luggage someone forced me to hold.

-- That's fine, I thought suddenly. If the world is this cruel of a place, I'll show my defiance by living on with only this loneliness in my hands. I'll struggle with only this emotion by my side. Even if we're separated, even if we can never meet again, I'll struggle. I'll never give in. Soon, I would forget the very fact that I forgot. So, with this sole emotion in hand, I yelled one last time to the night sky.

"Your name!?"

My voice echoed amongst the quiet mountains. As it asked the same question over and over again to the empty sky, it gradually grew softer and softer.

Before long, silence descended.

Chapter 7: Beautiful Struggle

I ran.

I ran and ran along the rough forest path, repeating his name over and over.

Taki-kun. Taki-kun. Taki-kun.

-- It's okay. I still remember. I won't forget.

Before long, the light from Itomori Village began to peek through the gaps in the trees, and my ears began to pick up the faint festival music riding on the winds.

Taki-kun. Taki-kun. Taki-kun.

In the sky above, Tiamat's Comet, with its dazzling tail trailing behind, sparkled brighter than the moon. *I screamed his name in an attempt to push back the crushing fear.*

Your name is Taki-kun!

The rumbling of a motorcycle engine became audible, and a pair of headlight beams shone into my eyes.

"Tesshi!" I yelled and ran towards the bike.

"Mitsuha! Where the heck were you!?"

Tesshi, wearing a big ridiculous helmet with a flashlight attached like he was going cave exploring or something, scolded me. Unfortunately, *I couldn't exactly explain what happened. Instead, I conveyed Taki-kun's words.*

"He said sorry for breaking your bike."

"Huh? Who?"

"Uh, me!"

Tesshi looked skeptical but didn't question any further. He cut the engine and, as he ran off, yelled, "You're gonna explain everything later, okay?!"

Itomori Electrical Substation - Entry Forbidden.

A plate with those words was attached to the metal fence, and beyond it lay the silhouettes of power transformers and steel towers and other complicated looking devices. It was an unmanned facility; the only light came from the red lamps installed on the machines.

"It's gonna fall? That? For real?!" Tesshi, looking up at the sky, asked me.

We were standing in front of the fence surrounding the substation, gazing at the glittering comet above.

"It's gonna fall! *I saw it with my own eyes!*" *I said, staring straight into Tesshi's eyes. Only two hours until impact. There was no time to be explaining things.*

Tesshi gave me a suspicious look for a brief moment, then broke out into a little laugh. The laugh seemed to be more out of desperation than anything else. "Oh, so you saw it, huh? Well then I guess we have no choice!" With renewed vigor, he zipped open his sports bag, revealing a cylinder shaped like a relay baton wrapped in brown paper tightly packed in there. A water gel explosive. *I gulped at the sight of it. Tesshi then took out a large pair of bolt cutters and began snipping away at the chains blocking the entrance to the substation. "Mitsuha," he said. "Any further than this and it's not just some prank."*

"Please, keep going. I'll take all the responsibility."

“Are you dumb? That’s not what I was asking for,” he said almost angrily, and for some reason turned a little red in the face. “Now we’re partners in crime!”

As if to smash the encroaching darkness, the sound of the chains being severed rang loudly throughout the surrounding air.

“Once the town’s power goes out, the school will switch to its emergency power system right away. Then we can broadcast!” Tesshi yelled into his smartphone.

I held his phone up to his mouth as he drove the motorcycle. A few homes beside the prefectural road sporadically illuminated our path. And ahead lay a dense gathering of light amidst the dark mountains, our destination: Miyamizu Shrine, site of the autumn festival. A strange sense of nostalgia suddenly overcame me, as if I were returning home after a long period of absence.

“Mitsuha, Saya-chin wants to talk to you.”

“Hello? Saya-chin?” I put the phone against my ear.

“Ahhh Mitsuhaa!” She was crying, or at least on the verge of it. “Hey, do I really have to do this!?”

A sharp pain shot through my chest when I heard her voice. If I were in Saya-chin’s position, I would probably be crying too. Just sneaking into the broadcast room at night alone by itself was no easy task.

“I’m sorry Saya-chin, but please.” Nothing I could say would make her job easier. “If we don’t do this, lots of people will die! Once you start broadcasting, keep going as long as possible!”

No response. Only a faint sniffing.

