THE SUMMER HIKARU DIED



Mio Nukaga 1

Original Story · Illustration by Mokumokuren


THE SUMMER
HIKARU
DIED
1
Pocky

CHARACTERS



Hikaru

He looks like Yoshiki's childhood friend on the outside, but on the inside, he's some sort of nonhuman *thing*. He appeared in place of Hikaru when Hikaru went missing six months ago on a mountain that was off-limits. He looks like Hikaru and has his personality, but...

Birthday: March 20
Height: 5'5"



Yoshiki

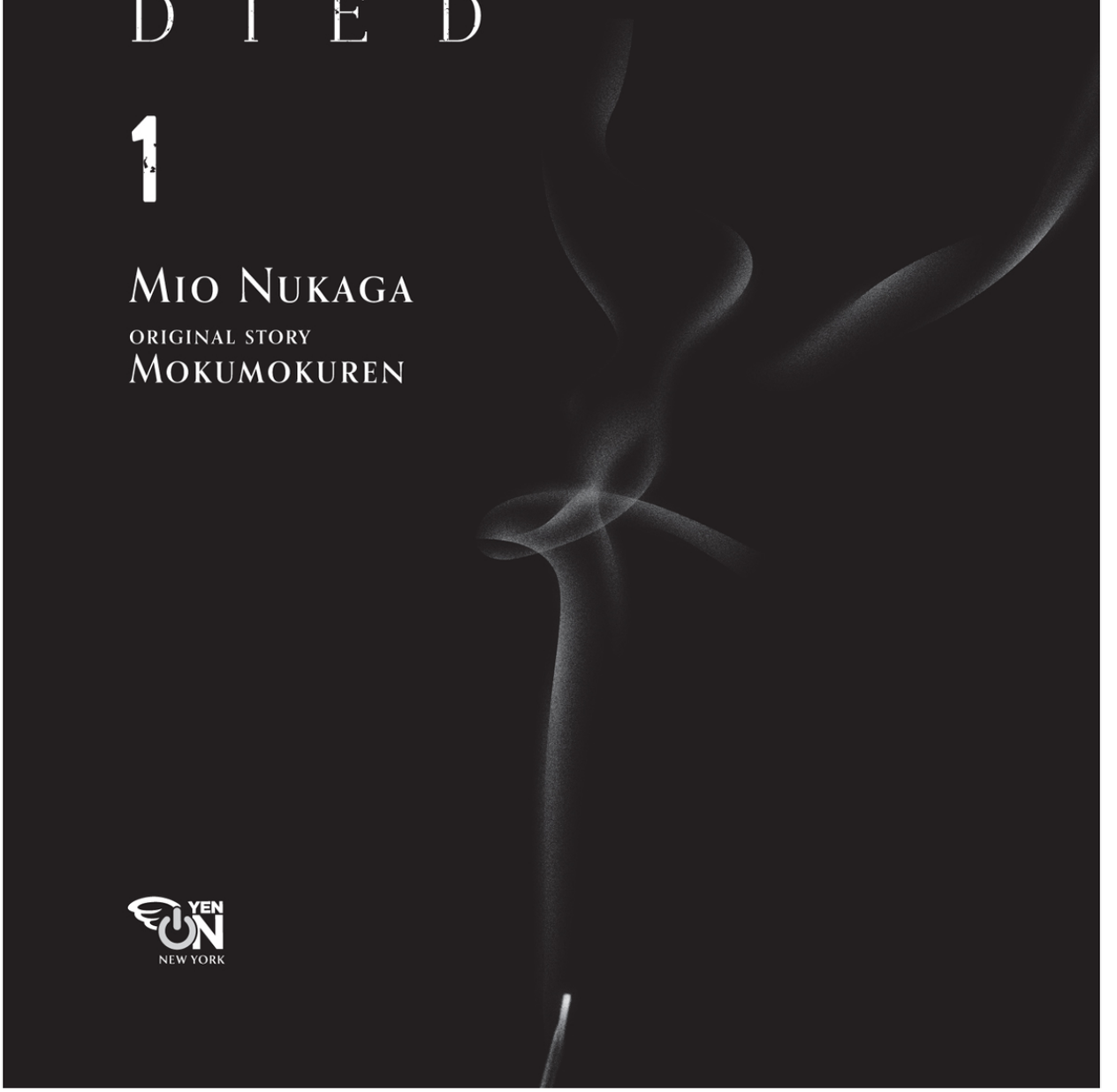
A high schooler in a rural village and Hikaru's childhood friend. Although Hikaru looks the same as always, Yoshiki knows that something has switched places with Hikaru, and he's been keeping the truth to himself. He lives in a household of four with his mother, father, and younger sister.

Birthday: April 20
Height: 5'9"

THE SUMMER HIKARU DIED

1

MIO NUKAGA
ORIGINAL STORY
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YEN NEWSLETTER



PROLOGUE

I’m gonna die.

A cold raindrop landed on the tip of Hikaru Indou’s nose, causing him to slowly open his eyes.

The rain continued to fall without end through the gaps in the midnight-black trees above. The sky darkened as if ink had been dissolved into it, and the sound of a far-off, howling wind reached his ears.

Something sludge-like pushed its way past his heavy eyelids and entered his eyes. When he managed to blink, his sight was bathed in red—a strangely vivid red despite the surrounding darkness.

Ahhh… Really? I’m gonna die.

That much was clear to him. He knew that his bones were broken in several places across his body. The sensation in his limbs had become terribly distant, yet he could still tell that his legs were twisted and sprawled out in impossible directions.

The tips of the rain-soaked bamboo grass brushed against his cheeks. Hikaru barely recognized the sharp, stinging pain coursing through him. He gradually grew cold, starting from the parts of his body that were touching the wet ground. His life was draining away.

Can’t believe this is how I’m goin’ out. Slippin’ after gettin’ distracted by a tree that looks like a woman’s body… Even with me walkin’ around in the dark, there just ain’t no dumber way to die than like this.

He wanted to laugh the whole thing off as being “jus’ plain stupid,” but the only sounds that escaped his parched throat were hoarse croaks.

First, he thought about his father, to whom he apologized for not carrying out the duties of the Indou family like he was supposed to. Then he thought of his mother.

I didn’t wanna make you suffer again, Mama… It’d be great if no one got sad about this…

He knew that would be impossible but wished for it anyway.

Finally, he thought about his childhood friend. They had been together for as long as he could remember. From the moment Hikaru developed a sense of who he was, his friend was right there by his side—that's who was on his mind.

If I die, he'll be alone.

As he thought that, his red-tinted vision twisted and warped. The sensation of the raindrops moistening his cheeks and their coldness faded far into the distance.

I don't wanna leave you alone…

As he exhaled, his breath turned white before being dispersed by the rain. His vision then turned red again. He saw a mix of blood red and the inky black of the night sky, and he felt as if a giant hand was reaching out toward him.

The hand wriggled and squirmed as it approached. Hikaru reached his own hand out toward it. The sensations that had become so disconnected from him returned to his right hand, and then, for a brief moment, his fingertips burned hot.

That's when he thought, *Anyone'll do. As long as they'll take my place and stay by his side, anyone will do.*

CHAPTER 1
Hikaru Was Always There

1

The cicadas in the village buzzed loudly.

They buzzed away all through the summer without a moment's pause. Their cacophony was relentless, as if the cicadas didn't even have time to catch their breath. Yoshiki Tsujinaka didn't know what sounds they made in the city and other far-off places.

BZZH, BZZH, BZZH, BZZH, BZZH, BZZH, BZZH, BZZH.

In the summer, the town where Yoshiki was born and raised overflowed with this sound. It was enough to drive you crazy.

Hikaru vigorously pulled at the front of his school uniform's white buttoned shirt to fan himself. He opened the lid of a chest freezer as he called out to the back of the store.

"Pardon, ma'am. Can we grab some ice cream?"

There was a brief silence, and then a voice replied, "Sure, go on ahead."

Hikaru's expression relaxed as he let the cold air from the freezer wash over his face.

"Ahhh, nice an' cool."

But not a moment later, he knitted his eyebrows with displeasure.

"Wait—there's barely anythin' in here! Dang. All they got is Papicco."

"It's always like that here," said Yoshiki as he brushed his bangs aside. His sweat-damp bangs were long enough to cover not just his forehead but also his eyes.

Around the store were sun-faded capsule toy and vending machines, along with shelves cluttered with items that may or

may not have been for sale. The only things that looked brand-new were the weekly manga magazines in the store's magazine section. Even after years of coming here, Yoshiki couldn't really discern if this store, which was called "Yamahisa," was a penny candy shop or a general store.

The shopkeeper, Mrs. Yamahisa, was an older woman of indeterminate age. Her appearance hadn't changed the slightest bit since Yoshiki's childhood days, so he secretly believed that she must be some sort of supernatural creature.

"'Ice cream avail.,' my ass!" Hikaru grumbled. "An' what the heck's 'frusty-cold' ice cream anyway?"

The sign hanging in front of Yamahisa was supposed to say "Frosty-cold ice cream avail.," but the owner's poor spelling made it read "frusty." This wasn't anything new.

This "frusty" sign had always been hanging at Yamahisa, even in Yoshiki's oldest memory of the store. In that same memory, Hikaru Indou was with him, snapping off one of the two bottle-shaped tubes of ice cream that came in a pack and handing it to Yoshiki, just like he was doing now. The cicadas were in that memory as well, buzzing away like always.

"Still, can't believe that jerk Hara made us run long-distance in this blazin' heat," said Yoshiki.

He sat down on a bench in front of the store and tore off the top of his tube of ice cream. A moment later, Hikaru sat down, causing the old bench to clatter and sway from side to side.

When did it get like this? When exactly did this bench get so rickety?

"What it is, is tor-*cher*, ain't it?"

"Hikaru. You said 'torture' all weird. You said it like you'd say 'for sure.' But it's the same intonation as 'scorcher.'"

The ice cream had already softened, and it didn't take much effort to slurp up its contents.

That freezer just might be on its last legs.

As Yoshiki considered whether it would be a good idea to exchange their ice cream treats for a new set, the buzzing of the cicadas unexpectedly drew nearer.

"Gotcha," said Hikaru. "Torture… It's torture. I'll be careful 'bout that."

Hikaru slurped up his ice cream, wearing a grin. As Yoshiki looked at his childhood friend's face in profile, the already overwhelming buzzing became even louder. Illuminated by the sunlight, Hikaru's light-colored hair looked oddly bright, with an almost white glow to it.

Triggered by that sight, in the back of his mind, Yoshiki recalled the flash of lightning he saw on a certain, fateful day—and he ended up asking his friend a question.

"So you really don't remember goin' missin' in the mountains for over a week?"

"Naw. Not at all."

The village where Yoshiki lived was called Kubitachi. It used to be a real village, but because it had merged with the town of Kibogayama, it wasn't an actual village in technical terms. Even so, the residents thought of it as "Kubitachi Village," and that's what they called it.

Kubitachi was surrounded by mountains on three sides, and each mountain had a name—Nisayama, Matsuyama, Kasayama, and Futakasayama. The village was desolate. Houses, sparsely scattered like dead leaves, dotted the banks of the river that flowed down from the mountains. Even the population was small; only about two hundred people lived in Kubitachi.

It had been about six months since Hikaru went missing on Nisayama—it happened at the end of January on a day with thunderous lightning and heavy rain.

The adults in the village came together to look for Hikaru and were unsuccessful, yet one week later, Hikaru suddenly returned home.

Moreover, he remembered nothing about the week when he'd gone missing.

And just like that, spring came, followed by summer. Yoshiki remembered how his breath turned white in the cold on the day he heard Hikaru had vanished, and naturally, a sigh escaped from his mouth.

"It's been a whole six months since then. Guess y'ain't gonna remember any more'n you already do," he said to Hikaru.

"It's all right, ain't it? How much longer ya gonna keep askin' me 'bout it?"

“It *ain’t* all right,” Yoshiki snapped back. He shoved Hikaru’s head down as if he were trying to make a dog lie on the ground. Hikaru protested and told Yoshiki to “quit it,” although he didn’t seriously mind.

“Everybody was worried sick ’bout ya,” Yoshiki told him.

“So ya missed me when I was gone?”

Hikaru smoothly squeezed his already narrow eyes into thin, needle-like slits and smiled. You could almost hear the snicker of the sly grin on his face.

“Not really…”

“You liar! You musta cried like a baby. Bet you were all like, ‘Don’t leave me all alone, Hikaruuu! Boo-hoo!’” Hikaru pulled down the corners of his eyes to make a crying face.

“Don’t get carried away,” Yoshiki warned, pushing Hikaru’s head down once more.

“Ya always do that, just ’cause yer bigger’n me…,” Hikaru mumbled.

Yoshiki agreed; that *was* why he always did that. Yoshiki was taller than Hikaru, so he always did things like this whenever Hikaru got carried away. It was only natural.

“Hey,” said Yoshiki. “Can I ask you somethin’ that might sound kinda weird?”

The buzzing drew near once again, and before Yoshiki knew it, the noise that had been screeching beside his ears was now echoing inside his head.

“What is it? Gonna confess yer feelings to me?” Hikaru teased.

“Naw.”

That’s right. That ain’t what this is. Not at all.

“…Listen, this ain’t somethin’ that came ta me just now—it’s been on my mind ever since you went missin’ an’ came back, so I’ve been wonderin’ ’bout it for a while…”

Yoshiki recalled the late January chill. He felt it in his upper arms. Even though sweat was running down his cheeks, goosebumps ran up his sides beneath his short-sleeved shirt.

Every temperature he had experienced since that day rushed along the surface of his skin—the cold of January, the deep chill of February, the thaw of March, the warmth of April, the sunshine of May, and even the muggy humidity of June.

“You ain’t the real Hikaru, are ya?”

He gradually began to see in Hikaru something that…*wasn't* Hikaru. Despite Yoshiki's bangs acting as personal blinds, he could clearly see the expression of the person in front of him.

With a face identical to Hikaru's, the person let out a "Huh?" And in the unbearably long silence that followed, it felt as if time itself had stopped.

But the cicadas continued their incessant buzzing.

"Why…?"

As soon as the person mumbled that to himself, something long and slender slithered out of his left eye. Then there were more of them, and his skin melted and crumbled into a gooey mess that flowed out from his cheekbones and hairline.

"I'm s'posed to be a perfect copy of 'im…"

Yoshiki wanted to believe the bangs in his eyes were to blame.

But no matter how many times he blinked, *it* wouldn't go away.

It appeared to be not quite black, or blue, or red, or even green. It looked something like the shriveled roadkill remains of a rat that he'd seen on the way to school that morning, or like the fishy-smelling scales that someone scraped off and discarded after fishing by the riverside, or even like rain-soaked mud and cold bamboo grass.

"Please…don't tell anyone…," the thing begged.


どぅ
OOZE

Yoshiki tried to speak but was instead overcome with nausea.

The thing before Yoshiki reached toward Yoshiki's torso with its right hand, which sported a boorish wristwatch. The right hand belonged to Hikaru Indou, who wore a watch on his right wrist even though that was his dominant hand.

The insides of the creature before Yoshiki overtook his vision, and the sour taste of stomach acid crept up into his mouth from the back of his throat.

"This is the first time I've lived as a human," the creature said. "School, friends, ice cream—I'm enjoyin' all of them for the first time ever. I may be borrowin' this body an' personality, but my feelings for you are real."

To Yoshiki's chagrin, the person in front of him smelled just like Hikaru. Even the feel of his sweaty palms was just like Hikaru's.

Why are his hands shaking? Is it me who's shaking, or is it him?

"So please," the person told him. "I don't want to kill you."

The buzzing of the cicadas disappeared. Now the sound of Yoshiki's own breathing filled his ears, and beyond that, he heard a voice say, *He's a fake*.

Through his bangs, Yoshiki could see the side of the thing's face. It wasn't the side that had crumbled open and spilled its contents but a profile of Hikaru Indou's perfect face.

He wondered why there were tears running down from that thing's eye and considered the significance of the tears running from his left eye in the exact same manner. As those thoughts crossed his mind, Yoshiki took a large breath, inhaling Hikaru's scent.

"Fine," Yoshiki said.

At any rate, Hikaru's not around anymore.

If that's how it is…

"Okay…*Hikaru*. Nice to meet ya."

*

I think it was last summer.

We were playin' video games in Hikaru's living room. I'm sure it was summer—I remember the sticky heat clingin' to the nape of my neck, the faint coolness of the tatami mat, and glasses of barley tea drippin' with condensation.

"Hey, Hikaru."

Even when Yoshiki called out to him, Hikaru wouldn't take his eyes off the TV.

"Whatcha gonna do after you're done with Kibogayama High?"

It was only then that Hikaru finally stopped what he was doing and looked at Yoshiki.

"Haven't given it much thought. Prob'ly run my grandpa's shiitake farm. How 'bout you, Yoshiki?"

"Haven't really thought 'bout it, either."

But for as long as I could remember, the only thing I wanted was to leave the village.

This village is surrounded by mountains and has always been the type of place where folks called each other by the name of their family's business instead of their actual surnames. The connections between people here are deep, for better or worse, and no matter how much the outside world changes, the village'll stay the same 'til the Earth sees its own destruction. That's what I wanted to escape.

"Yer smart, so ya can leave this backwater village and go to college in Tokyo," Hikaru mused.

The casual way in which he said it—like he was separating a two-pack of ice pops—momentarily left me at a loss for words. The place where we were born and raised, the all-too-small Kubitachi Village, was all-too-distant from Tokyo.

But Hikaru didn't miss Yoshiki's reaction.

I hadn't said anything, but Hikaru started laughing.

"Oh, wait. Or is it that you don't wanna be away from me?"

He kept laughing, even going on to say, "Gross, dude!"

As soon as he said that, I instantly shot back with "How 'bout you go to hell, then?" *before telling him* "If I do go to Tokyo for college, I'll be livin' on my own."

"Sounds nice. Wish I could do that."

But what Hikaru didn't say was, "Maybe I'll go to Tokyo, too."

Instead, he then started talking about how he'd head over to my place if he was visiting Tokyo and found himself needin' to take a crap 'cause he can't poop in public restrooms when there's lots of people around, and how he used to crap outside all the time until he was three years old, but he could probably still do it if he wanted to. It was all a bunch of silly nonsense.

"Or maybe I'll just hang around at yer place all the time. Ya could get yerself a cute girlfriend an' everythin', and ya'd never be able to bring her home 'cause I'd always be around."

And despite all the silliness, he would bring up something like that.

"I ain't gonna get no girlfriend," I told him.

"Aw, c'mon now. Y'always get sore whenever we talk about girls."

Then Hikaru laughed the whole thing off, saying, "I'm sure ya could get yerself a girlfriend," *as he turned back to the TV screen. The conversation ended there.*

Next to appear was Hikaru dressed in his winter school uniform. Kibogayama High School's winter uniform was very traditional: black with a stand-up collar for the boys and a black sailor uniform for the girls. Maybe that was why the hallways in winter appeared even darker than normal.

The hallways were cold that day. The coldness seeped into your body through your shoulder blades.

"Hikaru!" I said.

I tapped Hikaru on the shoulder, but I couldn't quite remember what I needed from him.

"Oh! Yoshiki! What's up?"

"So, 'bout this weekend…"

Right. Something was supposed to happen that weekend, but no matter how much I think about it, I can't remember what it was.

"Ahhh… This weekend's no good for me. I'm goin' to the mountains."

"The mountains? Why?"

At first I thought Hikaru meant he was gonna help with his grandfather's shiitake farm, but something about the way he said he was going to the mountains felt oddly significant.

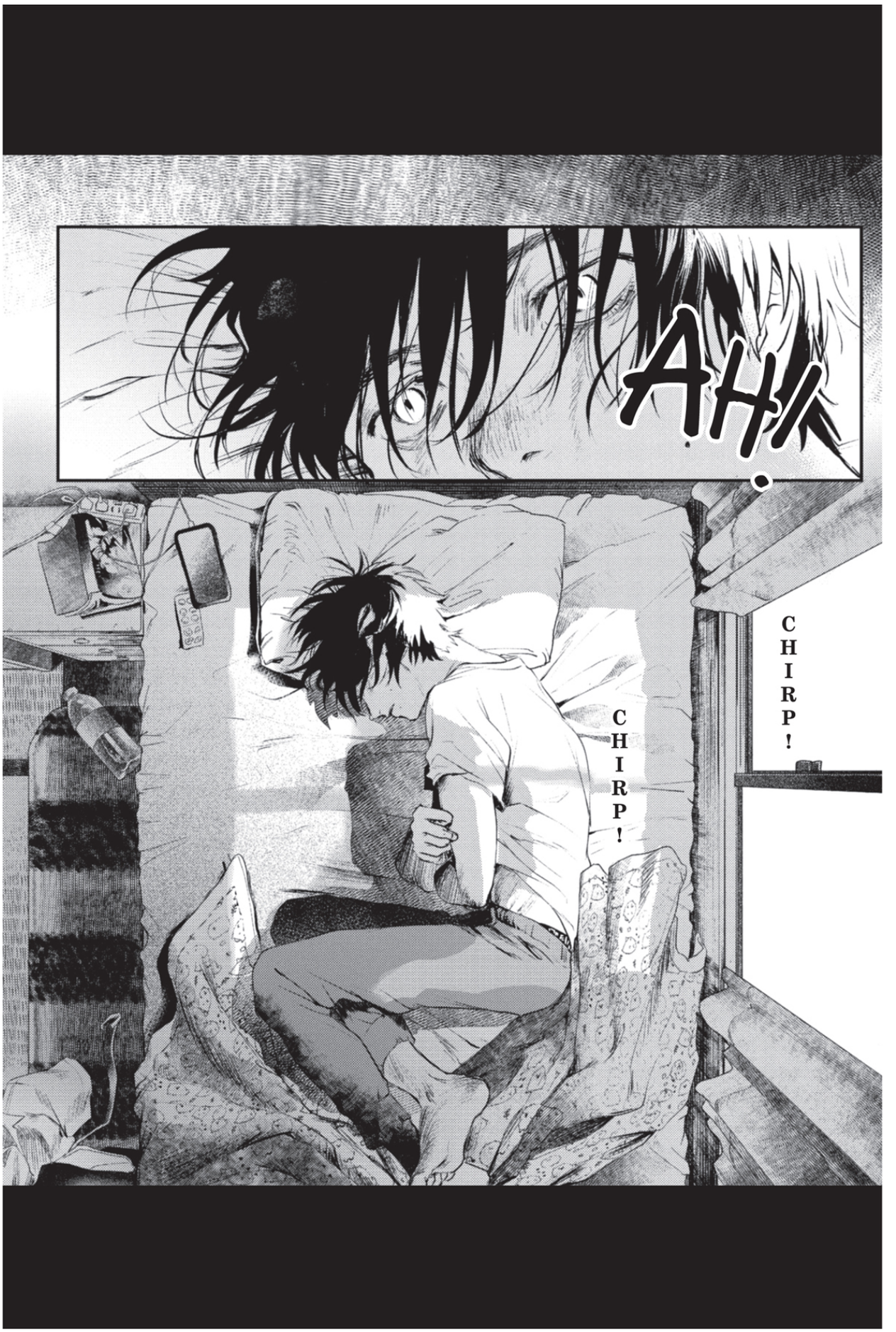
"Well, thing is…" Hikaru grinned. "It's a see-kweht."

