

マカロン大好きな女の子がどうにかこうにか千年生き続けるお話。

The Tale of the Macaroon Loving Girl,
who survives somehow
for a 1000 years.

illustration
からて わんにゃんぷー

MF文庫J

The Story of a Macaron-Loving Girl Who Lived a Thousand Years Somehow.

by Karate

Illustrations by Wannyanpuu

Translation by vgperson

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Book 1: The Story of a Macaron-Loving Girl Who Lived a Thousand Years Somehow.

She opened her eyes to a piercing blue sky.

It was so brilliant as to make her eyes narrow a bit.
Looking absentmindedly upward into the sky, she paced along the concrete.
It was a day like every other.
It was a sky like every other.
Brilliant light shining on the world, a soothing early-summer wind - a day just the same as ever.
And yet, unlike those other days, there had been no sign of Miko at the lab.
“There’s something I want to tell you tomorrow...”
The girl pouted angrily, recalling how Miko had told her that yesterday.
As she fumed, she took a macaron from her pocket and munched down on it.

This is the happy story of a macaron-loving fairytale girl.

*

She had been friends with Miko for a long time.
They were always together. They had been for ages.
And she thought that was how it would always be, until that day she went away.

She asked around while eating macarons, “Hey, what happened?”
But the people at the lab Miko worked at told her things like “Perhaps she’s been taken by paradise,” and “Maybe she did something or another with a wormhole” - just a lot of mumbling she didn’t comprehend.
“I don’t get it! Gimme a simpler explanation!”
She pressed the lab workers, but they gave her a worried look and scratched their heads.
The cause of Miko’s disappearance was still being investigated, so at present, no one truly knew what had happened.

“Will she be back tomorrow?”
“Um... I don’t know.”
“The day after?”
“Well, we can’t say for sure, but Miko may not be back tomorrow, or the day after, or ever again.”
“Whaaa? I don’t want that! Do something!”
“You can’t just tell me to do something...”
The lab workers were all greatly bothered by the girl and refused to look her in the eye.
Bored now that no one was paying attention to her, she continued to worry about Miko while acting like a triceratops.
Meanwhile, lab personnel continued their frantic investigation into the reason of Miko’s disappearance.

About a year passed, and the world’s most brilliant minds finally ascertained the cause.
When it was revealed, the world was overcome with grief.

Of course, it was a complex matter, so it was all gibberish to the girl. But there was one thing which even she could pick up on.

That was the fact that Miko had gone one thousand years into the future.

To be precise: September 2nd, 2999 CE.
A date far, far, and further still than that into the future.
In a world where humans may or may not even live.

It seemed that it was all related to a hole in space-time which Miko had tumbled into.
Being that she was the most beautiful and smartest person in the whole lab, the people there were depressed to learn about the incident that befell her - as if they had lost the very sun itself.
Since they were all very smart themselves, they firmly stated that they would never meet Miko again.
But she was only but a macaron-loving fairytale girl, and she didn't quite understand what it all meant.

"Hey, for real, where did Miko go?"
"I told you, a thousand years into the future."
Even after about seventeen repeated exchanges of this sort, the whimsical girl was unaffected.
"You're kidding. She went to the donut shop, didn't she?"
"Nnno, a thousand years into the future."
"Hey, really, tell me the truth!"
"I did! The truth is she went a thousand years into the future!"
"Ugh! I know you said that, you doofus!"

After asking about forty times, and punching lab workers in the stomach for no particular reason, she finally began to understand that Miko really had gone a thousand years into the future.

Still, the girl felt that there must have been something to be done.
After all, she hadn't heard the important thing Miko had to tell her.
Miko had never once broken a promise. So she would surely hear it from her somehow.

She nibbled on a macaron and thought, for the time being, that she might try and live for a thousand years.

*

"So then. How should I go about living a thousand years?"
She asked people around the lab, but they just looked at her and shrugged.
"Um, well... Humans can't live for that long."
"Oh, okay. So then how should I go about living a thousand years?"
"You're not following this at all, are you?"
The lab workers were stunned, and tried to talk her down.
They told her stuff about active enzymes, and the process of aging and whatnot, and all the reasons why humans can't live for over a thousand years.

These things went straight through her ears, and she continued to munch on macarons.
She didn't understand all the complicated things they said.
But what she did know was that eating macarons made her happy.

As she went around asking lab researchers, she eventually found a lone old man who told her this:
“Hmm... It’s not necessarily impossible, but this method is somewhat...”
“Really? I’ll try it!”
Her head was filled with nothing but Miko and macarons, leaving no room for words like “consequence” or “risk.” She accepted the old man’s offer without asking any of the details whatsoever.

And so the girl became a test subject for a certain organization.
It was some kind of fantastic experiment involving iPS cells and embryonic stem cells, and mucking about with telomeres to do this and that.
It had begun with meager hopes that they might discover a lifeform capable of living a thousand years, but there wasn’t even a one in a million chance of success.
Sure enough, the girl didn’t understand a single thing about the medicine, and she made no attempt to.
Even though it was an experiment that had no guarantee of survival (but in exchange for an incredible sum of money), she was most concerned with the fact that she had to hold off on her daily macarons for the time being.

Deep down she vowed, as she downed the medicine the people gave her:
“I’ll confront Miko a thousand years from now!”
No one knew it yet, but luckily enough, in that moment, she promptly became immortal.

*

“Those of you who drank the medicine, please return to your rooms.”
People from the organization donned in black suits said this, and she returned to her assigned room as told.
As she trotted around and gave the place a look over, she was surprised to find it resembled a high-class hotel. “It won’t be too bad living a thousand years somewhere this pretty,” she thought.
She arrived at the door to her room and was given a card key by a lady in black.

“It would be very bad if you lost this, so please, take good care of it.”
“Yes ma’am!”, she energetically replied.
Seeing the girl’s innocent smile, the lady in black looked a little worried.
“Whenever you want to enter the room, put the card through there.”
She pointed at a slot above the door handle. The girl nodded, and again enthusiastically replied, “I gotcha!”
She put the card in the slot, and the door soundlessly opened. Looking inside the room, she saw massive stacks of manga.
“Whoa, awesome! I haven’t seen so much manga in one place since that manga café yesterday!”
“Read them whenever you please.”
“Thanks! You’re so nice, miss!”
The lady again looked worried and whispered “Not so much,” quiet

enough that the girl wouldn't hear. Then she quickly left.
The girl spent until the next morning reading Doraemon.

"Subjects, please report to the plaza."

A shrill voice rang out from a nearby speaker, putting an end to her Doraemon vigil.
She didn't want to bother, but decided to head for the plaza.
There, she found others who had drank the medicine yesterday.
However, she soon noticed they were fewer in number, about half of what there had been before.
They looked at each other anxiously, but she just thought "Guess they all slept in late. Man, I should have slept in too...", continuing to page through an issue of Doraemon with one hand.
The subjects drank the medicine again, had their blood drawn, and that was all.
The days continued to go on in this way.

The girl made many friends at the testing facility.

There was the carefree Maa-chan.
She had worked a late-night job to support a boy she liked, but it wasn't working out, so she came to do the experiment. Maa-chan always looked so happy whenever she talked about the boy. Still, sometimes she would stand outside and gaze lonely into the night sky.

There was the ever-angry Kei-kun.
He loved to watch horses, and in the process of watching them run

every day, somehow went completely broke, so he came here. He said that once the experiment was over and he had lots of money, he'd like to go watch the horses again.

There was the usually-flustered Yuu-chan.
She grew a kind of plant that made you happy whenever you smoked it, but it made some important people angry at her. But she wasn't discouraged; hoping that everyone would become happy, she spread the seeds of her plant in the nation's waterways. She soon found herself taken here. She said that once she got lots of money and could get out of there, she would go around spreading her seeds to make the whole world happy.

There was Satomi-chan, who was quiet, didn't talk much, and had lots of cuts on her arm.
They had clearly been self-inflicted, but the girl couldn't have known that. So she figured that Satomi-chan must have fought a powerful foe indeed to have suffered such wounds, and thus always looked upon her with respect. She and Satomi-chan would laze around reading manga together, and the former would kindly watch over the latter.

Every day after the experiment, everyone would gather in the girl's room, play with the her pastel pink hair, and talk all night about their lives before they arrived. The girl would only ever talk about macarons, so she was just called Macaron-chan.
She had never had any friends besides Miko, so passing the days with such friendly people was refreshing and a joy for her. She was glad to have earned a nickname, too - so glad she would skip

around her room daily when she was alone.

Even so, there were less people showing up to the testing site by the day.
The bustling congregation of over five hundred people had been reduced to an easily-countable number.
On the twentieth day of the experiment, Kei-kun didn't come to the testing site.
Until then, the girl had thought people were all getting bored of the experiment and going home.
But with Kei-kun's disappearance, she realized that was not the case.
He had no money; he had to stay here to the end.
There was no chance that he would suddenly go home in the midst of it.

"Where'd you take Kei-kun?!", she somewhat angrily asked the lady in black. She replied with her usual slightly-concerned look.
"Kei-kun has, unfortunately, died. But you were told all this in the beginning, weren't you? You all signed up for this with full knowledge of what could happen."
"Huh, really...? Guess there's not much you can do about that, huh."
"Yes. So please, stop low-kicking the other researchers."
Since the lady in black told her so, she stopped kicking the old guy in black. And she solemnly told him "I'm sorry" on the spot.

Still, she was certainly not thinking "Oh well, what can you do?" deep down.

She had never really listened to any explanations, or fully understood what was going on to begin with. That day, she drank the medicine with the others feeling a little more down than usual.
Yuu-chan started coughing, like she had drank too much water.
Everyone laughed at this, and she said “Hey, don’t make fun of me!” with an embarrassed grin.

Yuu-chan didn’t come to the testing site the next day.

That was when the girl decided she would escape the facility.

*

The next day, she had made up her mind to escape. “Hey, we should go together!”
Maa-chan and Satomi-chan did not respond to her suggestion. They just listened to her in silence.

The day after that, Maa-chan and Satomi-chan came to her room.
“We’re going to stay until the end,” they said.
“Why? Let’s go!”
The two sadly smiled at her.

“I’m... I’m sorry. We were prepared for this, and we have our reasons for staying until we get the money. But we’ll be okay. We’ve made it this far, so we’ll survive to the end.”
Satomi-chan handed the girl a piece of paper. “Here’s an address. Once we’re done with this immortality experiment, however many years it takes... let’s play together, okay? I’m looking forward to the

day we meet again, Macaron-chan."
"Alright."
"Well, goodbye."
"It's not goodbye! It's see you later!"
"Right. See you!"

Maa-chan and Satomi-chan did survive to see the last day the girl spent at the facility, and saw her off with smiles.
She was a little sad to leave them behind.
Still, she didn't cry. She would get to talk with them for hours and hours once they met again.

Escaping was unexpectedly easy. Granted, she had Maa-chan and Satomi-chan's help, but when the guards weren't around, the security at the facility was a joke.
She just hopped out a window, and without a look behind her, started running.
Maa-chan and Satomi-chan waved to her from their rooms. And they kept on waving, until the girl was long out of sight.
She was running for her life, so she didn't even notice them.

One might wonder what they looked like at that moment.
Were they smiling?
Or were they in tears?
She didn't know.

Because after that, she never met those two again.

*

After running for about an hour, she noticed that not a single person from the facility was chasing her.
“Whaaat? Shouldn’t have bothered running...”, she thought to herself.
She also realized that even after an hour of running, she was barely even tired.
It was just a feeling she had, but she finally began to recognize that she had indeed become immortal.
She climbed a tall hill and looked out toward the facility, but saw no sign of anyone trying to follow.
She gave up on running then, and instead went on walking at a brisk pace for sixteen hours.
Having become immortal, she still didn’t feel tired at all afterward. However, toward the end, her stomach kept rumbling.
This taught her that even if a girl is immortal, walking at a brisk pace for sixteen hours still makes one hungry.

She kept walking aimlessly.
She had no idea where she was now.
None of the roads she walked had she seen before.
She wandered for about a week, until she found a rather large town. She decided to go in.
She found signs, but they were full of names of places she’d never before seen nor heard of. She felt just a little lonely to be in such an unfamiliar place.

However, it was more concerning to her that she was hungry.
Her stomach had been making an adorable rumbling sound, but

now it was a louder, unpleasant sort of grumble.
Of course, though, she wouldn't die of hunger. No matter what happened, she was still immortal.
But it made her happy to eat tasty food, so food was a necessary resource for preserving her happiness.
So the girl began fishing through garbage cans.
And thus was the birth of an immortal hobo.

"What's with that girl...?"
"What the heck...?"
The townspeople all whispered the same sort of thing upon seeing the pretty pastel pink-haired girl, who also seemed quite young, digging through garbage.
They all glanced at her, and some stopped, and talked amongst themselves, and took pictures.
But in the end, they acted like they hadn't been looking her way at all.
It was an unbelievably out-of-the-ordinary event that they suddenly found before them, so it was an understandable reaction.
"Ooh, found some cake today! Hooray!"
Wholly ignorant to the people around her, she dug around in the trash next to a sweets shop, happily eating the leftovers.
If you asked her, they were some average yet perfectly happy days.
She was a tough one.

"Why are you rummaging through the trash?"
A curious old man appeared about two weeks after the girl took up her hobo life.
He wore a worn-out suit, and looked to be in his late forties. The girl

was happily stuffing her cheeks with a pound cake he had thrown away.
“I can’t die, but I feel like I’m going to when I’m hungry, so I’m looking for food,” she cheerfully told him.
“I see... I don’t quite understand, but I suppose I get the gist of it.”
“This is really tasty!”
“But you’ll ruin your stomach eating stuff from the garbage.”
Of course, the girl was immortal, so she could subsist solely on concrete and it wouldn’t ruin her body at all.
But the old man couldn’t have known that, so he felt bad for her.

The old man produced a macaron from his pocket and handed it to the girl.
“Eat this.”
“Can I really have it?!”
Having not seen a macaron in a while, the girl was very enthused, and did a spin in place.
The old man softly laughed at the simple-minded girl.
“Ahaha, of course! You’re on the verge of death, I’ll bet.”
“I’m definitely not going to die, but thank you! Hooray!”
“What a strange girl...”
She finished the old man’s macaron in three seconds flat, and impudently declared “I want more!”
“Well, I don’t have any on me, but I might have some at home,” he said with a bitter smile, scratching his head.
“Let’s go to your house!”, she said without a moment’s delay.
She followed right behind the old man as they walked to his house.
She was an impudent one.

*

“Whoa, it’s so big! What a house!”
They arrived at an elegant house with a garden. She was amazed at the size of the house, unimaginable to her from the raggedness of the old man’s suit.
“Come on inside.”
“Okay!”
She went inside as told, and found it to be very spacious. There was a big entryway with many shoe shelves, and a pretty System Kitchen.
The sprawling living room had very little in the way of furniture, making its size stand out even more.

Arriving at the living room, the old man retrieved a macaron from a Shinto shrine and gave it to the girl.
On the shrine was a portrait of a young girl.
“My daughter loved them, you know...”, the old man said, looking at the portrait. From behind, it seemed as if he was crying.
The old man seemed terribly lonely, and so as the girl ate the macaron, she couldn’t help but stroke the old man’s head.
“Life always has good things in store. Keep at it!”
The old man cracked a smile at her comment.
“Keep at it, hm? Yes, I will.”
“Good!”
“Why, it’s almost as if my daughter has come back to life,” the old man remarked.
Just then, the girl became anxious with the thought that Miko might have died in the future.

“Anywhere you’re trying to get to?”, the old man asked, facing the happily-eating macaron-loving girl.
The girl lowered her head in thought. After a while, her face suddenly lit up with realization.
“Well, I guess I have to go a thousand years in the future.”
“A thousand years? That won’t be easy.”
“Oh, you don’t believe me, do you? I’m sure you don’t. Believe it!” She poked the old man’s sides.
“All right, I believe you, I believe you!”
“Good!”
With a satisfied look, the girl returned to her work of eating macarons. The old man sat down on a cushion in the living room and lit a cigarette. He seemed very happy to watch her eat.

“So then, how does waiting here a thousand years sound?”, the old man said once the girl was done, seeming stuffed full of macarons.
“Ooh, that’s a good plan!”
“It is, isn’t it?”
“Thank you very much!”
“No, I should be thanking you.”
“Oh, all right... I’ll let you thank me.”
“Hmm...”
And the old man laughed again.

*

Living with the old man was extremely pleasant for her.
He would buy her macarons every day without fail.

She loved macarons more than any other food, so that alone made her truly happy.

Lately, she was really into donating blood, and best of all was that they gave her candy for doing it.
They aren't supposed to draw blood until after a period of three months since you last donated, but she went once a week and became good friends with the doctor there.
There wasn't much else to do besides that, however, so she had a lot of time on her hands.
"You're bored, huh?", the old man would comment, and it always made her slightly angry.
"No, I was busy watching the ants in the park, and counting pebbles in the sand pit, and counting stains on the ceiling!"
She said this as she stared absentmindedly into the colorfully-gleaming sky.
In any case, yes, she was bored.

At times, the old man would convulsively burst into tears.
Whenever she heard sniffling from the bedroom, the girl would stroke his head softly.
She never asked why he was crying, or said a word about his daughter.
However, every time she consoled the old man, she asked for a payment of three macarons.

Though she lived with the old man, she knew nothing about him.
She didn't know what he did during the day, or his favorite foods, or what his hobbies were, or why he lived in such a large house by

himself. Or if he had friends, or where his wife went.
She considered these things unimportant, and it never even crossed her mind that she should ask them.
In fact, at the time, she never even considered that she should talk to him more, or pat him on the head more.

*

She lived with the old man in this way for eight years and eighty-two days.
He became sick on the fifty-second day of the eighth year, and died on the eighty-second.
He died of a contagious disease of unknown origin spreading around the world.
The incubation period could be several years or several days. It didn't show any symptoms until about a month before it caused death, and presently nothing could be done to cure it.
The girl didn't know it, but it was the very same illness that had taken the old man's daughter.

She was immortal, so it was no problem for her, but for ordinary people it was just the opposite. The illness spread in no time at all, engulfing the entire town.
One after another, the townspeople died off, until she was the only one left.
The still air and the cold wind told of the death that had stricken the now-empty town.
But the girl survived.
Alas, she survived them all.



“Idiot...”

Alone in the town, the girl muttered to herself.
“When you’re dead, you can’t buy me macarons anymore, can you...?”

She held a funeral with no visitors for the old man.
She lit three of his Seven Star cigarettes and laid them on the soil.
The smoke spread through the sky of the uninhabited town.
“I want some of your macarons, old man...”
But there was no reply.
She was saddened, and looked to the sky.
After the old man passed away, the skies were always gray, as if all color had vanished from them.
Looking into the sky, she ate the last macaron the old man had bought for her.
It was delicious, delicious as had been every one since they first met

And the girl cried for a little while.

She finished the macaron, wiped her tears, and walked on ahead.

She kept on walking.
Through endless wastelands.
Through glittering coastlines.
Between swaying trees.
Between towering buildings.
Over the horizons of land.
Over the horizons of sea.

She continued to walk.

On, and on.

*

Some time afterward, a medicine to cure the illness that had taken the old man to his death was developed.
It was made possible by the blood which the girl had donated while living with him, which carried the disease.
When a boy who had the illness was infused with some of her blood, he became the first case of recovery from the illness.
Doctors around the world studied the blood cells, and were able to create a cure for the illness which some had expected to wipe humanity out.
The girl didn't have any kind of identification, so no one knew who had donated the blood.
The miraculous blood cells left by a person unknown were referred to as "God's Drip."

"Thank you so much for saving my life!", the boy who was first to be saved wished he could say to his unknown benefactor.
When asked what he was going to do first once he got out of the hospital, he said something incomprehensible like "I dunno, go to the secret base?" and laughed.

But the macaron-loving fairytale girl who had saved the world couldn't have known about this person, their happiness, and their gratitude.

Instead, she continued to walk along wherever her feet took her.

*

As she walked, roughly a hundred years passed.
In that time, many large countries fell to ruin, throwing the world into much confusion. And many people died in large-scale disputes.
But this didn't have much to do with her, really, so she didn't pay it any mind.
She kept walking without a single thought for a hundred years, but one day, she suddenly thought back to the testing facility where she had once stayed.

"I wonder if Maa-chan and Satomi-chan are doing okay?"

With this sudden thought, she decided she would go visit them.
The address Maa-chan and Satomi-chan gave her was an apartment somewhere in Japan. Come to think of it, they did say that they wanted to hang out in an apartment once the experiment was over and they were immortal.
The girl was in Europe at the time, so she took a year and a half walking briskly back to Japan, and finally arrived at the location of the apartment.
But there was no house at all where it said there should be. Only a single wide road.
She checked again and again, and surely there was no mistake. Surely... The girl was uneasy.
It could be that she would never meet Maa-chan and Satomi-chan

again. She was unable to bear that thought.

She went to the facility to inquire about the whereabouts of Maa-chan and Satomi-chan.
When she returned to the site of the nostalgic facility, she found a changed place that showed no signs of it having ever existed.
There was no gorgeous hotel-like testing facility any longer; in its place was a large park and a sky bus terminal.

“Huh? This should be the place...” She tilted her head. Right on cue, a sky bus arrived.
She knew nothing about the fate of Maa-chan and Satomi-chan, so for the time being she got on the bus.
It being her first time riding, the view from the sky was one she had never seen before; even for one who had lived over a hundred years, it was a totally fresh look of the world.
The scenery swirling around the bus was so dazzling, she had to squint.

The bus was deserted.
Other than an old man sitting down, there was no one else around.
“Hey, old man? Was the facility at that place we were at torn down?”
She was about fifty years older than the old man, but she didn’t fuss over that detail and just rudely called the old man “old man” anyway.
He was a little surprised to be suddenly spoken to by a young pastel pink-haired girl (age 126).
Still, he answered the brazen girl’s question.

“Happened when I was just little, I believe. Seems they were doing something shady, and it got exposed. Not sure of the details about what they were doing, but heard it was pretty tragic.”
“What about Maa-chan? And Satomi-chan?”
The girl was getting a little scared over the frightful things the old man was saying, so she asked that in somewhat of a panic. He had not a clue what she was talking about.
The man scratched his neck and forced a smile. “Hmm... Don’t know.”
“Maa-chan and Satomi-chan promised we’d play together.”
“Sorry, I wouldn’t know anything,” he said, his face sorrowful.

The man went on to inform the girl of various things.
That he hadn’t heard anything about people from the facility who were still alive now, and how the experiments conducted in the hospital there produced no results, and how even now the idea of attaining immortality was a total pipe dream.
He told her everything.
She didn’t understand. But perhaps this one and only time, it was actually that she didn’t want to understand.

Still, she somehow knew that she wouldn’t be seeing Maa-chan and Satomi-chan again.

“Well then, I’ll be getting off here. I’m not sure I understand your situation, but don’t let things get you down.”
After talking for about an hour, the old man arrived at his stop - or at least said he did - and disembarked.

The now totally empty sky bus was completely silent, and the loneliness swelled.
The girl heaved open one of the bus's windows. She suddenly lept into the dizzyingly changing scenery, and the wind whipped at her skin.
Disembarking from the window, she boldly fluttered down from the sky bus.
She felt good with the strong wind blowing against her, and the ground grew before her.
Maa-chan and Satomi-chan were no longer in this wide world she saw.
In fact, it was likely everyone she ever knew was no longer anywhere to be found.
The world was always so large, and her always alone.