“Saya-chin? Saya-chin!”

As anxiety began to take hold of me, the speakers suddenly burst back to life.

“Fine whatever! You and Tesshi owe me big time!”

“What did Saya-chin say?”

“You owe her big time.” Putting the phone away in my skirt pocket, I answered loud enough to be heard over the motorcycle engine.

“Alright, let’s go!”

The moment Tesshi let out his battle cry, the sound of a loud explosion, like that of a giant firework going off, rang out behind us. Stopping the bike, the two of us turned around. Two, three, four. More explosions followed one after another, and fat columns of black smoke began to rise up from the middle of the mountain where we were just minutes ago. An enormous transmission tower gradually tilted over, as if in slow motion.

“Tesshi!” My voice quivered.

“Ha.. ha...” His breathing, which almost sounded like laughing, also trembled.

Then, with an explosive bang, all the lights in the village abruptly went out. We did it. We really did it.

All of a sudden, the violently loud, ear rupturing wails of the emergency sirens burst out of speakers all around town. The ominous sounds, like screams of a giant, reflected off the mountains and completely enveloped the village.

Saya-chin. She took over the wireless disaster system. Tesshi and I locked eyes, nodded, then got back on the motorcycle. As we started out towards the shrine, Saya-chin's voice began flowing from the speakers, as if to cheer us on. She read exactly what we had planned out in a voice so calm no one would have believed that she was crying just moments ago.

<This is the town hall. An explosion has occurred at the Itomori Electrical Substation. There is danger of additional explosions as well as a wildfire.>

Tesshi steered off the main road and onto a narrow mountain path. Going this way, we could reach the back of the main shrine building without having to drive up the stone staircase along the main entrance. I listened to Saya-chin's voice sound throughout the village as I clung onto Tesshi's back in my violently shaking seat. It was almost identical to her older sister's voice; almost no one would doubt that it wasn't an official broadcast.

<People in the following districts should immediately evacuate to Itomori High School: Kadoiri, Sakagami, Miyamori, Oyazawa...>

"This is it! Let's go, Mitsuha!"

We jumped off the bike and began descending the flight of wooden stairs on the slope behind the shrine. Through the gaps in the trees I could see the countless stalls lined up on the grounds and the crowds of people walking between them like fish swimming aimlessly in a dark, overcrowded tank. As we ran, we threw off our helmets.

<I repeat. This is the town hall. An explosion has occurred at the Itomori Electrical Substation. There is danger of additional explosions as well as a wildfire...>

We reached the bottom, which put us right behind the main shrine building. Surrounding us were the silhouettes of people gathered for the festival and rapidly growing seeds of uneasiness among them. As if racing each other, Tesshi and I sprinted through the crowd, yelling as we went.

"Run away! Fire in the mountains! We're in danger here!"

Tesshi's voice was so loud it sounded like he was using a megaphone. I also screamed my lungs out, not about to lose to him. Run away! Fire! Run! Before long, we reached the dead center of the shrine grounds.

"Ehh, is there really a fire?" "Hey, let's get out of here." "Do we have to walk to the high school?"

Our shouting seemed to be doing some good at backing up Saya-chin's orders on the wireless system. Couples in yukatas, groups of children, and elderly holding hands with their grandkids all shuffled hurriedly towards the exit. I breathed a sigh of relief. At this rate we would be fine. All thanks to him... him?

"Mitsuha!" Tesshi's abrupt call caught my attention. "This is bad!"

Following Tesshi's gaze, I noticed that there were more than a few people sitting idly beside food carts or standing around chatting. Some were even having a leisurely smoke, drinking, or joking around cheerfully.

"If a fire doesn't actually come, we'll never be able to get these guys to move! We need the fire department to come and force them out! You need to go to the town hall and convince the mayor..."

Tesshi stood almost right above me, yet his desperate shouts sounded far, far away.

... him?

“Oi, Mitsuha... what’s wrong!?”

“... Tesshi what do I do?” Unable to think about anything else, before I knew it I had turned to Tesshi in distress. “I can’t remember his name!”

“What are you talking about idiot!?” Tesshi yelled at me. “Look around you! You started all this!” He glared at me, his expression a mix of anger and concern.

Immediately evacuate to Itomori High School... For the first time, I noticed that Saya-chin’s voice was trembling with fear as she repeated her instructions on the speakers.