He was doing an impression of our homeroom teacher, Coach Hara. Hikaru was good at mimicking his face, which looked kinda like a drunk tanuki.

Did I laugh at that back then? Or did I get exasperated, thinking, The heck was that? *I can't remember anymore.*

And after going to the mountains, Hikaru went missing and returned one week later.

Yoshiki awoke curled up in his bed. The bright morning sun seared his back, making him realize that he'd gone to sleep without closing the curtains the night before.


AH!
CHIRP!
CHIRP!

It was a dream. A dream about Hikaru when he truly was Hikaru. And the last time I saw Hikaru's face was when he was impersonating Coach Hara… That's so dumb.

He wanted to laugh about it, but all he could do at that point was bury his face in his sheets. Even holding his breath wouldn't stop the trembling in his throat.

By his pillow lay the remains of a hastily emptied blister pack of stomach medicine, while the plastic water bottle he used to take it had rolled under his bed.

He then heard footsteps rushing up the stairs. A few seconds later, his mother harshly knocked on the door to his room.

"Yoshikiii!! Come eat breakfast already!"

Even with her angry yelling, he couldn't get himself to move right away. Ultimately, Yoshiki's mother dragged him out of bed, and he had to shovel down his breakfast while she complained that his bangs were too long.

"For the love of—! Hikaru's been waiting for you, y'know! Hurry up!"

Yoshiki finished getting changed and was thrown out the front door before he could even collect his thoughts. The piercing sunlight almost burned his eyes, and the cicadas continued their cacophonous buzzing just as they had the day before.

"Mornin'."

Hikaru greeted Yoshiki in front of his door with a smile, just as the real Hikaru had for the longest time.

"S-so," he began, "this mornin', my mama…"

He had a slightly awkward look on his face and appeared to be acting cautiously—perhaps because of what happened the day before.

"You an idiot? No time for that. We gotta get ta school—don't wanna be late," said Yoshiki.

Hikaru nodded with a serious expression, indicating that he was earnestly listening. It seemed as if Yoshiki's words came as a relief, or perhaps he felt reassured because Yoshiki was treating him just as he had always treated the real Hikaru.

"Okay. We don' want ol' Hara gettin' mad at us again," said *Hikaru*.

"Yeah, all the more reason we gotta hurry."

Walking side by side, they pushed their bikes along an old, narrow road flanked by rice paddies and farmland. No trains ran through Kubitachi Village, and while there were buses, none were convenient for their commute to school.

It took Yoshiki and Hikaru more than an hour to get to school by bicycle. That was just an ordinary part of their lives.

The terraced fields built with stone walls among the mountains always smelled of damp earth and manure. And it wasn't just on the route to school—that's how it was everywhere in Kubitachi.

In the summer, the cicadas were deafening. No matter where you looked, everything was faded, as if covered in a cloud of dust—the houses, the farm sheds, the cars, the street signs, the electric poles, and even the bugs and snakes that crawled and slithered down from the stone walls. Perhaps they'd been bleached by the harsh sunlight.

There were many elderly people and few children in Kubitachi. Hikaru had been the only person in the village who was Yoshiki's age. Hikaru had always been by his side.

Indeed, Hikaru was all Yoshiki had.

And so…Yoshiki figured that whatever *Hikaru* was, having him by his side would be better than not having him at all.

*

"Oh, we used ta go out an' eat this stuff sometimes, huh?!"

With a Yamazaki mincemeat cutlet before him, *Hikaru* looked like a child who was about to try one for the first time in his life.

He carefully held the oil-stained wrapper in both hands, slowly opened his mouth, and stuffed it with food. Indeed, he truly looked as if it was his first time eating a mincemeat cutlet.

The caramel-colored breading made a crisp, crunching sound. Light wisps of steam rose from inside the cutlet, and the golden juices from the meat glistened faintly.

Immediately after biting into his cutlet, *Hikaru* yelled out, "Whoooooa!"

When Yoshiki muttered, "You're bein' way too loud," *Hikaru* didn't pay any attention.

“It’s so dang good! Gawd, that crunch! I mean, I know this flavor, but…”

As *Hikaru* stuffed his mouth with the mincemeat cutlet, Yoshiki watched his friend’s overly exaggerated reaction to the food.

It most likely was delicious, but there was nothing particularly special about it, either. It was just an ordinary mincemeat cutlet from the ordinary Yamazaki Butcher and Deli near their high school. There probably wasn’t anything out of the ordinary about the recipe.

“Still,” said Yoshiki, “it’s strange that it’s new to you even though you remember it.”

“Yeah, that’s right. I got the same exact memories as him, but I never actually experienced any of ’em. I was never alive to begin with. So it’s my first time even feelin’ a clear sense of ‘me.’”

Hikaru had already stopped pretending to be Hikaru Indou. He was now speaking openly and matter-of-factly to Yoshiki about how he was Hikaru but also *not* Hikaru.

They had watched a movie in class earlier that day. It was probably the fifth time they’d seen it since elementary school, so while it was on, all their classmates were asleep with their heads on their desks.

Hikaru had been the only one staring at the screen with intense focus, and after seeing a woman in the movie victimized by her husband’s verbal abuse, he tearfully remarked how it was “all too sad.”

When Yoshiki cautiously asked why he was crying at the movie, *Hikaru* sniffled as he replied, “It’s in my memory, of course. But this is the first time *I’ve* seen it.”

First the movie, and then the mincemeat cutlet. They existed in his memories, but *Hikaru*’s eyes sparkled when he encountered them for the first time.

“…Ha-ha. You a ghost or somethin’?” Yoshiki asked him.

“I dunno. Naw, not a ghost, exactly. But I know fer sure I was some sorta messed-up ghoulie.”

As *Hikaru* chuckled and took a bite of his mincemeat cutlet, Yoshiki’s shoulders slumped, and he wondered if his friend really was “some sorta messed-up ghoulie.”

Then, perhaps enticed by the smell of fried food, a well-fed white cat slinked out from the shadows of the dry cleaner's. The cat wasn't quite a stray, but it didn't exactly belong to Yamazaki's owner, either—something of a pet and not a pet at the same time.

"Oh. It's Mincey," Yoshiki mumbled.

The cat mewed softly and snuggled against his legs.

No one knew who named the cat Mincey. He often appeared around Yamazaki and Kibogayama High School, possibly because he knew that people would feed him.

"Did he get fat again from all the food Yamazaki's been givin' him?" Yoshiki wondered.

"Yep. Sure looks like it," replied *Hikaru* as he reached out to Mincey.

As soon as Mincey looked up, his fur bristled, and he hissed loudly.

He'd always fawned over humans who had food, but this time, there was clear hostility and wariness deep within his gold eyes.

With agility unsuited to a fat cat, Mincey disappeared back into the shadows of the dry cleaner's, leaving *Hikaru* to just laugh at what happened.

"That cat can really book it, huh?!" he said. Then, pointing in the direction where Mincey had disappeared, *Hikaru* asked, "Ya see that?"

Yoshiki didn't give him any kind of response.

"He was really upset. Maybe it's 'cause of me. An' all I was doin' was eatin' a mincemeat cutlet! That really ticks me off, y'know?"

Before Yoshiki knew it, *Hikaru* had finished his mincemeat cutlet. The fact that Mincey had threatened someone over something so trivial, and that Yoshiki had never seen the cat act that way before, left him feeling strangely ill at ease.

"…You wanna go anyplace else in town?" Yoshiki asked *Hikaru*. "The only other things around are that shabby diner or the Mion Mall, though…"

"Oh. You'll go with me? Yer bein' real nice to someone like me… As nice as you've ever been…"

"I ain't bein' nice. If I make excuses for myself, I can't very well come down on others."

That's right. There's nothing nice about me.

Just remembering that ominous thing that gushed and swirled outta Hikaru *makes my throat tighten up like I wanna puke.*

But I don't want to be rejected by someone who looks just like Hikaru—I don't want to be rejected by Hikaru*. That's why I can't reject him.*

That's all there is to it.

"I ain't sure what yer talkin' 'bout, but either way, yer still bein' nice ta me," said *Hikaru*.

In line with *Hikaru*'s wishes, they visited a shabby diner and a shopping mall and circled around to a supermarket and drugstore.

Although all those places should have been in his memories—he and Yoshiki had even gone to some of them together in the past six months—*Hikaru* seemed to enjoy being there as *Hikaru*.

Kibogayama Town, where their high school was located, was still relatively lively, but as the two boys returned to Kubitachi Village at dusk, they began to hear the sound of cicadas.

The only other sound was the wind from the mountains gently caressing the heads of rice plants that were growing tall in preparation for autumn.

Compared to Kibogayama Town—which had not just a high school but a supermarket, shopping mall, and movie theater—there was nothing in Kubitachi. What it did have was a Shinto shrine, a community center, a town hall…a post office, and a small police station. It would be quicker to count what it had rather than what it didn't.

"Oh, a dragonfly," said *Hikaru*.

As they walked their bikes up a gentle slope, a dragonfly landed on *Hikaru*'s bike bell.

"It's a summer darter. A typical red dragonfly. But it's not that red yet," Yoshiki explained.

"A red dragonfly, huh? In summer?"

"The one associated with fall is an autumn darter. This one's a summer darter…"

"Huh. What's the difference?"

"It's annoyin' to explain. Summer darters an' autumn darters look nearly identical, but they're different species." As he spoke, Yoshiki felt a bitterness in the back of his throat.

Seemingly impressed, *Hikaru* sighed and said, “Huh. No wonder they call you Emil.”

Yoshiki wasn’t entirely sure who had given him the nickname “Emil” from the short story “Das Nachtpfauenauge” in their language arts textbook.

Yoshiki had never been an exemplary boy, nor was he particularly good at collecting specimens. It was just that at one point, he was influenced by something he saw online and started saying “I see, I see” as his standard way to indicate he was engaged in a conversation, and that somehow turned him into Emil. He couldn’t even remember if Emil actually used that phrase.

But *Hikaru* remembered those sorts of things.

There was also the time Yoshiki got another weird nickname after someone went around telling people that the moles on his face made the same shape as the Big Dipper. Yoshiki was sure that *Hikaru* remembered that, too. He didn’t *know* it, but he remembered it.

He looks just like Hikaru, but whatever he is, he ain’t Hikaru.

Yoshiki unconsciously gripped the handles of his bicycle.

This whole thing’s crazy. He’s crazy, and I’m just as crazy for accepting him.

His palms were damp with sweat, and he wanted to scream, “Just what the heck is that thing?!”

I’m so, so scared. Please, just stop already. You’re seriously creeping me out.

And as he wrestled with those fears, there was another thought in his mind.

But I don’t wanna be alone.

Even as he repeatedly apologized to someone in his own head, the thought remained.

“Oh! That reminds me!” *Hikaru* piped up. “So, I was thinkin’ next time, I could keep readin’ *Master* + *Master* at your place…”

Hikaru started to casually chat with Yoshiki, seemingly unaware of the struggle and turmoil happening within the boy.

“Sure. Fine with me,” Yoshiki replied. “Oh, so how far didja read?”

“Ron just left the island.”

“That’s barely anythin’ at all. You’re basically at the openin’ stage.”

If they were talking about the fairy tale of Momotaro, the old man wouldn’t have even gone to the mountains to gather wood—he’d still be lying in bed at home.

“All right. S’fine if you come over and read ’em next time you come by. But I’m missin’ volume three.”

“No worries. I’ll figure somethin’ out for that. But I was kinda wonderin’ why you got eleven copies of the first volume.”

Just as Yoshiki was about to explain that, a shrill voice launched at them from down the road. An ear-piercing scream that sounded like rough nails scraping against frosted glass.

It was Old Lady Matsuura, standing frozen with terror at the end of the road. Even though it was the middle of summer, she was wearing a long-sleeved sweatshirt. Now that it was evening, the temperature had cooled, but Yoshiki could still see from a distance that her forehead was beaded with sweat.

“Ah…ahhh… Whyyy…?” she moaned.

Her eyes, shriveled like dried grapes, trembled as she looked at them.

Actually, she was looking at *Hikaru*.

“Nounuki, don’t tell me yer down here nooow!”

As she wailed, Old Lady Matsuura’s hands, which were more wrinkle-and-bone than skin-and-bone, rattled, causing *Hikaru*’s eyes to widen.

“Whoa. The heck is that? Scary.”

“Eeek! Stay back! Go away! I said, git!”

Her voice wasn’t particularly loud. But the way she screeched, with a distorted quality that made it seem like she had forgotten how to scream, caused Yoshiki’s face to scrunch up with displeasure.

“Don’t pay her no mind,” he said. “I really hate this kinda stuff.”

Old Lady Matsuura would act like that sometimes and say strange things while wandering outside her house. The villagers felt bad for her because of that, and Yoshiki shared their sentiments, but being confronted by her like this was more than he could handle.

“Let’s go,” he urged *Hikaru*.

Without bothering to fix her disheveled white hair, Old Lady Matsuura continued to stare at them, trembling with each breath. Yoshiki turned his back to her, and *Hikaru* quietly followed, saying, “Ah! Wait up!”

Though it would be a bit of a detour, Yoshiki decided to take another route home. The sound of the cicadas faded away. Now the boys could hear only a loud chorus of croaking frogs coming from the orange-tinted rice paddies.

Meanwhile, the face Old Lady Matsuura had made as she called *Hikaru* “Nounuki” remained seared into Yoshiki’s mind and wouldn’t leave.

“See ya tomorrow,” *Hikaru* said, standing in front of Yoshiki’s house.

“Hey…,” Yoshiki began. Then, before he could stop himself, he asked, “Hikaru really is dead, huh?”

He avoided looking into *Hikaru*’s eyes, but he could still feel *Hikaru*’s gaze on his bangs.

After a long, drawn-out silence, *Hikaru* finally nodded and said, “Yeah.”

Then he put his hand on his chest as he murmured steadily, firmly, “This body has a pulse and warmth to it, but it’s already dead.”

It’s already dead—those words dragged something out of Yoshiki that he hadn’t been able to confront until now.

“So, did you…?” Yoshiki started.

“Oh, no way! He was breathin’ his last when I came upon him. No doubt about that. I ’member wanderin’ ’round the mountains for some time. Was like that for a good long while—just not feelin’ anythin’. I was pretty much like a machine on autopilot all that time.”

It didn’t sound like *Hikaru* was making excuses. He wasn’t the one who killed Hikaru. Yoshiki had a vague sense of that.

“Then Hikaru was about to die, and before I knew it, I was like this.”

“And you like me?”

Yoshiki’s abrupt question caused *Hikaru* to gasp and respond, “Huh…? What?”

Yoshiki wasn’t expecting an answer.

But as Yoshiki reached for his front door, *Hikaru* clearly said, “I do.”

He actually said it.

“I’m crazy for you.”

The setting sun illuminated one side of *Hikaru*’s face, while the other half was cast in shadow. As a result, Yoshiki could see just half of *Hikaru*’s expression, but he could tell that *Hikaru* was smiling.

Hikaru never said a thing like that before, was Yoshiki’s honest impression. He swallowed those feelings and took a breath.

“If that’s so,” he said, “then never disappear on me ever again.”

Yoshiki didn’t look at *Hikaru*’s face after that. He opened the glass door at the entrance to his house and closed it behind him. The sound of it shutting was louder than he expected.

And beyond the orange-tinted frosted glass, all he could hear was the sound of croaking frogs.

2

“Stay away! Stay awaaay!” Matsuura shouted at her front door from under a comforter pulled over her head. Her muffled breath caused sweat to trickle down the tip of her nose.

The floorboards at her house’s entrance gently twinkled in the moonlight that filtered through her glass door, making the woodgrain lightly visible. Above it, her skin-and-bone hands trembled.

It was just past midnight. With all the lights out, her home was dark and silent. Matsuura’s breathing was the only sound.

And yet…

“Mrs. Matsuuraaaa! I’ve got a delivery for you. Mrs. Matsuuraaaa?” a young man called out from beyond the pitch-black entrance. It wasn’t the voice of Satou, the deliveryman who usually delivered packages here.

In the quiet night, when everyone in Kubitachi was fast asleep, the man’s voice was all that echoed through the village.

“I ain’t openin’ the door…!”

After Matsuura managed to force those words out from the back of her throat, something hit the edge of her comforter with a

clatter. The dish of salt at the entrance of her house had been knocked over.

In the darkness, the talismans posted on her walls glowed white. But the voice did not stop.

“Ohhh? Maybe she’s not here? Hello! Delivery…!”

“There ain’t no way a package’d…c-come this late…”

She tried to get the words out, but her trembling throat wouldn’t let her. Her breath was shallow, and cold sweat ran down her cheeks.

“You’re home, aren’t you? We’re both gonna have a problem if I don’t deliver this package, you know… Mrs. Matsuuraaaa! Mrs. Matsuuraaaa!”

The voice wouldn’t stop.

“Mrs. Matsuuraaaa! Mrs. Matsuuraaaa! Mrs. Matsuuraaaa! Mrs. Matsuuraaaa! Mrs. Matsuuraaaa Mrs. Matsuuraaaa! Mrs. Matsuuraaaa… Mrs. Matsuuraaaa!”

“I—I—I…”

She began to stutter something, but as soon as she managed to say, “I won’t let’cha in,” she heard a cheery voice from behind her.

“I’m already inside.”

When she turned around, there was nothing but a dark hallway.

There was no sound, no sign of anyone—just the dark hallway.

CHAPTER 2
Undeniably Hikaru

1

“Come on, Yoshiki. I’m beggin’ ya here!” Yuuta Maki pleaded, almost as if he was rebelling against the scratching sounds of the desks being dragged across the floor.

The characteristic dry and dusty smell of cleaning time swirled about the classroom as Maki, with his buzzcut—the kind you’d find next to the dictionary entry for *high school baseball team*—looked at Yoshiki with desperate eyes.

That’s why Yoshiki instinctively replied, “Naw, don’ wanna…”

Maki exclaimed, “Whaaaaa?!” and collapsed onto the desk he had just finished moving. “Come on! It’ll only take a little bit!”

“I already told you I don’t wanna deal with any creepy stuff.”

But that wasn’t enough to make Maki give up, so Yoshiki, with a broom still in his hand, turned his gaze away. This was the third time this exchange had happened since they began cleaning.

“Hey, what’s goin’ on? Yer bein’ awfully loud…,” said a girl.

With a slightly annoyed look on her face, Yuuki Tadokoro walked over toward them with a garbage bag in hand.

“What happened?” she asked.

From her shoulders, which were much lower than Yoshiki’s and Maki’s, the tips of her pigtails slunk down as if they had just let out an exasperated sigh.

“Well,” said Maki, “you know how I always take the mountain path from the eastern gate to get back to Ashidori?”

“Yeah, sure.”

Most of the students who attended Kibogayama High School were graduates of nearby middle schools. Their school was a

typical, unremarkable prefectural high school in an out-of-the-way area, so barely anyone enrolled from far off.

Yoshiki, who was from Kubitachi, and Yuuki, who lived in Kibogayama, attended different elementary schools but went to Kibogayama Middle School together. Maki graduated from a middle school in the Ashidori area where he lived.

Kibogayama High was built halfway up the mountain overlooking the town, and as Maki had mentioned, the shortest route from the school to Ashidori was the mountain path that continued from the eastern gate.

“See, the tunnel there’s under construction, so now I gotta use another way through the forest. One I don’t normally use.” Maki paused and took a quick breath before continuing. “But that forest path is spooky as hell!”

“Huh?” Yuuki cocked her head in confusion.

“And that’s why he wants me to go with him,” Yoshiki clarified.

Yuuki heaved an exasperated sigh. “That’s stupid…”

“But bein’ scary ain’t the half of it… I can’t look into the forest. It’s like my eyes can’t move away from the path in front of me.”

While Yuuki remained puzzled by Maki’s incomprehensible explanation, a tall female student suddenly jumped into the conversation.

“Whoa! Freaky!! Really gotta wonder what that’s all about!”

Swaying her short, soft hair and speaking in a voice with the crisp brightness of a freshly fried croquette, the girl repeated her interest in their conversation.

“Sounds fascinatin’! Real fascinatin’!”

The girl, Asako Yamagishi, was Yuuki’s best friend who had gone to the same middle school as her. She was over five feet, six inches tall and was abnormally strong at arm wrestling.

“So, is it that you can’t look into the forest ’cause it’s so scary?” she asked, leaning forward eagerly.

Encouraged by her interest, Maki became more energetic. “Naw. Wasn’t scary at first, you know? But it’s like, even if I try to look into the forest, before I know it, my eyes are back on the road. That’s what really got me spooked. And that’s why I’m askin’ ya to come with me, Yoshiki!”

Here we go again, thought Yoshiki.

“Nope,” he said. “Sounds way too scary.”

“You can think of it as a test of courage!”

“A test of courage…? The only people who do that are stupid tourists who come through every now an’ then.”

Kibogayama Town had a surprisingly large number of haunted places. There were even tourists who came specifically to visit the town’s famous tunnel.

“But yer seriously good at tests of courage,” Maki said. “You were amazin’ the last time we went.”

“Naw. That was just—”

Yoshiki started to explain, but Asako cut in, laughing, and said, “You were movin’ like you were doin’ an *RTA* speedrun.”

In reality, Yoshiki had been rushing to get to a toilet and was scared out of his mind. Just as he was about to make that excuse, he heard light footsteps approaching, signaling the arrival of the very last person he wanted to get involved in their conversation.