I wonder if Miko is doing well?

This thought suddenly crossed her mind mid-fall.
And then she did a dive into a lake.

*

In the year 2200, the effects of global warming caused various landmasses worldwide to sink into the sea.
The excess of carbon dioxide warmed the water, so it would be only a matter of time before deep-sea methane hydrate started melting.
Once that came to pass, the Earth's temperature would exponentially increase, and in time mankind would surely perish.
This theory seemed highly plausible to many.

People living along coastlines frenetically supported eco-friendliness.
This eco-boom knew no stopping; in Australia especially, where the effects of global warming were very evident, there began a religious organization called the Eco Saviors that made up the majority of the effort.
Everyone in the west hemisphere, before meals, and before bed, would wave around a green stick and offer prayers to the god Eco-Eco.
But the majority of humanity, which had given up on trying to live in this world, sat at home with the air conditioning at full blast, living hopeless days.

And as the people of the world converted to lives of indoor despair, the girl swam in the ocean every day.
She loved sea bathing, so the global warming greatly pleased her.
In near-boiling heat, she went swimming in the ocean about twenty-six times a week.
She felt digital swimsuits didn't match her skin, so she swam in the nude for three-hundred-sixty-five days.

As she swam, decades passed in the blink of an eye.
In that time, two-sevenths of the world's landmass became sea.
People felt as if it were the end of the world, and annual suicide rates at last broke 150 million.
Suicides started outnumbering births in this pre-doomsday scenario.
In Japan, they gave up on the notion of "spring, summer, autumn,

winter” and divided the year into “hot season” and “slightly less hot season.”
So no one remembered the former celebrity who sang “In Spring it is the Dawn” anymore.

Soon, humanity’s greatest fear was realized.
The deep-sea methane hydrate began to melt.
A countdown for the death of all mankind quietly began.
In this doomed world, people sought salvation in religion. By then, believers in the Eco Saviors vastly outnumbered Christians.
As people all over worshipped their new, unknowable god Lord Eco-Eco, the end drew near.

And still the girl kept sea bathing.
As a result of swimming twenty-four hours a day for decades, her skin was tanned light brown, and she became very healthy.
She had mastered swimming, and had lately gotten into swimming the Pacific with a butterfly stroke.
“Hooray for global warming!”, she shouted to no one in the middle of the Pacific Ocean.

*

One day in the middle of her vacationing, a small meteorite crashed into Earth.
It landed right on a beach the girl was swimming near.
Luckily enough she was the only one nearby, as the impact was so staggering it would have instantly killed anyone else in a five-hundred-meter radius.

But the girl was an tough, immortal, macaron-loving fairytale girl, so she was fine.

“Boy, that surprised me!”
The girl had been thrown a ways by the impact and landed on the beach. Rubbing her head, she went to investigate the source.
There was a small crater formed by the meteorite, telling of the severity of the impact.
“Puyopuyopuyo...”
As she approached the meteorite, she became aware of a strange sound.
She slowly drew near the source of the cute blobby noise.

She found a strange white marshmallow-like creature.
“What the? Are you mochi?”
“Puyopuyo!”
“Whoa, it spoke!”
White, round, small... A creature she had never seen before was bouncing around the meteorite.
“Geez, this is kinda scary! Scary creature I can’t comprehend!”
The immortal girl was actually the most incomprehensible creature present, but the bouncing white creature had no way of offering that comeback.
When the creature saw the girl, it tumbled onto the sand, approached her feet, then lept up onto her arm.
“Aww! Now that I look at you, you’re really cute!”
She quickly took a liking to the creature.

It started out energetically hopping around her arm, but gradually

began to tire.
Even its blubbing seemed less enthusiastic than it had been at first.
“Are you hungry? Hold on a second.”
The girl took out a donut from a rucksack and offered it to the creature.
“Puyooo!” The energy returned to it at once.
It fiercely leapt onto the donut and chewed it up.
“Wow, you chow down like a sumo wrestler!”
“Puyopuyo!”
“Aww, you’re too cute. I know, I’ll give you a name!”
“Puyu!”
“Since you eat food like a sumo wrestler from the word go, from now on I’m calling you Gocchan!”
“Poyopuyun!”
And so she named the creature “Gocchan” and fed it sweets every day.
Gocchan gladly ate up the sweets given to it.
Even in a world on the brink due to global warming, she spent her days playing with the strange creature. She was a carefree one.

*

One day, about a week after she picked up Gocchan, she went to feed it sweets as usual, but found a second Gocchan blubbing around.
“What is THIS?” She could only look on in stupification.
When the two Gocchan saw her, they approached with cute blubbing, then quickly ate up all the macarons she was holding in her arms.



“Oh, you’re too cute to say no...” She was one who fundamentally didn’t think about complicated things.

*

After that, the Gocchan continued to multiply like rats.
As a result of always giving the cute Gocchan sweets, she realized she now had sixty Gocchan bouncing around her.
Of course, the amount of sweets she had to give them multiplied at the same rate, and she already had to cut down on eating macarons slightly.

The girl knew she was right to worry about the situation, and couldn’t just ignore it, so she decided she’d let the Gocchan go.
If things kept going like this, she wouldn’t have any more sweets to give them.
If she ended up unable to have some macarons to herself, she would undoubtedly go crazy.
Sometimes, painful decisions must be made for the sake of one’s own happiness.

“Sorry... I’m just going to do butterfly stroke...”, she muttered to the Gocchan, and continued her wonderful life of vacationing. She had no motivation whatsoever to change her life for the sake of the Gocchan.
To be honest, macarons and vacations were roughly a million times more important to her than the Gocchan. At times, humans can be uncaring creatures indeed.

So she handed the Gocchan over to a kind nearby researcher.
“I’m sorry, Gocchan #1 to #100, but for my own happiness, I’m letting you be happy in the care of this unfamiliar old guy!”, she said, pointing to the researcher’s house.
Before she knew it, the Gocchan had multiplied to greater numbers still.

“Er, just what are these creatures?”
“They make blubby sounds! Cute, huh? Take good care of them!”
“Just what are they? And what to even call them... What should I do...”
“Name them whatever you like! Good luck!”
With a final instruction to the researcher to be sure to feed them sweets every day, she left with a sigh of relief.
The Gocchan seemed sad as they blubbed at her back.
The researcher who these incomprehensible creatures had been forced upon, too, with eyes like a dead fish, started blubbering along with them.

*

Three years later, the truth about the Gocchan was revealed.
They were a dream organism that inhaled greenhouse gases and exhaled oxygen.
Scientific studies soon began, and every detail about the makeup of the Gocchan was eventually understood.
According to research, it was not sweets but sugar that caused them to multiply. In addition, since they could inhale greenhouse gases to a great degree and make the air harmless, having too many

was not a problem.
They were truly seen as saviors of mankind, given the current situation.
Also, if a Gocchan was not given sugar, all that resulted was the noises it made sounding a little sadder; its body seemed totally unaffected. What did the girl even have to worry about?

Five years after research began, all countries had recognized the creatures' utility. Two years after that, systematic methods for increasing their numbers were put into law.
As the multiplying Gocchan blubbed, they sucked up all the world's greenhouse gases, lowering the global climate in an instant.
The clumsy researcher who the girl left the Gocchan with won a Nobel Peace Prize, Nobel Prize for Biology, and a pile of other huge awards like that for his discovery of the world-saving organisms
What's more, he received an absurd sum of money, such that he could eat over a hundred macarons a day for a thousand years and still have cash to spare.

People around the world celebrated the Gocchan as saviors of humanity.
The fluffy white saviors were officially given the name "God."
And, also a fan of their lovable appearance, people did indeed adore them as gods.
Some young people would affectionately refer to them as "God-chan." Later, to make it easier to say, the nickname shifted to "Gocchan."
Miraculously, it was the exact same name the girl had given them.

The macaron-loving girl knew nothing of the times or of this, and happily soaked in the Pacific as always.

*

The year 2456 CE. It was a summer day on which an unusual number of cicadas buzzed. That day, the first intelligent life in space came to Earth.

It had specifically come here from far outside the solar system, and possessed a vastly different thought process from humans.
Within this story, we shall temporarily call the creature Paraporopurun.
The most striking feature of Paraporopurun was its incredible offensive capabilities.
Paraporopurun would wreak destruction and murder in the same way humans would eat breakfast.
The day Paraporopurun landed on Earth, all the people of Nagano prefecture were decimated like bits of sand.

But this was only one of Paraporopurun's fearsome characteristics. Another was its spirit link.
Right as Paraporopurun landed on Earth, it divided into clones of itself.
No matter how far they strayed from each other, they all immediately knew who was under what attack, and who was eating what food.
Paraporopurun was quite smart as well, so no matter what strategies humans thought up, it could quickly figure them out and

devise a counter.
Patriot Missiles, laser weaponry, atomic bombs, hydrogen bombs, they all had little effect on Paraporopurun. They were like fish bones to it.
Its seventy-six eyes bulging, its three-thousand-five-hundred-four hearts beating, using its long, three thousand arms which had three hundred million lungs attached, Paraporopurun continued its massacre.
It had only multiplied to a hundred, yet that was still plenty to annihilate humanity.

After its landing in 2456, Paraporopurun decimated half of humanity in less than thirty years.
Europe was particularly devastated, and it was unclear if the people there had been reduced to particles or atoms.
The Basilica was demolished like someone playing Sim City, and the Alps were pressed flat. Paraporopurun bathed in the Rhine, contaminating it with strange, unknown fluids and turning the water a purplish red. Stonehenge was tossed outside the atmosphere and became space debris.

Humanity tried developing biological weapons to use against Paraporopurun, but they were generally fruitless.
Whatever weapons they developed, Paraporopurun would turn them to dust in about three seconds.
The sole success among these was a human girl who was turned into a biological weapon.
The girl, about fifteen years old, carried unknown substances in her body and was surprisingly effective as a weapon.

But even humanity’s greatest inventions did not succeed in wiping out Paraporopurun.

By the happy turn of the century in 2500 CE, the population had shrunk to two hundred million.
A look at anyone’s eyes could tell you that annihilation was at hand.
Amid all this, the girl with much time on her hands was exploring the ocean deep carefree.
With her immortality, she was even able to live deep under the sea.

*

When the girl surfaced for the first time in fifty years, the world above had changed drastically.
No trace of her favorite sweets shop remained, and the roads were all riddled with potholes.
She was too surprised to speak, and started spinning and twirling along the concrete. She span, then fell right into a pothole in front of her.
“Ow!”, she quietly muttered, having hit her head on the hole.
“So this isn’t a dream, huh...”
She recognized that she was seeing reality.
She walked around, wanting to know why things had gotten like this.
She traveled all around Japan, but everywhere was similarly barren.
The Tokyo Skytree had been snapped, Sapporo Dome was flipped upside-down, the golden Shachihoko had been smashed and tossed to the sea, and Lake Biwa was a towering sand dune.
People’s faces were devoid of life, expressionless as if they were

already dead.

When she arrived in Okinawa, she saw a young girl and a strange creature on top of Shuri Castle ramming each other with incredible speed.
The macaron-loving girl didn't know that the latter was Paraporopurun, but she did recognize that it wasn't a creature of this earth.
The girl fighting was very clearly weary, having taken many severe wounds. After battling for nearly thirty minutes, the girl and Paraporopurun emitted a blinding light and vanished into the northwestern sky.
After bearing witness to this, the girl could only sigh "Sure is a dangerous world these days."
Honestly, as long as she could eat macarons, she didn't care that much about the annihilation of humanity.

However, the way things were going soon became less insignificant to the girl.
She had endured while exploring the deep sea, but since she was back on the surface, she wanted to go find a sweets shop. However, she had seen none anywhere she'd gone in Japan.
As a result of Paraporopurun's world devastation, her macaron supply line had been completely destroyed.
In these desperate times, if you had the time to make macarons, you would spend it making biological or nuclear weapons instead. No sweets shops could exist in such a world.
She went all around the country, but she could not find a single store that sold sweet things.

She sniffled and wailed in true despair at the thought that she might never eat macarons again.
Even when the old man died, she had only cried a little.
“Waaah! Nooo! Feed me! Feed me macarons!!”, the girl screamed, rolling and throwing a tantrum in the empty street. The ground was wet with her tears, and her crying echoed far away into the night.

She cried for three days. Feeling empty, she eventually stopped.
Her pastel pink hair was dirtied with gravel and sand, and her face was smudged with tears and snot.
She was filled with centuries’ worth of sadness.
“Macarons... macarons...”
She wandered like a ghost around the ruined world, muttering it again and again. In better times, it wouldn’t be surprising if police arrested her given how bizarrely she acted.
But life is not always woe. Happiness soon came upon her.

“This way, miss.”
The girl was suddenly spoken to in the ruined town of Tokyo.
There stood an old man wearing an apron.
“What is it? I’m really sad because I can’t eat macarons. Leave me alone.”
“Just come here for a second.”
“Ugh, what is it? W-Whoaaa!”
In his hands, he held perfectly round and colorful macarons, which she had longed to see more than the rising sun.
She drooled at the macarons which she had been dreaming of and stood up straight with excitement.

“Whoa! Wow! Macarons! It’s not a dream! Well maybe it’s a dream! I hope it’s not a dream!”, the girl shouted, thumping herself on the head.
“Ow! Not a dream! Wooow!”
The girl was so happy, she burst into tears.
“A-Are you all right, miss...?”, the aproned old man asked with a thin smile, recoiling a bit at the girl’s reaction.
“I’m fine! But anyway, what’s with those?”, the girl asked with a smile after wiping her tears. She was really, really happy.
The aproned old man calmly answered the smiling girl’s question.
“They’re from the black market. Those are the times for you. Those things destroyed my shop a decade ago.”
He gazed at a pile of rubble with a pained face.
The girl couldn’t have known this either, but the rubble was the remains of a shop destroyed by Paraporopurun.
“Well, even still, I love to make macarons. I hope I can open shop again once peace comes back to this world. So I’ve gotta keep up my skills, making and selling macarons every day. You’re cute, miss, so you can have them for free.”
“Hooray! Thank you!”
“No problem! Come by my shop once the world’s peaceful again!”
“Alright. I hope it’s peaceful soon!”
The aproned old man gave the girl ten macarons, and she bounced around happily.
The old man smiled with satisfaction at her delight.

*

“Okay, see you again!”

“Right, bye!”
The girl said goodbye to the aproned old man and ran through what had been Shibuya. She held a paper bag with macarons in it.
In high spirits, she ran through Tokyo looking for a place to eat with the best view.
Just then, a shadowy lifeform appeared before her eyes.
It had seventy-six eyes, three thousand arms. Slimy slippery reddish-purple skin, exposed hearts and three hundred million lungs.
It could be none other than Paraporopurun.

“Oh, you’re...”
The instant the girl said this, Paraporopurun shot an arm toward her at imperceptible speed. As soon as just one of its three thousand arms touched her, her body went flying off like a light rubber ball.
The force of this would blow an ordinary person to pieces, but the girl was immortal, so she survived.
However, the macarons she was holding fell to the ground, and got all muddy.
“Oww... Ahhh!!” The ripped paper bag entered her vision, then the macarons that had fallen out onto the ground.
Seeing these ruined macarons, she was filled with an emotion she had not felt before.
The girl who had generally lived taking things in stride now had a face red with rage.

“You...! Do you know what you’ve done?! These macarons are the old man’s life work! They’re extremely precious, and now I can’t eat

them! Now apologize! APOLOGIZE!!”
“... ....!”
Though she screamed loudly at it, Paraporopurun surely did not understand her Earth language.
Paraporopurun made some strange noises and vibrations and swung one of its arms again. Like before, the girl was blown away.
She hit the ground again, this time crushing a few macarons with her rear.
“...! ..... ? ... ...!...”
“Oww! You big dummy!”
She shouted again, and started throwing the macarons from the ground at Paraporopurun.
Miraculously, the macarons went straight into Paraporopurun’s mouth, of which it only had just one.
”. ....!”
Immediately, Paraporopurun’s reddish-violet face turned yellowish-green.
It suddenly stopped moving, and with a slight tremble, flew away into the west sky making bizarre noises.
“Wait! Give back my macarons!”
Her words echoed hollowly in the sky.

*

A few days later, all the Paraporopurun were cleanly wiped out.

To Paraporopurun, macarons were a terrifying food which induced what humans would call paralysis and strong hallucinations.
When Paraporopurun ate the macarons, it became confused, and

the hallucinogenic state spread via the spirit link to all the Paraporopurun.
Out of their right mind, they started to kill each other, and their numbers visibly dwindled.
In less than a week, nearly all the Paraporopurun had died, until finally, there was only one left.
The final Paraporopurun was quickly taken care of by the biological weapon girl.
And just like that, peace was easily returned to the world. Hooray.

“..... ... .”

The last remaining Paraporopurun, just before it was killed, said something in a language unknown to humans.
Members of a team made to strategize against Paraporopurun understood a few things about the language, and made it their final job to translate their ultimate foe’s parting words.

“I saw the goddess.”

One must keep in mind that these final words from the Paraporopurun were uttered in a state of paralysis and hallucination, and thus are nonsense.
But of course, people around the world paid that no mind, and believed that a great goddess had saved the Earth.
The invader who had tormented them for half a century had one day just been abruptly destroyed. So you couldn’t fault them for thinking that.
And so the Church of Venus began, a religion to celebrate the

goddess who had saved mankind.
Their numbers increased rapidly, and in less than fifty years, ninety-five percent of humanity was Venusian.
The macaron-loving fairytale goddess in question didn't even know she had become a god, and went on a tour of all the world's sweets shops.

And so she was out there somewhere, happily stuffing her cheeks with macarons.

*

All kinds of problems on Earth were resolved, and the world enjoyed a long peace.
Though Paraporopurun had put humanity on the brink of annihilation, the population already swelled back to 10 billion.
With little else to do in a peaceful world, they starting investigating all sorts of not-fully-understood things to kill time.
First of all, everything about the human body.
Then the deep sea.
Then all creatures on Earth, and the history of the Earth itself.
Everything from lost technology to how to make the best possible curry.
Every conceivable thing.

As the girl wandered the world for two hundred years, there came to be almost nothing on the planet that remained unexplained.
The origin of Earth, the secrets of life, and the mysteries of the deep sea had all been made clear.

Intelligent people decided they would go on to figure out things beyond their own planet. Enticed by the romance of unknown worlds, scientists turned their attention to space research.

There was a space development boom.
Just like people long ago had longed to be professional baseball players, people longed to be space researchers.
First, humanity started a project to terraform Mars.
After forcefully altering Mars's atmosphere with antimatter lasers, they sent over mounds of sugar, Gocchan, and vegetation.
The project began in 2700, and in only a few decades, Mars's environment was livable for humans. The Gocchan still happily blubbed there.
With the success of the Mars terraforming, space research advanced at an explosive rate.

While humanity was busy with space research, the girl became friends with a boy playing dodgeball in a park.
The glasses-wearing youth was rather weak.
In the 28th century, weak people were still looked down upon, and so he was made fun of by other children.
The game of dodgeball they played that day was in name only - it was mostly just about bullying the boy.
Suddenly, the girl passed by. She had a sudden urge to play dodgeball and asked to join the children.
The bullies were nervous being suddenly talked to by a whimsical and cute pastel pink-haired girl and readily accepted.

Starting then, the game was drastically changed.

The girl was immortal and very strong, so she hurled the ball at both the bullies and the bullied.
She truly looked like a vengeful god.
The sight of the girl making unbelievably fast throws with a perfect smile made some of the boys cry and wet themselves.
After a single match, the bullies all dispersed and ran far away.
“Aw, what? I wanted to play some more...”

The weak boy was unbelievably reverent of the girl.
She thought of her as a real-life hero.
“Excuse me! Is it okay if we talk?!”
“Hmm?”
“Sorry to ask this all of a sudden, but please let me be your apprentice! Please!”
“Apprentice?”
“Yes, yes! Is it okay if I call you Master?!”
The girl had lived a long time, but no one had asked to be her apprentice before. Her heart filled with cheer, she replied “Sure thing!” with a voice full of enthusiasm.
From that day forth, the boy called the girl his Master.

“If you want something to do as my apprentice, then buy me sweets every month!”
The boy agreed and said he would bring her many macarons monthly.
Happily accepting the girl’s orders, he used his small allowance to buy a mountain of sweets on the first of every month.
“Master! I’ve brought you macarons today!”
“Well done! Have some sand as your reward.”

“Thank you very much, Master! I’m as happy as could be to receive such a wonderful gift!”
“Having an apprentice is really easy,” the girl thought.
Even if she slept the whole month, the macarons would come. As she ate them, she wondered what sweets might be offered to her next.
She was a wicked girl. An adored, seven-hundred-fifty-year-old wicked girl.

“Master! How can one become so good at dodgeball?!”
The boy would occasionally ask her such questions.
When he did, she would reveal her secrets with a grin.
“Hmm... Swimming is good!”
“I see! So swimming develops the back muscles, which explains your godly throwing strength! That’s very helpful to know! You’re amazing, Master! All right, then, I’ll swim every day!”
“Yeah, that should help. Swim twenty-one hours a day for about two hundred years and you’ll be as strong as me!”
“Amazing, Master! Wow! I’ll do my best!”
“Good luck!”
“Yes! Thank you very much for your wonderful advice!”
“It’s fine. Just don’t forget the macarons next week!”
“Yes! Understood!”

The boy was fundamentally an idiot, so he continued to revere the girl in this way. Whenever she taught him anything, she would demand sweets.
However, he was a diligent student and was luckily able to achieve his dream of becoming a space researcher.

As the girl was receiving sweets from him, humanity was progressing with space research.
Tens of millions had moved to Mars by now, and study of the solar system was nearly complete.
Slowly, humanity began to venture beyond the solar system.

*

“Master, why do you not age?”, the boy asked the girl one day between research.
She snootily laughed and answered him.
“I became immortal a long time ago. Cool, huh?”
“Amazing! But of course, Master!”
“Naturally. Heap more praise!”

Decades after they first met, the boy was the same as always.
In all that time, there wasn’t a month he failed to deliver her sweets. And over the years, the sweets he brought became more refined and delicious.
By this time, the boy was actually one of the leading experts in space research.
He had plenty of money, which he spent on delicious sweets for the girl.
Even so, whatever she ate, she would merely sigh “Tastes good!” She wasn’t able to distinguish different tastes very well at all.

When the boy talked to the girl, he was always smiling and full of joy.
He now appeared to be much older than the girl, but in his eyes she

still stood high above him, as his Master.
To an observer, their relationship would appear strange. But it was perfectly natural to them, and they treasured it greatly.
Similarly, the girl always thought of the boy as a boy, and always as her apprentice.
So when she noticed one day the boy had a gray hair, she felt a little sad.
Still, she said nothing. That was her greatest bluff.

Time continued to pass, and when the boy's hair turned fully white, the researching of space was finishing up.
There was almost nothing left in the universe which wasn't understood.
Researchers then became curious to see if there was anything outside of space.
With space research mostly complete, mankind developed a warp-drive equipped spaceship called the White Holli.
Created to explain all remaining mysteries, it was an embodiment of humanity's hope.
The ship required human piloting, but the warp drive was already complete. All that remained was the journey to the outside of space.