“Go Mitsuha!” Tesshi yelled. This time, rather than scolding me, he seemed to be desperately pleading. “Go and convince your old man!”

I suddenly snapped back to the moment as if someone had slapped me. “Got it!” I nodded and sprinted off with all my might.

Behind me, I heard Tesshi’s yelling once again. “Then run away! Go to the high school!”

Saya-chin’s voice continued to echo throughout the village. “There is danger of a wildfire. Please evacuate to Itomori High School.”

I plowed through the stream of people, dashed through the *torii* which marked the shrine’s exit, and ran down the flight of stone stairs. You started all this, Tesshi had said. He was right. I, we, started all this. As I ran, I glanced up at the comet. Now that all the lights on the ground had gone dark, it appeared even brighter. The comet trailed its long tail above the clouds, leaving behind glittering bits of dust as if it were a giant moth showing off its brilliant scales. You’re not gonna win this one!

It’s going to be okay. We can make it in time. I repeated those words, which someone who I can’t remember had recently said to me, in my head.

It happened on an autumn day, when I was still a middle schooler.

Around that time, I was just getting used to living alone with my dad. We had finished dinner, which wasn’t very good despite how much we struggled to make it, and were drinking tea. I munched on an apple, while my dad had a beer.

The comet was just about the only thing on the news that day. I didn’t really have any interest in stars or space or all that, but those phrases like revolving around the sun with a period of 1200 years, or an orbital radius of 16.8 billion kilometers blew my mind. Just knowing that such phenomena on a scale so much larger than ourselves existed in the world amazed and frightened me at the same time.

“Look at that!” The announcer in the television suddenly shouted in excitement. “It appears as if the comet has split into two. Around it... countless falling stars are springing forth.”

The camera zoomed in, showing the fractured comet sailing through the sky with the highrises of Tokyo in the background. Countless long, thin strands continually appeared and disappeared at the head of the comet. I opened my eyes wide, entranced by the otherworldly beauty of the spectacle.

The creak of a door being opened suddenly mixed in with the commands being broadcasted on the wireless disaster system. A short scream from Saya-chin, followed by familiar voices of a few men flowed from the speakers.

<What are you doing!?!> <Hurry up and turn it off!>

After the crash of a chair being toppled over and the short screeching sound of feedback, the transmission cut off.

"Saya-chin!" / stopped running. She was found by the teachers. Large drops of sweat poured out of my body and landed on the asphalt with plopping noises. / stood on a road which circled the lake and led to both the town hall and the high school. / heard confused voices from a few people walking along the evacuation route.

"What's going on?" "Something happen?" "Do we still evacuate?"

This is bad, / began to think, when the speakers sprung to life once again.

<This is the Itomori town hall.>

This time, it wasn't Saya-chin or his sister: it was the old man in charge of broadcasting at the town hall, whose voice / vaguely remembered.

<We have confirmed an accident. Everyone, do not panic. Please wait for further instructions.>

/ burst out running again. Someone from the town hall must have found out what we were doing and contacted the school. Right now, Saya-chin was probably being questioned by the teachers. Tesshi will probably be in big trouble too.

<I repeat. Do not panic. Please wait for further instructions.>

No! Don't wait where you are! / need to stop this broadcast!

/ left the main road and dashed down a rough sloped path with thick grass growing out from the cracks in the asphalt: a shortcut to the town hall. Thorns pricked at my bare feet. Spiderwebs stuck to my face. Some kind of bug got into my mouth.

Finally, / reached the bottom of the hill and once again ran onto the main road. / couldn't spot a single person around me; my only companion was the voice continuing to order citizens to wait for further instructions. As / ran, / spat out a wad of saliva and wiped the sweat and tears and spider silk off my face with my sleeve. My legs were beginning to lose strength and falter. Still, / ran. / refused to slow down. On a sharp curve, my body grazed the guardrail which was the only thing preventing me from tumbling into the lake below.

"... Eh!?"

/ looked to the side, alarmed. The lake was shining faintly. Still running, / peered at it more carefully. No, the lake itself wasn't shining. The calm surface of the water was reflecting the sky. As if it were a mirror, the lake displayed two glittering tails.... two? / glanced up.

-- Ah, at last.

"... it split!"

I rapidly flipped through the channels. All of them had announcers enthusiastically narrating the sudden, unexpected celestial show.