“Sounds real interestin’ to me!” *Hikaru* remarked, entering their circle. “I wanna go, too!”

Surprised by this, Maki, Yuuki, and Asako widened their eyes and, in unison, said, “Huh?”

Confused by their response, *Hikaru* shot back with his own, “Huh?”

“Y-ya sure ’bout that? You’re the worst at handlin’ these things, Hikaru,” Maki cautiously pointed out.

Yuuki nodded. “Ya passed out for two hours when ya saw that horror movie.”

“Oh, yeah…” Hikaru scratched his cheek awkwardly and slowly turned his gaze toward Yoshiki. “Well, I’ve gotten better with that stuff lately. Ain’t that right, Yoshiki?!”

Hikaru sought Yoshiki’s agreement.

Asako glanced back and forth between the two boys before finally keeping her eyes on Yoshiki, who managed to squeeze out an “Oh. Yeah…”

Maki, taking that to mean the matter was settled, smiled. “All right, then. So it’ll be Yoshiki, Yuuki, Asako, and Hikaru. I’m so glad y’all are comin’. For real.”

Taking a quick glance around the room, Yoshiki noticed that the cleaning was mostly done. Pale sunlight seeped through the windows and reflected off the neatly arranged desks.

The red scarves on Asako's and Yuuki's sailor uniforms looked oddly vibrant.

"Okay. See ya at the eastern gate after school," Maki said brightly.

Their homeroom teacher, Coach Hara, arrived shortly after cleaning time looking tired. He spoke in an equally tired and slightly lazy tone. Hikaru had always been good at impersonating him.

"All right, I'm startin' homeroom now," Coach Hara drawled before sharing some news. "So, there was a dead body found over by Kubitachi this mornin'. They're sayin' there was no foul play involved, but the whole thing's causin' a stir. And, well, don't be too surprised if you see police cars around. All right, then."

The school bell rang—and though they shouldn't have sounded anything alike, the bell overlapped with the police sirens Yoshiki had heard earlier that morning.

The mountain path stretching out from the eastern gate was, as usual, filled with the incessant buzzing of cicadas. Since no one was saying anything, the noise seemed exceedingly loud.

"Ya scared, Yuu?"

The first person to break the silence was Asako.

"Huh? Not really. I ain't scared…" Yuuki did seem a little tense. "Not 'bout this, at least. But that stuff Hara was talkin' 'bout in homeroom before we left…"

She was about to say that was what was more concerning to her, but she cut herself off.

Maki, who was walking in front of everyone, turned back and said, "Pretty nasty way to go, right?" Then he quietly brought his hand to his mouth. "They say she stuffed her own hand down her throat, an' that's how she died."

"We don't know if that's true or not, though…," Yoshiki quickly added.

That morning, police cars had been out in front of a certain house in Kubitachi.

That house belonged to Old Lady Matsuura—the elderly woman who'd screamed "Nounuki" when she saw *Hikaru* the day before.

“That old lady’s been actin’ a little funny for a while now…,” said Yoshiki.

“Nothin’ we coulda done ’bout that,” *Hikaru* suddenly added. He didn’t even look at Yoshiki and said it as if it were the most natural thing in the world.

Yoshiki stared blankly at *Hikaru*’s back while Yuuki, behind him, spoke in a serious tone.

“But there were police cars in Kibogayama earlier. And there was a woman… She might’ve been the daughter of the old woman who died. I saw her break down crying. I feel bad for her.”

“There’s been an awful lot of scary things happenin’ in this village these days,” Asako murmured faintly. “It’s gettin’ ta be too much.”

Everyone naturally fell silent.

It was true that they had been hearing more and more “scary things,” as Asako put it—like how a police officer stationed in Kubitachi was injured while on their daily patrol, and how there had been a rash of traffic accidents around Kibogayama.

Each incident on its own could be dismissed as just “a bad thing that happened by chance,” but when you lined them all up like this, it started to feel eerie.

One bad thing after another kept happening, and each incident seemed to be getting more serious. This time, someone had died. The next bad thing could end up even worse.

Then, as if to shatter the heavy silence, Asako suddenly exclaimed, “Oh!” in her usual lively voice and pointed ahead. “That the forest path over there?”

Partway down the forest path lay a narrow pathway, appearing as if a hole had been opened in the guardrails. The path was covered in a dense tangle of trees, casting dark shadows that seemed to huddle together into a solid mass. There were also ominous signs that read POOR ROAD CONDITIONS and BEWARE OF FALLING ROCKS AND UNEVEN FOOTING, all of which were covered with dark green moss.

The sight of the forest path caused Yoshiki to blurt out, “Yeah… Guess that *is* creepy.”

It seemed like the air inside would smell rancid.

“Nnnh, it’s scary! Oh maaan! Let’s just get in there already! Don’t leave me behind, okay?! I might die, y’all! I might die!” Maki repeated over and over as he led the way to the forest path.

After entering, no one said a word—possibly because they were all slightly holding their breath.

And then they easily passed through.

Maki was the first to speak. “What?” he said. “…I guess…that went totally normal…”

“Nothin’ happened.”

The area beyond the dark path was so bright that Yoshiki couldn’t help but squint.

Next to him, Asako and Yuuki both remarked that they could look into the forest without issue and that it wasn’t scary at all. *Hikaru* yawned loudly. Even though it was late in the day, the temperature hadn’t dropped much, but the breeze was refreshingly cool for the time of year.

Yoshiki looked back the way they’d just come. From where he was standing, he saw golden sunlight flickering through the trees. It didn’t seem all that creepy.

“Thanks, y’all!” said Maki. “It was all in my head. Be careful on yer way back!”

Maki bowed deeply, even pressing his hands together in gratitude as Yoshiki and the others prepared to leave him and turn around. In the end, all they did was escort Maki on his way home in one big group.

“It’s a pain havin’ to get back through this forest path,” Yuuki grumbled.

“A real hassle is what it is!” Asako agreed.

“Ah, a bug bit me!”

“Least it’s cool in here.”

Yuuki and Asako were engaged in conversation, and Yoshiki fell behind. He glanced into the woods. The soles of his shoes scraped against the dirt and fallen leaves, making a damp, gritty sound.

The cicadas buzzed, and although the wind should have been rustling the leaves and branches of the trees, their sound was strangely absent.

Then, mixed among the deep, deep shadows that were like mud at the bottom of a river, he saw a white less-than sign.

“…What’s that doing there?” he said.

Without a doubt, it was a less-than sign—the type that you would use in a math equation. The symbol floated amid the gaps between the trees.



It was looking at Yoshiki.

Math symbols didn't have eyes, and yet, it was clearly staring at Yoshiki.

Among the trees, whose trunks glistened in the darkness as if covered in slime, the less-than sign writhed as if it were breathing. Then it swayed back and forth as if being swung like a billhook or machete, and something white trailed behind it.

That was when Yoshiki noticed on its end was a human face—an old woman's face. As soon as he realized that the thing trailing behind it was the old woman's white hair, he rushed to avert his eyes.

He could sense that it was getting closer to him as it wriggled its body, constantly swaying back and forth.

It made sounds, too. He could hear it violently swinging its neck along with the sound of the old woman's white hair fluttering as it trailed behind each swing.

Slowly but surely, the noises grew louder.

Yoshiki remembered reading about something similar online a while ago—an urban legend about the *Kunekune*, a white, wriggling figure that appeared in rice fields and by rivers.

Seeing it would make you go insane.

"Yoshiki."

Hikaru's voice called out to him. When Yoshiki looked up, *Hikaru* was staring at him calmly, as if to tell him that what he was experiencing was nothing to worry about.

"Ah, dang. Ya saw it, huh? Can't have ya doin' that. It's comin' for ya now."

Hikaru then moved his attention to a spot behind Yoshiki, who heard something swinging right next to his ear.

"Come here."

Hikaru's tone was gentle, but there was an odd forcefulness to it, like someone grabbing you by the collar.

In the moment that followed, there was a dry, popping sound, and *Hikaru* fell backward. Bright red droplets flew from the tip of his nose, grazing Yoshiki's bangs. The entire scene unfolded so slowly that Yoshiki could only stand with his mouth agape, unable to move.

"What?! What was that sound?!" Asako screamed. She grabbed Yuuki by the arm and ran as fast as she could toward the

exit of the forest path.

“Asa?! Huh? Wait! Where are ya going?” Yuuki repeatedly called out Asako’s name, and her voice quickly faded into the distance.

After coming to his senses, Yoshiki rushed over to *Hikaru*.

“Hey! C’mon! Hikaru!”

As Yoshiki lifted *Hikaru*, a stream of bright red blood ran from *Hikaru*’s nose down toward his lips. *Hikaru* roughly wiped it away with his palm.

“You all right?!” Yoshiki shouted.

“Ah. Just a nosebleed. Ya got a tissue on ya?” *Hikaru* asked, sniffing blood back into his nose.

He looked up at Yoshiki, who shook his head. *Hikaru* then got to his feet and held his nose, seemingly unbothered.

“What’d ya do…?” asked Yoshiki. “That was kinda…weird…”

“That thing tried to stick to ya, so I smashed it up and put it inside me.” *Hikaru* snorted and calmly began walking. “Ahh, I guess I sucked it up? Or slurped it up? Somethin’ like that… But it put up a fight and made my nose bleed.”

With blood smeared on his face and cheeks stained a vivid pink, *Hikaru* stared at Yoshiki, who was still frozen in place.

“Anyway, Yoshiki… Don’t look at anythin’ but me,” he said with a serious, pleading look in his eyes. “They follow you when you look at ’em. Those things’re lonely, y’know? The only thing you gotta look at is me. And the only thing that should stick to ya is me.”

Yoshiki was unresponsive, but *Hikaru* tugged roughly at the sleeve of his shirt, pulling him forward.

“Ya ain’t gonna get it! Just don’t look. If ya do look at somethin’, tell me.”

After *Hikaru* kept tugging at his sleeve, Yoshiki finally managed to say, “All right! Stop stretchin’ out my shirt.” His voice was hoarse, and he could barely speak.

“Oh! They’re back!” said Asako.

When the boys exited the forest path, they found Asako and Yuuki waiting in the sunlight.

“Sorry for runnin’ off and leavin’ you two behind—” Asako started to apologize, but when she saw *Hikaru*’s face, her eyes opened wide with shock. “Huh?! Yer bleedin’!”

“I just tripped along the way,” *Hikaru* answered nonchalantly while making a peace sign with his blood-stained fingers. “I heard some kinda loud *pop*, though…”

“Maybe a scare cannon misfired? But nothin’ really happened.”

Asako glanced back toward the forest path, scrunching her face up into a look of suspicion before dropping her shoulders with an, “Is that so…?”

“Yer not hurt, either, Yoshiki?” Yuuki asked, wiping the sweat from her forehead.

Yoshiki told her he was fine, and as he answered, he felt *Hikaru*’s gaze on him, burning the back of his neck with an intensity much greater than that of the light from the setting sun.

*

Hikaru took a direct hit to the face from one of Asako’s powerful spikes during fifth-period gym.

“I seriously suck at all ball sports ’cept for soccer…,” he grumbled.

Seated on a round stool in the nurse’s office and holding a tissue to his nose, *Hikaru* slumped his shoulders in disappointment. Yoshiki sat down with him.

“Asako’s still servin’ up some mean kills with the ball,” *Hikaru* said. “That thing warped space-time itself—like the space around it was all squashed up.”

Asako had apologized to *Hikaru* over and over after he collapsed, but the sharp, heavy *whump* sound that echoed through the gym was something Yoshiki wouldn’t forget anytime soon.

“Ya got pretty scraped up there…,” he noted.

Hikaru’s right arm was bright red from his elbow to his wrist, almost as if he’d been burned, and spots of blood seeped out in places around his forearm. *Hikaru*’s gym clothes, embroidered with his surname *Indou*, were similarly stained from his bleeding nose.

“Oh, for real?” *Hikaru* said to Yoshiki.

“It doesn’t hurt?”

“Is it…s’posed to? I hardly feel any pain at all.”

Hikaru suddenly came out with that statement, taking advantage of the fact that there was no one else in the nurse’s office. Yoshiki felt a chill run through him, as if his heart was in a vise.

“Then you ain’t no perfect copy at all, are ya?” Yoshiki blurted out while applying a large bandage to *Hikaru*’s scrape.

He had become frustratingly aware of the fact that *Hikaru* wasn’t human, but he was still surprised to learn that the boy didn’t even feel pain.

“Huh?” *Hikaru* tilted his head in confusion, a tissue still stuffed in his nostril.

Yoshiki averted his gaze. “…But yer nose sure does bleed a bunch.”

“Oh, yeah. Back at the forest path…”

The loud *pop* and the sight of *Hikaru* falling back with blood spraying from his nose came back to Yoshiki’s mind. The memory was all too vivid, causing his throat to tighten and making it hard for him to breathe.

“What happened back there? I still don’t get it.”

“I told you already. I put it inside…”

Hikaru trailed off, seeming uncomfortable as he adjusted the tissues stuffed in his nostril.

Then he suddenly looked up with a smile on his face.

“Oh, I know,” he said as if he’d thought of a new game for them to play. “I’ll show ya what’s inside me!”

Yoshiki couldn’t really give him a yes or no, and he couldn’t even tell if *Hikaru* was being serious. But before he could respond, the school nurse returned. She was a down-to-earth and friendly middle-aged woman who smiled at *Hikaru*.

“How are you feeling? Did your nose stop bleeding?” she asked.

Hikaru’s nosebleed had mostly stopped. When they returned to their classroom in time for the ringing of the bell that signaled the end of fifth period, Asako apologized profusely with her hands pressed together to plead for forgiveness.

“Sorry! Are ya okay? I’m super sorryyy!”

Hikaru laughed. “That was a powerful spike…”

His voice was slightly muffled because of the tissue still stuffed in his nose. Yoshiki couldn't bring himself to ask *Hikaru* what he had meant earlier.

However, after school, *Hikaru* led Yoshiki to the gym and, with an air of perfect innocence, opened the heavy doors to the storage room. He then grabbed Yoshiki's arm with his bandaged right hand and pulled him inside.

"This situation…feels kinda pervy, huh?" said *Hikaru*.

As *Hikaru* unbuttoned his short-sleeved shirt, one button after another, he kept his eyes trained on the door of the storage room.

He and Yoshiki could hear the basketball and volleyball teams practicing in the gym—the high-pitched squeaks of shoes scraping against the gym floor, the sound of a whistle, people calling out to each other, balls hitting the floor, and laughter. It was all so busy and noisy.

The storage room was quiet, and the air was stuffy. There was a musty smell—a mix of mildew, dust, and sweat; the basket stuffed with basketballs; the scoreboard; the vaulting boxes. The same stale odor hung throughout the room and on every object within.

Yoshiki was sitting down on a pile of folded-up gym mats and had his face turned away from *Hikaru*. Small flecks of dust floating throughout the storage room shined gold from the light of the window.

"Man, what the heck? I don't know what's goin' on," Yoshiki said.

He furrowed his brows and exhaled through his nose, sending the dust particles drifting toward *Hikaru*. Yoshiki followed their path with his eyes and was left speechless.

"…What the hell is *that*?"

With *Hikaru*'s shirt fully unbuttoned, Yoshiki could see that there was a thin slit running from *Hikaru*'s chest down to his stomach. His skin was split open as if someone had tried to rip him in half vertically, but not a drop of blood was flowing out.

There was only a gaping black opening.

"Why don'cha try stickin' yer hand in?"

Wearing a slight smirk, *Hikaru* grabbed Yoshiki's arm. Before Yoshiki could even utter a surprised "Huh?," *Hikaru* guided his hand toward the black opening.

Yoshiki's left hand was easily swallowed up by the paper-thin slit running down *Hikaru*'s torso. He felt a sensation like his fingertips were being licked by a moist tongue, and a muted scream came up from the back of his throat.

"Wagh…?!"

Yoshiki instinctively wanted to pull his hand out, but something inside *Hikaru* wouldn't allow it. He felt each finger on his hand being gently squeezed—similar to how it felt putting your feet into a flooded rice paddy. It was almost as if he was being slowly dragged in and being robbed of air.

"Feels…real weird," he muttered.

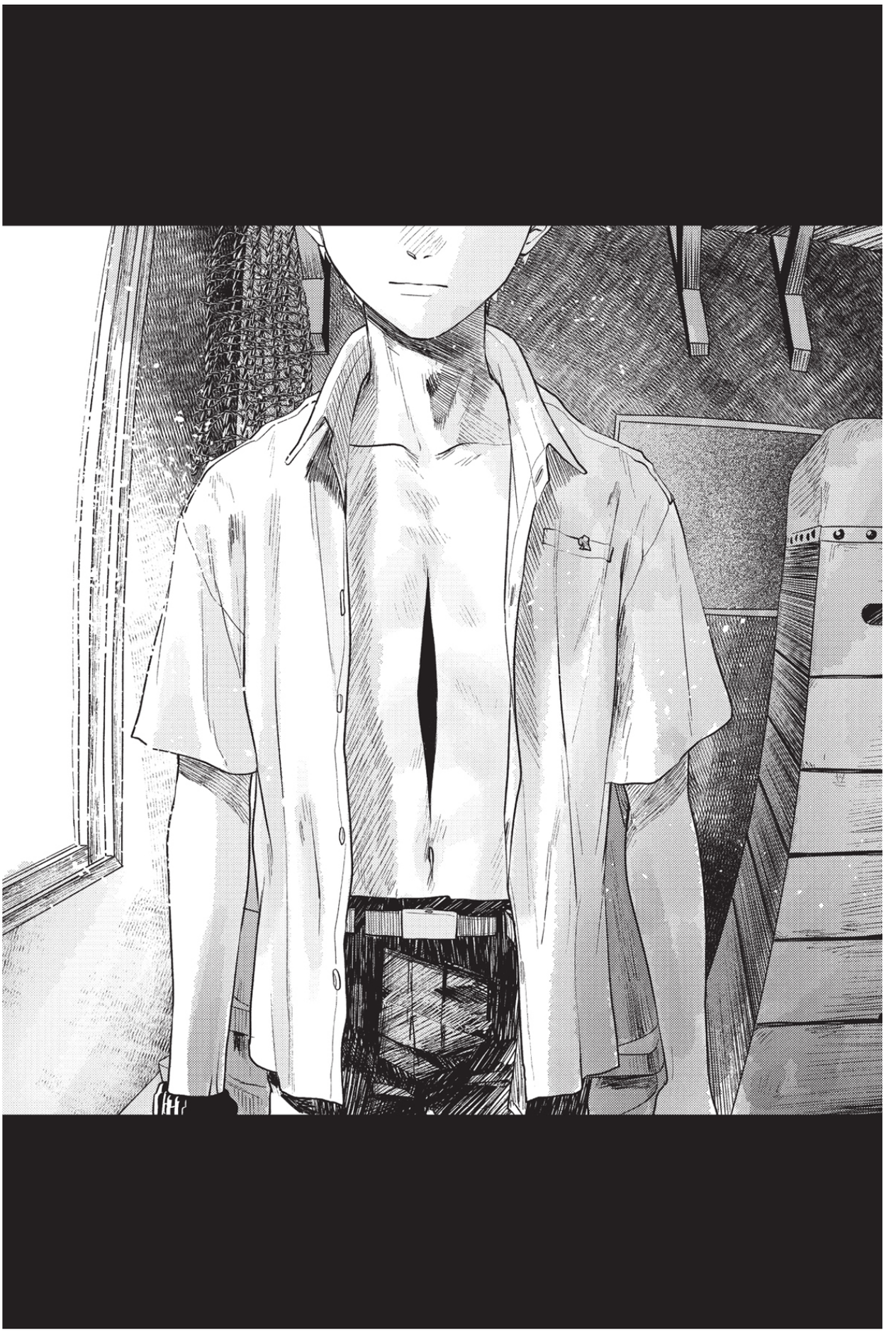
But that wasn't all.

Yoshiki could sense something seeping into him. *Hikaru*'s insides were squirming and writhing as they examined Yoshiki.

It was cold and showed no signs of life, but it was moving. It felt so slimy that Yoshiki could almost hear the squelch. His shoulders tensed.

"Like what?" *Hikaru* asked.

Yoshiki noticed that his own neck was covered in goosebumps. A cold sweat trickled down his nape.



“…It’s like raw chicken covered in marinade,” he managed.

Yoshiki tried to keep himself calm, clenched his teeth, and toughed it out. When he inhaled, the back of his throat wheezed.

“It’s cool inside,” he said.

“Yer…kinda warm.”

Hikaru chuckled softly and looked down at the spot where his body and Yoshiki were connected.

“Feels nice. Been a while since I’ve felt somethin’ alive inside me.”

Has he done this with someone else before? Yoshiki wondered. *Or has he experienced absorbing other “living things” into his body in some other way?*

That would mean—

“Hey,” *Hikaru* said, smiling. “Try bringin’ yer hand up more.”

Yoshiki did as he was instructed and moved his left hand. It passed through something that wasn’t quite like chicken meat or the mud at the bottom of a rice paddy—it was something similar yet far more sinister.

The slit in *Hikaru*’s body then began to widen, easily spreading apart with a sound like what you would hear when opening a tear strip on a package. In an instant, the slit lengthened, opening up from *Hikaru*’s collar bone to his neck and then his chin.

Hikaru watched the whole thing with a smile. His cheeks were flushed, and the breath that poured out of his mouth was unexpectedly damp.

Then he quietly took hold of Yoshiki’s shoulders.

“Ahhn,” *Hikaru* breathed. “Feels good right there.”

Hikaru’s back shuddered; his hands felt warm on Yoshiki. *Hikaru*’s insides were so cold, yet his palms were perfectly warm.

Hikaru’s collarbone felt hard as it brushed against Yoshiki’s brow, and his breath, naturally, felt damp against the crown of Yoshiki’s head.

Did he notice that my breathing was shaky? Yoshiki thought.

“This feels good to ya?” he asked.

“It’s the same as someone pattin’ yer head. I’ve never been touched there before…”

Hikaru trailed off, and Yoshiki could faintly hear him swallow.

Suddenly, Yoshiki wanted to pull his arm out. As if sensing his desire to do so, *Hikaru*'s insides gripped tightly around him—trying to drag him in deeper.

"I'm bein' pulled in…!"

Now Yoshiki screamed and yanked his left hand out of *Hikaru*. The slit released Yoshiki with ease and closed up with the smoothness of an automatic door shutting.