On the girl's eight-hundredth birthday, a few thousand researchers boarded the White Holli and set out to go beyond space.
The boy was among them.
As a lead developer on the White Holli, he was obligated to aid in the expedition as well.

“Huh? But I need my monthly macarons!”
When the boy told her he was heading beyond space, she complained.
She still looked forward to the high-quality sweets the boy brought her monthly.
Even with warp technology, the boy indeed could not send her sweets in the midst of the journey, which could take up to a decade. That was something the sweets-loving fairytale girl couldn’t bear.
He tried to console the pouting girl. “Please forgive me, Master! But when I return, I will bring you back sweets from beyond the cosmos! I’ll do what I can!”
“Hmm... Well, I guess...”
“And when I return, I’ll bring you a decade’s worth of quality sweets!”
“Really?! Hooray!”
She was a little let down, but she was okay with the promise of yet-unknown sweets.

“If you have any problems, just ask here.”
As the boy left, he gave the girl an address.
“What’s this?”
“A company I started recently. I thought I would try to train people to be like you, Master! I want your ideas to spread throughout the world!”
The card said “Hero Training Inc.”
No matter how old the boy got, she would always be the hero who saved him from bullies, her cool and unparalleled Master.
“Well then, I’ll do my best!”

“Don’t push yourself too hard! And don’t die!”
She energetically saw the boy off. He was smiling to the end.

*

A year passed since the boy left Earth with the other researchers.
After a year’s journey, the White Holli finally reached the end of the regions mankind knew and arrived at the outside of space.
As all humanity’s hearts danced with the prospect of an unknown world, a single message arrived from the White Holli.

“We’ve discovered happiness.”

No further transmissions were ever made.

People worldwide were shocked, and successive exploration parties were sent, but none returned.
Letting curiosity get the better of them, the space researchers all departed for outside the cosmos.
They never set foot on Earth again.

No one knew what was outside the cosmos.
No one could say if there was really happiness there.
But the boy would certainly never come back.
The girl waited for him, but even after a decade, he never did.
The park was the same as ever, yet now it felt emptier.
It felt like the color of the park they played in was gone.
She looked up at gray skies and closed her eyes.

I suppose my apprentice is living happily outside the cosmos.

As a mere macaron-loving immortal girl, she couldn't know.
But she hoped that her beloved apprentice was indeed happy out there.
As unbefitting a thought as it was for her, it was what she thought.
It was what she hoped.

*

2828 CE. Earth was hit by numerous giant meteorites.
Observation of them had been obstructed by thick clouds covering the sky.
An unbelievable amount of meteorites had unbelievable orbits headed for Earth.
It seemed that once-in-a-milennium solar activity had added up to this result.
As such, defensive weapons could not be used against them.
Thanks to the lack of scientists due to the events decades ago, there was an unbelievable lack of people to respond to the meteorite collisions.
It was all so unbelievable, one could only laugh.
That this was the reason the world would be destroyed.

As the end approached, a crazed president of one of the countries mashed the nuclear launch button sixteen times.
The nuclear missiles rained down on the world alongside the meteorites.
On that final night, the world was engulfed in blinding light, lighting

up the sky.
Such a spectacle, it was almost hard to perceive it as the end of the world.

Civilization was wiped off the map.
In an instant, half of humanity was killed, and the remainder soon perished in the broken world.
Barren and irradiated. All technology was returned to ash.
An unknown virus spread from the meteorites, and billions died at their wit's end.
Finally, dust clouds from the impacts covered the atmosphere, bringing on an ice age.
The once-beautiful Earth became a planet of death in the blink of an eye.
The sunlight came down no longer.
It was not a blue Earth anymore.
The world had turned completely gray.

In the century that followed, mankind rapidly died off.
The Earth had thirty-seven billion residents at its peak, and now hardly any remained.
Most animals and plants had gone extinct as well.
Because of the unknown virus, those humans who had moved off of Earth decided to give up on it completely.

And the girl continued to live in this world.
In a world without light.
A freezing world.
An empty world.

A world littered with death.
To meet Miko, who was waiting a thousand years in the future, she kept living.

She had to hear what Miko had to say.
“I’ll keep going. Just a little more...”
As she spoke, blood came out her mouth.
It had been nearly a thousand years since any such damage had come to her.

Of course, she had no way of knowing, but the virus had worn away at her genes.
At some point, she had become just an ordinary macaron-loving fairytale girl.

*

A world of ash.
No color, no light.
Everything ruined.
I want to go home soon.
To somewhere I don’t know.

I’m so tired of it all.
The changing of the world. Having to say goodbye to people.
I’m so tired.

I’ve lived more than enough.
I’ve made lots of friends at a testing facility, I’ve had an old man

give me macarons every day.
I've donated tons of blood, I've traveled the world.
I've had long vacations, I've swam plenty.
I've found cute blubbing Gocchan, and handed them off.
I've explored the deep sea, I've had a strange alien ruin some macarons, I've had an apprentice.

And now, I've seen the world destroyed.

Ah, those were the days.
Yes, it's enough. I'm stuffed now.
But, still, if I could have one more wish granted, I'd want to see her again, one last time.

That's all I want, Miko.

*

She had come to be the only one left on Earth.
Everyone, yes, everyone, had perished.
She could barely move her arms anymore.
She could hardly see, and there was no energy in her legs.
Still, she kept living in the ashen gray world.

Soon, it would be over for her as well.
She knew the final moments of this macaron-loving fairytale girl drew near.

A light appeared in that ending world.

It was the first light in that ashen world, covered by black clouds, in decades.
“If I’m seeing this, then the end must be here...”, she muttered to no one.
Suddenly, she heard a voice somewhere.
She thought she was hearing things.
But somehow, she knew.
She knew she had heard that voice before.
She couldn’t see it anymore.
But she knew everything.

“Long time no see.”

A nostalgic voice. One she had been waiting to hear. For a thousand years.

“Yes, it has been.”

The girl smiled.

What did those last remaining humans last think?
What did they talk about?
Did they cry?
Did they laugh?
Were they saddened?
Were they delighted?
Were they angry?
No one could ever know.
That was a secret between them.

But this much we can say for sure.
In a world without macarons or sweets of any kind, humanity perished happily in its final day.

And so was the macaron-loving girl's strange,

yet happy story.

*

3000 CE.
The humans who had moved to Mars finally decided to send robots to investigate Earth.
It was a long-perished planet, but people figured they might be able to do some good with it.
The robots took pictures of the planet, which was impossible to do from Mars due to the dust clouds.
It was an empty world.
A pure white ruined landscape.
A dilapidated, messy, starved world.
The robots continued to photograph it.
Those on Mars began to think that revitalizing the Earth was impossible.
Earth had truly been devastated.
As the robots went on taking photos, they found something.
The last remnants of humanity, holding hands and huddled together.
The two moved no longer, but seemed so pleasant together.

They looked very happy.

A few decades later, the humans on Mars made an antibody for the unknown virus.
It was made possible by the discovery of that girl who had been infected with it.
With this, a project to re-terraform the Earth began.
Thanks to her, the Earth was able to take back a promising blue future.
But that didn’t matter to the macaron-loving fairytale girl, who still holds her friend’s hand today.

The warmth of that hand was all she had ever sought for those thousand years.

Book 2: She Can Talk To Concrete

He opened his eyes, feeling an unwanted warmth on his hand.
Stunned by light reflected off the pure white ceiling, he unconsciously closed them again. It was not a ceiling he knew.
He had awoken when a nurse in her late thirties grabbed his hand and stuck an IV needle into it.
The nurse was slightly surprised to see him wake, and went to call for a doctor. The pattering of her hurried running sounded somehow otherworldly.
All that was within his vision was a somehow unreal, inorganic hospital room.

“What you’ve come down with can’t be cured.”

This is what the doctor told him a bit later.

He was told he had a fatal illness.

His class was one he consistently just couldn’t get acquainted with.
His high school life was worthless, without many friends.
Targeted by the class leader, he was often bullied.
The potential for his future seemed to diminish. He could hardly see a future ahead.
And at the front of his mind was “This is really just a pain.”
So he muttered cynically, “Welp, what can you do,” and entered the classroom with a metal bat.

She could talk to concrete.

Her big sister who went to college didn't know, and Tsubasa-kun, who always had girls providing him Dom Pérignon, probably didn't know either.
The hula dance teacher, and her mother who was cheating with him, didn't know, and her father who vanished into thin air one day didn't know.
Orphans starving in Africa didn't know, and her and Tsubasa-kun's children who had not yet breathed the air of the outside world definitely didn't know.
But to that she always said, "Welp, what can you do."

This is the story of them both.

*

What do people do the day they're told they have a terminal illness?
Some give up on living in despair, and some go running to their loved ones.
Some go mad with fear, and some indulge freely in their desires.
There are many different approaches.
But he was a little different.

"I guess now I don't have to think about my future!"

He was filled with cheer and entertained such pointless thoughts as those.
Thus, he went to his school's closing ceremony with a metal bat.
He repeatedly whacked the class leader in the butt with it, and ran out of the room as fast as he could go.
He heard beastly cries of anger from the classroom, but they mattered not to him.
After all, he had a fatal illness. By the end of this summer vacation, he'd no longer be one for this world.
So he'd no longer go to school, which was two hours from home. He'd never meet them again. The anger and yelling of someone you'll never see again is even more pointless than hearing someone talk about the dream they had last night.

Ignoring the voices echoing through the school, he dashed through the halls at top speed.
He liked the feel of the wind blowing against him, and closed his eyes for a moment.
He saw nothing but blackness. Like everyone had vanished from the world.
When he grew scared and opened his eyes, a brilliant light entered his eyes.
He suddenly thought, "If I die, will that blackness go on forever?"
That could have been a very scary thing indeed.
Eternal blackness with no time nor space. Would he be able to stand it?
Those thoughts were wiped away by the shouting from behind.

Running from the school, he went into town. He didn't even give a

glance to the school gates which he'd never again pass through. He just kept looking and running ahead.
The piercing blue sky seemed bigger than ever, and a world filled with brilliant color spread before him.

He was already free.

*

"I'm home!"
"Welcome back! You're early."
"Yeah, the closing ceremony ended early."
"Oh, you don't say. Now, go clean your room. I'm going to be going shopping now."
"Okay, mom. See you!"

His mother left, and her lying son saw her off. She never would have imagined he, in his third year of high school, took a metal bat to school and spanked a kid with it. Some things you're better off not knowing.
He hadn't told anyone he had a terminal illness. That was another thing better off not known, he thought.
His mother, of course, would be very sad if she learned about it. He didn't want to see that.

After confirming from the window that his mother was far enough away, he got his textbooks out of his bag. The symbols of high school. As he went up in years, these things got harder, tortured him further.

He tore apart one of these books, bundled it into a ball, and tossed it in the trash.
He put another in the shredder, and buried another to nourish the earth, and burnt another to contribute to global warming.
He went on disposing of his textbooks in all different ways. The last one, he turned into a paper airplane and sent flying away.
Freed from his chains, he went to observe ants in the garden.
That time he spent watching the ants carry sugar in one long line was the happiest of his entire high school life.

From that day forth, he did his best to do absolutely nothing.
He bounced erasers, dug up and immediately refilled holes, counted stains on the ceiling, gave himself baths with water bottles.
He tried his hardest in all of these meaningless things.
Considering his beyond-terrible high school life, these days were very enjoyable indeed.
“I wonder if I should just die already,” he sometimes thought.

On one of those days, he received an invitation to a class reunion.
That day, he was counting sand in the sand pit as usual. The surprise of hearing his cellphone notification, which he almost never heard, gave him a start.
He didn’t have any friends in high school, but he had a fair amount up to middle school. Sou-chan who lived nearby was a popular girl, and since they were close, he had more friends by extension.
So if he were to go there, even he would find friends.
In fact, the text inviting him to the reunion had been from Sou-chan.
“If you have some time, how’d you like to come to a class reunion?”

He wondered whether he should go or not, and asked his mother for her two cents.

“I dunno what I should do...”
“Well, you haven’t done anything since summer break started. Go see Sou-chan, I’m sure she misses you.”
“I’ve been doing things! Today I filled a water bottle with pebbles!”
“Please go.”
“Okay, mom...”
So he decided to go to the class reunion.
“Well, okay, I guess I should look forward to seeing Sou-chan again,” he told himself.

But alas, God was not kind to him.
The kind of god that gives people terminal illnesses willy-nilly is going to be bitterly malicious, he soon realized.
Due to catching an out-of-season flu, Sou-chan couldn’t come to the reunion.
Secondly, his friend Tsuu-kun was going on a trip at the same time as the reunion.
Thirdly, his friend You-kun became a shut-in who wouldn’t leave the house.
Fourthly, his friend Maa-kun was going to see a baseball game.
Fifthly, his friend Taa-chan was hospitalized after a traffic accident.
Etcetera, etcetera.

None of the people whom he was good friends with came to the reunion. He was left there all alone.
People laughed with each other. Had lively conversation. It had



nothing to do with him, so he worked to sprinkle lemon juice on fried chicken in the corner of the room.
He ignored the people at the reunion, and entertained fantasies about a convenient meteorite hitting the place.
“If I’d known it would be like this, I should’ve just looked for a nice-shaped rock at the river...”, he muttered, no one listening.
The loneliness piled up.

He got bored and started looking around. Most people had formed circles engaged in pleasant conversation. An honest thought came to his mind: “I wish they’d break an ankle.”
However, among them was a girl who was also isolated in the corner like him.
She had chestnut-colored hair with neatly-cut forelocks, and she was sprinkling lemon juice on fried chicken in boredom.
From what he remembered, she was in a group in their class that didn’t stand out very much.

In those days, she had long black hair in braids, and he had hardly ever talked to her in all their nine years of elementary and middle school.
That plain girl cutting her hair and dying it chestnut-colored seemed to make her an entirely different creature, so it took him some time to realize it was her.
He was able to gleam that she similarly had no friends who had come to the reunion.
With a glance over the crowd, he didn’t see anyone who he recalled being in her group, and he felt a sudden affinity.

In truth, as she sprinkled lemon juice on fried chicken in boredom, she was occasionally whispering things to the concrete.
Likely put off by the bizarre aura surrounding her, no one attempted to talk to her.
And perhaps not wanting to lose to her, he continued to sprinkle lemon juice on the fried prawns before him.

Of course, no one came to talk to him either.

*

When the reunion was over, the former classmates went off to various after-parties.
He and she had no chance of being invited to any of those, so they loitered around the area.

“Go home.”

They both muttered at nearly the same time. He found himself meeting eyes with her, but feeling awkward, averted his gaze.
She looked at him doubtfully. Then she appeared to realize something, and looked at him as if saying “Ahh, it’s that guy.”
As the only man on his own at the reunion, he had really stood out.
“Are you heading back this way?”
She must have felt a strange sort of sympathy as well. So she talked to him, of all people.
As soon as she spoke, his body froze up. He hadn’t had a single conversation at the reunion, so he’d totally forgotten how to

respond to being talked to.

He took a breath to calm himself down, then replied.
“No, not that way. Well, maybe that way.”
She smirked at his ridiculous response. It was the first emotion she, who was just squeezing lemons, had shown all day.
“Um, what’s your name again?”, she asked, smiling. She was completely unable to remember it, having interacted with him so little.
“I forgot. Try to remember it for me,” he jokingly replied.
She pondered and glared at his face. The smell of perfume tickled his nose.
Looking at her closer, she had quite a bit of makeup on. More than an ordinary high-schooler would wear.

After thinking for a while with her head lowered, her face gleamed and she shouted:
“I remember! You’re Tarou Yamada!”
That sounded like the name of a fourth outfielder, and it was not his, but he laughed and said “That’s right! Good memory.”

He had a tendency to say a lot of pointless lies.
He’d say he hated tomatoes even though he liked them, bring his homework but say he forgot it, say he was full even though he was hungry.
He loved to pointlessly lie. And this was yet another meaningless lie that he would be better off not saying.

“And I believe your name was Hanako Yamada?”

He actually knew her name, but he lied about that too. Getting people's names wrong was a kind of lie he told often.
People are usually a little displeased to have such mistakes made about them. But she laughed hearing it.
"Haha, that's right! Good job yourself!"
Without any sign of anger, she poked his face with a smile. She wasn't named Hanako Yamada, but her sunny smile didn't mind.
He found a little enjoyment in their bizarre first meeting that day.

*

"What have you been up to lately, Tarou Yamada?"
He was walking home with her. Their paths home went in completely opposite directions, but if he had time to observe ants every day, he could spend it walking the wrong way with her.
"Battling with death, I guess."
The first true thing he'd said to her all day. Thinking it was a joke, she laughed "Haha!" like before.
"Yeah, that's summer vacation. No school or anything. So hey, what can you do."
"Right. Hooray for summer vacation!"
"So you've got so much time, you're fighting death?"
"Yeah, yeah. I gotta battle death once summer comes along."
"Naturally!"
With that, she span around happily. She did three spins, then stumbled back toward him.

"Hanako Yamada, are you still in school?"
"Nope, I don't go to school!"

“Oh, wow! You’re a free woman.”
“Ahaha, that’s right. It’s great!”, she proudly stated, sticking out her chest. It looked like her breasts were about to spill out of her exposing clothes.
“It’s kind of a secret, but I work a night job.”
“Oh, huh. I bet it must be terrible getting all those weird late-night visitors to the store.”
“Nooo, that’s not it!”
He more or less understood what she was getting at, but he didn’t have that much interest and just acted oblivious.

“I’m a real hit with the guys! Isn’t that great?”
“Oh, yeah. I’m jealous!”
“You’re not really thinking that at all, are you!”
“No, of course I am. It’s been on my mind since yesterday.”
“Well then great!”
It was a dumb, thoughtless conversation, but she was smiling the whole time. A big difference from the bored expression she wore while squeezing lemons at the class reunion.

“I guess I’m glad I came today,” she suddenly said when they were about halfway home. “Though truthfully, most of the time I was thinking I should have gone to see a baseball game.”
“Baseball?”
“Yeah. I love baseball.”
After saying this, she assumed a batting pose, pretending to hold a bat with both hands swaying. “See, look! I’m Nori!”
Shockingly, her swing looked exactly like one of Norihiro Nakamura’s, from the stance to the throwing of the bat.

“Whoa, good impression! I really like it,” he replied, genuinely impressed.
Perhaps pleased, she nodded with a smile. “Yep, I love it!”
Her appearance had changed significantly, but her innocent smile still showed traces of middle school days.

He and she talked about a lot of things afterward.
About how her good friend Mii-chan went missing on a trip to Paris.
About how his good friend Maa-kun was off watching a baseball game.
About how he couldn’t make many friends in high school.
About how she couldn’t either, and dropped out.
About how he whacked the class leader in the butt with a metal bat.
About the night job she worked (and how it was very R-rated).
And about how she could talk to concrete.

“You can talk to concrete? That’s amazing!”, he praised, and she shyly giggled.
Things happened after she dropped out of school, and she wasn’t sure why, but she eventually realized she could do it.
It was a hard thing to believe right away, but he just thought “Yeah, I guess that could happen.”
After all, he had an incurable illness. So if there was a person or two who could talk to concrete, that didn’t seem so strange.
“I was so bored during the class reunion, I talked to concrete the whole time. I thought we were going to run out of things to talk about.”

Her Norihiro Nakamura impression done, she started doing a Daisuke Miura one.
She put her weight on one leg, and with a little bit of unsteadiness, pretended to pitch a ball.
“There’s so many dull people around, I’m glad you’re here to put me at ease,” he replied.
“What’s that supposed to mean?!”, she said, poking him in the back.

After crossing an intersection into a residential area and walking a ways, her feet suddenly stopped.
“Ah, we’re here. This is my place.”
It was a pure white, three-story apartment. It had a fresh, pretty exterior, but by any measure, it didn’t seem big enough for a whole family to live in.
“Do you live alone?”, he asked, getting curious.
“Well... I guess I live with my boyfriend!”, she answered, not seeming to hide anything.
“Huh. That sounds fun.”
“It’s terrible, it wears me out to be with him. I want some time to myself!”
“You could go into the woods or something to be alone.”
She clapped her hands and went “Eureka!” She was the first person he’d ever seen react in such a way.

“Still, it’s a pretty good place, isn’t it?”, he cautiously praised.
“Right? There’s a batting center, a butcher’s, and a mat-maker’s all nearby! And the woods,” she incomprehensibly gloated.
“I’m jealous.”

“You want to move in, Tarou Yamada?”
“Should I? I don’t think I’m that swayed by a mat-maker’s, a butcher’s, and a batting center.”
“Really? What a shame...”
She headed for the entrance, pushed the auto-lock button, and the door opened with a pleasing sound.
“Well, see you! Maybe in three years or so!”
“Alright. Let’s play again five years from now!”
“O-kay!” She waved like a grade-schooler.
Then she said one last thing.

“Today was pretty fun! Thanks!”

Skipping each step as she climbed the stairs, she whimsically vanished into the apartment.
When the sound of her steps stopped, he slowly began his walk home.

*

The next day, he resumed his usual life. Which, of course, was just observing ants in the park.
He stared at the ground in the red sun shining down on the early-afternoon park.
He watched the ants with each coming day, but on the fifteenth day he felt a creeping boredom.
Getting thirsty, he walked over to the park’s water cooler. Even that chalk-smelling water was a delicious feast for the thirsty boy.
And with little else to do, he sat on a bench and stared into the sky.

“Oh! We meet again!”

He turned to the voice, and found the one he called Hanako Yamada. She waltzed over to him.
“It’s been a while. Five years, almost?”
“It’s been a week! What are you doing now, Tarou Yamada?”
“I’m busy wasting time, I guess.”
“Ooh, sounds important.”
She had very little makeup on that day. Her strawberry-patterned white one-piece reflected the light and fluttered in the wind whenever she walked.
It was a more the kind of casual dress you’d expect from a high-schooler, and a huge change from her prior night-worker clothes.
This was closer to how he remembered seeing her.

“What are you doing, Hanako Yamada? You gonna be okay not sleeping for your night job?”, he asked.
She replied sourly. “Well... I guess I kinda got fired from my night job, or something like that.”
“Huh? What’d you do?”
“I was so enthusiastic to serve my customers, I gave out a little too much for free.”
“I see. I don’t get it, but I guess people get fired for that kind of thing all the time these days.”
“I know. Gosh!” She pouted, pretending to be mad.
As he gazed absentmindedly at her, he daydreamed about how he would waste time today.

“Are you listening?”
“Wah!”
When he ignored what she was going on about, she started to stare at him.
He suddenly noticed her big eyes looking at him and was startled, letting out a small yelp. He positioned himself like nothing had happened.
“Umm... I guess I was listening until about three minutes ago.”
“Geez! Hear out my hardship, will you? What were you thinking?”
“I was thinking about how I’d waste time today.”
“Alright, well, what can you do.”
She ran over to the corner of the park and reached a steel pole. She grabbed it and flipped upside down on it.
He could see her black underwear under her strawberry one-piece, but he looked away.