"The comet has no doubt split into two." "This was not expected." "This is truly a fantastic sight." "It is safe to say that the comet's core was split." "It was far from the Roche limit, so the only possible explanation is that some change occurred within the comet itself..." "No word from the National Astronomical Observatory yet..." "Something similar happened in 1994 with the Shoemaker-Levy Comet; it broke into at least 21 fragments as it collided with Jupiter." "Is there any danger to us?" "Comets are lumps of ice, so most of it will likely melt before reaching the

surface. Even if it becomes a meteorite, the probability of it landing on inhabited ground is very low..." "It is hard to predict the course of the fragments in real time." "Being able to witness such a grand spectacle, and moreover it just happening to be night here in Japan... this is truly good luck we may only receive once in a lifetime."

"I'm going to take a look!" I told my dad as I abruptly stood up and dashed down the stairs of the apartment building. From a nearby hill, I gazed up at the night sky. Myriad lights sparkled above, almost as if a whole other Tokyo had been formed. The sight was simply beautiful, like something straight out of a dream.

As I ran through the dark village like a lost child, the fragmented comet seemed to only make my loneliness more prominent.

-- Who? Who? Who was he?

Continuing to run, and unable to tear my eyes away from the comet, I desperately racked my brain.

-- Someone important. Someone I must not forget. Someone I didn't want to forget.

Only a little farther until the town hall. And only a little longer until the comet became a meteorite and fell.

-- Who? Who? Who are you?

I drew out the last of my strength, raising my speed.

-- Your name?

Suddenly I let out a yelp. The tips of my toes had gotten caught in a depression in the road. Before I even had time to think of falling, the ground was already right in front of my face. I felt an impact as my body began to roll around. Piercing pain spread throughout every limb. My vision blurred, then went black.

.....

.....

... But...

I heard his voice in my ears.

"So we don't forget each other when we wake up."

Back then, you said that... and wrote on my hand.

Still lying on the ground, I opened my eyes. In my fuzzy field of view, I managed to make out my right hand, clenched in a fist. Slowly, I lifted up my stiffened fingers. Something was written there on my palm. I strained my eyes and looked.

I love you.

My breath stopped for a moment. I tried to stand up, but there was hardly any strength left in me. Still, eventually my two legs once again stood on the asphalt. Then, once more, I looked at my palm. But that was all that was written.

Tears began to flow from my eyes, returning my vision to a blurry mess. At the same time, a wave of warmth began to spread throughout my body. As I bawled, I laughed softly and told him, "How am I supposed to know your name with this..."

Then, once again, I broke out in a dash.

I'm not scared anymore. Not frightened of anyone. Not lonely.

I understand now.

I am in love. We are in love.

That's why we're going to meet again.

That's why I'm going to live.

I will live.

No matter what happens, even if a comet falls on me, I will live.

No one would have predicted that the comet's core would have split into two, or that a massive lump of rock was hidden within its ice covered interior.

Apparently, that day happened to be the village's Autumn Festival. The time of impact was 8:42 p.m. And the place of impact: Miyamizu Shrine, the main center of the festival.

The meteorite instantly annihilated everything in a broad area centered around the shrine. The impact created a crater almost a kilometer wide in diameter. Water from the nearby lake flowed into the newly created depression, drowning almost half of the village. Itomori Village became the stage for the worst meteorite disaster in human history.

All that information ran through my head as I looked down upon the new Itomori Lake. The calm surface of the water reflecting the warm rays of the sun amidst the morning fog seemed so tranquil, making it hard to believe that three years ago such a tragic event unfolded there. The fact that the comet I saw three years ago in Tokyo, which had enraptured me with its beauty as it streaked across the night sky, brought about this destruction was also somewhat hard to come to terms with.

I stood all alone on the boulder covered summit of a mountain.

When I woke up, I had found myself here.

Suddenly, I got the urge to look at my right hand. There was a random line drawn on my palm, like someone had started to write something.

"What is this...?" I mumbled softly. "What was I doing here?"

Chapter 8: Your Name

Somewhere along the way, I developed a few habits.

Like touching the back of my neck when I panic. Or staring into my own eyes reflected in the mirror when I wash my face. Or always taking a moment to gaze at the scenery when I step out of the door in the morning, even when I'm in a hurry. And also, looking at my palm for no reason.