"That scare ya?" *Hikaru* asked.

Yoshiki's throat trembled, and he continued to take deep breaths. *Hikaru* was clutching his stomach and laughing hysterically.

"Shit," Yoshiki sputtered, and he wiped his left hand on his shirt.

But there was nothing on his hand. Not blood or any other bodily fluids—nothing from inside *Hikaru* had stuck to him.

And yet, the cold, raw sensation of *Hikaru*'s insides lingered on his fingertips, his palm, the back of his hand, and his wrist.

"C'mon! It ain't dirty or anythin'," *Hikaru* said while grinning and playfully nudging Yoshiki's shoulder as if Yoshiki had offended him.

The slit was gone, and the skin on *Hikaru*'s body was now like the real Hikaru's bare body, just as nature intended.

"What? My shirt?" *Hikaru* lifted his head playfully and flung his shirt wide open, saying, "I'll give ya a show that'll get yer nose bleedin'!"

They heard a piercing whistle from the gym, and everything suddenly became quiet. Perhaps someone had made a bad foul.

Yoshiki kept his face turned away from *Hikaru*'s exposed skin, and his ears burned in the stillness.

"Wait. What's wrong…?"

The silence was so heavy that *Hikaru*'s voice wavered.

Hikaru extended his hand, and Yoshiki swiftly slapped it away. The *crack* it made echoed throughout the noiseless storage room and transformed into the sound of *Hikaru*'s confused laughter.

"Aha. So ya don't like that…"

Yoshiki's left hand—the hand that had rejected *Hikaru*—was hot. It wasn't just pain that he felt; his hand burned with a sharp heat that seemed like it might blister his skin.

Perhaps to shake off the feeling, Yoshiki mussed *Hikaru*'s hair roughly, as if he was petting a large dog. *Hikaru* let out a "Whoa!" and seemed to enjoy this treatment.

"Hurry n' get yer clothes back on. You some kinda barbarian or somethin'?" Yoshiki said.

"Ah-ha-ha! Yeah, guess I oughtta do that."

Hikaru nodded like a dog wagging its tail, which made Yoshiki chuckle in spite of himself. His laughter came naturally, like rainwater soaking into parched soil.

"Heh. Ha-ha!"

But Yoshiki still couldn't bring himself to look at *Hikaru*'s face. He felt that if he did, his smile would vanish in an instant.

Because he's Hikaru*. Not Hikaru, but* Hikaru*.*

But his face was Hikaru's. He was undeniably Hikaru.

*

Almost as soon as Yoshiki's mother asked him to go food shopping, his younger sister Kaoru texted him asking him to "get super-spicy wasabi mustard."

So, after tossing a bottle of mayonnaise that his mother had forgotten to buy into a basket emblazoned with Nozomi Supermarket's logo, Yoshiki headed to the condiments section to look for said wasabi mustard.

It was just a really spicy brand, but Kaoru liked it. Despite being a middle schooler, her palate was that of an old man's. Yoshiki thought the stuff was way too spicy to be any good.

He remembered a time a while ago when he had come to Nozomi with Hikaru and bought some super-spicy wasabi mustard. Back then, as Hikaru hummed along to the cheery supermarket jingle, Hikaru commented how "Kaoru sure does eat a lotta nasty tastin' stuff like that."

Earlier that day, they had parted ways right after school because Yoshiki had errands to run, but Yoshiki wondered if *Hikaru* would have said the same thing he said back then if he were with Yoshiki now.

The sensation of "raw chicken covered in marinade" still lingered on Yoshiki's left hand, and he tried ridding himself of it

by clenching and unclenching his fist.

He put the super-spicy wasabi mustard in his basket, and while he was at it, he grabbed the seven-spice simmered enoki mushrooms that Kaoru liked. Then he set down his basket at an open register.

A middle-aged female clerk wearing glasses slowly looked up at Yoshiki and said, “Hmm?”

As soon as Yoshiki saw her face, he thought, *Oh no.*

“Well, if it ain’t the Tsujinakas’ boy!”

She seemed to take a deep breath, but then she let out a ridiculously loud and penetrating laugh.

This was the wife of Nishidaya’s shopkeeper. She often gave Yoshiki free vegetables. She had a round mole next to her similarly round, dumpling-like nose.

“Oh. Hi…,” Yoshiki managed.

But of course, she wasn’t going to let things end there. As she scanned each item at the register, the shopkeeper’s wife flapped her gums nonstop like a fan that was stuck spinning.

“Is yer little sister doin’ all right? Well, I heard she ain’t been goin’ to school none too often, but…the Yamazakis are worried ’bout her, too. People’re sayin’ somethin’ about her not bein’ able to wake up in the mornin’ an’ such, but y’know, everyone has trouble getting’ goin’ in the mornin’, right? Kaoru’s in her first year of middle school, ain’t she? Ya can’t be soft on her. No, sirree. Ah, well, yer mother is from Tokyo, after all. I guess she got that city schoolin’, too, huh…? Speakin’ of, yer mother and father were fightin’ before, weren’t they? Everyone’s worried since they were arguin’ so late into the night, y’know? Must be a lot for ya, huh, Yoshiki? I’m here for ya if ya don’t know what to do, y’hear? Oh, that reminds me—ya workin’ hard in photo club? My son was in track and field back in the day and got second place at one of his meets. Okay, then. That’ll be seven hundred yen.”

She tapped away at the register and then pointed to the total on display.

“Ah, right,” Yoshiki muttered so faintly it was laughable and handed over a thousand-yen bill.

“Here’s yer change!”

The hand that placed the three hundred yen into Yoshiki’s palm was firm. Her grip was so annoyingly strong that he almost

wanted to fling the change away.

"Oh, and Yoshiki, ya oughtta cut yer bangs."

Yoshiki left Nozomi feeling completely drained. The crows cawed restlessly—perhaps because the sun was setting.

"I hate this," he mumbled to himself while unlocking his bike in the empty parking lot. Just as he reached for the handlebars, someone suddenly grabbed his hand.

"Don't. Don't do it."

It was a middle-aged woman holding a plastic grocery bag from Nozomi. She was glaring at Yoshiki with an intensely serious expression.

She had a plain look—a T-shirt and sweatpants, her hair pulled back into a low ponytail. It made her seem like someone you might see at Nozomi or the neighboring drugstore on any given day, but the one thing different about her was her eyes. Her gaze was tense—as if she was standing in front of an extremely sinister individual.

"Huh?" Yoshiki blurted out.

He tried to back away, but the woman's grip tightened, preventing him from escaping.

"Young man, ya need to stop right this instant."

"Uh, umm…"

She must think I'm stealin' this bike. Yoshiki attempted to explain the situation, but the woman shook her head.

"Oh, I'm not talkin' about yer bike," she said. "I know you must be wonderin' what this random housewife is goin' on about, but you're close to somethin' incredibly dangerous… Don't tell me ya can't sense that."

Her gaze, fixed on Yoshiki, was so piercing that he almost nodded involuntarily.

Ah, that's right. I'm definitely close to "somethin' incredibly dangerous." And I even touched its insides today.

He knew that, if *Hikaru* had wanted to, he could've swallowed Yoshiki whole back then.

"Ya gotta get away right this instant," the woman insisted. "If ya keep this up, you'll *mix*…"

As dusk approached in the bicycle parking lot, the random housewife clearly warned Yoshiki that he would "mix." The

ghastly look on her face as she said it caused Yoshiki's left hand—the hand that wasn't in her grasp—to tremble.

And from his fingertips, he could feel the sensation of being inside *Hikaru* creeping up again.

*

"Hikaru's in the back sleepin' like there's no tomorrow."

Just as Hikaru's mother had said, *Hikaru* was indeed fast asleep in the Indous' cluttered living room with a fan running at full blast.

Light from the bright afternoon sun streamed in from the veranda.

The room had no air conditioner and was stiflingly hot. Even the breeze from the fan felt heavy.

Yoshiki came upon *Hikaru* sprawled out with his belly exposed and breathing loudly in his sleep. As soon as Yoshiki realized he was staring at *Hikaru*, he panicked, quickly removing his cap and sitting down on a cushion. A thin stream of sweat trickled down his temple.

"You just gonna sit there and stare at me? Yer not gonna wake me up?" *Hikaru* said.

Hikaru's leg shot out and kicked Yoshiki's arm, making an audible *thump* upon contact.

Ah, so he did notice.

Yoshiki was half-ignoring *Hikaru*, who kept nudging Yoshiki with his foot until *Hikaru* appeared to grow impatient and pulled a wrestling move on Yoshiki. He pinned Yoshiki down for a while, and once he seemed satisfied, he stood up.

"Hooray! I won! I won!" *Hikaru* cheered. "Didja bring somethin' when ya got here earlier?"

What the heck?! Was he awake that whole time?

Yoshiki remained face down on the floor, and instead of snapping back with a retort, he replied, "Got a watermelon from one of my relatives. They were sharin' their extra."

"Huh? A watermelon?! My favorite! I'm the best in the world at eatin' those things!"

"I know."

“I can eat it like they do in manga. And maybe I’ll spit out the seeds like a machine gun, too!”

I know that, too.

When was it again? Feels like it was back when we first started grade school. We were eatin’ watermelon on the veranda in front of this same room.

Hikaru was holding a big slice of watermelon in both hands and insisted that he would eat it “manga-style.”

“Hey, Yoshiki. Check it out!”

Hikaru had opened his mouth wide and chomped right into the watermelon, and without even pausing to take a breath, he crunched away, spewing seeds and juice onto Yoshiki.

“Ugh! Gross!” Yoshiki had protested.

Hikaru looked down at the half-eaten watermelon still in his hands. *“I swallowed some seeds…”*

As he said that, the wind chime hanging from the eaves jingled.

“I heard my daddy’s friend ate some watermelon seeds and turned into a watermelon man with stripes all over his body,” Hikaru added.

“Uh…then what happened?” Yoshiki asked.

“He died.”

“…I swallowed some, too.”

The cicadas were buzzing on that day as well. I remember us saying, “Guess we’re gonna die…” and crying as we kept on eating the watermelon. We thought that if we were gonna die, we oughtta at least spend our final moments eatin’ watermelon to our hearts’ content.

When Hikaru’s father saw us like that, he’d laughed and said, “Why y’all cryin’?”

He died a few years after that—when Hikaru was in the fifth grade.

Hikaru’s dad used to work at the Matsushima Sawmill in the village, and he was a shiitake farmer, too. I heard he had an accident on the job at the sawmill, but I dunno what actually happened.

…Come to think of it, Hikaru’s dad had been to those mountains before. He’d been to the same mountain where Hikaru

had gone missing and came back as Hikaru*. No one usually went there 'cause it was off-limits.*

I think it was during the same time of year when Hikaru disappeared…at the end of January.

"Hey, Yoshiki!" came a voice that was identical to Hikaru's.

Yoshiki snapped back to reality.

Hikaru was sitting across from him with two slices of watermelon on a tray.

"You wanna eat some watermelon? Mama cut slices for us. Sure is a nice melon. Huge, ain't it?"

The flesh of the fruit was a vibrant red. Just from its color, you could tell that it was bursting with juice and sweetness.

"So, you actually *know* the taste of watermelon?" Yoshiki asked.

"Yeah, I've eaten it 'bout ten times already. I upgraded the way I eat 'em, too!"

Hikaru chuckled softly and lifted a slice of watermelon. He then opened his mouth wide, and the next thing Yoshiki knew, *Hikaru* devoured the entire slice in just a few bites, practically inhaling the whole thing. He ate with such speed that some of the juice had splattered onto the tip of Yoshiki's nose.

Then *Hikaru* puffed out his chest and said, his mouth full of watermelon, "Mow mmbt maht?!"

For a moment, Yoshiki couldn't help but wonder if what he'd just witnessed was humanly possible or if it was beyond human.

"Ew…," said Yoshiki. "Wait, no. Maybe it was kinda awesome."

Hikaru gulped down the watermelon that was stuffed in his mouth. "Ahhh, swallowed the seeds. Guess I'm gonna turn into a watermelon man now," he added with a shrug. "Man, I'm bored. Wanna play some *Smash*?"

"…Naw. I'm good. Don't really feel like it."



“Really? Well, all right.”

Then, with a big yawn, *Hikaru* laid down exactly where he was. Yoshiki could hear the jingling of the wind chime hanging from the eaves. He covered his face with both hands.

I know. I know just how abnormal—how dangerous—this peaceful time is. I can’t go on acting like this is normal.

Because Hikaru died a long time ago.

“Y’know…,” *Hikaru* began.

Through the gaps between his fingers, Yoshiki could see *Hikaru* shifting his body slightly.

“…I’m really enjoyin’ myself. Just bein’ with ya is enough for me. Thanks for the watermelon, too.”

“The heck? Why’re ya comin’ out with that all of a sudden…?”

“Well, I’m not gonna lie to ya. I don’t know. I guess I just feel like I wanna be up front and tell ya that stuff.”

“It’d be great if I could do the same,” Yoshiki said under his breath.

But that regret, which had finally found its way out of his throat, was truly pointless now. It was too late.

When he looked up, his eyes fell on some items displayed in the small alcove above the room’s sliding door. There was a photo of Hikaru’s great-grandparents, an award certificate someone had received, and a group photo of the forestry union.

Next to those was a photo of Hikaru and Yoshiki from their elementary school graduation ceremony.

Every time Yoshiki came into this room, he would see that photo of the two of them making silly faces while holding their diploma tubes and think, *What’s with those faces?* and *What a bunch of goofs we were.*

In this small village called Kubitachi, Hikaru Indou was the only kid close to Yoshiki’s age, so they had always been together.

Even though you’re dead now. Even though the Hikaru from that picture is gone now. I’m still here, living my life comfortably, eating watermelon with someone who looks just like you but isn’t, and listening to the same wind chime we heard back then.

He knew that he couldn’t be forgiven.

Yoshiki fumbled around in his pants pocket and pulled out his smartphone. When he opened his messages, the name of the

person he had just exchanged contact info with appeared at the top of his screen.

Rie Kurebayashi.

That was the name of the "random housewife" who had approached Yoshiki at Nozomi Supermarket.

"If you keep this up, you'll mix*."*

The red shadows typical of dusk had fallen across Kurebayashi's face as she gave Yoshiki that warning.

" M-mix…? What do ya mean…?" he stammered.

"It's hard to explain… You won't be human anymore if you get too mixed in with somethin' from the other side."

Yoshiki had struggled to form a response, to which Kurebayashi shook her head and said, *"Oh, don't be scared! I really am just a housewife who happened to be passin' by! It's just that I can see more than the average person."*

She must have thought that Yoshiki found her suspicious, so she added, *"I ain't lyin',"* and heaved a big sigh. *"Ya know the mountains over in Kubitachi? The area that's off-limits? Well, for as long as I can remember, I got this no-good feelin' from that place. I just knew there was somethin' real bad out there."*

The mountains that're off-limits in Kubitachi—she means the place where Hikaru went missing.

"It's just…recently, that no-good feelin' just up an' disappeared all of a sudden. It had me in a right state wonderin' where it went off to. I didn't know what was goin' on."

Kurebayashi's eyes, which had been fixed on Kubitachi, slowly shifted back to Yoshiki.

"But it's come to be by yer side, hasn't it?"

The way she had her gaze trained on Yoshiki made it hard for him to breathe. It took him a fair amount of time and effort before he finally managed to say, *"…How…? Do you know somethin'…?"*

"I don't. But I do know that things won't go well for ya if ya keep doin' what yer doin'."

Kurebayashi then put her hand on her chest and took a deep breath. When she exhaled, her breath was tense and shaky.

"I'm serious. I've never seen somethin' like this before…but you have yer reasons, don't you?" she said before taking out her phone. *"If you'd like to talk about it, contact me."*

And as instructed, Yoshiki had exchanged his contact information with her.

Hey

That was the message Yoshiki sent to Kurebayashi. It was as if the sound of the wind chime had urged him to do it.

He didn't know what to do next. His finger hovered over the keyboard, unable to move.

"Hey, Yoshikiiiii! I got somethin' I'd like ya to bring to yer mama…," Hikaru's mother called out from the kitchen.

Yoshiki was relieved; that gave him an excuse to stop what he was doing, although he thought it was cowardly of him. He placed his phone on the table.

"Yes, ma'am," Yoshiki replied toward the hallway.

Then he left the living room where the fan continued to spin at full power.

2

"Hikaru, if ya really like someone, ya gotta marry 'em quick like."

His father had given him that advice when he was little.

He couldn't remember exactly how old he was in that memory, but his dad had a sparkler in his hand, and so did Hikaru—the kind that spat orange sparks.

"I'll just get married like normal. What'll happen if I don't?" Hikaru asked.

"Unuki will take 'em into the mountains."

That's exactly what his father had said. Until a moment before, the man had been watching his sparkler with a serene look on his face, but now his brows had furrowed into an expression of sadness.

"It's an Indou family rule. If you got yourself a lover, you gotta hurry an' marry 'em. It promised not to lay a hand on our family members, so they'll be safe as long as ya take 'em as your bride."

"Why does it take them away?"

"It's lonely, so instead of takin' one of our family members, it takes the person we cherish most."

Like the setting sun, the embers from his father's sparkler dropped, leaving a dark blotch on the ground.

Hikaru's sparkler still burned energetically, as if it was singing.

"Just an ol' wives' tale, though! That one girl that dumped yer old man—and a whole buncha others before her—are all alive an' well…"

The tail end of the man's words, spoken with a laugh, overlapped with his burnt-out sparkler. Deep down, Hikaru questioned if it really was just an "ol' wives' tale," but just as he was about to ask, everything went dark.

His own sparkler had already gone out.

That was Hikaru Indou's memory, not his own.

But even if I won't be takin' you, I can always be with you now.

That's what *Hikaru* thought whenever he dug up this memory.

I'll just have to be careful not to let anyone else take you.

Ping! The sound of a notification woke *Hikaru* up. He tried to go back to sleep, but the wind chime kept him awake.

He got up while rubbing his cheek, which held an imprint of the tatami floor. Then he noticed Yoshiki's smartphone had been left on the table.

He saw that there was a message from someone he'd never heard of before—someone named "Rie Kurebayashi"—and stopped yawning.

Feel like talking now?

It was a brief question addressed to Yoshiki.

"…Who's…this?"

CHAPTER 3
I Can’t Help but Find Him Endearing

1

Their meeting place was the bicycle parking lot at Nozomi Supermarket in Kibogayama Town.

“Goodness! I’m so sorry for gettin’ here a little late…,” said Kurebayashi.

Even though she was wearing a neck cooler, Kurebayashi was drenched in sweat. Her T-shirt had “Dance Club Life” printed on it—perhaps it was an old shirt from one of her children’s afterschool clubs.

“It’s hot out, so why don’t we find somewhere we can sit inside and get a bite? Would America be all right with ya?”

Yoshiki wondered why all middle-aged women seemed to have such loud voices. It wasn’t just that they were loud, either—it was that they appeared to push out a lot of air with each word. As if being pushed along by such a force, Yoshiki followed Kurebayashi.

A few minutes’ walk from Nozomi was a restaurant named “America.” It looked like a casual diner, but it was (probably) not a chain, and despite its moniker, neither the menu nor its interior had much of an American vibe.

Still, there was a supermarket and a drugstore clustered in this area of Kibogayama, meaning there was a high chance of running into someone you knew if you weren’t careful. Even after being seated in a spacious booth, Yoshiki couldn’t bring himself to remove his baseball cap.

“Oh my, my, my! They have a new jumbo parfait! Order whatever you like, Tsujinaka. Do ya like sweets?”

“Um…,” Yoshiki began, cutting through Kurebayashi’s cheerful, lively voice as if taking a scalpel to it.

This caused Kurebayashi, who had been looking at the menu, to close her mouth. Her boisterous mood suddenly disappeared, almost as if the whole thing had been a farce.

“So what happened? Can ya tell me?” she asked him.

Yoshiki wondered where he should even start and worried that, no matter how much he explained, he might not be able to convey the crucial parts of his story. He had spent a long time in bed the previous night thinking about these things.

He talked about his childhood friend, about how that friend went missing in the off-limits area on Nisayama at the end of January, and about everything that had happened since his friend had returned.

Kurebayashi listened in silence to everything Yoshiki had to say. She occasionally nodded to let him know she was engaged, but she did not interrupt him.

When Yoshiki finally finished, she smiled.

“Thank you,” she said. “Yer really tryin’, huh?”

At some point, Yoshiki had hung his head deeply. He could feel his nose running, so he hurriedly wiped it with the back of his hand.

“Why…do ya say that?” he asked.

He realized he must have been looking at Kurebayashi with such desperation.

“Yer really tryin’, but…” With her gaze still fixed on Yoshiki, Kurebayashi slowly but clearly shook her head. “Ya shouldn’t be feelin’ like ya deserve to be punished. Ya gotta keep it together.”

Kurebayashi’s firmer tone made Yoshiki catch his breath.

“Beatin’ yerself up ’bout all this only serves to ease the guilt you put on yerself. The dead don’t care a lick. Fact of the matter is, we’re the ones who’re desperately clingin’ on to the dead.”

“We.” I’m pretty sure she said “we” just now.

Unsure if she realized her little slip of the tongue, Yoshiki suddenly raised his head, and Kurebayashi laughed out loud.

“Sorry,” she told him. “Just forget about all that! Brought the mood down more than I needed to there.”

Kurebayashi continued to laugh, and Yoshiki couldn’t bring himself to ask her what she meant when she said “we”—

especially after she shifted the tone of her voice, lowering it to at least half volume.

"I'll get to the point," she began. "Have you noticed things've started gettin' strange around the town an' village? There's some sorta distortion that's formed all throughout this area, and there's been an uptick in suspicious incidents, too. Things that shouldn't be are showin' up. The town and village are slowly startin' to get all screwy."

Kurebayashi paused for a moment and then trained her eyes on Yoshiki.

"I think…whatever 'it' is that's become yer friend is havin' an effect on things."

"'It'…?"

"It feels like…a huge mass of something… Like Hell itself… As soon as I felt its presence disappear from the mountains, the distortion in this area suddenly grew larger. This is just a guess, but it might've been keepin' the distortion contained in the mountains all that time. That's how huge that thing is."

The way she spoke was so abstract, but strangely enough, it didn't bother Yoshiki.