“I’m bored now, too. Since I’m thinking already, I’ll think about how we can waste time.”
“Okay,” he said, still staring into the sky. He reminisced vaguely on the past.
A long-past memory arose: “Back in elementary school, I think I played with Sou-chan around here.”
They played tag and kick the can every day during the summer.
Still, as time passed they got bored, and sat around like now wondering if there was anything else fun they could do.
“What did we do back then?”
Just as he thought it, it revived another memory.

That’s right. Their secret base.

When they were in elementary school, they made a secret base to play in.
They spent the summer making a base for the two of them in the grove behind the park. A secret place where their parents and teachers wouldn't interfere.
"But what ended up happening with that?" It was so long ago, he couldn't remember anything more.

"A secret base," he mumbled.
"Hm? What's that?", came her voice from afar.
"I know what we'll do. We'll make a secret base."
He suddenly stood up from the bench. But he was dizzy for a moment from doing so and staggered, then regained his balance and stood back up.
"Ooh, that's a good idea!"
Ignorant to his stumbling, she ran over from the pole.
"Just the idea of a secret base makes me excited! That's pretty good coming from you, Tarou Yamada."
"Right? You can just call me Japanese Thomas Edison."
"What a genius! Alright, I'll help you make a secret base!"

"Shouldn't you spend time with your boyfriend with your time off?", he asked the elated girl, having some doubts.
"He's busy with his host job, so I've got lots of time," she answered with a hint of disappointment.
"That sounds terrible."
"I wish he'd sympathize with me more. I wish he'd make me meals, too."

“Well, what can you do. I guess you can help me make a secret base, then.”
“Hooray! I’ll do my best!” She spun and hopped in place.
Her skirt fluttered up revealing her black underwear multiple times.
“I can see under your short skirt, you know.”
“Huh? Don’t be ridiculous. It’s just your imagination.”
“Alright, I guess it could just be my imagination.”
“Yeah, when it’s just your imagination, what can you do. So give up.” A childlike, worriless grin came to her face.

*

“So, do you know what you do first in making a secret base?”
“Um. Well, I’m hungry, so first we should get some food!”
“Wrong! First, we procure cardboard!”, he proudly explained.
“Cardboard?”
“Yes, cardboard. With enough cardboard, we can create an infinite number of secret bases. Cardboard is the greatest invention of all mankind.”
“Ohh.” She rapidly nodded, taking him very seriously.
They were the only two voices in the park, lit by the red mid-afternoon sun.
“And so we must procure cardboard.”
“Roger that!”
They left the empty park and headed for the shopping district.

There weren’t many people there, but since it was summer, there would sometimes be bored kids passing by. Every one of them had a joyous expression, like they’d been freed from something.

The two walked around the shopping district, old and littered with shuttered stores. At the far end was the only convenience store in town.
“We’re here. Let’s get some cardboard.”
“Huh, you can get cardboard from the convenience store? I didn’t know that.”
“That’s common knowledge for secret base builders. Remember it!”
“Roger that!”
Not wanting these exchanges to go on excessively, they entered the store.

“C’m’n in,” came a soulless voice from the register, accompanied by pleasant music.
When the boy saw the clerk, he put a hand to his head.
“This could be bad...”
“What’s up?”
“Hanako Yamada, this is very bad. This clerk here is extremely lacking in motivation. If we ask him for cardboard, it’s highly likely he’ll consider it more trouble than it’s worth.”
“Oh, no... We only just started, and we’re already stuck...?” Her shoulders drooped.
Seeing this, he put on a firm, cheery voice.
“But it’s too early to give up. We’ll see what we can do.”
“Just as I expected, Tarou Yamada the Great! So cool! Cooler than a dogu doll!”
“Stop, you’re embarrassing me.”

He walked right up to the register. There was a cold sweat on his back. He tried to ignore the quickening of his heartbeat.

“Visit’r, eh, c’mon to th’ reg’ster...”
When the boy approached, the blond clerk spewed words that he was unable to ascertain as Japanese.
He took a deep breath and stated his intention.
“Excuse me. Um, would you be able to give us some cardboard?”
“Ehh... s’rry, can’t, bossain’t’ere...”
“Ah. Okay.”
“Th’nksfer...”

He twirled away from the clerk and returned to her.
“I, uh, don’t think it was any good...”
“You’re so lame, Tarou Yamada...”
“Yeah...”
He, too, drooped his shoulders in disappointment.

“It’s over. Our secret base project is at a standstill right after it was begun.”
“Ah, what can you do... Alright, just leave it to me.”
Hating to see him in such lamentation, she patted his head, then adjusted the straps on her one-piece. Her cleavage was significantly more noticeable than before.
He tilted his head, thinking it a strange thing to do, as she traipsed over to the register.

“C’m’n in...”
As she approached, she heard the same soulless voice as before. The clerk showed no signs of wanting to give them cardboard.
“Um, excuse me. Could I get some cardboard?”
“S’rry... I, I ‘unno rig’now.”



“Just give us that cardboard in the back. We’ll take it all, so it won’t be any more trouble for you.”
“Ehh, uh... I ‘unno, really... nocando.”

The blond clerk was clearly too lazy to bother. How can you be a clerk with this attitude?, the boy thought deep down.
She faced the clerk and made a request a little bit louder.
And with her words, the mood in the store changed immediately.

“Um, you can touch my boobs if you want. Will you give us cardboard?”

She took the clerk’s hand and put it on her own breast.
The clerk was wordless at this sudden action, and his mouth hung open. There was immediate silence.
She took the clerk’s hand and groped her breast with it. Even through the one-piece, one could tell her large breasts were being squeezed.
All the customers in the shop turned toward the clerk to see this sight rarely seen in daily life. Noticing the odd atmosphere, the clerk quickly took his hand away.
“I, I go’cha. Y’, take it. M’bad.”
“Thank you very much! Also, can we borrow a cart or whatever?”
“K-kay. Pleese.”
“Hooray! Thanks so much!”
She thanked him and ran back to the boy. With a quick breath, she innocently smiled and took his arm.
“Alright! We procured cardboard!”
“Hanako Yamada... No, Hanako Yamada the Great. You did well.

Now let's take it before he changes his mind."

"Roger that! Let's carry!"
The two took a cart from the clerk and ran through the back entrance to the cardboard storage.

*

"I'm beat!"
The two returned to the park carrying a mountain of cardboard. They had pushed the carts a long way, so sweat dripped down their faces.
He drank water while trying to catch his breath, and she tried to fan herself with her hands.
"Still, I'm glad it went well."
"Thanks to you, Hanako Yamada. You saved us!"
"Heheh. More praise!"
"Such brilliance! Smarter than a chimpanzee!"
"Aren't I? Teehee!" Again, she stuck our her breasts.
Further asserting her already large breasts, her one-piece looked about to tear.

"Alright, time to make our base."
"Roger that! Let's get started quick!"
On the way back, they had bought packing tape, glue, and other supplies, so their preparations were nearly complete. All that was left was to build.
"Okay, ready?"
"Yes!"

Pushing the cart loaded with luggage, they headed into the grove.

The grove behind the park had changed little since he was in elementary school, as it had been mostly untouched by people.
Even though it was early afternoon on a holiday, they didn't hear anyone. Of course, it was quite far from the shopping district. All they could hear in the dim grove was the buzzing of cicadas.
After walking a little ways, they found a light spot that stood out among the darkness. The sun poked through thanks to the lower density of trees there, and the ground sparkled in the light.
"Let's build around here."
"Ooh, that's good!"
They unloaded the luggage from the cart. It took a while to get all the cardboard off, but filled with excitement to make a secret base, they didn't mind the work.

"Hanako Yamada, what kind of secret base do you want to make?", he asked, and her face beamed.
"I want it to be a fancy type thing! Like a castle!"
"Alright. We'll do our best."
"We will! Let's do it!"
"Yes, we'll both do it."
After carrying that conversation, he took the largest piece of cardboard and began construction.
He honestly didn't care much about what kind of base she wanted to make.

*

“I’m exhausted... I feel like I made something awesome!”, she said with satisfaction, wiping her sweat with a handkerchief.
The sun set behind the horizon, and everything got much darker. Looking at the time, it was already nine. That meant he and she had been toiling away on their bases for nearly five hours.
After all that work, they still weren’t done, but you could see them starting to come together.

Using cardboard extravagantly, he had built a large rectangular-prism-shaped base.
There were splinters, corners, and nails all over, so it was a simple design, yet one that tickled his male instincts. He was quite satisfied with his achievement.
Meanwhile, her secret base was the opposite of his.
Using color sprays she had bought from the shopping district, she made all her cardboard pink during construction.
She glued flowers and vines all around, adding some wonderful color. Though it was small, with its greens and browns, it didn’t feel at all out of place in the grove.

In places around her base, there were incomprehensible scribbles drawn with magic marker.
“What’re these?”
“These are concrete.”
“They look like humans to me, albeit stick figures.”
“Because Concretelings are pretty human-like already.”
“Well, okay, what can you do.”
She innocently laughed.

Suddenly, his body swayed with dizziness.
Unable to stand his reeling vision, he dropped to the floor.
“What’s wrong? Are you okay?”
She looked at him in a panic. Her face was swaying and warping in his eyes. It was clearly something entirely unlike the dizziness from standing up earlier.
“I’m fine. I think I’m just a little tired...”
“Really? Good. Boy, you’re weak.”
“I’ve always aspired to be a fragile, misfortunate person, so I consider being in poor condition a good thing.”
“Haha. It’s no good to aspire to that!”, she laughed, stroking his back. It made his shaky vision calm down just a little bit.

Once he was feeling better, he staggered to his feet.
“Better go home, I’m exhausted for today.”
“Yeah, I’m tired too.”
“Guess we should take the cart back.”
“Right. My boyfriend will be back soon, so I need to get home.”
“We’d better hurry, then.”
“Yep. Run!”
“I might get dizzy again...”
“Okay then, walk!”

The two leisurely walked back to the convenience store.
Having their usual content-less conversations, they swaggered through the shutter-filled shopping district. Theirs were the only voices in the desolate place.
When a conversation ended, she started humming. And when she got bored of that, they talked again. The two were comforted

having that appropriate sense of distance between them.
There wasn't a cloud in the sky, and thousands of stars glittered in the summer night. The Milky Way's glow lit the shopping district, which lacked in streetlights.

She looked up at the sky and sighed.
"Wow, the Milky Way is pretty. Looks tasty."
"It'd be nice to eat it someday. When you die and become a cloud, do your best to eat the Milky Way for me."
"I'll do the best I can!"
They returned the cart to the store, promised to meet again tomorrow, and parted ways.

*

"Ahh! They're destroyed!"
When they met at the park the next day and entered the grove, their secret bases were in shambles.
"Oh, this is awful... Can we possibly let this stand?"
She was despondent and crumpled to the ground. He didn't let it show, but he was very dejected inside as well.

That was when he remembered the fate of the secret base they made long ago.
Indeed, he recalled it was destroyed just the same way. When he and Sou-chan found the ruins of their base, they wailed in sorrow.
It may have been such a sad memory that he tried to erase it from his mind. But with the same sight before him, it was brought back.
And the ones who had destroyed it had been...

“Hey, you the ones who built those weird things?!”

As he was reminded of the past, a voice came from behind.
When he turned, he saw four young boys in middle school uniforms, arms linked. Maybe middle-schoolers these days are brought up better, as the one serving as their leader was about same height as him, a high-schooler.
“Yeah! And you’re the ones who destroyed them?”
“That’s right! We’re thinking we’re gonna build a secret base here! What’s the big idea building that weird junk?!”
“We got here first!”
“Shaddup! We already decided we’d build one here and everything!”, the largest of the boys shouted back.

From their attitudes, they didn’t seem like very logical people.
On top of that, he had a fatal illness, and was getting weaker by the day. It was obvious he wouldn’t win in a fight against these four.
That was when he remembered the whole story.
Back in elementary school, it was a group of middle-schoolers who destroyed their base.
Since they were far older than him and Sou-chan, they could do nothing before them and ran away in tears.
An enjoyable memory was immediately turned into a dark past that they never wanted to remember.

No matter the times, people’s natures don’t change. He yielded once more to the childish threats of selfish middle-schoolers.
While he remained silent, the middle-schoolers went on and on.

“Ikkun said we’re gonna build here, so we’re gonna build here. Can I make it any clearer?!”
“Yeah, yeah! Get outta here!”
“Heck, you should know without us havin’ to tell you!”
“Go home! Go hooome!”
Not just Ikkun, the leader, but also his three cronies started berating them. Though they had certainly made their point already.
The power of numbers defeated his rationality.

“So what! You can go build over there! You don’t have to destroy anything!”
She was angered by this irrational spectacle. It was the first time he’d seen her actually be mad.
He couldn’t help noticing that her rebuttal made the middle-schoolers wince for a moment.
“Hanako Yamada, let’s withdraw for now.”
“Huh? Why?! Let’s kick them in the stomachs and make them apologize!”
“Come on!” He took her arm and ran.
She was too surprised to react and ran with him.

The middle-schoolers got rowdy to the point of not being able to make anything out, and their yelling echoed through the grove.
This sort of thing had happened before, hadn’t it?
He smiled a little, remembering that.

*

“I’m so upset! Geez...”

After running from the middle-schoolers, they went to the convenience store at the end of the shopping district.
She sulked and held his arm tight, very frank about her sorrow over the destruction.
“Hey, calm down a little.”
“You want me to calm down?! Our secret bases were destroyed!”
“Well, we can just make them again.”
“But they’ll be destroyed again! That’s not the only good place for a secret base, right? Why didn’t we beat them up?!”
“Didn’t you see? Even though they’re middle-schoolers, their leader’s arms are as thick as yours, Hanako Yamada. If I punched one in the gut, I’d be the one beaten up.”
“Hmm... I guess that might have happened. The others were big, too.”
“And violence begets violence. Even if we got some lucky hits, our bases would be destroyed as soon as we were gone.”
“I guess that might be true... But Tarou Yamada, didn’t you tell me you beat a kid’s butt with a metal bat?”
“That was different. Things happened. Anyway, I don’t think violence is the right approach.”
“Hmm... I guess I get it...”

She listened to his argument, but she didn’t appear to accept it.
The secret bases they put their all into had been destroyed. Was that just another “what can you do”?
“But it sucks to just keep running...”
Hanging her head, she sourly offered one last plea. Tears were faintly forming in her eyes.
Patting her on the head, a bold smile came to his lips.

“Of course I’m not going to run. We’ll keep away from that place, but other than that, I don’t have any intention of giving up on our bases.”
“What do you mean?”
“I’ve got a good idea.”
“Really? Tell me, tell me!” Her face brightened instantly.
He started calmly explaining.

“Hanako Yamada, did you see? When you protested, the leader, the one they called Ikkun, was rather shaken.”
“Huh? Really? I didn’t notice that!”
“I think they probably haven’t had much contact with girls. They didn’t look cool enough for that. Plus, in middle school, boys and girls still tend to be on bad terms with each other.”
“That’s true! When I was in middle school, I hardly talked to any boys.”
“So they’ve never really had a cute girl like Hanako Yamada get mad at them, either. That’s why they were so taken aback.”
“Heheh, you’re making me blush. Heap on the praise!”
He completely ignored her and went on talking.

“So I think we should set up a Venus flytrap.”
“I get it! You’re amazing, Tarou Yamada! So I guess I should have them touch my boobs?”, she proposed with face beaming, holding her large breasts up.
“Hmm... I don’t think that’s the best idea. There’s four of them, but only one of you.”
“Oh... Yeah, that’d be hard.” She was let down by having the idea rejected.

She felt like she'd come up with the most brilliant plan the world had ever seen, and never expected it to be shot down so quickly.
Seeing her disappointment, he said something.
"Well, I might be able to work something out with what I'm thinking. Give me a second."

He entered the convenience store, and a pleasant door jingle echoed throughout it.
"W-Welcome!"
The clerk who had given them the cardboard stood up tall and greeted him. He paid him no mind and walked to the back of the store.
He brought a large quantity of something back to the register. The clerk was startled, but rang it up without a word.
"T-Thank you, come again!"
"No, thank you," he said to the polite clerk, then left the store.
When he exited the cool store to the midsummer exterior, he stumbled for a moment. He felt he was getting dizzier every time.
He stopped for a while, then when it had calmed down, walked over to her.

"Sorry for the wait. I was a little nervous..."
"What'd you buy?"
"Take a look." He handed her two vinyl bags.
The bags were both stuffed full, and thus rather heavy. When she took them, she immediately pulled an item out.
"Whoa, what the?! Tarou Yamada, you perv!"
She found a large quantity of porn magazines.
High school girls, married women, everything from Gravure Photo

Collection to Kairakuten, they had it all at the convenience store.
Ten thousand yen's worth of cheap porn.

"We'll use these to take back our secret base."
"Ohh. But can we really do it?"
"Of course we can!", he confidently replied. Though she had doubts, he put them at rest.
"How reliable! Great job, Tarou Yamada!"
"Also, there's one more thing we have to do, so we'll do that today. Tomorrow we'll put the plan into action."
"Alright! Let's do it!"
With a ton of porn in hand, they walked away from the store.

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"Man, those two were pests. We told 'em we were building here! How dare they go against us?"
"Heck, it looked like they're in high school or something, yet they couldn't say a word back. Super lame!"
"Ikkun's too cool to be beaten by high-schoolers!"
"Ha, it wasn't even hard. Those guys were weak!"
The next afternoon, the four middle-school boys were in the park by the grove. After driving off the high-schoolers, they were very enthused.

"Alright, let's make our base."
They rudely marched into the grove. Nothing seemed different from yesterday, and theirs were the only voices in the grove.
But when they neared the secret bases they had destroyed

yesterday, there was a clear oddity.
“What’re these?”
“Whoa...”
There, they found porn magazines. Tens of them, scattered all around.
“Ikkun, what do we do with these?”
“Ah, uhh... Well, er... Can’t we just ignore them?”
Ikkun was clearly shaken. He was as inexperienced as an elementary-schooler.
Having done nothing but karate all through elementary and middle school, he was not so immune as to honestly say such a thing.
After all, he was in middle school and still talking about secret bases. That alone could give you insight into his personality.

As the boys worked on their secret base, they kept glancing over at the porn. Anyone could tell they were enthralled by the sight of magazines containing naked women.
Even once construction began, there was an uneasy atmosphere that persisted between the boys.
Nervously and with clumsy hands, they put the base together. But unable to focus, little progress was made.

“Hey, Ikkun. Can’t we... clean that stuff up a little?”, one of the boys asked.
They did their best to hide it, but erotic material clearly excited them, and they couldn’t take it any longer.
“S-Sure. Yeah, it’s getting in the way. Clean it up.”
The four went over to the porn together. Their eyes lept to the covers of captivating naked women.

Ikkun's face went red with embarrassment, and he looked away.
"Whoa! Awesome!"
"Take a look at this! Duuude!"
"Ohhh man..."
Quickly forgetting their sworn duty to clean the magazines up, the boys looked over the covers as if chowing down. The sound of slurping up saliva echoed through the grove.
Unable to contain himself, one boy took a magazine and flipped it open. With that, the other boys started reading through them one by one.
"This one's unbelievable!"
"This one's sooo hot!"
"..."
With the boys around him engrossed, Ikkun timidly reached for a magazine.
The moment he flipped open one labeled "Kairakuten," the sound of a camera shutter echoed around them.

"Hm, what're you guys up to?"

There the two stood, holding a digital camera and a smartphone. With a grin on his face, he approached the boys.
"Buh... wha? What's this about?!", Ikkun shouted, tossing the magazine aside in haste.
"Hmm, I wonder if I should tell you? You're students at Yamanoura, aren't you?"
"Huh? How'd you know that?"
The boys were taken aback by his question and looked at each other. He continued on with coldhearted eyes.

“I can tell from your uniforms. There’s only three middle schools around here, but they have different uniforms. I don’t know if you were coming from club meetings or what, but you should have changed outfits.”
“Why you...”
“Oh, oh! Not another step. I’ve already sent the photo to my friends. What will people at school think when they see you were looking at porn? Girls really hate pervy creeps.”
In reality, he had few friends and thus no one to rely on for such a thing, but the boys couldn’t know that. Their red faces were visibly turning pale.

“B-But we were just cleaning up some magazines we happened to find...”
“You think anyone will believe that? Cameras these days are amazing. Everything from your bloodshot eyes to the extent of the collection you were perusing... It’s all perfectly clear in the photo.”
He waved around his brand new digital camera like such a show-off.
The boys could say nothing. Some of them were about to cry.
He laughed with satisfaction and slowly walked over. Standing in front of them, he gave Ikkun a wide smile.
To Ikkun, it was the most terrifying thing in the world.
“Oh, there’s nothing to worry about. We’re not demons. If you behave properly, there’ll be no need to do such an awful thing,” he kindly told the quivering boys.
Ikkun shook fiercely with his head hung low.
“...orry...”
“Hm? I don’t think I heard that,” he lied. Huge tears formed in Ikkun’s eyes.

“We’re sorry! We’re sorry for destroying your secret base!”, he sobbed. One after another, the other boys apologized as well.
“Very well!” He gave her a stealthy peace sign.
“That was so cool, Tarou Yamada!”, she whispered into his ear.

“Now don’t go making people mad at you!”, she gleefully said to the boys who would not stop sniffling. Perhaps because of the sudden kindness, the boys burst into tears.
She approached the wailing boys and patted their heads.
“These things happen in life. It’s all right.”
“Sniff... I’m so sorry...”
“It’s fine. Don’t worry! We’ll put it behind us and make a secret base together. We’ll have lots of fun!”
Smiles returned to the boys’ faces. They still did want to make a secret base.
So they energetically told the kind goddess who had forgiven their sin and offered to build one with them, “Yes, ma’am! Understood!”
“Alright, we can get lots of cardboard from over thataway. Hoof it!”
“Got it! Let’s go!”
She pointed in the direction of the shopping district and the boys ran off that way.
After they were gone, he muttered. “Bad girl.”
“Haha! With their help, we should be able to make a great base. Aren’t I smart?”
“Yeah. It’s leagues better than just driving the kids away.”
“Heheh! Of course!” She confidently slapped his back.

When the boys returned, they began making a secret base together.



With the change in command, this time it had a quieter vibe.
“Put a flower there! And put cardboard together there!”
“Yes, ma’am! Understood!”
She worked the boys hard to create her own secret base. They obeyed her commands without question.
The boys felt like they were getting friendly with a cute older woman, so they didn’t mind the work one bit.
“Ohh, now that’s a good job! Great, great!”
Every time the boys completed a task, she would pat them on the head. They delighted like faithful puppies and felt proud indeed. They were absolutely her servants.
Meanwhile, he worked silently to recreate his own secret base.
He helped her out with her base from time to time, but in a few hours, his was back to where it was before.

Entranced in the building of their bases, they worked until sunset, and then they were finally complete.
“Woo, we did it! Hooray!”, she shouted, looking upon her base. She hopped up and down to express her joy. And he looked on in satisfaction at his own base, wiping sweat.

“You did great! I’m so happy for you kids!”
“It was nothing! We had lots of fun too!”, they frankly told her. They smiled with childish innocence.
“Well, we have to get home now.”
“Right. Good work today!”
“Um... Can we come to the base again?”
“Of course! For sure!”, she laughed. The boys shyly nodded. Yes, they were absolutely her slaves.