Next station is Yoyogi... Yoyogi...

As the synthetic voice sounded throughout the train car, I noticed that I was doing it again. I removed my gaze from my right hand and idly looked out the window. Hordes of people standing on the platform flowed by as the train slowed to a stop.

Suddenly, all the hairs on my body stood up.

It was her.

She was standing on the platform.

As soon as we stopped, I dashed out of the train, too impatient to wait for the doors to fully open. Twisting my body around, I rapidly ran my eyes over the entire platform. After a few passengers walked by giving me suspicious looks, I finally calmed down.

There wasn't even anyone in particular I was looking for. 'She' is no one.

This is another one of those habits I picked up some time ago, probably one of the weirder ones.

As I stood on the platform waiting for the next train to come, I realized I was staring at my palm again. And I thought to myself, just a little longer

Just a little longer is enough. That's all.

Somewhere along the way, I had also begun to wish for something, not knowing exactly what that something was.

"I applied to work for this company because I like buildings -- or rather, the scenery of a town, of people living."

The faces of the four interviewers sitting in front of me seemed to darken. No no, it must just be my imagination. This is the first time I've been able to make it to a second interview. I can't let this chance go.

"It's been like that since a long time ago. I don't really know why, but... anyway I like it. Gazing at buildings and observing the people who live and work there. So I often went to cafes and restaurants, getting part time jobs and--"

"I see." One of the interviewers gently cut me off.

"Then may I ask why you want to work in the construction industry as opposed to the food industry?"

The one who asked me that was a middle aged woman, the sole interviewer who looked like a nice person. I realized I messed up a little when talking about my motives for applying. I began to sweat in my uncomfortable suit which I haven't yet grown accustomed to wearing.

"Well... interacting with customers in my part time jobs was fun, but I want to be involved in something bigger..." Something bigger? This is like an answer a middle schooler would give. I could feel my face growing bright red. "Basically... even Tokyo could disappear at any moment."

This time, the four interviewers faces darkened for sure. Noticing that I had begun to touch the back of my neck, I panicked and quickly put both hands back on top of my knees.

“So I want to build the kind of town that will remain in people’s memories even after it disappears...” This is bad. Even I have no idea what I’m saying at this point. Another failure, I thought as I shifted my gaze to the gray skyscrapers rising up behind the interviewers, holding back the urge to just start bawling.

“So today’s interview... how many companies has it been now?” Takagi asked.

“Haven’t been counting,” I answered gloomily.

“Doesn’t look like you’re getting in,” Tsukasa said in an annoyingly cheerful voice.

“I don’t want to hear that from you!” I shot back angrily.

“Maybe it’s because your suit looks so bad on you,” Takagi said with a laugh.

“You guys’ aren’t much better!”

“I’ve gotten unofficial offers from two companies,” Takagi said happily.

“Me, eight companies,” said Tsukasa.

I had nothing to say in return. My coffee cup rattled as my hands shook in disgrace. Suddenly, my phone on the table made a dinging noise. I checked my messages, drained the remainder of my coffee in one gulp, then stood up out of my chair.

As I waved goodbye to Takagi and Tsukasa and began jogging to the station, it occurred to me that the three of us often went to that cafe in our high school days. Back then every day was so carefree. There was no need to worry about the future or finding a job, and for some reason everything was always ridiculously fun. Especially that one summer, the one in my second year of high school. For some reason, I recall that summer being more fun than all the others. I recall my heart beating wildly in excitement at almost everything that reached my eyes. I tried to remember exactly what happened, but I could only reach the conclusion that nothing special actually occurred. It was just a time when even a pair of chopsticks falling down could be hilarious. Idly running through the past in my mind, I hurried down the stairs to the subway station.

“Ooh, looking for a job,” Okudera-senpai said with a smile, looking up from her smartphone and at me in my suit.

The leisurely commotion of people released from a day of work or school filled the streets around Yotsuya Station.

“Haha... well I’m having a bit of trouble.”

“Hmm?” Senpai moved her face in closer and seemed to be inspecting me from head to toe. Then, with a dead serious face, she said, “Maybe it’s because your suit looks so bad on you.”

“I-Is it that bad!?” I looked down at myself.

“No, no it was just a joke!” she said cheerfully.