I know what you're talking about. Whether I want to or not, I know.

A huge mass of something. Hell itself. He could feel a similar sensation lingering on his eyelids, nose, and skin.

"There's that unnatural death that happened recently in Kubitachi to consider as well," said Kurebayashi. "There's somethin' terribly eerie about that, too… I feel like it's related."

Yeah, it's related. No doubt about that.

"To be honest, it's all so scary it makes me wanna leave this town. But my mother-in-law and daughter are here. My oldest—my son—left this place long ago, though. And my husband…"

It seemed like she had more to say, but she stopped there. Then Yoshiki felt confident enough to speak.

"Um… So, before, you said 'we'…," he ventured.

"…My late husband. He came back once, a long time ago."

Kurebayashi smiled as she stared at her hands on the table. Her eyes were calm, as if she were recalling something very dear from her past. Yet deep within those eyes stirred a cold and brooding vortex of emotions.

“But it didn’t work out. In the end, he left my son with a scar on his body that will never heal for the rest of his life. It didn’t matter what he was. I just wanted to be with him again.”

Even though the restaurant had the air conditioning on, Yoshiki could feel the sticky heat of the blazing hot sun on his cheeks. It made him think of the sign at Yamahisa that read “Frusty-cold ice cream avail.”

Yoshiki realized that when *Hikaru*’s ominous “insides” had been oozing down half his face, Yoshiki had felt the same way Kurebayashi had—it didn’t matter what *Hikaru* was. Yoshiki just wanted to be with him again.

“Some part of you must know it, too. That you can’t keep bein’ with yer friend like this,” Kurebayashi said.

Yeah. I know, but…what exactly am I supposed to do about it…?

“Before, you said that I’ll ‘mix,’ but what exactly did you mean by that?” Yoshiki asked.

“While yer still alive, yer insides will get closer to whatever that thing is. It’s like ya become a part of it, and you’ll never be able to be separated. And who knows what will happen then?” she said. “Also, it might attract things from the other side toward ya more easily.”

Based on the expression on Kurebayashi’s face as she pressed her fingers to her temples and furrowed her brow, she didn’t appear to be exaggerating just to scare Yoshiki.

“Mix.”

“Get closer to whatever that thing is.”

“Become a part of it.”

Each time he repeated her words in his mind, Yoshiki’s left arm—the one that had been connected to *Hikaru*—tensed.

“I’m sorry,” Kurebayashi told him. “I don’t want ya endin’ up like me. And…I figured ya oughtta know so ya can move forward.”

Raindrops began to patter against the window. The sound grew louder until it turned into a downpour that seemed like it could wash the town away. Then a server arrived with the giant parfait Kurebayashi had ordered.

*

The rain that started on Sunday hadn't stopped by the next day. The classroom was sweltering even after everyone had left. A massive puddle had formed on the school's sports field, and every inch of Kibogayama town looked hazy. At the foot of the mountain near the high school was a church; usually, the cross atop the church steeple stood out more clearly, too.

Yoshiki sat alone in the empty classroom, staring at the scenery he'd grown tired of seeing. He wasn't sure how much time had passed before he heard footsteps approaching from the hallway. There were the squeaks of indoor shoes scraping against the linoleum in light, short strides—sounds that didn't belong to *Hikaru*.

"Huh? Yer still here?" said Yuuki. She slid the classroom door open and looked confused. "There's a faculty meetin' this afternoon, so everyone can go home early… Ya didn't know?"

"I forgot somethin' here," Yoshiki told her. "I'll leave as soon as I find it."

He remained seated at his desk, not giving any indication that he was searching for anything. This caused Yuuki to appear even more puzzled, but she didn't press the issue.

"Hikaru's been lookin' for ya," she said.

"If you see him, tell him ta go home without me."

The door rattled as it closed, and Yuuki's footsteps faded into the distance. Yoshiki dropped his head down onto his desk, making a *thud* as his forehead hit the wood.

The cold surface clung to his brow, and he remembered *Hikaru*'s voice, whispering, "I don't want to kill you," as he held Yoshiki.

He thought of *Hikaru* with his indescribably colored insides gushing out on the bench in front of Yamahisa.

Hikaru had said he didn't *want* to kill Yoshiki—but that meant he *could*.

That Nounuki that Old Lady Matsuura mentioned. Somethin' trapped in the mountains. Distortions.

"You can't keep bein' with yer friend like this."

"I don't want ya endin' up like me."

"So ya can move forward."

Yoshiki wondered what Kurebayashi meant by "so ya can move forward." He already knew the answer, but he still had to

ask himself.

A Hikaru *that isn't Hikaru. A* Hikaru *that isn't human. I should stay away from him. We shouldn't be involved with each other anymore.*

It should have been a simple thing to do, but just thinking about it caused a dull pain to course through the pit of Yoshiki's stomach.

"Hikaru."

Yoshiki found himself muttering that word almost unconsciously, as if he was squeezing it out.

"Just what the hell are you…?"

A moment later, the classroom door clattered loudly open.

"Ah! There ya are!" came a voice.

The sound of hurried, restless footsteps quickly reached Yoshiki's side—as if being there was the most natural thing in the world.

"Ya didn't know there was a faculty meetin' today? Let's hurry an' head home," *Hikaru* urged.

"…You mind goin' home without me?"

Yoshiki was aware of how curt he was being. He was speaking coldly, almost as if he were brushing someone off.

"Huh? Ya in a bad mood or somethin'?" *Hikaru* asked.

"Yeah."

Yoshiki glanced at *Hikaru*, who was silently making a funny face. His eyes were open wide, and his jaw jutted out—it was the same funny face Hikaru used to make.

"Yer not laughin' at my funny face!" *Hikaru* griped.

But you're not him. What used to make me laugh was Hikaru's funny face. The funny face my childhood friend, Hikaru Indou, made.

"Hey, for real. What's goin' on? Yer lookin' pretty pale," *Hikaru* said, patting Yoshiki's shoulder.

Instinctively, Yoshiki swatted *Hikaru*'s hand away. The slapping sound was dry, in complete contrast with the weather that day.

"Ya just don't know when to give up. Leave me alone. Seriously."

Yoshiki remembered that he had once told *Hikaru*, *"If I make excuses for myself, I can't very well come down on others."*

He didn't want to be rejected by *Hikaru*, so he couldn't bring himself to reject *Hikaru*. He pushed that selfish part of him—the part that had these thoughts—deep within himself and glared at *Hikaru*.

Hikaru just kept grinning. Then his eyes began nervously darting around. "Whoa. You for real? Ha-ha…," he said. "…Is it 'cause of me?"

"What're ya talkin' 'bout?"

"Huh? Well, I mean, yer clearly actin' weird with me. Ya mad at me?"

"I ain't really mad or anythin'."

"Naw, y'are mad, though." *Hikaru* raised his voice slightly as to cast aside the lingering tone of Yoshiki's words. "What's been up with ya lately? Are ya hidin' somethin' from me?"

"What? The hell? Ya interrogatin' me now? Yer bein' creepy, man…"

Yoshiki was aware he was speaking quickly. He had been caught off guard and was desperately trying to evade the issue.

And *Hikaru* seemed to have picked up on that.

"Okay, then why didja go into town the other day? And what's with ya exchangin' messages with some stranger?"

Yoshiki opened his mouth, but his reply vanished from his lips.

He'd sent a message to Kurebayashi the day he brought a watermelon to Hikaru's house. Her reply had come quickly, but in a case of unfortunate timing, Yoshiki had stepped away, and when he returned to the living room, *Hikaru* had pointed to Yoshiki's phone and said, "Seems like ya got a message."

At the time, Yoshiki had brushed it off, saying it was probably his mother, and *Hikaru* didn't press any further. But now, Yoshiki's uneasy hunch that *Hikaru* had actually seen the message was quickly making him nauseous.

"…Either way, do I have to tell ya everythin'?" Yoshiki said.

"I'm pretty sure we used to talk about almost everythin' before! If there's somethin' ya wanna say to me, then—"

But that wasn't—

"Before? Yer sayin' that like it was you back then."

Yoshiki couldn't say any more. Because he heard *Hikaru* make a soft, nearly inaudible gasp.

He could imagine the expression on *Hikaru*'s face at that moment. He didn't need to look up.

"So that's what this is about?" said *Hikaru*.

He grabbed Yoshiki's arm. Even though he was right-handed, he wore a watch on his right wrist—a watch that Yoshiki remembered almost certainly being a gift from Hikaru's father.

Hikaru's father had bought it without realizing that it was meant for left-handed people, and the real Hikaru had only started wearing it in high school. Now, neither Hikaru nor his father were in this world anymore.

"It's 'cause I'm not the real Hikaru? So I'm not enough for ya? That's it, ain't it?"

"Of course yer not!" Yoshiki spat, much more sharply than he'd intended.

His throat became flush with heat, almost as if it was bleeding.

"Y-you! The way ya sound, the way ya look, the way ya talk—it's all exactly like Hikaru…but yer not Hikaru…!"

The rain pounding against the windows sounded unusually loud. With each pitter-patter, raindrops delicately hit the glass and trailed down, forming long streams.

A similar stream was also flowing from Yoshiki's left eye.

Hikaru kept his grip on Yoshiki's arm but said nothing. Then, after an excruciatingly long silence filled only with the sound of the rain, *Hikaru* just barely opened his mouth.

"Sorry," he said. "Yer right."

He repeated himself quietly, in an almost matter-of-fact manner.

"That's just how it is. Yeah. Yer right. Yer right."

Then he gradually tightened his grip on Yoshiki's arm, and just as the dull, heavy pain caused Yoshiki to turn up his hand, Hikaru spoke again.

"But I'm…useless without you, Yoshiki. 'Cause yer my first…" *Hikaru* covered his face with his left hand. "Ugh, I…just don't know what's really my feelings or his at this point."

From the corner of his twisted grimace and through gritted teeth, *Hikaru* whispered, "This is so hard." He wept silently. "What am I supposed to do?"

Then, still crying, he shouted, “I know it ain’t right…but I still like you! And I can’t stop my feelings!”

The stream of tears pouring from the corners of *Hikaru*’s eyes changed color.

It was not quite black, or blue, or red, or even green—it looked like the shriveled remains of rat roadkill, or like the fishy-smelling scales of a dead fish, or even something like rain-soaked mud and cold bamboo grass.

Hikaru’s insides spilled out, causing his face to collapse into a crumbled mess of flesh. It erupted toward the ceiling as if trying to break through it before raining down on Yoshiki.

In fact, it was trying to drag Yoshiki inside.

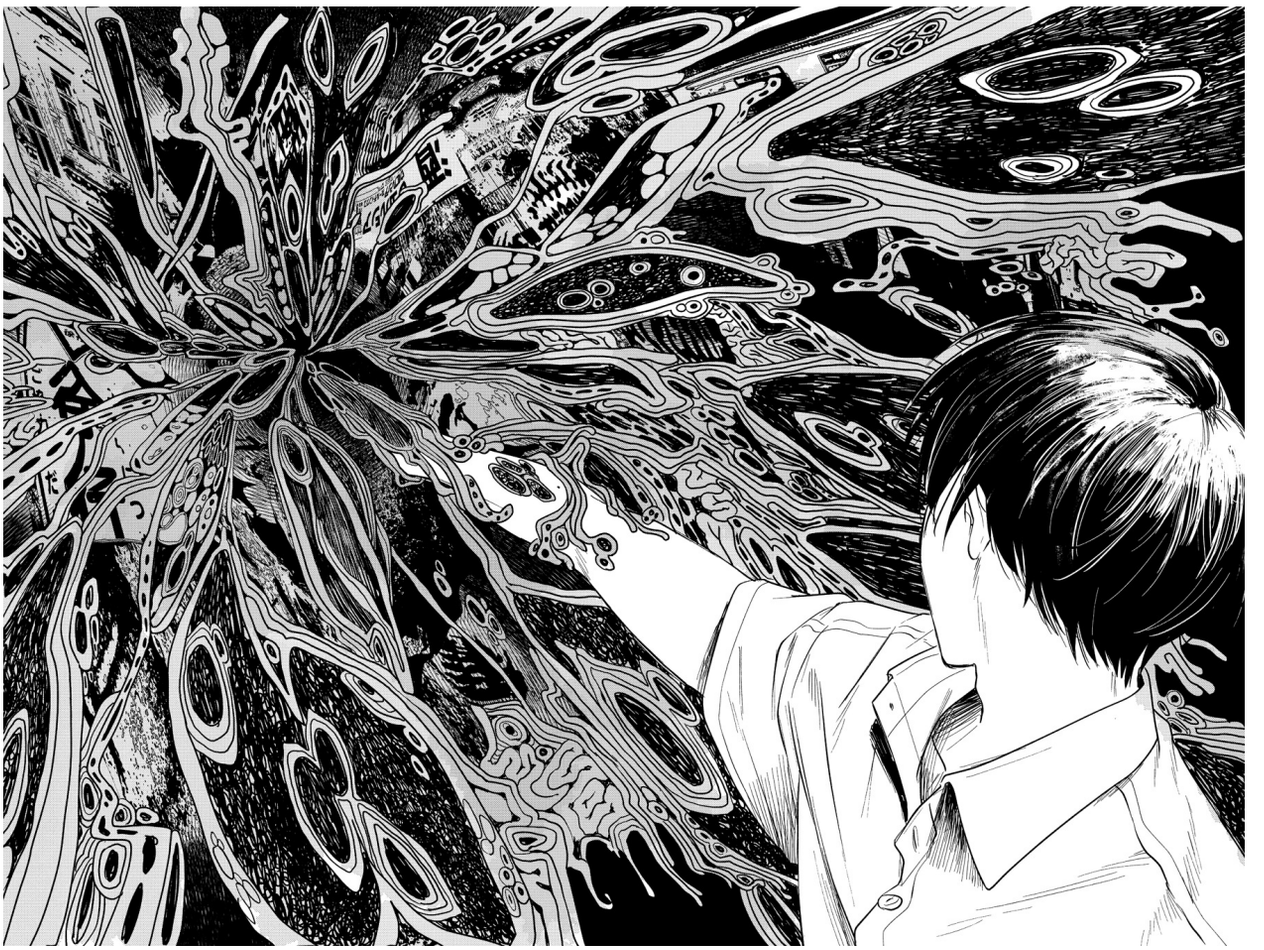
The combined smell of mildew, dust, and sweat from the gym storage room, where Yoshiki had first touched *Hikaru*’s insides, came flooding back to Yoshiki, along with Kurebayashi’s voice.

“You must know it, too. That you can’t keep bein’ with yer friend like this.”

Yeah, I know. I know it all too well.

Yoshiki couldn’t speak. *Hikaru*’s insides were covering his mouth, his eyes, and his nose, suffocating him.

Something was flowing from *Hikaru* into him. It felt gross. Frightening. Uncomfortable. Yet there was also an almost touching, faint sense of pleasure to it.



It feels so gross.
…It feels good?

In the distance, beyond rows of narrow footpaths separating several rice paddies, Yoshiki could see small, thatch-roofed cottages. The air carried the clean scent of freshly tilled mud, typical of the season when rice paddies are flooded. The misty outline of the mountain ridges, characteristic of humid days, seemed familiar to Yoshiki.

A young man wearing a scarf around his head stood in an area overlooking a small village nestled between the mountains. His eyes were just like Hikaru's. He was holding something wrapped in cloth close to his chest as if it were dear to him. Sweat trickled down the bridge of his nose as he adjusted the bundle several times. The rustling of the cloth sounded like someone sniffling as they wept. From between the folds of cloth, swaths of human hair spilled out like wilted flowers.

It was at that moment that Yoshiki finally took a breath.

The familiar ceiling of his classroom came back into view.

The corners of his vision were blurry with the tears spilling from his eyes, and the flickering he saw was because he was out of breath.

As soon as he sat up, he felt sick to his stomach. He clutched his chest, coughing and gagging.

"H-Hikaru…"

Beside him, *Hikaru* was covering his face with both hands.

"No." *Hikaru* repeated this despondently while shaking his head from side to side. "No, I can't do it… Anyone but him…"

His shoulders trembled, and in a single, short breath, he said, "Sorry."

Hikaru picked up the backpack he had thrown to the floor, and without another word, he ran away from Yoshiki. On his way out, his leg caught on a desk right next to the door, causing a loud clatter.

"Don't hate me."

He said it so quietly that the rain almost drowned it out. Then he left.

2

Rie Kurebayashi parked her van in Nozomi Supermarket's parking lot after spotting a long and narrow shadow hanging from a train crossing signal.

When she opened the driver's side door, she was struck by how damp and muggy it was outside, a stark contrast to the air-conditioned interior of her van. The rain that had fallen an hour or so earlier made the humidity that much worse.

The sky was gradually changing from orange to dark blue, yet the temperature showed no signs of dropping.

"Goodness, this is unbearable!"

She pulled a hand towel from her bag and wiped her forehead with it, then walked back to the crossing she had passed by moments earlier.

The shadow hanging from the signal had grown. It left no reflection in the puddle that had formed at the edge of the crosswalk.

Long, black hair swayed in the wind, and a face-like shape started to peek out from the signal. Left unattended, it would surely fall out onto the crossing and cause a serious accident or two.

Kurebayashi pretended to wait for the light to change at the crosswalk as she glared at the shadow. There was a stench, too. It smelled like food scraps that had been left in the kitchen sink for too long.

Kurebayashi pressed her left arm with her right hand, gripping it tightly. It didn't really mean much, but doing this helped her better control the flow of energy within her so she could "close" the place that was spitting that thing out.

"Sorry 'bout this," she said quietly.

There was a snapping sound, and the shadow vanished. The portal between this side and the other had been forcefully shut, pushing back the thing that had begun to poke its head out from that boundary.

The long, black hair that had swayed eerily like the branches of a willow tree had also vanished, as if blown away by the wind.

Kurebayashi called these things "impurities."

"I really don't wanna be doin' this, but there's jus' too many of 'em…"

She knew that they didn't all cause people harm. She understood that, in small numbers, they didn't significantly affect the lives and activities of humankind. But lately, there had simply been too many.

Heaving a sigh of relief, Kurebayashi wiped her neck with her towel.

There wasn't much that she could do. All she could manage was to push back the impurities that appeared up on this side and seal the "holes" behind them. She could never actually destroy the impurities, and if the holes they passed through ended up growing larger than expected, they would be beyond her abilities.

Still, whenever she closed one of these holes, she recalled her past.

Her son, the eldest of her two children, was still in elementary school at the time. She could still vividly recall the sensation in her hands of lifting his limp body after he collapsed in her house. Her son had been hurt because of his own weak mother, and as a result, they hadn't seen each other for a long time.

As she headed back to Nozomi, she thought of a high schooler named Yoshiki Tsujinaka.

He was a boy who had been burdened with something far too dangerous—a boy who had gotten involved with something not of this world, become influenced by it, and ended up closer to impurities as a result.

Kurebayashi called people like him *majirimono*—mixed beings that touched the boundary between this world and the other side.

She wondered what had become of that boy after they met.

Could he ever overcome the death of the friend he held dear, knowing full well that this person was now some incomprehensible, nonhuman entity? Even though this person was so close that he might just "mix" with them?

Would he be able to understand and come to terms with that situation, grieve and process his regrets, mourn, and then pray before setting out on his own path?

"I assumed it was a girlfriend or somethin'."

After muttering that to herself as she returned to her car, Kurebayashi wondered just what kind of person this “friend” of Yoshiki Tsujinaka was—or rather, what kind of person they *had* been.

Then, as she was about to start her engine, she remembered that she was out of soy sauce and eggs. She rushed back out of her van and, as she headed toward the store, muttered, “Ahhh, it’s so dang hot!”

3

The sky was bright blue, making the previous days of nonstop rain seem like fiction. The enormous cumulonimbus clouds that practically engulfed the mountains lingered even after school had ended.

As he prepared to go home for the day, Yoshiki looked down at the bruise on his arm. Though the rain had stopped, the mark left by *Hikaru*’s grip remained fresh to an almost frightening degree.

“Hey! Somethin’ happen between you an’ Hikaru?”

Asako had her school bag on her shoulder. She spoke like her usual self except with a more probing tone.

Yuuki’s with her, so it must be written all over my face that something indeed happened.

“Sure is weird how Hikaru’s missin’ school an’ all,” said Asako. “An’ ya got this real dark aura around ya, Yoshiki…”

“Did y’all get into a fight after school yesterday?” Yuuki asked.

Yoshiki could only manage a vague response; he neither confirmed nor denied anything. It was a fight, but not just any fight. It was something far worse—something slimy and muck-like…something so disgusting, so terrifying, that even his body forgot how to tremble.

“I dunno what happened, but ya oughtta make up with him,” said Asako. “That boy’s been crazy about ya lately. I feel bad for him.”

“…Huh?”

Yoshiki looked up to see Asako nodding.

“For real,” she told him. “And…I just have this feelin’ it’s better if y’all stayed together.”

“Yeah, like Asa said, it’s like, lately, Hikaru’s been real attached to you? Something like that…”

“Like some punk kid clingin’ to his mommy.”

Suddenly, Yuuki pinched Asako’s cheek. “You can’t be talkin’ trash like that!” she chided. The conversation shifted to a gangster movie Asako had recently been into, and that was the end of it.

As they playfully exchanged quotes from the movie, Yoshiki found himself thinking about the funny face *Hikaru* had made the day before.

But that wasn’t all. Images of *Hikaru*’s face, calling Yoshiki’s name and running toward him, popped into his head, one after another—and surely, mixed among those images were memories of the real Hikaru.

But in the end, what stood out the most was the image of *Hikaru* crying beside Yoshiki after he had woken up on the floor of their classroom.

“…I want to apologize.”

It wasn’t until he said it that Yoshiki realized it was his own voice that spoke those words. Yuuki and Asako, still engrossed in their conversation about the gangster movie, didn’t seem to have heard him, so Yoshiki quietly took a deep breath.

“I’m gonna go.”

He slung his backpack over his shoulder and left the classroom without saying another word.

Asako waved to him. “Huh? All right, then. See ya tomorrow,” she said, but Yoshiki didn’t look back.

At the school’s entrance, he changed his shoes and grabbed his bike in the bicycle parking lot. His palms were sweaty, and the handlebars felt slippery. He looked at the red bruise on his arm. He felt like it was cursing at him, saying, “You’re the worst.”

There was no doubt that *Hikaru* was just a substitute for Hikaru. As Yoshiki pedaled his bike, he spat those words out deep within himself.