“We’ve got porn mags too, so you can come read those if you want!”

Immediately, the boys got awkward looks and ran away.
“Way to hog all the friendliness, Hanako Yamada.”
“This is popularity in action, Tarou Yamada.”
He didn’t quite understand, but he’d had too much fun to care.

By the time the boys left, it was very dark. Only the moon lit the area, as there were no lights around. The grove was silent except for the buzzing of bugs.
“Guess we should go home,” he said, and she replied a little differently.
“Hmm... While we’re here, why don’t we take it easy in the base? My boyfriend won’t be coming home today.”
“Alright, let’s take it easy here.”
“Right. Let’s do that!”
So the two lied down in the pink secret base she created.
As they looked up through the roof of the base, glittering stars filled their vision with no clouds to block them. It was so bright, he closed his eyes.

Ahh, this is great. I wish this could go on longer.

He suddenly had that thought.
But he had a terminal illness. Soon, he wouldn’t be able to tease the boys nor talk to her anymore.
He would only return to the secret base they had built just a few more times before it was all over.

For the first time, he thought “I don’t want to die yet.”

“Sure is pretty,” she uttered beside him. The moonlight gently illuminated them both.
“I haven’t seen such a pretty sky in forever.”
“Hahh... It’s great.”
He gazed at the fantastic sight for a little while.
The two were wrapped in comfortable silence in the gloomy secret base.

“I’m getting kinda sleepy...”, he said, rubbing his eyes. It was already 11 at night.
“Really? Stay up longer!”
“I’m too tired. I’ll get some sleep for tomorrow.”
“Aww... Well, what can you do. Alright, we’ll make modifications to the base tomorrow. We’ll combine my base and yours, Tarou Yamada!”, she said, her excitement still not quelled.
He quietly laughed. “Alright. Let’s do our best!”
“Yeah, we will!”
“Alright, see you tomorrow. Good night.”
Just then, his vision spun. With a pain like his head was splitting, his vision gradually narrowed.
Not just one moon, but many like shooting stars filled the sky.
He could feel the energy being sucked out of him.

“I hope I can make it tomorrow.”

He softly whispered, and relinquished consciousness.

*

He was awoken by a warmth in his hand.
He saw not the sky above the secret base, but a white ceiling he had seen before.
Surprised, he looked around. He was on a white bed, with several needles in his arm attached to a tube. His every muscle ached.
Beside him, there was a girl anxiously holding his hand. He seemed to recall who it was.
“W-Whoa! You’re up! N-Nuuurse!”, the girl called in panic.

It seemed he was in the hospital. There was a pattering in the hallway, and a nurse in her thirties he’d seen before appeared.
“Are you okay?”, the woman asked, touching his cheek. He didn’t know what had happened at all, but he said “I’m fine.”
“You didn’t tell your mother about your illness, did you?”, the nurse said with a sigh.
It was just common sense. It was unthinkable that he, a boy in high school, wouldn’t tell his mother he had a terminal illness.
“No. But anyway, how did I end up here?”
““But anyway,” he says...”, the nurse loudly sighed. She was simply stunned.
“You were apparently near the park, coughing up large amounts of blood. If the girl there hadn’t called an ambulance, you wouldn’t be with us here now.”
“I see...”

That day, at the same time he lost consciousness, he had coughed up a ton of blood. This threw her into quite a panic.

She called for an ambulance with shaky hands and ran to the park carrying him. Every time he drew a pained breath at her back, she nearly cried.
She let him down in the park, and his mouth was red with overflowing blood. Her back was bloody too, but it didn't matter.
While waiting, she kept stroking his back, muttering "Get well, get well, get well..."
Before long, the ambulance arrived at the park. He was carried on and taken to the hospital.

"You should really thank her. I'm going to call your mother now."
"Right. Understood."
The nurse ran down the hall again. As he watched her go, he thought, unbelievably, "I wonder if mom'll be mad."
Once the nurse vanished down the hall, she said "You scared me..." with a sigh of relief, stroking her chest.
"Sorry to make you worry. Thanks."
"It's fine. I'm glad you're safe."
"Hanako Yamada, I owe you my life. I'll thank you to the day I die."
"Tarou Yamada, are you going to die?", she solemnly asked. There was silence in the empty hospital room.
"Hmm. Well, humans die someday."
"I don't mean like that!", she angrily specified. He was silent.
She looked straight into his eyes, and he unconsciously looked away.

"Hey, will you come work on the secret base tomorrow?"
"Hm. Tomorrow might be hard."
"I see..." The typically naive girl hung her head, like she had at the

class reunion.
In response, he spoke as cheerfully as he could muster.
“Tomorrow’s no good, but we’ll work on it as soon as I get better.”
“But you have a terminal illness, right, Tarou Yamada? You’ll die.”
“I won’t. I’m full of energy, see?”
He stood up from the bed. It was a total bluff; his body was falling apart.
Still, he forced his teetering body and hopped around on the bed.

“Believe me. It’s not like I’ve ever lied.”
“Alright, I’ll believe you. But you tell lies all the time, Tarou Yamada. I don’t even know your real name.”
“Okay then, I’ll tell it to you the next time we work on the secret base.”
“Ooh! Okay, and I’ll tell you my real name then, too!”
“It’s okay. I already know your real name, Hanako Yamada.”
“Whaaa?! How?! That’s not fair!”
“Your fault for forgetting my name after going to the same middle school, Hanako Yamada.”
“Geez...”, she said with puffed cheeks, smiling for the first time that day. It made him laugh from deep down.

There was pattering in the hallway again.
“I guess your mother will be here soon.”
“Probably, yeah.”
“Well, I should go, then.”
“Right. Thanks so much.”
“No problem! I’ll be praying for Tarou Yamada to get well every day, so you hang in there too!”

“I’ll get better real quick. Protect the base until I’m back.”
“Okay! Make sure you come! That’s a promise!”
“I promise. And if I should break it, I’ll do whatever you say.”
“Ooh! Well, if you keep it, I’ll do whatever you say!”
“Really? Definitely!”
“Ahaha. Leave it to me! Well, see you!”
“Right. See you.”
He promised a future that may not have really come, and she left waving.

“Ahh, I want to live... Dammit.”

He mumbled after she left.
He heard someone greeting his mother in the hallway. Once they stopped talking, the nurse promptly brought her toward his room.
Listening to the hurried footsteps, he stared at the ceiling. It was so much smaller than the sky he’d seen that night.
He closed his eyes and thought back on it.
The glittering, unfading spectacle came clearly to his mind.
He opened his eyes, and made one last little wish.

“I hope I live to see tomorrow.”

He didn’t believe in God, but for the first time, he made a wish to someone who was not himself.

*

He was told he had a fatal illness.

His class was one he consistently just couldn't get acquainted with.
His high school life was worthless, without many friends.
Targeted by the class leader, he was often bullied.
The potential for his future seemed to diminish. He could hardly see a future ahead.
And at the front of his mind was "This is really just a pain."
But he prayed that he could live in that world.
He wanted to live to the fullest in this beautiful world.

She could talk to concrete.

Her big sister who went to college didn't know, and Tsubasa-kun, who always had girls providing him Dom Pérignon, probably didn't know either.
The hula dance teacher, and her mother who was cheating with him, didn't know, and her father who vanished into thin air one day didn't know.
Orphans starving in Africa didn't know, and her and Tsubasa-kun's children who had not yet breathed the air of the outside world definitely didn't know.
Only he knew.
So she prayed with all her might that someone could live happily in this beautiful world.

Book 3: Paraporoparun Peroporoparapon

I prayed with all my hearts that she could live happily in this beautiful world.

Thousands upon tens of thousands upon billions of stars twinkled outside the spaceship, illuminating the ash I held.
I hoped she, who would one day be absorbed into the cosmos, could smile and laugh forever. Such silly thoughts I entertained.
At the same time, an image of her from back then arose in the back of my mind.

“Hey... what does it mean to live?”

I recalled it in empty space.
The words she told me one hundred billion years ago.
I still thought back on it fondly, as if it were yesterday.

“I love youuu!”

Peroporoparapon-chan said to me, staring directly into my seventy-six eyes.
She was highly intoxicated after having swallowed down a macaron, and her cheeks were turning a faint emerald green.
I was disoriented to see this Peroporoparapon-chan, so different from her usual.
After all, Peroporoparapon-chan always said such rude things to me. It was the first time she’d ever said something so whimsically

sweet.
Her perfectly round seventy eyes were so cute, I was too embarrassed to look directly at her thirty-five faces.
And after she'd said that to me while slithering a green tentacle, my own faces went completely red.
I looked down in silence.
But my three-thousand-five-hundred-four hearts beat like alarms at a hundred and twenty decibels.

I wondered if Peroporoparapon-chan could hear my hearts too.
Being so drunk, she'd probably forget this in a matter of seconds. But if she didn't, it would be just too embarrassing.

Peroporoparapon-chan was so very adorable.
Her violet skin, her slimy green tentacles, the yellowish-green fluid that leaked from her seventieth digestive system... What was there not to love?
Sometimes I thought how odd it was that she would ever be with someone like me.
Peroporoparapon-chan could have spent time with someone much cooler than me. So why?

"What do you love about me?"

I nervously asked her.
She was too drunk to get angry at me now, I thought.
Peroporoparapon-chan giggled and hugged me.
"Well, I like your three thousand arms with all the lungs on them! And I like your bulging seventy-six eyes! Also, I like your reddish-

purple skin... I love all of it! I love you!”, she concluded, beginning to tear off my tentacles.
“Heeheehee,” she laughed, tearing off one after another.

Adorable.
Adorable as heck.
I wanted to marry her.

But I knew that could never happen.
Peroporoparapon-chan had thirty-five trillion fiancés. That was because she was the sole daughter of the queen of the Ferogaron Sutegoronopusupero Poroparapolings.
A mere Roronopusun Ganopiririnronron Peroporoling like me could never be her husband.
I knew. I knew that.
So it would only be for a little longer that I would even get to enjoy Peroporoparapon-chan’s company.
When the time came, no doubt Peroporoparapon-chan would leave me, and marry one of her thirty-five trillion fiancés. And she would live happily with him. No doubt.

My mood sank.
And I had just been so happy.
There was no escaping reality, always so harsh to me.

I sighed, decimating a grassy plain. Suddenly, the light returned to Peroporoparapon-chan’s eyes.
“Huh? What?”, she said, her seventy eyes bulging.
Perhaps she’d sobered up.

“Morning.”
“Huh? Was I perhaps drunk?”
“Yeah. Just a little.”
For sixteen years, to be accurate. Peroporoparapon-chan had been drunk for a while, but I lied about it.
“My heads kinda hurt,” she said, rubbing her thirty-third head. Even her casual actions were cute. Too cute. Like she’d gotten mixed with an angel. Her thirty-five faces were especially angelic.

“This is all your fault.”
“Huh, why?!”, Peroporoparapon-chan asked, smashing seven of my hearts.
Classic Peroporoparapon-chan.
She was always harsh and punishing with me.
But just a while ago, I’d learned how Peroporoparapon-chan really felt.
Of course, I absolutely couldn’t tell her I knew. I wouldn’t be able to take it if she smashed more of my hearts.

“I’m feeling kinda bored. Guess I should go,” Peroporoparapon-chan said, glancing toward me.
She could and should have just left without saying that.
But it made me happy to see Peroporoparapon-chan caring about me.
“Don’t go. Stay a little longer.”
“Hmm... If you say so, then I will, but...”
“Hooray! Thanks, Peroporoparapon-chan!”
“H-Hmph. I’m not happy in the least that you’re thanking me, you know!”

Twenty-four of Peroporoparapon-chan's thirty-five faces weren't able to hide their smiles. Ohh, too cute.
"You decide what we're going to do."
"Hmm. What do you want to do, Peroporoparapon-chan?"
"I can't be bothered to make decisions, you dummy!"
Peroporoparapon-chan slapped my body, sending seventy-two tentacles flying off. She was cute even when she was angry.

After that, we had fun annihilating a planet three planets away from ours.
It was a kiddy kind of game about who could kill the most inhabitants, so I was uneasy about whether Peroporoparapon-chan would be satisfied.
I was nervous all throughout my slaughter, but Peroporoparapon-chan seemed to enjoy it more than I expected.
She seemed a little pouty at first, but now she was laughing it up and gleefully killing the inhabitants of the planet three planets away from ours. She was so cute when she was all smiles and killing people.

"Hmph, not a bad game, considering you thought it up."
"Right? I'm glad you had fun!"
Peroporoparapon-chan's cheeks turned just a little emerald green.
Perhaps childish games were fresh to Peroporoparapon-chan, having been raised as a princess.

I wish it could just keep going on like this, I thought.
I really thought so.

*

One thousand seven hundred and sixty-six years passed after my killing spree with Peroporoparapon-chan on the distant-neighbor planet. Finally, I was able to meet her again.
We had both been too busy to see each other lately.
It slipped my mind from time to time since she spent time with me, but she was the princess of Ferogaron Sutegoronopusupero Poroparapo, so of course she was much busier than I'd ever be.

"Oh my, it's been a while."
"It has. You haven't changed."
"But I have. Haven't I gotten much prettier? Rude."
Peroporoparapon-chan who I hadn't met in so long had become very pretty.
For some reason I was excessively sad, and said "You haven't changed" to pretend I hadn't noticed. But of course I knew that wasn't true.
Her once-thirty-five faces had doubled, and she grew three thousand new feet. Her body was oozing with slippery yellowish-green fluid, and the lungs on her tentacles were like new.
I knew every little thing that had changed about Peroporoparapon-chan.
Downy hair grew out of her abdomen toward her seventh belly button.
This was the proof of adulthood for a Ferogaron Sutegoronopusupero Poroparapoling.
While I wasn't looking, Peroporoparapon-chan had become a grown girl.

“Harumph. I’ve become very popular with the guys lately, you see.”
“I’ll bet. You’re so cute, Peroporoparapon-chan.”
Peroporoparapon-chan’s faces turned deep green and lowered.
She grumbled something at about fifty decibels, but I couldn’t catch it.
I was amused by this reaction, and looked into Peroporoparapon-chan’s seventy faces.
“A hit with the guys... That’s great, Peroporoparapon-chan.”
“No, well, that’s just...”
“Just nothing. Of course they’d think you’re attractive. Because you’re just so cute.”
“Oogh...”
“D’aww, adorable!”
“Ohh, shut up, you idiot!”, she screamed, taking off at Mach 100.

Her appearance had changed, but inside, Peroporoparapon-chan seemed the same as ever.
That made me so happy, so relieved, that I couldn’t stop grinning as I destroyed a distant planet.

*

As I spent about a hundred years destroying planets, I got a telepathic message from Peroporoparapon-chan, which I paid a monthly fee for.
“Are you free next year?”
“You can’t have much time on your hands if you were in such a hurry to leave a hundred years ago, Peroporoparapon-chan.”

“Shut up. I just want to know, are you free then?”
Peroporoparapon-chan sent me a telepathic message as if the event a hundred years ago hadn’t happened.
I felt like if I pressed it any further she’d beat me senseless once we met up, so I telepathically said “Yeah, I’m free.”
“I see. Well then, go out with me next year. There’s somewhere I want to visit.”

This was the first time Peroporoparapon-chan ever invited me to hang out.
Before, I’d always invited her. It made my seventy-six [sic] hearts beat fast.
Trying hard not to reveal my exaltation, I replied “Sure!”
“Alright, we’ll meet up at the start of next year, on Pisoronopokorun which I destroyed with you before.”
“Got it. I look forward to it!”
Filled with cheer, I lept off the planet I was currently annihilating.

*

“So yeah, I’m going on a date with Peroporoparapon-chan next year. What do you think I should do?”
As soon as I got home, I went running to my neighbor Yuuka.
I didn’t know the first thing about romance, so I always asked my childhood friend Yuuka when I needed help.
Though she found it tiresome, she always talked things out with me.
Yuuka’s name was one of those weird, embarrassing “unique” names for your kid, and she wasn’t looked upon favorably by adults.



But I knew that she was a kind girl.

“*Again* with Peroporoparapon-chan? Learn to think for yourself!”
“I did that! But I just couldn’t figure out what to do...”
Yuuka let out a big sigh. “You really need to stop relying on me already.”
“Please! Just this once!”
“Ugh, fine. Sighhh... Why do you have to fall for a girl like her, anyway...”
Yuuka seemed to say something at about fifty decibels, but I couldn’t make it out.
“Hm? What’s that?”
“Nothing. Right, strategy meeting.” Yuuka scratched her head with her two arms.
“Thanks! You’re a lifesaver. You’re so nice, Yuuka.”
“But kindness alone doesn’t turn any heads...”
“Hm? What?”
“Oh, forget it. Let’s start.”

Yuuka took out a pen and paper to write a list of points I needed to improve on.
“First off, there’s so much that’s hopeless about you. I’m going to list all of it.”
Yuuka moved the pen with terrifying speed.

- Your tentacles are shaped grossly. Cut them evenly every year.
- You’re desperately lacking in legs. Grow one more.
- Your reddish-purple body is gross. Make it ivory or something.

- You have way too little sympathy. Think about your partner's feelings.
- Your destructive game is hella weak. Eat people like all the go-getter guys do.
- Get a better understanding of the female mind. That's why you're a virgin.
Etcetera, etcetera...

"Stop it already, you're breaking my hearts..."
"I gotta stress how little you understand women."
"Am I that clueless?"
"If you ask me, you're trash."
"Trash...?"
"Worse than trash, highly radioactive waste. Your very existence is a bother."
"I see..."
One of Yuuka's best qualities was that she told it like it is. I couldn't say I didn't like that.

But sometimes it depressed me. Highly radioactive waste...
"W-Well. I guess I kind of like that about you, though..."
"Hm? What was that?"
Just then, a sudden ninety-meter-per-second squall passing through made me unable to catch what Yuuka said.
Yuuka's face was all red, though, so I wondered what had happened.
"Shut up. Just shut up."
"Huh? I'm curious! Tell me!"

“Shut up!” Yuuka looked away.

Yuuka would sometimes do things like this which I didn’t understand. I mean, if she had a problem, she could just tell me. Given how long we’d known each other, it’s not like I’d get mad over some little thing.
“Well, whatever. Get your tentacles in order and study the heart of a woman. I’ve got stuff to do.”
“Got it. Thanks for everything. I’d be hopeless without you, Yuuka.”
Yuuka laughed hollowly. “You really would be.”
“Absolutely!”
“Now leave me alone and go be happy with Peroporoparapon-chan.”
“I hope it goes that way...”
“Bye, and tell me if it does go well with her.”
“Got it!”
“Okay, good luck!”
“I’ll do my best!”
With that, I said goodbye to Yuuka for the day.

*

Next year, I went to the desolate and empty Pisoronopokorun.
My tentacles were neatly cut. I’d worked hard to grow another leg.
I didn’t know how to study the heart of a woman, so I tried reading the akashic records, but it was too hard to understand and I gave up.
But I figured I was fine for now. Now I just had to wait for Peroporoparapon-chan.

At our appointed meeting time, Peroporoparapon-chan flew in at Mach 30.
“Sorry. Were you waiting?”
“I just got here.”
I lied. I’d been waiting for thirty-seven days.
But it was too embarrassing to admit, so I lied about it.
“Where are we going today?”
“We’re going to a fixed star for some sunbathing.”
Fixed-star sunbathing was such a common date idea for the raised-princess Peroporoparapon-chan.
Perhaps it was to suit me? If she had anticipated in advance what kind of date I’d enjoy, that would make me extremely happy.
“Wow, fixed-star sunbathing?”
“You don’t like it?”
“No, that’s not it at all. I love it!”
“Hmph, is that right. Well, not that it matters whether you like it or not,” Peroporoparapon-chan bluntly said, but let out a small sigh of relief.

“Did you pick it for me?”, I asked.
Peroporoparapon-chan’s faces turned green and she shook her tentacles.
“Hahh? A-Absolutely nothing of the sort! I just wanted to go do it myself! I only invited you later!”
“I see! Well, I’m still really glad!”
Peroporoparapon-chan tore off one of my legs in fuming anger.
It had been too long since she demonstrated such violence.
It was so nostalgic, I was almost about to cry.

I wondered how long it could be like this.
There was a sudden anxiety in the back of my mind, but I shook it away.
We headed off for the fixed star.

*

“Mmm, feels good...”
Peroporoparapon-chan was bathing in the flares of the star with her upper-body clothes off. It was an ordinary thing, but it made me excited.
True, I had seen Peroporoparapon-chan naked when we were young.
Indeed, there was nothing significant to a Ferogaron Sutegoronopusupero Poroparapoling about being seen in the nude.
But on my planet, there was a bit of an implication in the act of nudity after becoming an adult.
There, once you were an adult, you were normally not to be seen nude. Only couples who loved each other could hug in the nude to ascertain their love.
I wondered if Peroporoparapon-chan knew that or not.

“Feels good, doesn’t it? Such nice flares!”
“Y-Yeah. You’re right.”
I couldn’t look Peroporoparapon-chan in any of her faces. It took all I had to say that over the rapid beating of my hearts.
“Not having fun?”
“Of course I am! I’m just having so much fun and I’m so happy that it’s making me a little nervous, that’s all!”

“I see. Well, all right,” Peroporoparapon-chan said a little sadly.
Then she turned to me and said something, with some difficulty.

“Um, err... I actually invited you today because there was something I wanted to tell you.”
Peroporoparapon-chan’s sudden remark made my hearts beat like alarms.
“What?”
“You see...”
She took a breath, then quietly spoke.

“This might be the last year I can hang out with you like this.”

My hearts exploded like they were hit by bombs.
I froze up, unable to say anything.
“See, papa and mama told me to get ready for marriage. You know about my thirty-five trillion fiancés, right?”
“Yeah. I do.”
“The potential grooms are going to have a tournament of mutual killing next year. Then I’m going to marry the top hundred.”
Marriage to her fiancés. A common event in the realm of royalty. I thought I was prepared for when it would happen for Peroporoparapon-chan.

But Peroporoparapon-chan was a regular girl who was extremely violent with me, a girl who was usually cross with me, a cute girl who suddenly became sweet when she ate a macaron, and a girl I loved very much.
I understood it in my mind, but I simply couldn’t accept the reality.

Even hearing it from Peroporoparapon-chan, it felt unreal, like it had to do with someone else far, far away.
Looking into my faces as I said nothing, Peroporoparapon-chan spoke.
“That’s why I invited you here to make some final memories this year. I felt like that was the least I could do. But... but...”
Before she could finish that sentence, tears flooded out of Peroporoparapon-chan’s one hundred forty eyes.

“I don’t want this to be the last time. I want to stay. I want to spend more time with you. To destroy more planets with you, and fixed-star sunbathe with you. I want to know more about you. And stay with you forever.”

I said nothing.
My body didn’t move, as hard as tungsten.
I had to say something.

Something...

“I’m sorry. I’m such an annoyance.”
“Not at all. That’s not true at all...”
“Oh, but I am... If I stayed with you, papa and mama would kill you for sure. I’m going to have to marry my fiancés. I’m sorry for bothering you. I could never be honest around you...”

Something to stop Peroporoparapon-chan...

“I’m leaving for the year. I had fun meeting you again.”