Senpai suggested that we take a walk, so we decided to stroll down Shinjuku Avenue, going against the waves of college students. As we passed through Kioicho and crossed Benkeibashi, I noticed for the first time that the leaves were beginning to change color. About

half of the people passing by wore light coats. Okudera-senpai also had a loose fitting ash gray one on.

“So what’s up? Don’t usually get sudden texts from you,” I asked senpai as I walked beside her, thinking about how I alone seemed to be late getting with the changing seasons.

“What, I can’t talk to you if I don’t have any business?” She frowned with her glossed lips.

“No no no!” Flustered, I waved my hands back and forth.

“Aren’t you happy seeing me for the first time in a while?”

“Ah, yes very happy.”

Satisfied with my answer, senpai smiled and said, “I happened to be around for work, so I thought I’d see how you’re doing.” Apparently she had landed a job in Chiba at a branch of a big apparel chain. “Living in the suburbs is pretty fun, but still Tokyo really is something special.” As she talked, she looked around, seemingly entranced by the bustling city around us. “Hey look.”

I looked up to see one of those large screens on the exterior of an electronics store in front of us. On it, aerial footage of the new double lobed Itomori Lake as well as the words ‘8 years since the comet disaster’ were displayed.

“We went to Itomori once, didn’t we?” senpai said, closing her eyes as she dug back deep into her faraway memories. “That must have been when you were in high school...”

“Five years ago,” I said.

“That long...” Senpai sighed faintly, seemingly surprised. “I’m forgetting things already.”

As we descended from a pedestrian bridge and walked down Sotobori Avenue beside the Akasaka Goyōchi, I delved into my memories of that time. The summer of my second year of high school -- or no, it was about the same time of year as now, the beginning of autumn. I went on a short trip with Okudera-senpai and Tsukasa. We rode a combination of Shinkansen and special express trains to Gifu, then walked around aimlessly along the local lines. That’s right, we also found a random ramen shop beside the highway

After that... after that my memories started to become blurry, almost as if they were from a previous life. Did we have a fight or something? I recalled splitting up from the other two and going off on my own. Climbing some mountain, spending the night, then going back to Tokyo by myself the next day.

Yes, that’s right -- for some reason, I showed extreme interest in that chain of events set off by the comet. An entire village destroyed by a single fragment of a comet. A natural disaster on a scale rarely seen in human history. Yet miraculously, almost none of the town’s residents were injured or killed. The night the comet fell, the village had just so happened to be carrying out a practice evacuation, causing most people to be outside the area of destruction.

After the impact, many rumors went around, trying to explain the extreme coincidence. The rare astronomical spectacle combined with the villager’s luck of a lifetime set off the imaginations of the media and just about everyone else. Some tried a folkloristic approach, tying together the comet’s visit with local legends of a dragon god. Some praised or criticized the authority of the mayor, who forcefully carried out the evacuation. Some spewed occult like beliefs that the meteorite falling was actually prophesied. All these wild theories flew about for days after the incident. Mysterious facts like how Itomori was essentially its own isolated little

village cut off from the rest of Japan or how apparently the whole area lost power about two hours before the impact only further spurred people's imaginations. The craze continued for a while, but like all other episodes of the same nature, the topic eventually disappeared from the mainstream.

But still, now that I thought about it, my behavior puzzled me even more. I made more than just a couple sketches of Itomori Village. On top of that, my frenzied interest suddenly welled up years after the incident actually occurred, almost as if *something* had come to visit me and left just as abruptly without a trace. But what in the world...

Well, no point in worrying about it now, I thought as I watched the evening sun sink towards the horizon over the streets of Yotsuya. Rather than piecing together something from way back that I barely remember, I needed to focus on finding a job.

"There's a little breeze now," senpai said quietly as her long curly hair danced in the air.

A sweet scent, one that I had smelled long ago somewhere far away, reached my nose. A peculiar pain suddenly shot through my chest, almost as if by reflex upon detecting the scent.

"Thanks for hanging out with me today. This is far enough." We had just finished eating dinner at the Italian restaurant where we used to work back when I was in high school. She brought up a fishy promise I had supposedly made way back when to treat her when I graduated. I had no recollection of saying such a thing, but I ended up paying for her anyways and started walking with her to the nearest station. "I didn't know the food there was actually that good."

"Yeah, we never actually got to eat the food during work."

"I guess it took us years to finally realize then."