I really am the worst, and it’s ’cause I’ve been avoiding the things about me that are weird—the parts I don’t want to see, the inconvenient truths. I tried to not think about them. I ignored them. And it feels like, by doing that, I’ve let myself drift through life

pretending that everything's normal and calm—wishing for it to be that way.

But just as *Hikaru* could never fully become Hikaru, Yoshiki also couldn't fully treat *Hikaru* as if he were Hikaru.

And yesterday, all that frustration and disgust, that cowardice, the sadness and regret that would never go away for as long as he lived, had been directed at *Hikaru*.

Yoshiki's bruise, now under the bright sunlight, looked even more garish than before. He was sure that it wasn't just a simple bruise.

And yet, here I am, still wanting to apologize so desperately. My fear, my anxiety, and everything else has become numb. My desire to apologize is so deep that I'm even willing to ignore the warnings of someone who understands my situation.

As he rode his bike, his shadow stretched dark and long down the slope leading from the mountainside where the school stood toward the town below. Sweat trickled down his forehead, brushed past the corners of his eyes, and then flew off behind him from his temples.

"Hikaruuu! Yoshiki's here!"

Even after his mother called for him, *Hikaru* didn't come out. Yoshiki made his way down the hall that he had come to know so well, and when he opened the sliding door to the living room, he found *Hikaru* in the corner, wrapped up in a towel blanket.

He was completely covered from head to toe and unresponsive.

"Hikaru."

There was no reply. Unperturbed, Yoshiki sat down in front of him.

"Sorry 'bout yesterday."

Yoshiki could've sworn he heard *Hikaru* gasp softly from underneath the towel blanket's thin fabric. And then, slowly but surely, *Hikaru* began to lift his head.



“Why’re ya tellin’ me sorry?” he asked.

“I…said some awful things to you.”

Yoshiki continued apologizing until *Hikaru* suddenly spoke over him.

“Why? I’m the one who was awful… After what I did to ya…”

“It’s all right.”

Yoshiki reached his hand into the gap in the towel blanket. *Hikaru* shifted around and then slipped his right hand out. The sensation of plunging his hand into *Hikaru*’s body suddenly flashed back into Yoshiki’s mind, causing him to instinctively pull away. As soon as he did, he knew that it hurt *Hikaru*. He could tell just from looking at *Hikaru*’s fingers.

“See?! Ya flinched. Yer scared o’ me, ain’t ya? I’m sorry…”

“N-no, I ain’t scared.” Yoshiki averted his eyes from his tense fingers and tried to downplay the situation with a “Say what?!”

But *Hikaru* shook his head while still wrapped up in the towel blanket. “Liar…,” he said. “I already showed y’all that. It was just downright disgustin’. I’m so embarrassed.”

“Huh?” Yoshiki mumbled, confused.

Hikaru kept repeating that he was “embarrassed” as he squirmed and swung his head around and around under the towel blanket.

“Oh…that…?” said Yoshiki.

Hikaru didn’t respond.

“Naw. It’s just…after what I said, I wanted to—”

“Sorry.” As he curled into himself, *Hikaru* apologized once again. “…Do ya hate me now?”

Yoshiki thought he would be lying if he immediately responded with “I don’t,” but it was also true that he could never hate *Hikaru*.

He could feel *Hikaru*’s gaze on him somewhere around his forehead, and when he cautiously lifted his head, his eyes met *Hikaru*’s. Those eyes that Yoshiki had become familiar with in his childhood trembled as they looked back at him through the small gap in the towel blanket.

Then, in an almost reflexive motion, *Hikaru*’s face emerged from the towel. He was practically close enough to graze Yoshiki’s nose with his own.

“Yoshiki…I…y’know…”

In *Hikaru*'s eyes, moist with tears, Yoshiki saw a faint reflection of himself.

"I wanna be near ya. That's all I need. I don't care who yer meetin' anymore. I just don't want ya to hate me, so I won't do that again…"

Hikaru was crying his eyes out. Tears gushed down his face in a way that seemed appropriately in character, but he didn't bother to wipe them away.

"I won't do that again!" he repeated. "I know it's a lot after I already went an' took yer friend's body. I'm sorry for bein' like this."

Like a puppy seeking comfort from its mother, *Hikaru* nuzzled his forehead into Yoshiki's chest. Yoshiki knew he was dangerous—he was well aware of that—and yet, he found himself touching *Hikaru*'s hair and couldn't help but comb his fingers through those slightly curly, somewhat stiff locks.

He's dangerous. He's dangerous, but…

"You're even more of a little kid than Hikaru was."

But is it really just 'cause he's dangerous? Is that really, truly all he is? Maybe he doesn't know anything after only mimicking Hikaru for less than six months.

And in that case—

"Ya sure?" *Hikaru* asked cautiously.

He was wearing his school uniform. Perhaps he had planned to go to school, but when it came time to leave his house, he remembered what happened the day before, and he felt like he just couldn't do it anymore.

"Yer just a lonely little kid, after all," Yoshiki said. He almost laughed but held it back.

If Hikaru*'s like a newborn puppy or kitten, then I'll have to teach him a thing or two.*

"Lonely…," *Hikaru* repeated.

His eyes wandered as if he were searching deep within his own mind, flitting here and there before finally returning to Yoshiki.

"So is this what ya call bein' 'lonely'? Have I always been lonely, then?"

"Beats me."

He's dangerous. He's definitely dangerous.

Yoshiki’s own voice echoed deep within his ears like a warning signal.

Even so, I can’t help but find him endearing.

CHAPTER 4
Hikaru Comes Pouring Down

1

“C’mon now, Minceyyy!” *Hikaru* called out into the bushes while waving a sun-soaked, vibrantly green stalk of foxtail grass side to side.

From deep within the underbrush, Mincey scrunched up into a white ball of fur and watched warily, shifting his gaze over and staring intensely at *Hikaru*. The cat looked at him as if he was an unwelcome guest who had just darkened his doorstep, Mincey’s golden eyes seemed to say, “What’re you doin’? Hurry an’ get the heck outta here.”

“Dang it. He just won’t come to me,” *Hikaru* groaned.

Mincey had wandered onto the premises of Kibogayama High School, but instead of the usual group of girls who would treat him to different dishes from their boxed lunches, *Hikaru* had spotted him.

He had yet to warm up to *Hikaru*—in fact, he was clearly wary of him. Perhaps, in his own feline way, Mincey realized that *Hikaru* “wasn’t human to begin with.”

“He really hates ya, huh, Hikaru?” said Yoshiki.

When Yoshiki crouched and reached his hand out, Mincey immediately stepped into the sunlight. The cat rubbed his pure white fur against Yoshiki’s left shin and stretched, prompting Yoshiki to pet him affectionately.

Hikaru looked on, seemingly displeased. “Least he didn’t hiss at me.”

“That’s usually what he does.”

Mincey was friendly, especially toward anyone who offered him food. Swaying his plump body, he seemed to be saying “I’ll

eat anything, so please don't hold back" as he approached.

"He got along with the old Hikaru, huh?" said *Hikaru*.

"Naw. Didn't get along with him at all."

"Oh, s'that what happened?"

Yoshiki remembered a time when Mincey had scratched the back of Hikaru's hand with all his might, causing Hikaru to yell out, "Dang devil cat!" But he couldn't recall exactly when that was.

"I don't really care how. I just wanna touch that cat."

"Ah, all right, then."

Yoshiki rummaged through his bag. Deep inside, there was one treat left for Mincey. He tore open the end of the stick-shaped packet, and Mincey perked up with alarming speed; his golden eyes gleamed as he fixed his gaze on Yoshiki's right hand. Mincey very clearly knew the value of that treat.

"If this doesn't work, then ya oughtta give up," Yoshiki told *Hikaru*.

"Wow! Would ya lookit that!" After taking the treat from Yoshiki, *Hikaru* sniffed it with an expression similar to Mincey's. He then held it out in front of the cat, saying, "Heya, Mincey! I got a squeeze treat for ya!"

At first, Mincey growled with a look that seemed to say, "Why you?!" But apparently, he couldn't resist the flavor of tuna and bonito. His expression completely changed, and he went on to restlessly lap up the food at the end of the stick with his small tongue.

"Yoshiki! Check it out! He ate it! Maybe he'll lemme touch him now?" *Hikaru* whispered, struggling to contain the excitement in his voice. Then he reached his hand out toward Mincey's back.

Yoshiki figured that the cat would probably let *Hikaru* pet him as long as he was feeding him…but quite unexpectedly, *Hikaru* poked his index finger right into Mincey's side.

Mincey's eyes opened wide with shock; *Hikaru* had just touched him the same way a person would pick their nose.

The cat glared at *Hikaru* as if to say, "Just pet me normally, kid! The hell was that?!" Then, with a swiftness that was unimaginable for his pudgy body, Mincey disappeared deep into the bushes.

"Awww, man…"

Hikaru stood there, stunned, with his index finger still outstretched as he watched Mincey run off.

Yoshiki couldn't help himself from muttering, "That's some way to touch him…"

I don't remember Hikaru ever petting a cat like that before. Maybe this is Hikaru*'s way of expressing his interest or curiosity. Even so, what a crazy way to touch something.*

Just as Yoshiki was about to laugh at the absurdity of it all, *Hikaru* sighed deeply.

"I'm really…"

He trailed off and fell into silence.

Yoshiki then cautiously asked him, "Really what?"

"I just feel like I'm so dumb on account of not knowin' what's going on around me. That's how it was with what happened before. An' I wish that creepy stuff would stop comin' outta me when I get all shook up."

The sight of *Hikaru* scratching the back of his neck and looking down reminded Yoshiki of when *Hikaru* was calling himself "creepy" and crying while wrapped up in a towel blanket.

Hikaru was undeniably childish, but even so, he had moments where he seemed ashamed of himself and showed that he wanted to change.

But Yoshiki wondered if that really was a good thing.

What would happen around him if he started to grow and change? The thought made the skin around Yoshiki's upper arms tense and prickle.

"Lookit Mincey! He's poopin'!"

As *Hikaru* pointed at the bushes and cracked up in the periphery of Yoshiki's vision, Yoshiki softly stroked his own arm.

What do I do with a guy like him?

Yoshiki felt confused about how to deal with *Hikaru*. And, of course, he felt afraid.

But it seemed like living his everyday life with *Hikaru* would wash away those feelings. Yoshiki was hoping that's what would happen, and he was aware that he was avoiding things he needed to confront.

From the kitchen, Yoshiki heard the voices of his mother and his younger sister, Kaoru.

Their conversation gradually grew louder, turning into what seemed like a minor argument. With his smartphone in one hand as he munched on rice crackers with the other, Yoshiki listened carefully.

After getting rejected by Mincey, *Hikaru* invited himself into Yoshiki's room, claiming that he wanted to continue reading *Master + Master*, and he was now quietly flipping through the pages of a manga volume while lying on Yoshiki's bed.

Naturally, *Hikaru* also lifted his head when he heard Yoshiki's mother yell, "Would you give it a rest?!" from the first floor. This was followed by Kaoru whining, "But I wanna wear a yukata!"

"What's up with Kaoru?" *Hikaru* asked Yoshiki.

"Ah, she wants to wear a yukata to this year's summer festival."

Kaoru had recently grown taller, so her yukata no longer fit her. If she really wanted to wear it that badly, someone would have to ask Mrs. Mikasa, who was skilled at sewing, to adjust the length. The argument between Yoshiki's mother, who insisted that Kaoru ask Mrs. Mikasa herself, and Kaoru, who wanted her mother to fix it, had been going on since the night before.

Yoshiki thought the whole thing was getting tiresome and hoped they would settle the argument soon. Meanwhile, *Hikaru* had tossed aside the manga he was reading and exclaimed happily, "Oh! That's right! The summer festival!" He then rolled around on Yoshiki's bed with a grin. "I can hardly wait!"

It was like he was pulling out memories of past summer festivals from within himself and laying them out one by one to admire.

"I heard they'll have shaved ice and all kinds of other food again this year," said Yoshiki.

"I'm really lookin' forward to it. Let's you an' me go with Kaoru—all three of us."

A soft laugh escaped from the corner of Yoshiki's mouth. It was a frail laugh that seemed to drop gently onto his chest. His sense that something was amiss, his anxiety, and his fear were all overwritten by the presence of Hikaru inside *Hikaru*'s memories. It was as if Hikaru Indou's hands were covering Yoshiki's eyes.

In the end, Yoshiki's mother brought Kaoru's yukata to Mrs. Mikasa's house. Despite all her talk, their mother was still soft

when it came to Kaoru.

*

The summer festival that Hikaru had eagerly been counting down the days for wasn't a particularly grand affair. It was held at Nisa Shrine, a small shrine in Kubitachi, and it didn't involve any special rituals. It was a run-of-the-mill festival in a village where the number of children had drastically decreased. It had some stalls and a *Bon Odori* dance but wasn't at any sizable scale, making it nothing more than a modest annual summer festival.

However, because there were so few children, many of the stalls offered free food to kids.

"It's the festival! The summer festival!"

Hikaru looked around in amazement while taking in the smells of all the food drifting about from the rows of stalls and the sights of lanterns glowing overhead. Occasionally, he let out a "Wow!" in awe, his cheeks flushed with excitement.

"Yer feet ain't hurtin', Kaoru?" he asked. His voice sounded cheerful and full of energy, almost as if it were colored pink or yellow.

"…I'm fine."

Kaoru was dressed in a neatly hemmed floral yukata with a matching hair ornament—she even brought a drawstring bag with her—but she was wearing plain old sneakers. She had been forced into them right before leaving for the festival because if she came in traditional sandals, she would quickly start whining about her sore feet and might start crying.

As they went along, an older woman from the neighborhood called out to Kaoru.

"Oh my! Is that Kaoru?! That yukata looks darlin' on ya!"

This made Kaoru hunch her shoulders in discomfort. Kaoru was a prime example of the kind of person who acted bold and confident at home but became shy and awkward in front of others.

"That's nice, huh?" Yoshiki said, playfully nudging Kaoru, who was blushing.

Just then, a lively voice called out from a nearby stall.

“Heeey, you kids there!! Have some takoyaki!”

The person handing Kaoru a tray of takoyaki with a friendly smile was Mr. Kameyama, an older man Yoshiki knew well. Every year, he had some sort of stall at the summer festival, and this year, he was running a takoyaki stand.

“Wow! Thanks a lot!”

Hikaru grinned ear to ear, unlike Kaoru, who meekly accepted the takoyaki. Kaoru had her way of doing things, and *Hikaru* had his.

“Ya sure about this, Mr. Kameyama?” Yoshiki asked.

“Yeah, I’m sure! Kids eat for free! It’s hot, so be careful eatin’ it!”

“He’s really doin’ us a kindness here. You oughtta say thanks, too, Kaoru.”

Following Yoshiki’s encouragement, Kaoru finally managed to softly murmur, “Th-thanks…” Even though her gratitude didn’t come out very clearly, Mr. Kameyama didn’t seem bothered at all.

A cross pendant hanging around the man’s neck glinted in the light and shimmered from the heat rising off the takoyaki grill. His son, Masa, who was busily frying up takoyaki beside him, also wore a similar pendant.

Yoshiki felt like he’d also seen crosses on the father-son pair at last year’s summer festival where they’d complained to one another about how hot it was and how the temperature wasn’t getting any better, even at night. Back then, Yoshiki thought those crosses were just accessories, but now they somehow seemed to hold a different significance.

However, that odd feeling was quickly swept off somewhere by the bustling energy of the festival. From the throngs of people coming and going along the stall-lined path to the shrine, Yoshiki overheard someone pointing at his group and saying, “Oh, that’s Tsujinaka’s…”

“…Little sister,” said someone else. “What’s up with her? She still ain’t goin’ to school, right?”

“Ah, what’s that girl’s mother doin’?”

Even with the festival music playing and the fun and lively atmosphere, those people’s voices were strangely clear.

Yoshiki glanced at Kaoru. She had her head down and was holding the tray of takoyaki in both hands, staring down at the

fine whisps of steam rising from her food.

It was unclear if *Hikaru* had noticed what just happened, but he looked over at Yoshiki and said, “Hey! Don’t you wanna get some shaved ice? Where can I get some again?”

“…It’s around the shrine grounds.”

Before Yoshiki even finished speaking, *Hikaru* said, “Right. Let’s go,” and started walking. *Hikaru* grabbed Kaoru’s hand to pull her along, and Kaoru pulled Yoshiki’s.

The whispers of gossip were gradually drowned out by the lively noises of the festival.

In contrast to the path that was crowded with stalls, the stone-paved path leading to the shrine’s courtyard was quiet.

The Nisa Shrine torii gate was illuminated by the red glow of lanterns. The stalls here were sparse, and the festival music was distant.

“What else do they have on the shrine grounds again?” *Hikaru* asked Yoshiki.

“I think yakisoba an’ stuff…?”

They chatted back and forth, but just as they were about to pass under the torii gate, they heard a distorted *crack* that sounded like shattering glass.

It was different from the festival music—different from the voices of people enjoying the event.

It was the sound of one thing rejecting something else.

“What…?”

Hikaru had stopped in his tracks just beyond the gate. Visibly confused, Kaoru asked, “What’s wrong?” but *Hikaru* only stared at his palm in silence.

His eyes then quietly shifted over to the gate.

Yoshiki wondered what the sound they just heard was and why *Hikaru* couldn’t pass through, but he didn’t need to think very hard about it—he instinctively knew what was happening.

“Ah…sorry. Gotta use the toilet,” *Hikaru* said. “Go ahead and buy some grub for me.”

He turned on his heel, and without looking back, he walked away from the torii gate with his right hand clenched tightly.

Yoshiki saw *Hikaru*’s mouth twist in irritation. He also noticed *Hikaru*’s thin lips mouth the words “What a pain in the ass…”

2

As lively as the festival music over by the path to the shrine was, it could be heard just faintly in the background before being drowned out by Hajime Takeda pounding the table and yelling, “That’s what I’m sayin’!”

Tetsu Mikasa was half expecting the teacup in front of Takeda to topple over, but it merely wobbled slightly.

“It’s all ’cause no one took care of things after Kouhei Indou died!!” Takeda shouted.

Mikasa had his arms folded and remained silent. He couldn’t help but be somewhat impressed by Takeda’s audacity to shout so loudly in someone else’s home.

As the head priest of Nisa Shrine, Mikasa was committed to the long-established traditions of their village, but Takeda, a landowner in Kubitachi, was even more entrenched in the village’s customs. To put it bluntly, he was trapped by them. Mikasa slumped his shoulders, realizing he felt a similar burden.

“Yeah, but even so…takin’ care of it fell under the Indous’ jurisdiction, so no one knows much about it,” said Mikasa. “Kouhei’s son went missin’ for over a week, and he came back, but he prob’ly didn’t complete the ritual.”

“Kouhei used to say this sorta thing couldn’t go on forever… So maybe that time’s finally come?”

Mikasa had no clear answer to offer.

The silence in the room only seemed to irritate Takeda further, who turned his gaze to the third man there, Yoshihiko Matsushima, who had been quietly drinking liquor the entire time.

“Hey! How can ya be drinkin’ at a time like this?! Yer a real jerk, ya know that?!”

“Ah, c’mon… Ha-ha! I’ll be drinkin’ highballs till the day I meet my maker!”

Matsushima, whose face was flushed and speech was slightly slurred, was the president of Matsushima Sawmill and a central figure in Kubitachi’s forestry industry. He had always been a laid-back and unhurried man, but once he got some alcohol in him—especially highballs—it only made things worse. He was the kind

of guy who would bring a bottle of booze to a serious gathering like this one.

“And is that thing really gone from them mountains? Did that thing ever really exist in the first place?”

“Ya dang fool!” snapped Mikasa.

No longer able to hold his tongue, Mikasa glared at Matsushima before Takeda could.

“That thing…is Kubitachi’s burden that’s been passed down since ancient times. It’s the duty of the people of this land to keep it trapped here forever. If we don’t do anythin’, it won’t just be Matsuura, the entire village’s gonna be in a heap’a trouble…”

Mikasa didn’t know why Old Lady Matsuura died, nor did he know why she was the one to go, but if they left the situation unchecked, more deaths would follow. That was the one thing he was sure of. Now that Kouhei Indou was no longer around, it was up to Mikasa, Takeda, and Matsushima to prevent that from happening.

After taking a deep breath through his nose, Mikasa looked at Takeda. “Hajime, think we oughtta give Tanaka a call?”

Scowling, Takeda nodded and said, “…I already did. I really didn’t want to, but I had no other choice.” He deeply furrowed his brows as small beads of sweat—possibly a product of stress or just from the heat—trickled down his face.

The truth of the matter was that Mikasa didn’t want to see Tanaka so often, either. That man’s arrival basically meant that serious trouble was brewing in their area.

“That’s right. We had no other choice.”

3

“Huh? Where’d Kaoru go?” *Hikaru* asked.

Hikaru arrived not long after Yoshiki started waiting for him with a bowl of shaved ice in one hand. They met on a small embankment off the main path to the shrine.

They could hear the voices of the stall vendors, but perhaps due to the direction of the wind, the aroma of the sauces and the sweet smell of cotton candy didn’t reach them. Instead, they could smell the grassy odor of mud from the stream nearby.

“She went to get some money from our mom to buy pickled cucumbers,” Yoshiki replied.

He handed a bowl of shaved ice to *Hikaru*, who said, “Awesome! Thanks!” and then sat down next to Yoshiki. The Blue Hawaii syrup in the shaved ice glowed slightly dark blue under the outdoor lights, while Yoshiki’s lemon-flavored shaved ice had a dull green tint to it.

“I’ve been wonderin’ ’bout this for a while now, but what kinda flavor is Blue Hawaii s’posed to be?”

“I don’t think it’s a flavor at all. Apparently, all shaved ice flavors taste the same.”

As expected, *Hikaru* let out a “Wha—?” and nearly dropped his spoon.

“Just changin’ the color’s enough for people to feel like it tastes different,” Yoshiki added.

“For real?!”

Visibly disappointed, *Hikaru* dug his straw spoon into his shaved ice and scooped up an especially deep blue chunk drenched in syrup.

A wet, crunching sound followed, and though Yoshiki was expecting *Hikaru* to react on the spot, saying things like, “Dang, that’s good!” or “That’s so cold!,” *Hikaru* remained silent with his spoon still in his mouth.