“Wait -”
Without waiting for me to finish, Peroporoparapon-chan’s tentacles fluttered.
The tentacles visibly changed form, eventually becoming wings of a sort.
“Well... Goodbye.”
Peroporoparapon-chan flapped her wings and flew off at Mach 200.
I could only look on in shock.

*

The next day, the fiancé tournament on Ferogaron Sutegoronopusupero Poroparapo was all over the news.
When I heard it, Peroporoparapon-chan who had once been so close at hand suddenly felt incredibly distant.
I returned to the planet I’d been in the middle of destroying to cheer myself up, but nothing worked.
Black clouds seemed to cover my hearts, and everything I did hurt.
I aggressively destroyed planets to forget the reality.

A hundred years later, I was done destroying planets. With nothing left to do, I holed up at home.
One day, the news said that Peroporoparapon-chan’s fiancés had been whittled down to a thousand.
At this rate, her husbands would be decided in a matter of days.
I couldn’t bear it.
Imagining one of those husbands drinking her yellowish-green fluid of love that leaked from her seventieth digestive system made me want to burst.

My hearts hurt. I felt like I was going mad.
But I couldn't do a thing.
I couldn't be one of Peroporoparapon-chan's husbands.
I couldn't marry Peroporoparapon-chan.

"Hey! Open up!"

My house shook. When I looked outside, I found Yuuka.
"What are you doing?! I saw the news!"
"I know. Leave me alone."
"At least let me come in!"
Yuuka let herself in and grabbed me by the collar with her two arms.
"Didn't you go on a date with her?"
"You said you saw the news, didn't you? It's too late."
Perhaps I had resigned myself to despair.
So I said that to Yuuka despite her worry for me.
Irritated, I performed nuclear fusion in the center of my house, showing her all my anger.

Just stay away from me!

I know I'm absolutely hopeless.
But it hurts to think about Peroporoparapon-chan anymore.
Just leave me alone.

Yuuka approached and slapped me with all her might. The force of her slap caused earthquakes within a two thousand kilometer radius.

As I stood there dumbfounded, Yuuka screamed at me.
“That’s not how you really feel, dammit! You’ve loved Peroporoparapon-chan for thousands, tens of thousands of years! You really want it to end like this?!”
“Of course I don’t!!”, I yelled back. “I love Peroporoparapon-chan! I really do! I’ve always wanted to marry her!”
“Then go do it!”
“Shut up! Even if I could go and marry her, you think I would make Peroporoparapon-chan happy?! Obviously Peroporoparapon-chan would be happier marrying good partners her parents picked for her, not some remote Roronopusun Ganopiririnronron Peroporoling!! You don’t know anything, you moron!”
“But I do know!” Tears fell from Yuuka’s two eyes.
“I know all the good things about you... Because I’ve always loved you myself.”
“Wha...”
Yuuka’s sudden confession blew away my anger at once. I couldn’t say anything more.

“But now, I hate you. You were always so earnest about your love for Peroporoparapon-chan. No matter how inferior you felt, how cold she was, you never stopped loving Peroporoparapon-chan, right?”
I said nothing. I was waiting on Yuuka’s every word, spoken between tears.
“There’s nothing charming about you at all now. Now you really are highly radioactive waste. Do you want that?”
“But...”
“Shut up! No excuses!” Yuuka slapped me again.

A light cracking echoed. Unlike the previous slap, this one was very kind.
“And can you really say that Peroporoparapon-chan will be happy marrying her fiancés?”
“I didn’t say that.”
“Then don’t go talking like you know how Peroporoparapon-chan feels. You don’t know anything!”

Wait... That’s right. Peroporoparapon-chan had said...

“I want to spend more time with you. I want to stay with you forever.”

I recalled what Peroporoparapon-chan said the last day we met.
That’s it. That’s how it was.
I was a fool.
Though Peroporoparapon-chan usually didn’t let her true feelings be known, she told me that without having even eaten a macaron.
It must have taken immense bravery. A whole lifetime’s worth, absolutely.
And yet I didn’t do anything.
I didn’t do anything at all to respond to Peroporoparapon-chan’s feelings.
Dammit. I was a fool among fools.
I had to go. I had to hurry.

“Yuuka, I have to go,” I said, hurrying to depart.
“You’re going?”
“Yeah. I am.”

“I see. So you’re turning me down...”
“I’m sorry.”
“It’s fine. I didn’t like you that much anyway.”
“I’m sorry.”
“Don’t worry! Hurry up and go! Peroporoparapon-chan will get married soon!”
“Right. I’m off.”
“Bye!”
Yuuka was always strong-willed, but it looked like she was crying a little then.

“Thank you.”

I left her with that.
Without waiting for a reply, I kicked off from the ground with all my might.

I didn’t look back.
I flew off straight into the stars at Mach 400.

*

When I arrived at the tournament grounds, I found the ground littered with hundreds of fiancé corpses.
I could tell that the fiancé tournament was already over.
“What are you doing here?! Authorized personnel only! Go home!”
A guard-like Ferogaron Sutegoronopusupero Poroparapoling saw me and shouted very threateningly.
I vomited highly corrosive sulphuric acid at him, and he soon

disintegrated in a sea of it.
“What’s this?!”
“Who goes there?!”
Ferogaron Sutegoronopusupero Poroparapolings who saw this gathered around.
“Bring out Peroporoparapon-chan! There’s something I need to tell her!”
“Peroporoparapon-chan is preparing for the wedding. Leave at once!”
I ran for where the ceremony was being held while decimating them like bits of sand.

Please, let me make it in time.
There’s something I need to tell her.
My legs, my body, move as fast as you can.
My tentacles were being torn off, and my muscles came off in clumps.
But that was fine.
The pain in my body was nothing compared to the pain in Peroporoparapon-chan’s heart.
I ran at Mach 1000.

“Peroporoparapon-chan!”

After reducing the super-reinforced tungsten door to atoms, I found Peroporoparapon-chan and a hundred grooms.
Seeing this, I screamed at two hundred decibels, blowing some of the weaker ones’ semicircular canals to pieces.
With a look at Peroporoparapon-chan, it was clear that she was

about to be married.

There was a groom made of sticky slime, and a squarish mineral-like groom. There was a seventy-meter-tall cylindrical groom, and a smog-like groom, and grooms of all varieties.
And they were all cool-looking, and socially speaking, they all made good couples with Peroporoparapon-chan.
But I'd stopped worrying about that.
I didn't care what the world thought.
What mattered were my and Peroporoparapon-chan's feelings.

It had only been a hundred years since we last met, but Peroporoparapon-chan had changed drastically.
She'd removed her usual violet clothes, letting her beautiful ivory skin show. She was also covered in pale, slippery fluids, as was the marriage tradition.
"Why are you here?! Didn't I say goodbye?!", Peroporoparapon-chan shouted in anger.
"Lady Peroporoparapon! Stand back!"
An attendant-like Ferogaron Sutegoronopusupero Poroparapoling held back Peroporoparapon-chan.
The hundred grooms looked at me coldly. Peroporoparapon-chan's father and mother looked ready to burst into rage.
But it didn't matter. It doesn't matter!

"Peroporoparapon-chan, listen!"
"Now what is it?! Leave me alone!"
"I love you, Peroporoparapon-chan! I love you!"

Peroporoparapon-chan's mouths hung open in shock. Ah, it looked so cute.
"W-What..."
"I love how you act coy with me, Peroporoparapon-chan! I love how when you get shy, your skin turns emerald green right away! I love your slimy tentacles! I love all of it! There's nothing I don't love! Marry me!"
Peroporoparapon-chan's was visibly turning emerald green.
It made me happy deep within my hearts.

"Let's go!"
Taking Peroporoparapon-chan by the tentacle, we ran at the speed of light.
The grooms made a commotion behind us. The angry shouts of Peroporoparapon-chan's parents resounded in my ears thanks to the Doppler effect.
I felt wonderful, like the hero of a story.
As I held tight to Peroporoparapon-chan's tentacle, she held on tight to mine.
I would never let go of it ever again.
Our tentacles gripped each other so, so tightly.

*

"Geez, you startled me..."
We had run about twenty light years from the ceremony, and there was no sign of our pursuers.
Peroporoparapon-chan seemed relieved.
"So, what you said back there... Was it true?", Peroporoparapon-

chan bashfully asked, her faces still emerald green.
“It’s true. I love you. Please, marry me!”, I said, holding onto Peroporoparapon-chan’s thirty-two-thousand-four tentacles.
“Oh, it’s so embarrassing when you say it so firmly...”
“But you’ve done that too, Peroporoparapon-chan. Like when you ate that macaron.”
“Wait, what?! What did I say?!”
“That’s a secret.”
“What! Geeeeez!”
Peroporoparapon-chan ripped off seven of my tentacles.
I was happy.
I sincerely hoped this time could last forever.

“Hey, Peroporoparapon-chan?”
“Hm? What?”
“Smooch!”
“Wha!”
Without waiting for her reply, I gently kissed the lips on Peroporoparapon-chan’s seventh face.
Peroporoparapon-chan froze in place. It was so funny, I burst into laughter after the kiss.

“Dummy!”
Her faces a deep green, Peroporoparapon-chan punched away at my body.
“Haha! Sorry, sorry!”
“Geez! That was the WORST first kiss!”
“Then let’s do it right this time. Now you go, Peroporoparapon-chan.”

“U-Um...”
“I’ll stay still.”
“R-Right. Okay.”
This time, Peroporoparapon-chan kissed me.
It lasted much, much longer than the previous one.
We kissed for about three years.

*

We were married.
After Peroporoparapon-chan left Ferogaron Sutegoronopusupero Poroparapo, it was apparently in chaos, with her mother and father in an angry search for her.

We didn’t hold a particularly large ceremony; we just destroyed a planet we were passing by and had a bare-bones one with no one around.
“Sorry this had to be our ceremony,” I said, and Peroporoparapon-chan smiled back.
“Oh, it’s okay.”
“I couldn’t invite anyone, so it’s just the two of us.”
“Don’t worry! I love planets where I’m the only one alive.”
“I see... Well, that’s good.”
“And in fact, I’d say a wedding on a planet with only us two is really romantic. It’s like we’re in the center of the world,” Peroporoparapon-chan happily reassured me.
Even if the whole universe were destroyed, as long as Peroporoparapon-chan was smiling, it was all fine.

*

“Hey. Do you remember when we first met?”, Peroporoparapon-chan suddenly asked.
“I do.”

I could never forget.
At the time, I was small and powerless, a prisoner on a certain planet.
I could see no future. I didn’t know why I was still living.
I knew nothing of hope.
It was a hell of only having three-thousand-six meals a day.
We prisoners gradually died of starvation.
In those days of despair, suddenly Ferogaron Sutegoronopusupero Poroparapolings arrived to destroy the planet.
Among them, I saw Peroporoparapon-chan.
Peroporoparapon-chan seemed to live a life far more free and blessed, and beat up those who had worked me to the bone as if it bored her.

It was a beautiful sight.
Yet somehow, so very sad.
Thinking about it, until our marriage, Peroporoparapon-chan had never deviated one bit from the path laid out for her.
She lived a life planned out by her parents, and was to be wedded as they saw fit.
Perhaps Peroporoparapon-chan had become fed up with it all.

Peroporoparapon-chan’s tentacles drew an orbit of sadness,

destroying numerous satellites above their orbit. The people in the bases on those satellites fell to the ground like sparkling shooting stars. The sky glowed, illuminating Peroporoparapon-chan's over ten thousand tentacles.
I stared at the beautiful scene, Peroporoparapon-chan shining like a fixed star.
And Peroporoparapon-chan's arms approached me.
"Ah... She's going to kill me too," I thought. I unconsciously closed my seventy-six eyes.
But minutes later, I was not dead. I timidly opened my eyes to Peroporoparapon-chan smiling.
She spoke on the verge of tears.

"Hey... what does it mean to live?"

I could never forget. Even to this very moment, I can't answer Peroporoparapon-chan's question.

I was freed from imprisonment.
The Ferogaron Sutegoronopusupero Poroparapolings who destroyed the planet left like nothing had happened.
I later learned that Peroporoparapon-chan's father had ordered its destruction on a whim. There was no real purpose.
At any rate, I survived, and I met Peroporoparapon-chan.

"I know the answer to that question I asked when we first met," Peroporoparapon-chan said, then kissed me.
"To live... It must be to be here with you."
Her faces were deep green, but she looked right into my eyes.

Ah, I was so happy. I was glad to be alive.

“I love you, Peroporoparapon-chan.”
“I love you, too.”

On that empty planet, we became one.

*

Peroporoparapon-chan and I were together for eighty-four million years after that.
We were happy.
I had never been so satisfied before.
But the lifespans of Ferogaron Sutegoronopusupero Poroparapolings are much, much smaller than mine.
So Peroporoparapon-chan’s time came before mine did.
Her tentacles gradually stopped moving. Her body crumbled.
I could only watch as Peroporoparapon-chan’s body became like ash.

“It won’t be long,” Peroporoparapon-chan said one day while we were living on a ruined planet.
The tentacle she put on my shoulder crumbled apart into ash.
I decided that I wouldn’t cry.
I knew that if I did, Peroporoparapon-chan wouldn’t be happy.
But I couldn’t stop it from pouring out of my seventy-six eyes.
I wanted to be with her longer.
I wanted to be together until the whole universe perished.
She had always helped me, and I could do nothing in return.

I love you.
I love you so much.
I want to eat magma with you, and destroy planets.
I want to get stuffed with plutonium, and bathe in flares.
I want to fight sometimes, cry together, and laugh together.
I want to be with you forever. Forever and ever.
I'll never forget you, Peroporoparapon-chan.
I don't want to forget.
So... So...
Let's be...

"Thank you."

Peroporoparapon-chan muttered as she turned to ash.
She could hardly speak. Her vocal cords were beginning to crumble.
I cried. I couldn't stop the crimson tears running down my red cheeks.
Peroporoparapon-chan ripped off a feeble tentacle of mine and spoke with a smile.
"Really, don't cry. Don't worry, I'll always be with you."
"But your body, Peroporoparapon-chan..."
"It's all right. Even if I die, and my body crumbles to pieces, I'll still exist in this universe. I won't go away. I'll just become one with the world."
Lastly, she said my name like a faint whisper.

"Paraporopurun-kun... I was so glad to have you in my life. I hope we can get along for a long time hereafter."

Peroporoparapon-chan vanished into white ash.
Her body would become the soil of this planet, the sky, and someday would be absorbed into the cosmos.
Her final words saved me.
Unlike Peroporoparapon-chan who was so smart, I was still too dumb to know what it meant to live.
But thinking about Peroporoparapon-chan warmed my thirty-five hundred hearts.

And perhaps that's what it means to live.
It was just a feeling, but that's what I thought.

*

In a spaceship, I thought back on Peroporoparapon-chan.
Those glittering memories of her.
Colorful days that would never fade.
Now, I was voyaging toward a certain planet.
I decided to destroy one for old times' sake. The spaceship would soon arrive at one with intelligent lifeforms.

I held a pot containing the ashes of what was once Peroporoparapon-chan.
I'd never failed in invading a planet before, but this time especially, I could not fail.
I had to aggressively level it to the ground.
To ensure my success, I decided to split up into a hundred bodies once I arrived. Connected by a spirit link, we would be able to bring

annihilation with all certainty.
Once it was all destroyed, I was going to scatter Peroporoparapon-chan's ashes in the wasteland. Across a barren planet, like she always loved.
The ashes would spread, someday becoming one with this beautiful world. That way, Peroporoparapon-chan would live on forever.
And when it was all over, I'd forever scream my love in the center of that uninhabited planet.
Because that's the one thing I could do for Peroporoparapon-chan.

The planet was coming into sight.
It was many tens of thousands of light years from Roronopusun Ganopiririnronron Peroporo where I'm from. Extremely far away.
It was brimming with intelligent lifeforms, and covered with shining blue seas. A perfect planet to spread Peroporoparapon-chan's ashes.
Well, time to get to work. This is my final mission for Peroporoparapon-chan.

I landed on that azure-gleaming planet Earth. The impact of my landing sent out an explosive sound.
Surprised by the thunderous roar, the people of Earth started squirming closer.
As I scattered and decimated them, I made a quiet prayer.
"I hope she can live happily."

Miin-min-min. Miin-min-min.

Under the clear blue sky, one could hear nothing but the buzzing of unknown creatures.

Book 4: The Lying Cicada and the Blue Sky

“Miin-min-min. Miin-min-min. I’m a cicada!”

Under the dark black sky, I could hear nothing but the buzzing of an unknown creature.
It was a night around the middle of summer, on which the heat was coming back in full force. When I heard that voice suddenly ring out, I was abnormally fearful.
What was this? What was going on? My head spun, unable to get my thoughts in order.
I hid in my futon and covered my ears, but the voice showed no signs of stopping. In fact, it seemed to get ever louder.
I was feeling even sicker than usual today, and yet the voice mercilessly rung in my eardrums.

“My mistake! I’m a human! Just a human, so it’s okay! Please open up! Heey, open up! Please! OPEN! Don’t worry, I’m not shady! HEEEY!”
The dilapidated, tiny, forty-year-old apartment was violently shaken by the creature’s knocking. The creaking of the squeaky, badly-fitting door echoed all around.
My vision spun with fear and anxiety. My head was short-circuited by the sudden event.

“Open up! I’m not shady! I’m really just a human!”
The creature continued to insist she was a human in a cute voice. Of course, a normal human would never say “I’m really just a human.” So she was clearly something else.

“I know you’re in there! I am not seedy, suspect, or dubious! And I’m not a cicada or anything! No problems here, just please open the door! Open it! ...Murderer! Rapist! Guy with a lolita complex!”
The things she said got stranger and stranger. At this rate, the neighbors would complain for sure. I had to do something.

I cautiously approached the entryway. As ever, I heard insults of “Open up! Bean sprout farm owner! Excavator of rare metals!” through the door. Well, I wasn’t sure if the last one was an insult.
Just then, I heard knocking on the wall from the neighboring room. Surprised, my body faltered and fell, and my hand landed on the doorknob.
Since I’d forgotten to lock the door, it slammed right open.
“Wahh!”
There were no cicadas at the door. Instead, there was a short girl who resembled a small animal.
Surprised by the sudden lack of a door to knock, she staggered a bit and let out a strange yelp.
“Ah! You finally opened up!”

What on earth was happening.
“Don’t worry, not a cicada! I’m a human, it’s fine!”
No, that wasn’t it. That wasn’t where the problem was.
I experienced for the first time an event that was, at the time, so far beyond my comprehension that I couldn’t do anything. I froze on the spot and stared vacantly.
“Good afternoon! Oops, my bad. Good evening! It’s me, Semiko! I’ve come today to repay the favor!”
“Semi? So you *are* a cicada?”



She continued to speak, leaving me no chance to make that comeback. That's what it felt like she was doing, anyway.

It's not that I don't have any memory at all of what followed. But I soon lost consciousness, unable to process the situation. I collapsed in a heap in the entryway while she introduced herself.
My senses cut out with her adorable panicking voice in the background.

This is the story of that lying cicada.

"Are you okay?! Firetruck! Somebody call a firetruck!"
When I regained consciousness and opened my eyes, she - Semiko - was squatting beside me, flustered.
"Whoa! Whew! I was really scared when you just collapsed!"
Semiko in her white one-piece was especially radiant in contrast to the jet blackness outside. She wore a single orange ribbon under her chest that stood out like a flickering flame.
She reminded me more of "the ghost of a flowering plant" than a cicada. Making hovering sound effects and all.

"Um... You're..."
Before I could finish, Semiko pushed my words aside.
"Good evening! I'm the human Semiko! I've come today to repay the favor!"
"Er, who are you? And why were you saying you were a cicada at first?"

I had lots of questions, but that was what I wanted to know first of all.
Suddenly, sweat formed on Semiko's brow. Her face got stiff, her legs trembled, and she started to whistle unnaturally.
"D-Did I say thaaat?"
"You did. And something about the Cicada Kingdom."
"Waaaugh! Now I've done it...", Semiko mumbled, crouching and holding her head.
"Aaaa, I can't believe I screwed up right off the bat... Me, who they called the Japanese Cicada Genius..."
"Right, well. I don't get it, but could you take off your shoes?"
Semiko's face went red like an apple, and she hurried to take them off, then ran to the entrance. When she tripped on the step there, I began to have doubts about the future of the Cicada Kingdom.

"This is something I *really* shouldn't be saying, so I'm *really* begging you to keep it secret..."

Though no one was around, Semiko spoke in a whisper about apparently confidential matters. The explanation took nearly three hours, so I'll spare you the non-essentials.
Evidently, a long time ago, I had saved her.
"When everything was looking super no good for me, you were all "Waaah!" and saved me!"
Semiko rapidly talked on and on with excitement. The fact she was still saying all this in whispers seemed to have fallen out of her brain.
It was a very aimless explanation, but that seemed to be the gist of

it.

Of course, I had absolutely no memory of it. So I asked her for details.
“It’d be really bad to say any more. If I did, it’s entirely possible that the people of the Cicada Kingdom would use a curse kind of thing to give Marukuru anorexia...”
And I got another aimless answer.
According to what Semiko told me, this “Marukuru” was her pet. He liked fish, and he hated water bottles.
He sounded very cute, a creature that had a habit of curling up in kotatsus in the winter, and that made this “meooow” noise.
Yes, he was obviously a cat. A cicada keeping a cat...
“If Marukuru got anorexia, he wouldn’t be all fluffy anymore... That’s something I have to keep from happening. A Marukuru who isn’t all fluffy is like a cat who isn’t all fluffy!”
“Right. Because he’s a cat.”
Forgetting the topic at hand, she went on feverishly about Marukuru and his fluffiness and the retaining of such. Then suddenly, as if remembering the topic...
“But that doesn’t matter!”, she yelled, and got back on track.

Semiko went on to explain how she had to somehow return the favor for me saving her, or else Marukuru would be stricken with a curse that made his fur come off in clumps, tripping over herself all the while.
“So I have no choice but to repay the favor to do something about that curse-like thingamajiggy...”, Semiko lamented, finally concluding her explanation.

I... see? Is that how it is?
No, there was still no way I could understand.
I had never heard of a “Cicada Kingdom” since the day I was born, and I didn’t intend to hear it ever again. I couldn’t even consider such a thing with all common sense.
“Err... Hold on a second. Let me sort things out.”
“You bet! Sort until you can sort no more!”
I frantically thought. Maybe it was how sick I felt, but my brain just wouldn’t work. I was unable to figure out this ridiculous situation.

While I pondered, Semiko got bored and went around staring the plants in my room with scrutiny.
I struggled to think what about them she found so interesting. Sometimes she hid her face and quietly giggled. Her wide grin was fully visible from where I was. It was honestly scary.
“That, um, Cicada Kingdom, was it? Where would that be?”, I asked, my thoughts in disarray.
Semiko thought a few seconds and looked around. Then she pointed to the north window and said smiling, “I think it might be thataway!”
Ahh, perhaps she was a full-blown moron. Now I could be fairly sure.
“I see. Thataway.”
“Yep! If it weren’t thataway, whataway would it be?”
“I see. I gotta go to the bathroom.”
“Understood! See ya!”