We laughed, then, after a deep breath, senpai said goodbye. As she waved, I could see a small band sparkling like a thin droplet of water upon her ring finger.

You find happiness too one day, okay? She said that to me after announcing her engagement while we were sipping espressos. Unable to formulate a proper response, all I did was mumble a few words of congratulations.

It's not like I'm unhappy, I thought as I watched senpai descend the stairs of the pedestrian bridge. But then again, I still didn't really know what happiness was in the first place. I looked at my palm. All that seemed to be there was the absence of something.

Just a little longer, I thought to myself again.

The changing of the seasons had crept up on me unnoticed again.

The many typhoons of autumn passed, and, without any transition, the cold rains of winter had moved in. The rain maintained its constant, quiet chatter into the night, like memories of a conversation from long ago. Beyond the window streaked with water droplets, Christmas lights shone brightly in defiance of the dreary weather.

I took a sip of coffee as if to swallow up my wandering thoughts and returned my eyes to my planner. Despite being December, a jam packed job hunting schedule filled the pages: visits, information sessions, deadlines, interviews. Getting a little disheartened at the busy lineup, which included everything from big name general contractors to small factories, I compared all

the items written in my planner and those in my phone's scheduling app, then started organizing all the important ones from tomorrow onward.

"Hmm, I think I want to go to another bridal fair."

When mixed with the pitter patter of the rain, even the conversations of random strangers seemed to be shrouded in mystery. For some time now, a couple sitting behind me had been talking about their upcoming wedding ceremony. It reminded me of Okudera-senpai, but the stranger's voice and atmosphere were totally different from hers. The couple, who both spoke with a little rural accent mixed in, gave off a very relaxed feeling, as if they were childhood friends. My attention drifted naturally to their conversation.

"Another?" the man answered with a groan. "We've been to so many bridal fairs, and they're all basically the same." Although he was complaining, his affection for his partner clearly seeped into his voice.

"Maybe a *shinzenshiki* would be nice." [A more traditional type of wedding, taking place at a shrine]

"You said your dream was to get married in a chapel..."

"Well you only get to do this once in a lifetime... I can't decide that easily."

"But you said you already made up your mind," the man groaned again. The woman ignored him and continued her internal struggle.

"Anyways, Tesshi, you better shave before the ceremony."

My hand, in the middle of bringing my coffee cup to my lips, froze. For seemingly no reason, my heart pounded faster and faster.

"And I'll lose three kilograms for you."

"You say as you eat your cake..."

"I'll start tomorrow!"

Slowly, I turned around.

The two had already stood up and were putting on their coats. The man was tall and lanky, with a beanie on top of his shaven head. The woman gave off a somewhat childish impression with her small figure and bob cut. Before I could really get a good look at them, however, they turned their backs to me and walked out of the store. For some reason, I couldn't take my eyes off them. The voice of the waitress saying 'thank you' to them only vaguely registered in my head.

By the time I left the restaurant, the rain had turned into snow. The abundant moisture in the air made the snow filled streets strangely warm, giving me the uncomfortable feeling that I had wandered into the wrong season. I felt the need to turn around and look once more at each person that passed by, as if they were all hiding some dire secret from me.

When I reached the local library, it was nearly closing time. The sparsely populated wide main hall made the atmosphere within the building feel colder than outside. I picked a chair to sit down in and opened up the book I took from the shelves: 'The Disappeared Itomori Village - Full Record'.

As if breaking some kind of ancient seal, I slowly and carefully turned the pages one by one. A ginkgo tree by an elementary school. A steep staircase in front of a shrine overlooking the lake. A *torii* with its paint chipped off. A small out of place railroad crossing, like a pile of

bricks suddenly dumped in the middle of a rice field. A needlessly large parking lot. Two snack bars next to each other. A high school made out of darkened concrete. Old and cracked asphalt on the prefectural road. A guardrail winding along a sloped path. Greenhouses reflecting the sky.

All of it was ordinary scenery that could be found anywhere in rural Japan, and maybe that's why I felt a certain familiarity with the pictures. I could imagine the humidity in the air and the coldness of the wind as if I had lived there myself.

But why, I thought as I turned the pages. Why do I feel so much pain looking at boring scenery of a town that no longer even exists?