Yoshiki slowly turned to look at him.

“Then…how about me?” *Hikaru* asked.

The bowl of shaved ice in Yoshiki’s hand felt painfully cold, and he tried to express his surprise, but his voice was strained and nothing came out of his throat.

“If somethin’ looks the same as another,” *Hikaru* went on, “can it feel the same, too?”

Yoshiki recalled what happened the other day—the look of desperation on *Hikaru*’s face—as he’d asked, *“…Do ya hate me now?”* while wrapped in a towel blanket.

The real Hikaru never made faces like that.

“…No way,” said Yoshiki.

He shook his head slightly, and *Hikaru* looked away for some reason. *Hikaru* gave an ambiguous response—something between a “Really?” or a “Hmm,” but not quite either—then shoveled more shaved ice into his mouth.

“Looks like yer happy to hear that,” he said.

“Huh? Do I?”

Yoshiki noticed that *Hikaru* was trying to brush things off, but then, unable to hold back, *Hikaru* exclaimed, “Ah, dang! I’m all embarrassed now,” as he tossed his empty shaved ice bowl back at Yoshiki. The few drops left in the bowl were still tinged with the artificial Blue Hawaii blue.

“Yer already done eatin’?” Yoshiki asked with a chuckle.

Almost as soon as he did, *Hikaru* said, “So, Yoshiki…”

“What’s up?”

“Did you figure out I wasn’t the real Hikaru because you could sense I wasn’t the same even though I looked jus’ like ’im?”

Yoshiki felt *Hikaru*’s piercing gaze on his brow. He also noticed that he couldn’t hear the frogs that usually croaked throughout the village on a summer night like this one. Even the river flowed silently, just as the trees’ branches and leaves swayed without a sound, only giving the impression of their movement.

Yoshiki slowly averted his eyes from *Hikaru*.

“Naw.”

A response escaped his lips before he even realized it.

“I…saw Hikaru’s body.”

“Don’t you dare even think about going out there to look for him! Please! Just stay home!”

That’s what Yoshiki’s mother told him on that day.

It was a terribly stormy day.

What at first seemed like an intense but short rain shower had turned into a downpour that showed no signs of ending, even as night fell. Thunder roared throughout the mountain village of Kubitachi. The ground shook with every rumble of the sky.

And despite such terrible weather, every adult in the village was out searching.

They were all looking for Hikaru Indou—the boy who had been by Yoshiki’s side for as long as Yoshiki could remember.

“Yoshiki…where ya goin’?” Kaoru asked after seeing Yoshiki putting on his raincoat at the entrance to their house. Even

though the parlor was brightly lit, Yoshiki clearly remembered it being pitch-dark at the entrance to his house.

“I’m just gonna check something outside right quick,” he told her as he shoved his feet into his rain boots.

“Liar,” Kaoru snapped back while shooting him a suspicious look. “The grown-ups are out searching for him, so the kids should stay home. That’s what Mom said.”

“I’ll be right back.”

Yoshiki picked up a flashlight before opening the front door. As he left, he heard Kaoru say, “You better,” mixed in with the intense sounds of the rain and wind.

Hikaru had said he was going to the mountains. That was what Yoshiki told his own mother, and apparently, the adults in the village had spread out to search the mountains surrounding Kubitachi—Kasayama, Futakasayama, and Matsuyama.

Because Futakasayama was where Hikaru’s grandfather farmed shiitake mushrooms, much of the search effort was focused around there. Despite the considerable amount of time that had passed since the search began, Hikaru was nowhere to be found.

The pouring rain made it impossible to see even a few feet in front of Yoshiki, who headed not to Kasayama, Futakasayama, or Matsuyama, but to another location.

He went to Nisayama, the mountain behind Hikaru’s house—a mountain that was off-limits because the ground was unstable and frequented by bears and other wild beasts. Children in particular were warned to never go there, and the people of Kubitachi Village actively avoided it.

If Hikaru had said he was going to the mountains and still hadn’t been found, Yoshiki thought that he might have gone to Nisayama. Yoshiki didn’t care if this was a hasty decision or just a misunderstanding on his part. If all he discovered was that Hikaru wasn’t there, that would be good enough for him. It was far better than waiting around and doing nothing in his warm house.

The barely paved road turned to a gravel one, then to a muddy path, and soon enough, even that path disappeared.

“Hey! Did ya find him—?”

Yoshiki heard someone's voice from beyond the sound of the rain. Several flashlight beams flickered in the darkness. It seemed that a search party had ventured into the off-limits area of Nisayama after all.

Still, Yoshiki didn't stop walking.

Even in his raincoat, Yoshiki was soaked up to the nape of his neck, and he could no longer tell if the liquid dripping down his cheeks was rain or sweat. He dragged his mud-caked rainboots along, pushing his way through the thicket of trees and bushes.

He tried calling Hikaru's name countless times, but the rain and thunder quickly drowned out his cries. The sound of his own feet firmly slogging through the mud made it feel as if something inside him was being scraped away with each step.

He could no longer hear the voices of the search party that previously echoed in the distance. All that remained now was the sound of his own breathing—a mix of long sighs interspersed with miserable whimpering. His throat trembled, producing a noise that sounded like a hungry cat or dog searching for its owner.

A droplet trickled down his forehead and into his eye, distorting his vision, which wouldn't clear even after blinking. He repeatedly cursed under his breath and wiped his eyes.

That's when the beam of his flashlight caught a dark shape.

"…Hikaru!" he called.

But his call was drowned out by the thunder.

And lying amid the pale glow of the bamboo grass was Hikaru Indou.

There was no mistaking it—it was Hikaru. Yoshiki couldn't possibly forget his friend. Try as he might, Yoshiki could never distance himself from Hikaru; no matter how many precious people he lost, Hikaru was the one person he could never lose.

He touched Hikaru's cheeks with both hands. They were cold, like stones. His lips were pale, and his chest did not rise or fall.

A large drop of water fell from the tip of a bamboo grass leaf and ran down Hikaru's strangely beautiful forehead. When Yoshiki gently brushed it away with his fingertips, they were so cold that it felt as though they might split.

His body's in surprisingly good condition. Somewhere deep in his mind, Yoshiki heard himself muttering that in a daze. *I*

wonder why that is. Oh, right. 'Cause it's winter.

As he calmly looked around, a voice inside him told him that he needed to tell someone about this right away.

But the next thing Yoshiki knew, he was home.

He found himself being hugged by his mother while still sopping wet. Kaoru had quietly peeked her head out to watch them from the parlor.

"The fire brigade… They're doing their best to search for him," Yoshiki's mother said.

No, I found Hikaru, Yoshiki thought.

His mud-stained lips only trembled, unable to utter a single word.

"So it'll be all right…!" his mother told him.

No, I know it won't.

When he opened his mouth, all that escaped was a groan. His mother called Yoshiki's name, shook his shoulders, and slapped his cheeks. Then, in a voice choked with panic, she cried, "You're burning up…!"

For a few days after that, Yoshiki was bedridden and delirious with a fever. He lost track of how many days had passed as he drifted in and out of dreams and reality.

And when his fever finally broke, *Hikaru* was there.

Hikaru, who had been admitted to the hospital in Kibogayama for tests, was sitting up in his hospital bed with a healthy grin—one that seemed to tease Yoshiki, who rushed over to *Hikaru*, still in a state of shock.

"There were a buncha times when I thought it was a dream, but it was all real."

There were many ways Yoshiki could have convinced himself that finding Hikaru's body was just a dream. And there were just as many opportunities for him to mentally block it all out.

But he couldn't do that.

"There were lots of other odd things about you, but normally…that wouldn't be enough to think ya were someone else."

Yoshiki still remembered how cold Hikaru's lifeless cheeks were, and the feeling of blood caked onto his own fingertips. He

remembered that far more clearly than the flavor of the shaved ice he had just eaten.

No matter how much he tried to wipe it away, he couldn't erase the fact that Hikaru had died.

"Oh, wow…"

Hikaru covered his mouth with both hands and slumped his shoulders. Yoshiki heard him let out a sigh through the gaps between his fingers.

"That's nuts…," *Hikaru* continued. "I was prob'ly already like this when you found 'im. But I reckon it took a few days for me to repair his body, so you musta come in the middle of all that."

If he's saying that, then that must be what happened, Yoshiki thought.

"And you've been holdin' onto this for six months?" *Hikaru* asked.

"It's why I've been havin' trouble sleepin'."

A sharp pain shot through Yoshiki's brow, and he lowered his head. He then hugged his knees and buried his face in his arms.

I wanna see Hikaru.

That desire drifted through his mind as naturally as sending a bamboo-leaf boat down a babbling brook.

Hikaru. Not anyone else—I want to see you.

"Ahhh, dang it."

In this small village, there were memories of Hikaru everywhere.

In their homes and the narrow paths that connected them, the stone walls around the rice paddies, the dust-covered asphalt road leading to Kibogayama, the sun-bleached safety mirrors, the color-faded mailboxes, the river where they used to play—there was no place where Hikaru hadn't been.

That's why, no matter where he went, at any given moment, Hikaru would come pouring down into Yoshiki's mind.

"Why'd he have to die?"

But his anger, after slipping through the gaps of his clenched teeth, inevitably turned into sobs.

"I seriously can't wait to move out."

Yoshiki had said that to Hikaru once when they were in middle school. He was pretty certain that it was when they were

first-years.

They had gone to the upper reaches of the river that flowed from Futakasayama to catch freshwater crabs, and Yoshiki was sitting on a flat rock, watching Hikaru enter the river in his sandals.

The water Hikaru kicked up as he went into the water had gotten the hem of his T-shirt wet, but he paid no attention to it and intently peered into the stream. It was then, as Yoshiki was observing Hikaru in that state, that he let those words come tumbling out of his mouth.

“Whaaa? Why d’ya wanna go to the city so badly?” Hikaru asked.

“The country sucks.”

Hikaru’s carefree tone made the dark resentment in Yoshiki’s voice even more pronounced. Yoshiki wasn’t saying it out of some childish form of rebellion—the sound of his own voice made him realize that he seriously and completely hated that crappy rural village of his from the bottom of his heart.

“Why do people ’round here gotta pry into my family’s business so much?” said Yoshiki.

“Ohhh, so yer folks’re still fightin’?”

Hikaru laughed it off, but Yoshiki glared at the bottom of the river, watching small, pinky-sized fish swimming against the stream in frustratingly clear water.

“My parents…don’t get along, and they fight just about every day. But folks like Yasaburo’s granny’re always talkin’ about it like they want us to hear ’em…”

Yoshiki wondered if it was because his mother was from Tokyo. She had only a slight city accent, and he didn’t understand what people found so interesting about that. He wondered why people seemed to find so much joy in prying into other families’ business and criticizing others behind their backs.

“Speakin’ of,” Yoshiki continued, “there was a big fight at Yasaburo’s place not long ago. Somethin’ about his next-in-line, Yuusuke.”

“They were sayin’ he’s sick.”

“He ain’t sick,” Yoshiki cut in and then rushed to correct himself. “Yuusuke ain’t sick. He’s a homosexual.”

“Home-o-sex-you-all?”

“I dunno…”

Yoshiki felt half annoyed and half relieved by the carefree and clueless way Hikaru spoke. He didn’t want to discuss it with Hikaru anymore.

“This village is too small and cramped,” Yoshiki grumbled. “I can barely breathe with how cramped it is here.”

He was sure that Yasaburo’s son, Yuusuke, felt the same.

Hikaru kicked the river, splashing some water. The splash was light and melodic, and the surface of the river rippled and sparkled brightly, as if musical notes had been scattered across it.

“All right…then you can sleep over at my place tonight,” said Hikaru.

“Huh?”

“Even if the country sucks, you always have fun at my place. Whenever ya feel like you wanna go to the city, you should come to my place!”

It wasn’t that simple. Yoshiki’s resentment wasn’t something that could be treated so lightly. But the way that Hikaru seemed to punctuate his sentences with a cheery exclamation mark always managed to momentarily clear away the fog that swirled about in Yoshiki’s heart.

No matter how crappy the countryside was for him, he could breathe easily as long as Hikaru was there. It felt like there was more air around him—more oxygen to breathe.

He vaguely knew that would no longer be the case one day, and perhaps that was why he wanted to leave the countryside.

“Check it out, Yoshiki!”

Hikaru thrust his hands into the golden, glittering river, grabbed two freshwater crabs, and pulled them out of the water.

“Crabby crab!”

He pressed the fishy-smelling crabs into both of Yoshiki’s cheeks. Yoshiki acquiesced.

Apparently, the look on Yoshiki’s face was funny enough to make Hikaru burst into laughter until tears welled up in the corners of his eyes.

Those were the kinds of memories that came back to Yoshiki whenever he heard the sound of the flowing river.

Then *Hikaru* called Yoshiki's name. They had the same voice, but no matter what, it wasn't Hikaru. It was *Hikaru*.

Yoshiki could sense that *Hikaru* was reaching out to him amid his confusion. His warm hand went to touch Yoshiki's shoulder but then quietly retreated.



There was a rustling sound as *Hikaru*'s clothes, the grass, and the ground brushed against each other.

"I'll…be right back," he said.

As *Hikaru* tried to leave, Yoshiki grabbed the hem of *Hikaru*'s T-shirt and tugged on it.

Yoshiki knew this boy wasn't Hikaru, but he still found himself clinging to him like this. He couldn't let go of *Hikaru*'s T-shirt.

Hikaru stood there with a troubled look on his face, but moments later, he sat back down next to Yoshiki.

"You know…," *Hikaru* began, his voice raspy. "Well, I might not be able to replace him or anythin', but I'll always protect ya."

Yoshiki looked up, and a gentle, cool breeze blew from the river, jostling his long bangs.

"And I'll do whatever y'ask me to."

CHAPTER 5
I Could Finally Breathe

1

Yoshiki wondered why, of all things, the menu for their cooking class had to be fried chicken.

As he mixed raw chicken and spices in a stainless-steel bowl, Yoshiki held back yet another sigh.

Even with his vinyl gloves on, a familiar sensation squirmed through his hands.

“Hurry up, Yoshiki!”

Yuuki, who was in his group, was rushing him. Then Yoshiki put his hands deep into the bottom of the bowl in resignation.

“Ugh!”

The more he thought about it, the more the texture reminded him of what *Hikaru*’s insides felt like.

Like raw chicken covered in marinade—an incredibly accurate comparison he came up with. It was so accurate that he almost wanted to pat himself on the back then and there.

He put up with the hairs standing on end at the nape of his neck and looked over at Maki, who was also in his group.

Maki had been instructed to cut their cabbage into thin slices but was cutting it into fairly thick chunks while exclaiming, “Yahoo! I love fried chicken!” Seeing him like that, Yoshiki felt jealous. He was genuinely envious of someone who could get that excited and say “Yahoo!” over something as simple as fried chicken.

Maki was wearing an apron with a dragon design on it. He had made it in his elementary school home economics class and wore it without an ounce of shame. Yoshiki also felt… No, actually, he wasn’t particularly jealous of that.

“Ya weren’t even helpin’ out none, and when you finally did, you didn’t shred the cabbage like ya were s’posed to! What the heck is this?!” Yuuki wailed.

She scowled and picked up a piece of the “shredded” cabbage that was about as thick as her thumb.

“Ah, shut up! You my mama or somethin’?!” Maki snapped back, and predictably, an argument ensued.

Yoshiki quietly pushed the entire bowl of seasoned chicken over to Yuuki and then washed his hands without saying a word. Despite the fact that he had been wearing gloves, he just had to scrub his hands clean.

“Yer bandana…,” came a voice.

Someone behind Yoshiki tugged on the bandana covering his hair, causing the top edge to flap about.

“They look like them triangle caps that ghosts wear.”

Hikaru had a grin on his face. There was a dragon on his apron, too, though it was slightly different from Maki’s. Yoshiki couldn’t understand how those two high schoolers were completely fine wearing dragon aprons.

“Why were ya starin’ at the chicken somethin’ fierce earlier?” *Hikaru* asked. He was pointing at a bowl with chicken in it.

What the heck? Was he watchin’ me?

Yoshiki should have avoided the question, but he hesitated instead.

“Well,” he said. “It’s just…”

“Just what?”

“It’s just…the way raw chicken feels… It’s kinda like how it felt that one time…”

Inside you.

Yoshiki was about to say that, but he realized that *Hikaru* was staring at him—and so was the dragon on *Hikaru*’s apron.

“Dang, man, you’ve been thinkin’ ’bout that stuff all this time? Havin’ them nasty thoughts while lookin’ at that raw chicken all on yer lonesome…”

Hikaru snorted, barely containing his laughter, and Yoshiki instantly glared at him. That was all he could do.

“The heck?! What’s with that reaction, man?! It’s not like that,” Yoshiki grumbled.

“Naw, it’s all right, though.”

But *Hikaru*'s shoulders continued to shake with laughter. Just when it seemed like he had finally stopped, a strangely calm smile spread across his face, and he started looking intently at Yoshiki.

"Wanna try feelin' it again?" *Hikaru* asked.

It looked like Yuuki had started frying the chicken. *Hikaru*'s group started doing the same. Soon, the entire room was filled with the sizzles and cracks of popping oil.

To Yoshiki, it almost felt like he was being jeered at or warned of something yet to come.

"No way," he told *Hikaru*. "It feels too freaky. That's not the kinda thing I can get used to."

"But ya know, you were like this back when we were on that forest path, too. You really can't handle it when guys like me get all up in your space. Gets me nervous jus' lookin' at ya. That's why it's better if you get used to feelin' it!"

Hikaru looked at Yoshiki to gauge his reaction, and something about what *Hikaru* said gave Yoshiki a bad feeling. He couldn't put his finger on it, but it was almost as if there was some ulterior motive behind *Hikaru*'s words.

Before Yoshiki could respond, Yuuki, who was standing in front of their group's stove, said, "Yoshikiii, put out a plate," and pointed to a cabinet.

"That Maki's totally useless," Yoshiki grumbled.

When he glanced at Maki, Maki was busy showing off his "super awesome" apron to the guys in *Hikaru*'s group.

"All right. Fine."

Yoshiki should've said that to Yuuki, but for some reason, he found himself directing his response at *Hikaru* instead.

"Great," *Hikaru* replied. "Then let's do it after school."

Hikaru then went back to his group, looking pleased.

Thanks to Yuuki, Yoshiki's group managed to fry their chicken to delicious perfection. Meanwhile, *Hikaru*'s group's fried chicken was burnt beyond recognition, rendering it inedible. People had a lot of negative things to say about it, including how it looked like dark matter or how it tasted like the back end of a truck, but *Hikaru* seemed to enjoy it all the same.

Compared to years ago, Kibogayama High School had seen a steady decline in the student population, leaving the school with many empty classrooms. However, the classrooms still retained traces of their past, making it clear they had once been put to proper use.

At the farthest edge of the school was an unlocked classroom despite the DO NOT ENTER sign on its door. In the corner of this room, *Hikaru* undid two of the buttons on his short-sleeved shirt, just like he had done once before.

An incredibly thin slit ran along his suntanned skin from his throat down to his chest.

"Ah, c'mon already," he urged.

Yoshiki reached out his hand more than once, only to withdraw it each time.

Hikaru shrugged impatiently. "Hurry up! Clubs're 'bout to start."

Yoshiki couldn't bring himself to quip how that was rich coming from someone who never took club practice seriously.

"I gotta just…psych myself up for it," Yoshiki said.

He took a deep breath, followed by another, as if that first one wasn't enough.

Then, while holding his breath, he inserted his hand into Hikaru's slit.

The sensation—like having a tongue lick his fingertips, and the chilling, damp feeling—were the same as before. The pressure he felt as it slowly tightened around his skin reminded him of the chicken that he had his hands all over in cooking class. The back of his throat tightened up. He felt like vomiting.

But the feeling didn't last as long as the first time.

"…It's not as bad as before."

"Ha-ha! See? You're gettin' used to it."

Getting used to it? No way I could get used to this.

Then Yoshiki remembered Kurebayashi telling him that he would "mix."

Just as that thought crossed his mind, he felt something slither into him through his fingertips.

Something that wasn't himself crept up inside Yoshiki, starting from his index finger and on to his hand, his wrist, and then up his arm.

Yoshiki screamed with *Hikaru* staring intently at him all the while. *Hikaru*'s eyes were filled with a twisted excitement, and his cheeks were flushed. He had an aggressive look on his face, like that of a child playing with a new toy for the first time.

"The hell?! It's on me…?!" Yoshiki hollered.

He tried to pull his arm back, but something inside *Hikaru* had a strong grip on it.

Hikaru nodded, his expression unchanged. With every quick nod, every "yeah" he uttered, something hot seemed to bubble and pop around the nape of Yoshiki's neck—like oil for frying chicken.

The same as that time. Like when *Hikaru* confronted Yoshiki about meeting Kurebayashi. Yoshiki was being attacked by *Hikaru*'s insides—just like before.

He was overcome by the ominous sensation of *Hikaru* trying to engulf him.

As that sensation brushed against his cheeks, he knew that it had reached the deepest parts of his mind—places that he didn't want anyone to touch.

And in that moment, he finally spoke up.

"Stop it!"

Hikaru's eyes widened, and in that instant, Yoshiki pulled his arm free. He then heard the sound of something dragging, and with it, the feeling of *Hikaru* inside him also disappeared.

The mark on his right arm from the last time *Hikaru* had tightly gripped him still remained. Yoshiki imagined that it wouldn't fade away that easily, but it actually seemed to have grown darker.

"…What'd you do just now?" Yoshiki demanded, his shoulders heaving as he breathed in and out and in again. Then he glared at *Hikaru*.

Hikaru, however, looked around the room, acting as if he didn't know what had just happened.

"I just thought I'd try touching you for a sec… Guess that won't work if yer not used to it," he said.

"Is that the truth?" Yoshiki interrogated *Hikaru*, recalling the look on his face when he asked if Yoshiki wanted to try feeling his insides again. "I ain't too sure about this, but you weren't just doin' that 'cause it feels good for you, right?"

It appeared that having someone touch his insides or the act of absorbing someone into himself gave *Hikaru* some sort of pleasure or sense of satisfaction. Yoshiki had suspected as much before, but now it was crystal clear.

“So? What was that about?”

Apparently, Yoshiki had hit the nail on the head. *Hikaru* let out a small, choking sound but said nothing in defense and looked away from Yoshiki. *Hikaru*’s reaction was straightforward to the point of being anticlimactic.