I was nearly convinced now that I’d never be able to get my

thoughts in order in such an unreal environment. So I stumbled unreliably over to the bathroom.
I wondered if my cold was coming back. The pain in my joints, like they were being constricted, made me feel like fainting every time. Still a little woozy, I tried to think.
Was she, Semiko, really a cicada girl who came from the Cicada Kingdom?
No, that couldn't be. More than likely she was just an aloof nut with a few screws loose.
And this was the kind of nutso girl who it was best not to get too involved with. No doubt this would end in calling the police.
I'll have the shady girl take her leave. That was the natural conclusion I came to after a few minutes of thinking.

"Now how should I get her to leave...", I mumbled, leaving the bathroom.
For some reason, Semiko was practicing somersaults. Flip.... Flip... Splat. She flubbed one.
Semiko held her forehead in pain; apparently she hit her head.
"What are you even doing?"
Instantly, Semiko hid the hand on her forehead behind her back, acting like nothing happened.
"I-I was bored and wanted to kill time, so I was doing somersaults," Semiko admitted in embarrassment.

Shortly after saying that, her eyes flew wide open, and she continued.
"U-Um, but you see! In the Cicada Kingdom, being able to do somersaults is a proof of adulthood!"

“I-Is that so.”
“Yeah, so, doing somersaults just ‘cause isn’t embarrassing at all in the Cicada Kingdom!”
“I... see. Impressive.”
Semiko chuckled, proudly beaming. Clearly it was an afterthought, as the way she was brimming with confidence seemed to imply she was thinking “Ha, I sure fooled him!”
“I guess if I were born in the Cicada Kingdom, I’d be a prodigy.”
“A thoroughbred!”
I could make all kinds of comebacks to that. But since she seemed to have no ill intention, I had the gut feeling that people from the Cicada Kingdom would do no harm to humans.
But I only thought it; I didn’t say such a meaningless thing out loud.

“Ahh! It’s time! I gotta go!”, Semiko suddenly shouted.
It was four at night. Nearly five hours since I’d opened the door.
“Well, see you next time! Sorry about today!”
“Right...”
Semiko stood up and flew to the door. And exactly as before, she tripped on the step.
I could swear I saw blue and white stripes under her one-piece... but I pretended not to see.
“I-I-If you’ll excuse me!”, she stood up and said red-faced, then ran outside.

Gone with the cold wind, I again could only stare. Two seconds later, I plopped down on my futon.
What happened today was only a dream, I thought, and prayed, as I gave up consciousness.

*

I woke up to simmering heat. I felt like I'd had the strangest dream, though I couldn't remember what it was exactly.
I felt much better than yesterday. My head and body were light.
As I tried to recall my dream, I noticed the murderous heat of the room. Before I went crazy from heat stroke, I hurried to turn on the air conditioning. Cool air quickly began to flow and lower the temperature.
I took off my sticky clothes and went to take a shower to wash off the sweat.
"What kind of dream was it..."
Since I started living alone, I'd begun talking to myself a lot. I spoke to the wall as I showered.
Soon, I was able to remember last night's strange dream, almost as if it had been real.

Ah yes, Semiko.
It felt strangely real for a dream.
Just what did that dream mean?

I couldn't help pretending that it was just a dream. I got out of the shower early and returned to my room.
Thanks to the cool air conditioning, within ten minutes, my skin even felt a little chilly.
Suddenly, I looked to the clock and saw the hour hand on five.
Oh, now I've done it. It was already 5 PM.
My cold was really wreaking havoc on my usual routine.

I hurried to get ready to head for the library. But I stopped.
I would only be able to study at the library for about two or three hours if I left now. I might as well stay at home to study.

I took my classical literature reference book out of my backpack and flipped through looking for where I'd stopped two days ago.
Like always, I didn't really understand any of it. I sighed and reluctantly started answering questions.
Every time I confronted these classical literature questions, I felt an immense hate for the person who came up with college entrance exams.
Grinding my teeth over questions I knew nothing about, I went on answering in silence.

About six hours passed. I had made some real progress today, something I hadn't managed in a while.
I didn't hate studying so much when I could get a sense that I was actually getting smarter, albeit very slowly. It felt particularly nice to understand questions I didn't before.
I was in a pretty good mood, having finally gotten over questions that had stumped me, all by myself.
Taking a break after six hours, I skipped around my room.

Suddenly, I noticed pink stationery that was clearly not mine.
I immediately had a bad feeling. I could easily gleam that my good mood was being threatened.
I fearfully picked up the stationery. On it was written, in cute handwriting:
"I'll be visiting again tomorrow to repay the favor. I like carbonated

drinks, so it'd be great if you could prepare some soda."
Though my cold had long since healed up, I faltered. Just as I finished reading, I heard a voice at the door. Yes, hers.

"Good evening! It's Semiko! The human Semiko! Please open up!"

So yesterday had not been a dream. The high-pitched girl yelling outside was proof of that.
I ran over to Semiko as fast as I could move.
"Wow, you're fast today! Did you do weight training?"
I let Semiko, saying detached nonsense as usual, into the room for the time being. Perhaps it was too late, but I was concerned about people getting the wrong idea.
No, but would they be mistaken? It was undeniably true that this hopeless, aloof nutso-ette existed. My stomach churned.
Looking at Semiko, so whimsical I doubted whether her feet were on the ground, made me feel somehow melancholic.

Once inside, Semiko quickly began to speak.
"Sorry I had to leave so suddenly yesterday!"
"No, um, I don't mind. In fact, I was grateful..."
"I will absolutely, positively repay the favor today!"
"No, there's really no need to..."
"Leave it to me! My repayment'll be like a crane's times seven!"
Oh, she wasn't even listening. I sighed once again and gave up on thinking of how to force the nutso-ette out.
To drive out Semiko, eyes glittering with motivation, would be asking the impossible.
Thus, it would be easier to quickly fulfill her conditions so she'd

leave.

Giving it all up, I looked at Semiko and asked, “So, how will you repay me?”
“By...”
Semiko was stuck for a bit. Then she looked up and spoke with confidence.
“Er, I don’t... know?”
“You don’t know...”
“It’s for you to decide what you want me to do.”
“Me?”
“Yes. You.”

Indeed, it made more sense for a repayment to be on the terms of the one being paid back. That was logical.
I pondered for a bit. A while, actually, since I wasn’t having any good ideas.
Meanwhile, Semiko, with all too much time on her hands, started swinging the curtains left and right. I was already getting used to that stuff.

“I know,” I said, having come up with a plan.
“Get me into the college of my dreams.”
If Semiko could grant any wish I had like magic, I would be able to escape all that studying.
And if she unfortunately couldn’t, and were to stay here a while, then at least she wouldn’t bother me while I studied.
My studies were no doubt at the forefront for me right now. I couldn’t mess them up. It was a perfect idea, if I do say so myself.

“Understood!”
Semiko lifted herself up and briskly walked toward me. Once in front of me, she stopped and squatted down to peer into my face with her big eyes.
Her long black hair fell on my cheeks as if brushing them. I could smell her uniquely girlish scent.
Semiko put her palms against mine, and whispered...

“I sure hope you pass. Amen!”

Semiko returned to where she was before, smiled like a dog that had caught its master’s frisbee, and asked in a lively voice “Okay, what’s your next wish?”
Yeah, this wasn’t looking good, I quietly thought.

The pointlessness continued.
When I wished “I want money,” Semiko smiled and said “I only have three yen on me, so take this!”, handing me tissue paper.
When I said “My shoulders are stiff,” similarly to before, she prayed “Hope they get better! Amen!” Come on, at least massage them.
I gave up and said “Please, bring about world peace” like someone who’d attained enlightenment.
She took out a compass (which she apparently carried with her at all times), faced north, and shouted “Pleeease do something about it!”
This is just a guess, but I think Semiko was requesting the United States of America to usher in world peace.
It seemed pointless, and I wondered if it meant her own Cicada Kingdom couldn’t do anything.

“What are you good at? What can you DO?!”, I eventually asked with all honesty, as this was getting nowhere.
“I’m good at finding well-shaped stones!”, Semiko said with seemingly all seriousness.
“H-How might that help in repaying me?”
“Maybe it could help when you’re looking for well-shaped stones!”
All I could do was clutch my head.

We went on like this, and in the blink of an eye it had already been four hours.
All I’d learned in that time was that this girl had no particular abilities whatsoever to repay me. Nearly all desire to actually receive her help had long vanished.
While I sighed over the surreal responses to my desires, in the gap between requests, Semiko stared absentmindedly out the window.
As I looked at her, I found myself thinking back on my college life that started up this spring. That dull gray college life.

As soon as I got into the college I was presently attending, I thought that I wouldn’t be able to study what I wanted to study here. I felt that this wasn’t where I should be.
On the day of the entrance ceremony, I decided I would retake the exam to go somewhere else.
So I didn’t try to make friends. It would be a waste to if we’d just part in a year. So I didn’t go to freshmen events, class events, anything.
That was for the best, I kept telling myself.

All to retake the exam. All to retake the exam. Al l to re ta ke the ex am.

I didn’t have a single friend, of course. Even my local friends had all gone far away, so I had no one to talk to.
Sometimes I’d go to college, but I didn’t say a word. I hated the cafeteria, so I had no choice but to eat lunch in the bathroom.
I was never invited to any get-togethers, and communities which I was never a part of formed all around.
Everyone’s laughter pierced me in the gut.

It got so painful to ride the train to college with the rising of the sun.
But I wasn’t lonely. There were things I had to do. What else could I do? I wouldn’t want to be friends with them anyway.
That was a lie. A big fat lie. I could bear being alone, but isolation from the group was too much.
I didn’t feel that strongly that I wanted to abandon relations with people. But while I knew that, I couldn’t make friends because that would interfere with my choice.

In a year, I had completely forgotten how to make friends.
Of course I wasn’t unique, I recognized again and again. Even knowing that in my head, I isolated myself daily to protect my pride. As a result, I was hopelessly alone.

Living that life had really depressed me, hadn’t it.
I wondered, had it not been that way, if this enthusiastic nutso-ette would have come knocking on my door.



“I want a friend.”

I found myself muttering. It took me a moment to realize I’d said it out loud.
When I did, my face went red like it had caught on fire.

Even I didn’t know who I was directing that toward.
Perhaps it was just a hope that crawled from the depths of my heart as I reflected on college.
I still can’t say if it really was a request directed at Semiko.

“Understood!”
Semiko confidently spoke, hearing my words. She pointlessly stood up, looked at me with her big eyes, and -
“Starting today, I’ll be your friend!”, she said, pointing at me.

What? Not “I hope you get a friend, amen”? I didn’t want this lunatic, I wanted someone more normal -

“Scratch that, BEST friend! Hey best friend, buy me a soda!”
Semiko interrupted my thoughts with eyes sparkling. How impudent.
“If you want a soda, just get one from the fridge.”
I was very gloomy, but I felt like my day-to-day gloom was cleared up just a little bit.
As I watched Semiko drink noodle soup from a bottle in the fridge, I felt the tiniest gratitude for this bizarre cicada girl.

*

“Ah! It’s time!”
Before we knew it, four at night came around.
“Time to go.”
“Yeah, it’s already morning, I gotta go!” Semiko hurriedly got ready to leave.
“Are you alright at night? I feel like you shouldn’t go out so late.”
“Er, well, in the Cicada Kingdom, you see, it’s very recommended to go out late at night!”
“Maybe so, but it’s dangerous in the human world.”
“It’s fine! If it comes to it, that’s why I brought my stungun!”

Semiko dug through the bag she was always carrying.
A compass, a pastry, a well-shaped rock, a miniature light bulb, an alarm clock, a rock, lip cream, a rock, a rock, and another rock.
“Geez, you really love your well-shaped rocks...”
What was the point of carrying all this stuff around?
“Ahh... Not here. It should be in there...”
She spent some time fishing through her bag, but could not produce the vital stungun.
“Huh? That’s weird...”, she muttered. Suddenly, she found a macaron inside the bag, and her face brightened at once.
“Oh, I remember! I put macarons in instead of my stungun today!”
Then she opened up the bag of macarons in her hand and started munching on them.
“Ahh, macarons are so good...”
Happily stuffing her face with macarons, Semiko already seemed to no longer have any memory of the stungun. Such a simple girl.

“Well, it could be dangerous going home, then. I’ll take you.”
Semiko’s expression got a little cloudier in response.
“Err, umm...”
“What’s wrong?”
“Nope, that won’t do. If you, uh, learn where the Cicada Kingdom is, then, uhh... Right! I won’t be able to come here anymore!”
...Aha. So that was it. Well, I had no intention of digging too deep into it. Everyone has things they prefer not to open up about. Myself included, of course.
“I see. Then be careful on your way back.”
“Alright! I’ll go home like I’ve never gone home before!”
Semiko stood up and spun over to the entryway. She didn’t trip on the step this time.
“Well, see you tomorrow!”
Outside, with a full and radiant smile, Semiko rhythmically stepped down the apartment stairs.
So she’d be back tomorrow, huh.

Seconds later, I heard someone falling over down below.
I sighed, but smiled a little.

*

The next day, my routine still had not recovered from the havoc my cold wreaked. I woke up at 4 AM and studied for about six hours from there.
Meeting my quota for the day, just as I was going to take a break, Semiko arrived.
Just like yesterday, she did surreal things to repay me, looked at my

plants while I studied, polished well-shaped rocks, read stories, and generally killed time.
Perhaps taking my request to heart, she didn't disturb my studies.
And like yesterday, when four at night came around, Semiko left.

After that, I got in the bath, then did a little more studying.
Just as the sun announced the start of a new day, I dove into a world of dreams.
I had become rather nocturnal. It was something I seemed unlikely to come back from.
Still, talking with Semiko turned my mood around, and I was making good progress in my studies.

And yet, what really had Semiko come for?
That day, she had done little in the way of repayment, just talking to me to wasting time on her own.
But I supposed it wasn't a problem if she wasn't getting in the way of study.

*

"Come to think of it, Semiko..."
The fourth night since I met Semiko, I asked her something as she rolled around reading a particularly damaged book.
"Why do you only come at night?"
Semiko only visited after the sun set. And always left right at four at night.
So it was a question that was always on my mind.

“Blue skies...”, Semiko whispered.
“I hate blue skies.”
“You hate blue skies?”
“That’s right. I like the night. I like the dark.”
“Huh. Kind of like a mole.”
“Moles are so cute! I love moles! But blue skies, hate.”
“I like them, though.”
Semiko looked just a little upset to hear it. But in a moment, her expression was back to normal like nothing happened, and I couldn’t help but smile.
Still, it was a weird thought. People who hated blue skies must have been rare.

“So why are you studying?”
While I was thinking about that, Semiko threw a question back at me.
“Aren’t you a college student? So why are you studying to take college entrance exams again? That’s waaay more weird.”
She hit on a painful spot.

There was indeed a reason why I wanted to take college entrance exams again.
But I wasn’t yet at the stage where I could tell it to anyone, so I didn’t.
To others, it would certainly look like a pointless endeavor, and I didn’t have any idea if I could really do it.
Ordinary, average, and talentless as I was, I couldn’t speak of it.

“Hmm, how should I say it... I’m not suited for science courses. So

I'm thinking I want to go to a liberal arts college."
I was vague, and hid the core of the issue.
"I see. Where are you aiming for?"
"Hmm. Something like ___ University's literature department, maybe. It might be a little hard for me, though..."
When I said this, Semiko's face brightened.
"L-Literature?!"
"Uh, yeah."
"So you can get a job writing stories!"
"That's just part of it. I want to have a fun time at college."
"Huh..."
Semiko took a tone of disappointment. She was obviously let down.
Hating to see her like that, I switched the subject and asked "Do you write, Semiko?"

Once again, her expression flipped and her eyes shone.
"Um, well, I've been thinking up all sorts of stories since I was teeny tiny! I'm almost done with the one I'm writing now!"
Semiko spoke innocently and unhesitatingly, like a child being complimented by her mother.
Ignoring the pricking pain in my chest, I asked Semiko, "What kind of story is it?"
"Well, it's a very strange sentimental love story that takes place in the Cicada Kingdom!"
Her long hair swaying as she made all kinds of gestures, she excitedly told me about the stories she was writing.
"I'm also thinking of writing a story about these weirdo aliens, and a story about a girl who stuffs herself full of macarons, and some others too. I haven't yet, but I definitely will someday!"

Semiko shone so brightly as she told me about all the stories she wanted to write, I had to look away a little.
That night, I listened intently to the tales Semiko spun as she glittered like the night sky.

*

“Huh? Long time no see.”
The fifth day after I met Semiko, I woke up in the evening as usual. But unusually, I didn’t study; I went to a bookstore in the heart of the city.
I had finally completed my book of questions, so I decided it was time to buy something a little more difficult.
At a big bookstore in the city, I was looking around for something good. Just then, I met Yuuki, a friend of mine from high school.

I had hung out with Yuuki often back then.
Always orderly, he was vice president of the student council, well regarded by teachers, and quickly proceeded to college on a recommendation.
I rarely met him after that, and only knew what I heard from the grapevine.

Since I last saw him, Yuuki had dyed his hair chestnut-colored. He wore a matching shirt and expensive-looking jeans, and generally, he certainly looked like a college student.
Unlike me, with my worn jersey and unkempt hair, he felt like a real one.

“Yeah, it’s been a while.”
“Whatcha doing here?”
When Yuuki asked, I unconsciously hid the question book I was holding behind my back.
“Oh, nothing really. You, Yuuki?”
“Me? Just wasting time before a get-together later. Man, the test corner here sure brings me back.”
Yuuki picked up a nearby reference book and flipped through it.
“Aw, man, I forget most of this.”
“Well, it’s been over a year since you had to take it, so that figures, doesn’t it?”
“You’re right about that.”
I felt an unfortunate distance between myself and Yuuki. Certainly, it was related to how Yuuki was experiencing college as it should be.

“So what are you up to now? Trying to get into college?”
My heart beat with surprise.
“Um. I’m a college student.”
“Oh, you passed? Congrats!”
I lied at once. Yuuki knew nothing of my desire to retake the exam, so he instead congratulated me.
My heart beat like an alarm. I was attacked by an unknown feeling of awfulness.
“But that’s great, that you picked a college.”
“Yeah.”
“It’s miserable having to do it twice. There’s a guy who did that in my club, and he’s super gloomy and out-there, man. It’s nuts.”
Yuuki laughed. I wanted to get out of there as soon as possible.

“Man, though, you gotta cut your hair. Just ‘cause it’s summer -”
“I was thinking I’d cut it soon.”
A lie. It would be a waste of money I could spend on books. Why would I cut my hair in the first place if I didn’t have any fr -
“Anyway, we should go drinking!”, Yuuki said, stopping my thought.
“It’s been so long, and we’re already out here, so why not? Oh yeah, and you canceled your cellphone after high school. We gotta trade numbers!”
“Yeah... sure.”
That was when I realized I hadn’t exchanged numbers ever since I got a new phone. So I didn’t even know how.

“O-Oh, my bad. I left my phone at home.”
“Huh? Aw, man.”
Once more, I lied. I silently apologized to Yuuki as I grasped the phone in my pocket. It got wet with the sweat running down my palm.
“Whoa, look at the time. I gotta go.”
“Alright. Have fun.”
“Hey, next time we meet, let’s go drinking!”
“Okay. See you.”
“See ya!”

I had a sort of premonition, one I was quite convinced of, that I would never meet Yuuki again.
As Yuuki left the bookstore for a bar far in the distance, I felt a loneliness I couldn’t voice.
Once I couldn’t see Yuuki anymore, with my head hung, I took the

question book I was hiding behind my back to the register.

*

When I got home that day, I couldn't study. I was unable to keep any focus.
I read the texts in the book, but none of it stayed in my head. That had never happened before.
I knew why. It was what happened that afternoon. My fellow students were living the college life. And what was I doing?
But even if I knew, I couldn't do anything. I ground my teeth, worthless thoughts swirling through my head.

"What's wrong? Feeling bad?", Semiko asked, concerned. She was sitting nearby reading a story.
I hadn't seen her show that kind of concern in a while, since the day we first met.
"I'm fine."
"Hmm... But you look really pale."
Semiko saw through my lie. She was sharp only at times like these. It was like Semiko's big black eyes saw right through my entire body.

"Say, Semiko. Do you have any regrets?"
I found myself speaking to Semiko about my worthless feelings. I knew it wouldn't make things any better to say them. But it didn't stop me.
"I was prepared to take the exam again. I know that's the path I want to take. And yet really, somewhere in my heart, I regret it."

Like a dam opening up, the words spilled out of me.
“I still think about what it’d be like to live a normal life at college. And how if I could just make friends normally, I wouldn’t have to suffer like this. And what if I never felt like retaking the exam at all.”
The words I’d been keeping in for months came out all at once.

I made my decision, and moved ahead without looking aside. As I proceeded, the path behind me crumbled apart.
By the time I noticed, there was no going back. Still, I continued to tell myself at all times that this was the way I was going.
But I really couldn’t help being anxious.
Semiko listened in silence.

“Semiko, do you have any regrets?”

I found myself asking again. I don’t know why I was actually expecting some kind of answer from her. But as if clinging to it, I asked her.
Semiko took it all in, and smiled like always.

“Huh. Well, I don’t regret a single thing. Not meeting you, not trying to repay you. And whatever happens in the future, in a year, in ten years, in a hundred years, aaall the way until I die, I won’t regret it.”

Semiko spoke with strong resolution. She looked straight into my eyes. I could feel that her words came straight from her heart.
Ahh... So I see.
Surely, for a long time now, I...
“You’ll manage just fine! My repayment may not be going well

either, but I'm still full of energy. So I'm sure you'll be fine too!"
"Shouldn't you focus on doing a good job repaying me?"
In response, Semiko pouted with puffed cheeks.

*

"Ahh! Oh no, I've gotta go!"
Semiko noticed it was now half past four, and ran outside in a great hurry.
It was the usual, but it felt especially lonely today.
"Well, see you tomorrow!"
After I saw frantic Semiko off, I took a look out the window. The sky was inky black.

I heard Semiko hopping down the steps, and saw her outside.
As she went out into the road, she grandly tripped. I thought I saw white underwear, but maybe it was just my imagination.

I suppose a lot had happened, but I must have been unusually tired that day.
After all, watching Semiko run, her left arm looked for a moment like a real cicada's.
I really must have been tired.

*

One day, Semiko kept flinging rubber bands around the steamy room.
"What are you doing?", I asked for some reason.

“Flinging rubber bands! It’s super fun! It’s the greatest leisure activity in the Cicada Kingdom, since they don’t allow drinking and smoking!”
“I see.” Letting Semiko’s reply wash over me, I returned to studying. It had already been six days since she arrived, come to think of it.

Watching Semiko flick rubber bands, I thought on the days I’d spent with her.
They were fun.
Now, I could say that with confidence. They were gloomy at first, but Semiko helped me just a bit to get along in my studies.
For the first time, I felt like her repayment was actually proving effective.

I had a sudden idea.
“Want to go to a festival tomorrow?”, I invited.
“Festival...?”
Semiko stopped flicking rubber bands and stared at me in amazement. Like she had no idea what that word implied.
“Yeah, you know. A festival. Where you have all these food stands, and the portable shrines and stuff. That kind of festival. You’re always trying to repay me, so I’d like to take you as thanks. I could treat you to shaved ice or something,” I said, speaking a little rapidly.
“I can’t go to a festival... There’s blue skies in the day.”