I had once very strongly and firmly decided something. Looking up at the light pouring out of someone's window as I walked home, reaching out to grab a bento box at the convenience store, retying my loose shoelaces, I suddenly had that thought. I had made up my mind about something. I met someone -- or rather, in order to meet someone, I decided something.

Gazing into the mirror as I washed my face, taking out the trash, squinting my eyes at the morning sun shining through the gaps in the buildings, I thought about that and laughed bitterly. Someone and something... in the end I didn't even have the slightest clue what I was trying to remember.

Yet, I thought as I walked out of another interview. Yet, I was still struggling. To put it in an exaggerated way, I was struggling against life. Was this what I had decided back then? To struggle. To live. To breath and walk. To run. To eat. To tie together. To simply live naturally, like how I naturally spilled tears at ordinary pictures of an ordinary village.

Just a little longer, I thought.

Just a little longer is enough. That's all.

Without knowing exactly what for, I kept wishing.

Just a little longer.

The sakura blossomed and fell. Long rains cleansed the streets of the city. White clouds floated high into the sky. The leaves gained color. Cold winds blew. Then, the sakura blossomed again.

The days flew by at an accelerating rate.

I graduated college and had begun to work, living each day desperately as if trying to not get thrown off a violently shaking vehicle. Sometimes, I feel like I'm inching closer and closer to that place where I wish to be.

In the morning, I wake up and gaze intently at my right hand. A small droplet rests on my index finger. The tears that dampened my eyes just moments ago have already dried up, along with my dream.

Just a little longer, I think as I get out of bed.

Just a little longer, I think as I look into the mirror and tie up my hair. I pass my arms through the sleeves of a spring suit, open the door of my apartment, and take a moment to gaze at the cityscape of Tokyo rolling out endlessly before my eyes. I climb the stairs to the station, go through the ticket gate, and get on a crowded rush hour train. Beyond the sea of bobbing heads, I see the clear blue sky through the window.

Leaning against the door, I watch the scenery as it flows by. In every building, in every window, in every car, and on every pedestrian bridge, the city is overflowing with people. On a car carrying a hundred people, in a train carrying a thousand people, in a city carrying a thousand trains, I gaze. Just a little longer.

And then, suddenly, without warning, I see.

Suddenly, I see.

Only separated by a couple layers of glass, almost within arm's reach, on the neighboring train, he is there, looking straight back at me, his eyes also wide open in surprise. And then, in that moment, I knew what I had been wishing for the whole time.

A mere meter in front of me, she is there. I don't even know her name, but I instantly know it's her. But as our trains go opposite ways, that distance gradually increases. Then, another train enters the gap between ours, and I lose sight of her completely. In those few seconds, however, I finally knew what I had been wishing for.

To be together just a little longer.

At the next stop, I sprint off the train and start running wildly around the streets, searching for her. I know that she is searching for me right now in the same way.

We had met before. Or maybe that was just a feeling. Just a dream. A delusion from a past life. But still, we had wanted to be together for just a little longer. We want to be together for just a little longer.

As I sprint up a hilly road, I wonder. Why am I running? Why am I looking for him? Somewhere deep down, I probably already know the answers to those questions. My mind doesn't remember them, but my body does. I turn out of a thin alley and the road abruptly ends. A staircase. I walk up to the edge and look down. He is there.

Fighting back the urge to burst out running, I slowly make my way up the stairs. A wind blows by, carrying the scent of flowers and puffing up my suit. She is standing at the top. Unable to look at her directly, I turn my head just close enough so that her presence registers in my peripheral vision. That presence begins to walk down the stairs. Her footsteps ring throughout the spring air. My heart dances wildly within my ribcage.

We slowly draw closer to each other, our eyes cast down. He says nothing, and I too fail to find any words. Still remaining silent, we pass each other. In that moment, my entire body aches as if someone had reached in and grabbed my heart. This is not right, I think strongly. There is no way that we are strangers. That would go against all the laws of the universe and of life.

So I turn around. With the exact same speed, she too turns around and looks at me. She is standing on the stairs, eyes open wide, the city of Tokyo behind her back. I notice that her hair is tied with a string the color of sunset. My entire body shakes.

We met. We finally met. By the time I think that I'm about to cry, tears have already started falling. He sees that and smiles. I return the smile as I weep, and take a deep breath of the fresh spring air.

And then, at the same time, we open our mouths, harmonizing our voices like children doing a cheer.

"Your name?"