Why did Semiko hate blue skies so much? Pitch black skies just seemed so lonely.
Whenever I asked her about it, she’d look away and change the

subject, so I really never knew the reason.
“No problem. This festival starts once the sun goes down.”
Semiko delighted, her face shining like the sun. “Then that sounds great!”
“But -” Her face suddenly dimmed, and she swallowed her words.
“What is it?”
“Mmm... Nothing! But you know, it’s just it’s my first time going to a festival.”
“They don’t have them in the Cicada Kingdom?”
“No such thing in the Cicada Kingdom!”
It definitely felt like an afterthought.

But I’d learned in the past few days it would do no good to probe further. “Alright, then tomorrow will be your first festival. Enjoy it!”
“Can’t wait! Looking forward to it more than playing in the sand!”
“That excited, huh?”

We laughed and had our usual sort of exchange, but I felt like Semiko was trying to force a smile a little more than usual.
After deciding when we’d meet tomorrow, Semiko left before dawn just like always.

*

I arrived at the meeting place thirty minutes before I told Semiko to get there. I finished my studying early and actually went to get a haircut.
I tried to ignore my own unusual excitement, and waited for Semiko at the entrance to the park.

Five minutes before the meeting time, I saw a girl in a white one-piece running in the distance.
The girl, her black hair swaying, was running over here so unsteadily it seemed like she could trip any moment. Oop, there she goes.
Semiko tripped nearby and skidded on the ground. She was the same as ever.
“Oww, it hurts...”, she said, rubbing her scraped red knee.
“Geez... concrete is hard. If I could talk to concrete, I’d tell it to soften up and not hurt my knee!”
“Now what are you talking about? Grab on.”
Grabbing my hand, Semiko staggered up. Like always, her one-piece was not dirtied by the fall.

“Thanks! Have a sign of my gratitude!”
Semiko took a green stone out of her pocket and handed it to me.
“It’s fine. But what is this?”
“Found it on the ground. Pretty, huh? Looks tasty too.”
“Thanks. You should really watch your step.”
“Got it!”
I put the green stone in my wallet and looked over the place where Semiko had tripped.
Nothing really sticking out, or any rocks one could easily trip over. There really are people who can trip over nothing.

“You said festivals have lots of shops, right?”
“That’s right. Innumerable amounts.”
“Whoa! I can’t wait!”
Semiko was so filled with excitement, she looked ready to fly off at

any moment.
I kept her in check and took out my wallet.
“To show my thanks, I’ll treat you to anything you want today.”
“Hooray! Thank you! I’ll keep thanking you in the afterlife!”
“But only up to a thousand yen!”
“I’ll thank you until I’m hungry!”

We went walking around the festival.
It seemed it really was Semiko’s first time going to a festival, and she sighed with wonder at all the stands.
“Wowww... These are all shops?”
“Right.”
“Even the one with all the fishies?”
“Yep. Wanna try?”
“Yaaay! I’ll try!”
Semiko was filled with excitement to go goldfish scooping for the first time.
She held the poi with trembling hands and scooped it through the water as forcefully as she could. Suddenly, the poi broke, and Semiko’s three hundred yen went to a death at sea.
“Huh? That’s weird...”, she muttered in confusion. Even on future attempts, she was unable to scoop out a single goldfish.

“This is some new kind of fraud! It’s phishing, with a P and an H!”
“I don’t think that’s quite what that is...”
Seeing Semiko in tearful lamentation, the old man running the stand spoke to her kindly.
“Oh, that’s too bad, miss. Here, I’ll let you have any goldfish you like as a consolation.”

The old man launched into his common practice of helping those who couldn't catch any. With an experienced hand, he scooped out a fish, put it in a vinyl bag, and handed it to Semiko.
"Thanks! You're a god, old man!"
I wondered then if Semiko might be an easy target for actual phishing.

"It's like I'm eating a cloud!"
I sat with Semiko on the steps of a shrine as she happily ate cotton candy with a full-on smile.
Semiko seemed to be getting a little tired, too. Walking through crowds for an hour really hurts your legs, and I hadn't walked like that in a long time.

"Was the festival fun?", I asked Semiko, her cheeks full of delicious cotton candy.
"Suuuuuuuuuuuuuuuper fun! Just the best! I've totally been missing out not doing anything so fun before!"
"That's great."
"I wish those lottery tickets I pulled would've won, though..."
She pointed to the three-hundred-yen-each lottery inside and sighed.
Semiko had spent twelve hundred yen hoping to win a stuffed bear, and wore the four sparkling rings around her wrist.
She was quite upset to find that none of the four were winners. She looked menacingly at the lottery booth and sighed.

I had considered advising her to maybe not go in there, but I decided against it. I didn't want to estrange her.

And it was fun to watch Semiko's face flip between joy and regret in an instant.

We sat on the steps for a while talking about the festival. Before long, we ran out of things to say, enjoying a comfortable silence.
There was nothing bad about silence with Semiko. I didn't know anyone else like that.

All of a sudden, I was reminded of what Semiko said about hating blue skies.
I had the thought to try asking her the reason again.

"Um, there's actually something I need to tell you."

Semiko spoke before I could. Surprised that we decided to say something at the same time, I went with hers.
"What is it?"
"Umm, well..."
Semiko looked down, her words stuck.
"I'm listening. Tell me."
She looked forward with determination and let out what she'd kept in.

"Well... I have to say goodbye to you today."

Semiko continued.

"Um, in the Cicada Kingdom, you only get seven days to repay a favor. So, um, er... I can't go to your house anymore."



Semiko said, downcast.

What was my expression like then?
How did it look to Semiko?
Who knows. I don't know.
Still, I looked up and stared at Semiko.
I noticed her long eyelashes, under her big doll-like eyes, were gleaming like they were wet. Her soft cheeks were faintly pink like cherry blossoms, in contrast to her jet black hair.
She didn't look like a cicada, but like a little fairy.

"I..."

I realized I was hugging Semiko. Her body stiffened up at once. Still, I held her tight.

"You know, I really want to write stories too."

Words sealed deep in my heart leaked out my mouth.
"That's why I'm retaking the exam. You think it's funny, right? He's not talented, he doesn't know anything, yet this guy who's always been scientific changes schools because he wants to be a writer. When I don't even know what I'd write a story about, I just want to. And I know. I know I'm just an ordinary guy."
I didn't have any idea what I was saying anymore. I was too scared to look at Semiko, but I went on.
"But it's been a little different lately. I've seen a few things I want to write. It's still fuzzy, but I see them. And it's thanks to you, Semiko."
I spoke with loquacity that even surprised me.

The energy left Semiko's body, and her thin arms hugged around my hips.
"Leave the Cicada Kingdom somehow, and we'll meet again. I'll be writing until this time next year. Then we'll meet."
"...Okay," Semiko said in a trembling voice. It sounded like she was crying.

"We'll show each other our stories then. You're writing one too, about the strange sentimental love story in the Cicada Kingdom?"
"Of course. I'll always be writing them."
"Then it's on. Who can write the better story? I bet I can come out ahead."
I let my tightly-gripping arms go of Semiko's body. There were slight traces of tears on her face.

"I'm not planning to lose! I've got a masterpiece with a decade of planning in it!"
Semiko's voice wasn't trembling anymore. She stated her victory confidently.
"Then it's a promise. Come back next year to repay the favor. And we'll show each other our stories."
"Got it!", Semiko spoke with her chest out.

She really looked happy then.
At least, that's what I felt.

*

I studied wholeheartedly after that. Summer was over before I knew it, and school reopened.
The local library shut down, so I reluctantly went to college.
In the university library, turning a blind eye to the other students busy with classes, I studied for the entrance exam.
While I indeed couldn't make friends at college, I didn't feel the same loneliness I did before.
I would absolutely make it into the school of my dreams. If I didn't, Semiko would laugh at me. Thinking that allowed me to do my best.

I noticed the colorful leaves began turning gold. When they started to lose all color and fall from the branches, it was winter already.
I devoted all time awake to studying. I was at a desk for fifteen hours a day, longer even than when I was preparing for the exam the first time.

By the time my breaths were completely white, the first hurdle, the Center exams, arrived.
After decent results on the Center exams, the stage was set for the final showdown with the entrance exam.
I was confident I had done everything I could.
This year, I would end it. I would leave no regrets.
Thus my final battle began.
Even the main event went smoothly. With all the knowledge I'd amassed, my pen sped through the pages and I had plenty of time to spare.

"The test is over. Put down your writing implements."

The proctor's voice echoed through the room. As the chime rang to end it, I looked over my test as I recovered.
"Ahh... It's finally over."
There was not a shred of regret in me. I'd put it all in the answer sheet.

And my final entrance exam was over.

I made it into my first choice of school. I hadn't managed that the first time, so I couldn't even believe it.
When I heard the recorded voice on the phone tell me I was accepted, I didn't even celebrate.
"Are you sure you didn't call the wrong place?" was what I said first. I called back about seven times, and just in case I asked from a public phone too. Every time, they said the word "accepted" until it lost all meaning.

"I passed..."
Joy bubbled up within me.
"I did it. I did it!"
Delight began to control my heart. What a wonderful feeling.

After hearing the news, I headed for my parents' house to tell them. I urged the train to go faster. Hurry. Go faster. Faster, faster.
When I reached the station, I ran for the house where they were waiting. I was quickly gasping for breath, having not exercised in a while.
I stopped for a moment to take off my thick coat and looked up at the sky.

As if to celebrate my success, it was a perfect and cloudless sky.
And I remembered someone who hated blue skies. I unconsciously started running faster.
I kicked at the asphalt like I was running a hundred meter dash. My feet were light. They could take me anywhere.
It was getting hard to breathe, so I slowed down just a little. I looked upward and took in deep breaths.

A clear and piercing sky, just the same as it had been.

I took off running again with all my might.

*

After that, the flow of time really sped up.
“Why didn’t you tell us?!”
I repented before my angry mother, bowing in apology about thirty times.
“You did good.”
I’ll never forget the joy I felt once my mother was gone and my father commended me.

The day after I informed my parents, I replied to the school I now go to.
They processed it quicker than expected, so without missing a beat, I headed to enter the university that accepted me.
By the time the cherry blossoms were a pretty pink color, I’d begun a new life on that campus.

I made many friends there. I didn't deny getting involved with anyone else like the year before.
I was truly glad to have made it in. It wasn't a lie.
And so I had a fulfilling time there.

I began to get a small start on my stories. I still haven't forgotten what I promised that summer.
Maybe the writing was rough. Maybe they were crude things to write about. Even so, I wrote every day.
After all, my competition was "a strange sentimental love story in the Cicada Kingdom." She was no doubt still writing her masterpiece now.
Whenever I closed my eyes, the seven days I spent with Semiko came to mind. I wouldn't lose either.

As the cherry blossoms began to scatter and summer neared, I noticed my restlessness.
For some reason, the season when young leaves turned green, and it was too hot for long sleeves, seemed to lift my mood.
I faintly smiled watching a canvas of fresh verdure pop up all together.

No, it wasn't "some" reason; I knew why. I had known long ago, and only pretended not to.
And I really did know what my face was like on the day of that summer festival.
Why did I run with all my might when I looked up at the sky? I knew the reason for that, too.
I'd come to love her.

I missed her. She was never altogether there, yet I couldn't hate that oddball cicada.
Now, I could say that without a trace of embarrassment.

Summer vacation arrived by the time I was halfway done with my story.
Starting off that summer, I received a letter. A strange letter with no address.
When I read the letter, time stopped for me.

Semiko was dead.

*

I was in the park by my apartment as the sun set.
My hand trembled slightly, holding the letter.
Night was approaching, so there was no one around.
Only the streetlights dimly lit the equipment in the park.

"Were you waiting long...?"
I turned around to see a mature-looking woman around twenty. I already knew it wasn't Semiko, but I still couldn't hide my disappointment.
"I just got here."
The woman put a hand on her chest in relief. She really seemed like a human...
"Well, sorry to do this so soon, but I'll show you proof. I need to hurry as well."

Anticipating my thoughts, she held out her arm in front of me.
A white human arm. Gradually, it changed form, becoming a black shape, thin and long like a cicada's arm.
I had seen the arm before, last summer. I thought I was mistaken, but it was just like Semiko's arm I saw from the window.
"As written in the letter. Now do you believe?"
Perhaps in a stupor, I couldn't think anything as I looked at the clearly-not-human woman's arm.
All I could get from it was that everything Semiko had said was true.

Yes, this woman was one of the people living in the "Cicada Kingdom" Semiko spoke of.
I recalled what was written at the end of the letter.

We are bound by a set of rules.
First: In our original forms, we can live for a thousand years.
Second: If we desire, we can take on human forms during the summer only.
Third: Once we assume human form, we die within seven days.
Fourth: If we go out into the sun, we die.

"I'm glad you understand. Now then, this way."
The woman walked ahead, leading me. After taking just a few steps, she tripped and scraped her knee.
"Are you okay?"
"I'm fine... Just faltered a bit."
She stood up and wiped the sand off her knee. I realized then that,

like Semiko, she was dying.
As we walked, the woman kept talking. It was mostly what had been written in the letter, but I listened in silence.

Semiko's race, which lived eternally, was one among the "myriads of gods" spoken of in the human world.
Though they were once revered by people, one day an ancestor of Semiko's fell in love with a human.
A forbidden love between god and man. The other gods were angered and cursed Semiko's ancestor to take the form of a human, instating certain limitations - the aforementioned rules.

"And we are still bound by that curse."
The gods took from Semiko's kind the seasons, life, and the blue sky. Even Semiko's tripping was not clumsiness, but this curse.
The curse gave the once-gods awful cicada-like forms, and so they came to be called monsters by humans. Contact with us became all but impossible.
And yet Semiko defied it, and took a human form. Why? Why had she?

"Why did she become a human? How could she throw her life away like that?"

I found myself asking the woman out loud. She smiled.

"Being in love with someone myself, I understand how she feels. Indeed, that's how it is when you fall in love. Life is a trifing thing, if sacrificing it means being able to speak with and love them. Neither

Semiko nor I will ever regret our choice. Not in a year, not in ten years, not in a hundred years, not when we die, never. That's just how girls are."

Semiko had told me the same.
She said it to me happily, and there was not a shred of regret in her.

I listened to the woman talk as we walked through the grove.
She was about to go meet the one she loved. But before that, she had to send me the letter, as well as fulfill a task Semiko asked of her.
Task...? I wondered what she could mean.

We walked for a few minutes. Looking all around her, she suddenly stopped.
"Ah. Here it is."
She started digging up the ground with a shovel.
"Would you mind helping? The ground is tough here."
I received a shovel from her and started to dig. The soil was softer than I expected, and it came up easily.
Even as I dug, I couldn't believe that Semiko was dead. I wondered if she might just appear before me now with a well-shaped rock.

After a few minutes digging, the shovel hit something hard.
It was like a big can, stuffed inside a vinyl bag.
"There," the woman said, hurrying to open the lid.
Inside the can was something wrapped up in another vinyl bag.
After carefully opening up one after another, there appeared a small college notebook.





“I didn’t write it in the letter, but I called you here today to give you this.”
She handed me the notebook. Written small on the binding was “Story Notebook.”
And on the cover, written in big letters, was the story’s title:

“The Lying Cicada and the Blue Sky”

And when I opened the first page, I found, drawn in colored pencils:

A depiction of a perfectly blue sky.

Ahh... So that was it. I understood now.
She, Semiko, loved the sky. Not the sheer blackness that filled it in the night, but the blue sky. The blue sky lit by the sun.
What was she thinking, telling me she hated it?
Her body was rapidly weakening under the curse. Her life was leaving her.
So what was she thinking, dreaming of a blue sky she'd never be able to see again? I didn't know.

Still, desperate to understand Semiko's thoughts, I turned the pages.
One page after that blue sky, the first sentence of the story lept out at me.

There was once a cicada who hated the blue sky. This is the story of that lying cicada.

It was a human she fell in love with.
And it was such a trivial thing that led to it. When the cicada was still young, she found herself buried in a hole by mistake, and he dug her back out.
It was as trivial as thinking how wonderful he was for doing that.

Of course, she knew it was only a fluke. She didn't expect him to remember such a minor thing anymore.
Still, the cicada's life had definitely been saved then.

So when the cicada grew up, she decided she wanted to repay that favor.

Humans don’t know it, but when cicadas become adults, they can talk to humans.
When the cicada had time, she would go to him and gaze at him from afar. She wasn’t an adult cicada, so he couldn’t understand her.
So all she could do was look at him, and make buzzing noises.

“I’m here! Notice me!”
Of course, he wouldn’t notice. The cicada was lonely, and wanted to cry, but instead she looked up at the sky.

The cicada loved the blue sky. That piercing blue sky that seemed to make her heart clear.
As she gazed at the sky, she thought about how she would repay him once she was an adult.

But once cicadas become adults, they’re soon to die. They can’t look at the blue sky anymore.
She hated being saddened by the pitch black sky. Looking into that black sky, like it was going to suck her up, always made her unspeakably anxious.
Still, if she could meet him, she wasn’t scared of the black sky. All along, she wanted to talk to him.

Once day, twenty years after the cicada was born, she became an adult.
She was so happy, she ran straight for his house.

“Miin-min-min. Miin-min-min. I’m a cicada!”

After that, she wrote of the days she spent with me.

How she was surprised about me suddenly collapsing.
How she lied to hide various things.
How she did somersaults because she was so happy she could talk to me.
How she faltered when asked why she was somersaulting.
How she became my friend.
And how truly happy she was.

All the days I spent with Semiko were all there.

She even wrote about the festival. Semiko's happiness and the fun she had came through plainly in her writings.

When the festival was over, he said, "Let's meet again next year."
The cicada was so happy he said that, and made a promise.
But the cicada had already become an adult. She had little time left. She went home and was saddened.

However, the cicada did her best to live. So she could meet him again next year.
So she could read the story he wrote, and have him read her story. She even thought, like such a schoolgirl, how she would confess her love then.



Autumn passed, then winter, then spring arrived.
The cicada held onto life amid the changing seasons. Until the day they'd show each other their finished stories.

And summer came. Amid the colorful trees, under the illuminating red sun, the cicada was able to meet him again.
She was happy. She was so grateful to see him. Even though she knew the end would come, she shone thinking about him.

The cicada wouldn't regret her decision in a year, in ten years, in a hundred years, all the way until she died.

"Um, there's something I've been wanting to tell you."

The cicada took a breath, then told him.

"Thank you."

And then, one more thing.

"I've always, always loved you."

The human and the cicada walked along hand in hand under the summer sun.
There was no sadness nor suffering to be found. They just walked on like that together, forever.

The cicada suddenly looked above.

And when she looked up, she saw a piercing blue sky.

The story had a happy ending.

I wondered what Semiko thought as she wrote this story.
Surely she feared her coming death, felt her body weakening, and yet she kept writing.
She really must have known we'd never meet again. And yet without regrets, she wrote to the end a story about a world, filled with the light of the sun, which she could never see.
It was amazing. Truly amazing.

I wanted to be the one saying thank you. I thought about how glad I was we met.
Because of Semiko, I was able to enter the school of my dreams. I could write stories. Masterpieces that would shock Semiko.
Because of Semiko, I could so much as get started on that.

It was all thanks to her. So I needed to say it myself.
"Thank you." "I love you." "Hey, show me that innocent smile again."

I noticed tears on my cheek.
I stood there thinking about Semiko, and I cried.

Clouds covered the black night, and rain fell hard on the ground.
As if mourning Semiko's death, forever.

*

Another summer came to an end.
The refreshing sound of out-of-season wind chimes echoed through my chilly room.
I'm writing a story now. So as not to forget my memories with Semiko, I decided to write it down. I'll be done with it soon.
This story might never be shown to anyone once it's finished.
If that's how it goes, then fine.

But if someday, someone is to read this story, I know who I want to read it first.
The second reader can be anybody. But the first will be her.
I don't know when it might be, but it's on my to-do list.

I think I'll keep writing until then.
All these stories for Semiko to laugh and cry over.

And then... And then...

I wish...

I wish for the day to come when we can show each other our stories and laugh.
And I think I'll put down my pen and end this story as I'm wishing for something so out of character.

I opened the curtain on the north window Semiko had once pointed to.
The emerald green stone she gave me was shining on the windowsill.

Perhaps Semiko is somewhere looking at the same thing.
Thinking that, I stuck my head out the window.

Under the sky Semiko dreamed of, the sun warmly lit up the earth.
The green trees and sparkling skyscrapers brilliantly covered the world.
The grass swayed, and the night summer breeze brushed my skin.

Looking over this world filled with radiance, I closed my eyes.
Thinking of someone, remembering them fondly, I turned my head slowly upward.

I opened my eyes to a piercing blue sky.

Afterword

I really like sweet things. So while eating chou a la creme, I mutter to the mirror in an empty room, “I’m such a happy person! And the world is beautiful!”
Furthermore, I’m not particularly good at talking to people. So after talking to anyone, I mutter in an empty room, “So tired... I’m such an unhappy person... Can’t the world be destroyed already...” (does this life have any hope of salvation?)

But normally, people who hate sweet things won’t be made happy by eating chou a la creme, and people who are good communicators won’t be made unhappy as a result of talking to someone.
So I’ve become unable to say what happiness actually is, and mutter to a white wall in my room, “So what the heck is happiness anyway!”
That muttering didn’t help me understand anything, so I ate a lot of custard pudding and that calmed me down (very happy).

Ultimately, “happiness” seems to change from person to person, so I feel like you can’t look at things as an observer and decide what is and isn’t happiness.
In “The Story of a Macaron-Loving Girl Who Lived a Thousand Years Somehow,” which became the title of this book, Macaron-chan ends up living a thousand years, then enters a sound eternal sleep.
Perhaps an observer would describe it as “a girl lived a thousand years, then met an unfortunate end.”

Still, the pressing question is, was she happy herself?
That's why to me, the story has a happy ending. In fact, in all the stories of this book, I think there are happy endings.
Perhaps not all of them may be seen that way, from a different point of view. But the characters took them, as a whole, to be happy endings. I'm sure of it.

By the way, I was able to have Media Factory Bunko J release this book.
Well, that all started thanks to Y-san, who took what I wrote on a certain message board and summarized it on his own blog, and also assisted with the editing of the book.
At the time, I wasn't particularly recognized by anyone, but Y-san had the courage to say "Hey, this story is good!" and give me praise. I'm still very grateful to him, and if Y-san were to have offered me an expensive vase back then, I think I'd buy it without question.

The illustrations were provided by the great Wannyanpuu. She made the characters leagues cuter than I imagined them when writing the stories.
Honestly, I feel the transformative addition of Wannyanpuu's artwork should help sales immensely, compared to if I had gone with my not-very-cute rough sketches.
I'm truly grateful to her for drawing such wonderful characters.

Also, there was my friend U-kun who I could talk to when I was at a loss for ideas, my proofreader, everyone at the print shop... Thank you very much.

And thank you to everyone who is reading this now. My gratitude can’t be put into words.
If this book sells, I’m sure I’ll want to write something else. So I’ll make it my responsibility to write you something interesting.

I just thought I’d write this afterword as a way to repay the favor to those who may someday be reading this.

And thank you so very much. I’m a happy person.

- Karate