“Ya know, ya shouldn’t be doin’ things people don’t really like. Ya got that?” Yoshiki said.

“Wh-what…? Yeah, I know. But…,” *Hikaru* added, as if hesitantly reaching his hand out toward Yoshiki. “I really wasn’t lyin’ to ya. I wouldn’t lie to ya…”

He sulked like a child who had been scolded by his parents, and seeing him like that, Yoshiki couldn’t help but believe him. He didn’t think *Hikaru* could lie to him in the first place.

Because if *Hikaru* did lie to Yoshiki, then Yoshiki was probably truly alone in the world.

“I believe you,” Yoshiki said. “For now.”

“…‘For now’?”

Hikaru’s shoulders slumped, and he scratched his cheek with his pinky finger. Yoshiki glanced away and nodded.

Yoshiki then softly touched his own right arm. The sensation of being inside *Hikaru* no longer lingered on his skin.

But beneath his skin, in some very deep place beyond his muscles, veins, and even deeper than his bones—within some part that could only be described as “Yoshiki’s core”—*Hikaru* still remained.

It felt gross. But that wasn’t all. There was also an undeniable, almost spine-chilling pleasure—a sensation so overwhelmingly clear to Yoshiki that it made him want to turn his eyes away.

He wondered if this is what Kurebayashi meant when she warned him about “mixing,” “getting close to whatever that thing is,” and “becoming a part of it.”

If this feeling continued to build up, would he mix with *Hikaru* and become inseparable from him?

I can never let that happen, he thought. Yoshiki was absolutely sure of that.

And yet, he couldn't forget the look of ecstasy on *Hikaru*'s face. He even wondered if he'd been making the same face as he felt *Hikaru* crawl into his body.

"Also, it might attract things from the world toward ya more easily."

That night, Yoshiki recalled that warning from Kurebayashi.

Kaoru had seen a "ghost" in their bathroom.

*

"A wig monster?! In the bathroom?!"

Maki spoke so loudly that other groups of customers in the food court turned their attention to Yoshiki's table. It was a weekday, but since it was already evening, there were a number of students from Kibogayama High School scattered around the Mion Mall food court.

Yoshiki rushed to clear his throat. "That's right. She was sayin' she didn't wanna take a bath 'cause there's a wig monster in the tub. Been goin' on about it since last night."

"The heck is that?! It's totally just loose hair."

"Naw. It was, like, a stupid amount of hair. There's no way it could be loose hair. And she said that thing was aggressive as all get out."

The previous night, after dinner, Kaoru had been the first to take a bath. But within minutes, she'd come flying out of the bathroom, screaming.

She'd clung to their mother, who was washing dishes in the kitchen, and shouted, *"There's a monster in the bath! A wig monster!"*

Yoshiki, who had been watching TV at the dining table, was the first to react by expressing his disbelief, but Kaoru glared at him and insisted that she wasn't lying.

While she was washing her hair, she felt strands of hair clinging to her foot.

Everyone in their family had short hair, but this hair was long.

Then, just as she heard a *splish* from the water, she saw a large mass of hair peeking out from between the tub and the bath cover. According to Kaoru, there was definitely enough hair for a whole person. When she reached out to touch it, it slipped back into the bathtub and disappeared.

Kaoru promptly flew out of the bathroom and put on her clothes without drying herself off. Then, as she tried to leave the changing room, she heard a loud *thump* behind her.

She turned around and saw the shadow of a mass of hair clinging to the bathroom's glass door.

"No way!" said Maki.

After hearing the details, all Maki did was laugh. Yoshiki didn't blame him. Even Yoshiki himself was thinking, *What the heck is a wig monster anyway?!* as he told the story.

Before their group went to the food court, they had stopped at an arcade, where Yoshiki won a plush toy for Maki from a crane game. The plush was some kind of bizarre character. It was hard to tell what exactly—maybe a dog or a cat—but according to the description, its "hair had grown out because it worked too much at a factory for hair-growth formula," which was how Yoshiki found himself bringing up the story about the wig monster.

"Another ghost, huh?!" said Maki, a soft drink in one hand.

He kept on laughing, having completely forgotten that Yoshiki had just won him a plush toy. And only recently, he had asked Yoshiki to walk with him through the forest path on his way home because it was too scary.

"One guy on the baseball team also said he spotted somethin' not too long ago," Maki mused. "Seems like this kinda thing's been happenin' more an' more."

Unlike Maki, *Hikaru* had been quiet the whole time. His only response was a nasal "hmm" as he stared down at the straw in his soda fountain cup—although earlier, after seeing how happy Maki looked to get the plush at the arcade, *Hikaru* had teased Maki, saying, "Ya givin' it to a girl or somethin'?" (And he seemed to be right on the mark.)

Finally, *Hikaru* asked, "You still haven't seen it yourself, have ya, Yoshiki?" with an uncharacteristically pensive look on his face.

"No… I haven't seen nothin'."

After Kaoru left the bathroom, Yoshiki had only taken a shower. He'd carefully checked inside the tub, behind the wash bucket, under the bath stool, and throughout the room but didn't find anything. It was the same for his parents, who took their baths later that evening. In the end, nothing happened.

"Then we'll go an' check out your bathroom later today," *Hikaru* announced. He chugged his soft drink, and as soon as he finished, he got out of his chair.

Maki, with the plush toy in one hand, said, "What? Yer goin' already?" but *Hikaru* threw his empty cup into the trash, and Yoshiki followed him.

As soon as Yoshiki had opened the door to his house, *Hikaru* said, "Boy, it's hot out today!" and wiped sweat from his forehead.

"Would ya like some barley tea?" Yoshiki asked him.

"Naw. Let's get to the bathroom first," *Hikaru* replied firmly before taking off his sneakers at the entrance and putting them away.

Hikaru's hurried actions made Yoshiki realize that whatever it was that Kaoru had called a "wig monster" was no joke—it was the real deal.

It was one of *those things* from the other side that Kurebayashi had told him about.

"…Why's a ghost showin' up in my house? And what is that thing anyway?"

"I'm not exactly sure what ya'd call it. Somethin' like a 'stain' or 'impurity,' maybe? They always collect in places where humans live. They don't normally appear like that, though."

"But why my place specifically?"

No one was home. Both of Yoshiki's parents were at their jobs, and Kaoru had joined her mother at the beauty salon where she worked. Kaoru had been doing that occasionally ever since she stopped going to school, but perhaps the reason she went on this particular day was because she was afraid to stay home alone.

With no one in the house, everything was quiet, so when *Hikaru* muttered, "Well, that's 'cause"—his voice echoed oddly throughout the residence—"there's somethin' appealing about ya to those things from the other side. Since yer nice."

"I don't really get it. I'm not nice at all."

Yoshiki knew that mixing too much with *Hikaru* would make it easier to attract things from the other side, but he wondered if that was because he was, as *Hikaru* said, being "nice."

The light of the setting sun shined weakly into the changing room. Standing in front of the glass door that dimly glowed white, *Hikaru* paused for a moment with his hand on his chin and strained his eyes to peer through the frosted glass. He appeared to be listening for something.

"…Nothin' there?" Yoshiki asked him.

"Naw, it's there."

Hikaru's instant reply caused Yoshiki to instinctively step back.

"Honestly, it's fine if these things are drawn to me, but why are they comin' to you?"

"What're ya gonna do to it?" Yoshiki asked.

"I'll smash it up and put it inside me like last time," *Hikaru* replied as if it wasn't a big deal.

He opened the door to the bathroom that Yoshiki used every day.

"Is that all right?" Yoshiki asked *Hikaru*.

"Yeah, it's fine. 'Cause I'm protectin' ya."

Hikaru smiled and closed the door behind him.

Yoshiki waited and waited, but the bathroom remained silent. There weren't even any signs of movement from *Hikaru*. Yoshiki considered calling out to him several times, but the incredibly heavy stillness made him hesitate to do even that.

Yoshiki wasn't sure how long he waited, but just as the light of the setting sun streaming into the changing room began to turn a deeper orange, there was a loud *thump* from inside the bathroom.

When he looked up, he heard an unpleasant noise of something being hit, along with splashing.

It was a heavy sound—as if something…or *someone*, had fallen into some water.

"Hikaru?! What happened?!"

There was no response. Yoshiki reached for the door, hesitated, and then flung it open with all his might.

He immediately regretted his decision. The air in the bathroom was stagnant and filled with a suffocating, sour stench.

“…Hey!” he called.

Hikaru was in the bathtub. It should have been empty after Yoshiki’s mom drained it the night before, but it was now filled with water, and *Hikaru* was completely submerged. Only his hand had managed to pull out of the tub and was gripping its edge.

“What’re ya doin’…?!” Yoshiki cried.

Yoshiki plunged his hands into the water to pull *Hikaru* out, but as soon as his hands entered, something thin wrapped around one of his arms.

It was hair.

Countless strands of long hair crawled up Yoshiki’s arm.

It reminded him of when he had touched *Hikaru*’s insides. It was just like that time. Something nonhuman was entering Yoshiki.

Before he even had a chance to call *Hikaru*’s name, the hair dragged Yoshiki down into the water. It coiled around his legs, waist, chest, and neck, and all he could see before him were countless bubbles floating about.

In each murky bubble were reflections of scenes that appeared and quickly disappeared—memories of the food court he was in earlier, yesterday’s events, last week’s, last month’s, the day Hikaru disappeared, and then Hikaru, and Hikaru, and Hikaru again.

The next thing he knew, Yoshiki found himself standing in the middle of a rice field.

The landscape didn’t belong to Kubitachi. Instead of terraced rice fields built with stacked stones, there was an endless expanse of flat, eerily perfect square rice paddies.

Yoshiki stood motionless upon a footpath, one of the many between each paddy that appeared perfectly straight, as if drawn with a ruler.

“…The bath,” he said.

When he looked up, where the sky should have been, there was a blank space filled with a seemingly artificial whiteness. It was an inorganic, unsettling white—the kind that would have a plastic odor to it.

“Ah… This is a dream. Must be.”

As he began mumbling to himself, a shadow fell upon his face.

There was no sun, but something was casting its shadow.

Beside him, standing at attention like a dear friend of many years, was a brain. The brain wriggled its massive, slug-like body and squirmed its head back and forth to look down at Yoshiki.

It had no eyes, but it was staring at him.

“Here, have some radish,” it said. The voice belonged to an older man from Yoshiki’s neighborhood.

“That boy of theirs sure is slow,” came a different voice, this time from behind Yoshiki.

When he turned around, there was another brain that was just like the first one. The voice belonged to the middle-aged wife of Nishidaya’s shopkeeper—a woman he would sometimes encounter behind the register at Nozomi Supermarket.

Before he knew it, Yoshiki found himself surrounded by numerous gigantic brains. Something moist and hot brushed against his cheek.

“Yer smart, aren’t ya? What’re ya doin’ for college?”

“Hey! Ain’tcha gonna cut yer bangs?”

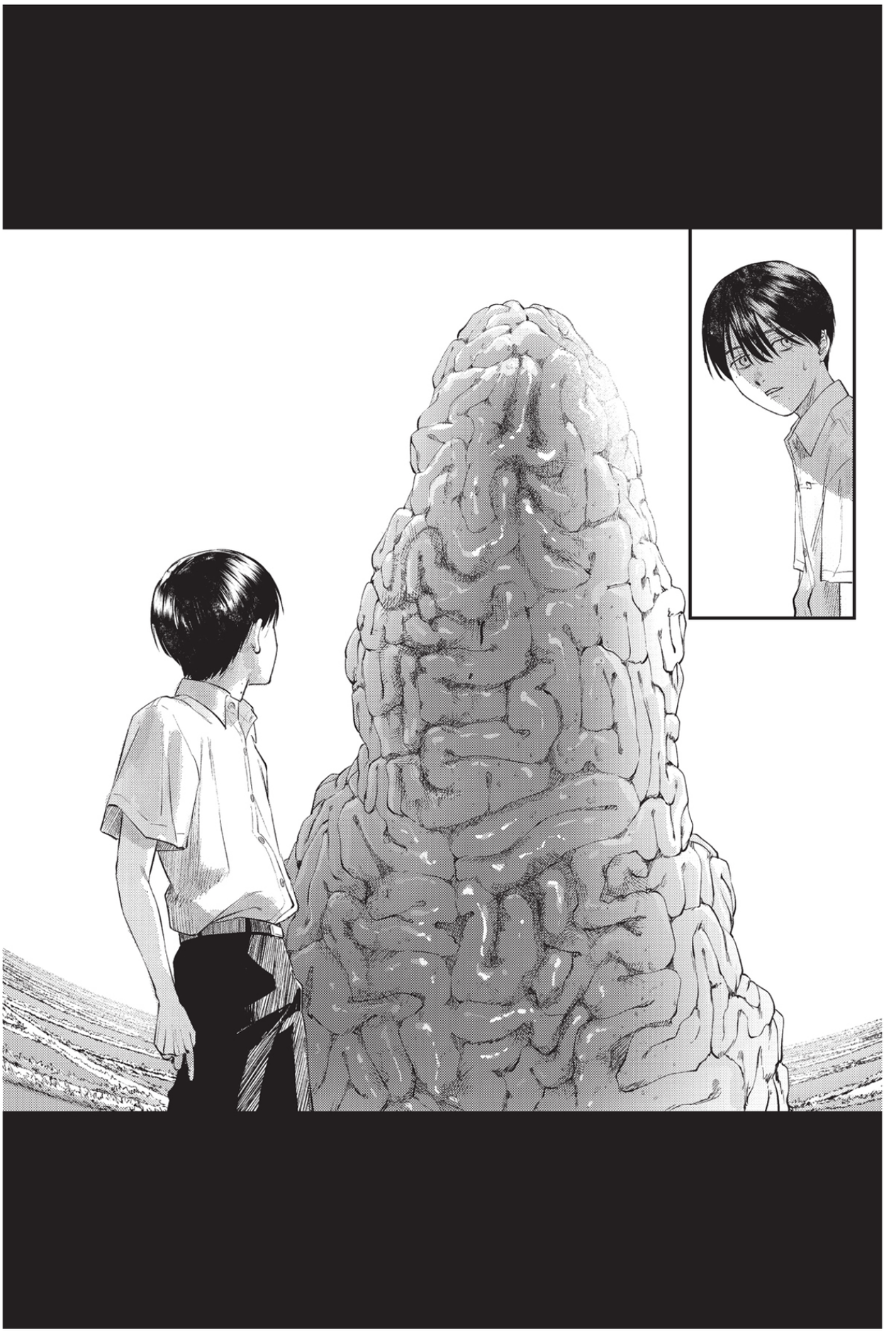
“Boy can’t even give a proper hello!”

“Those Tsujinakas were fightin’ again. I feel so bad for their son!”

He knew each and every voice, each word they spoke.

They were things Yoshiki had heard over and over again in his suffocatingly small village.

The brains slowly dragged their massive forms forward and closed in on Yoshiki.



“That father of yours ain’t no good.”

“Everyone’s worried.”

“Yer sister’s a real beaut. Think she’ll like my oldest?”

“Why doesn’t yer sister go to school? Ya best not spoil that girl, y’hear?”

“You can tell yer auntie anythin’.”

“Ain’t no trouble at all. Go on an’ take it, now.”

“That lady is awful scary. Them city girls’re so stuck-up.”

“My, yer so big! How tall are ya now?”

“My son helps out around the house more.”

“Y’ain’t interested in nobody?”

“You oughtta hurry ’n’ get hitched for yer mother’s sake.”

“Y’aint doin’ no club activities?”

“Lemme cut them bangs for ya!”

“Ya sound just like yer father. Yer becomin’ more and more like him every year.”

“He’s always got a gloomy look on his face.”

When he covered his ears, a sharp, stabbing pain ran through his temples.

A brain that was right in front of his eyes and ears asked, “What’re they doin’ keepin’ their lights on till the middle of the night?” Each damp fold radiated a nauseating warmth that grazed Yoshiki’s nose. He could no longer breathe.

“Yer gonna go to the city, leavin’ no one to take over the loggin’ business, ain’t ya? Y’oughtta think about the parents yer leavin’ behind.”

Just as the weight of the overlapping brains threatened to crush him, a voice called out to him from afar.

It was Hikaru’s voice.

Yoshiki could finally breathe again, and when he looked up, Hikaru was there.

It really was Hikaru.

It was him when he was in elementary school, wearing a pitch-black satchel—the clunky Dutch-inspired ones that Japanese grade-schoolers used—and glaring at Yoshiki while holding a small cardboard box.

“Don’t run away, ya dummy,” Hikaru told him.

Inside the box was a fledgling crow. It wasn’t breathing.

“That’s…,” said Yoshiki.

Crowly—Yoshiki remembered that was the bird’s name. Hikaru had named it, and the two of them took care of it together back when they were in elementary school. They had found it all alone without its parents near Hikaru’s grandfather’s shiitake farm.

But it died before making it to adulthood.

“Crowly’s dead, and it’s all yer fault, Yoshiki.”

“…Yer wrong.”

“Am not! It was yer turn to feed ’im today.”

Yeah. That’s right.

Hikaru had blamed Yoshiki then, too.

What was it that I said back to him again?

“He’s a livin’ creature… This sorta thing happens.”

“What?! It doesn’t just happen! Stop makin’ excuses!”

That’s right. That wasn’t enough for Hikaru. That’s the kind of kid he was.

Yoshiki knew that. He also knew that the Hikaru standing before him was Hikaru as an elementary school student, and a sharp pain shot through his forehead, striking him persistently, over and over again.

“And you forgot to feed him that one time, too, didn’t you?” Yoshiki said.

“But today was yer turn to feed ’im!”

The sharp pain continued, and Yoshiki wondered just who was repeatedly slashing away at him.

“Look, I’m sorry for forgettin’ to feed ’im. But it was just one time,” he told Hikaru.

“Well, he died durin’ that time.”

That’s right. He did.

“Ya forgot twice, and I fed him both those times,” Yoshiki countered.

Hikaru’s eyes widened slightly, and he didn’t know what to say. But barely a moment later, he snapped back, childishly and violently swinging his anger around with reckless abandon.

“Just admit it! Ya killed him, ya dummy!”

Hikaru was berating Yoshiki, saying that it was all his fault and that he was to blame.

He couldn't handle his own grief over Crowly's death and the fury he felt knowing there was no way to undo what happened, so the most he could do was throw all of it at someone else.

Hikaru's eyes, which were far more childish than high-school aged Hikaru's, were filled with sorrow.

I knew that, and yet…

"Huh? No way! Never!" Yoshiki shouted.

Despite understanding what Hikaru was going through, for some reason, Yoshiki's emotions became more juvenile. Both his temper and his tolerance for nonsense took a frightening nosedive, and they rampaged in his throat.

"It ain't my fault…!" he yelled at Hikaru.

"Huh? Ya make me sick!"

"Yer the one who makes me sick! And it's been me takin' care of Crowly all this time! Why do I have to take the blame?!"

"So how'd he die, then? He was doin' fine up till now."

"Beats me. Yer the one who makes him eat weird junk all the time. So don't ya reckon yer the one who killed 'im?!"

The truth was that Crowly wasn't long for this world from the moment he was separated from his parents. That much was clear, and Yoshiki understood it perfectly well in retrospect, but he couldn't stop himself at that moment.

"Yer always such a whiny wimp!" Hikaru shouted.

Hikaru's wiry hands grabbed Yoshiki by the collar, causing Yoshiki to lose his temper. Blood rushed to his head.

Yoshiki grabbed Hikaru's soft hair with his equally wiry hand. The satchel on his back, which was identical to Hikaru's, swung heavily as Yoshiki used his full weight to lunge at his friend.

Then, deep inside Yoshiki's ears, he heard a muffled *splash* and the sound of bursting bubbles.

2

"Takeshita from Class D asked to see me the other day," said Asako.

Yuuki squinted suspiciously and replied, "Huh? For real?"

But it was indeed for real. Asako confirmed as much, nodding enthusiastically as she gripped a bottle of soda that had begun to

sweat with moisture the moment she'd stepped out of the convenience store.

"Takeshita… He's that popular guy?" said Yuuki.

"Yep! I was all like, 'What?! No way!'"

"Don't tell me he…"

Asako had wondered the same, and as she went to see Takeshita, she couldn't deny the nervous excitement that had bubbled up inside her.

"He challenged me to an arm wrestlin' match in front of all the boys in his class! Felt like one of them underground fights I saw in a movie one time," Asako explained.

As if she somehow expected that result, Yuuki burst out laughing with a look on her face that said, "Of course that's what happened!"

"And I whooped his ass! Now I'm gonna end up famous for bein' an arm wrestlin' champ!"

"You oughtta be a legend!"

"Ugh, no!"

As they finished their playful banter with laughter, like the gently loosening knot on a bow, their conversation naturally came to an end.

"Anyway, I best get goin'," Yuuki said, and the two girls waved goodbye to each other.

This was how their farewells went on days when Asako walked home from school with Yuuki.

"Right. See ya tomorrow!" Asako called.

The sound of the railway crossing signal echoed, and Asako paused in the middle of waving to Yuuki.

Yuuki's house was in Kibogayama Town's urban district, so she lived closer to the school than Asako. It was just a short walk past the convenience store and beyond the railway crossing.

The barrier came down at the same railway crossing that Asako had walked across countless times.

Its red lights flashed.

There shouldn't have been anything out of the ordinary about the signal, but today, it gave Asako a very bad feeling. It carried something that felt eerie and unpleasant—as if someone was blowing their damp breath by her ears.

"Ya might wanna avoid that crossin' today," Asako cautioned.

Yuuki stopped and looked back at Asako. “Again?”

The setting sun shined upon her pure-white summer sailor uniform, causing the area around her shoulder to take on a soft, golden hue.

“Well, yer instincts have never been wrong. All right, then,” Yuuki said, fully trusting Asako’s advice. “See ya.”

She waved once more and made a turn at the intersection right before the railway crossing.

After confirming that Yuuki was out of view, Asako put in her earbuds and fiddled with her smartphone to play some music. This time, she made the volume a little louder than usual.

She could still hear the crossing signal. Its high-pitched clanging gradually transformed into a voice.

“It’s coming,” the voice said. “It’s coming. It’s coming. It’s coming.”

She neither knew what was coming nor why the voice was calling to her.

Before long, a train passed by, and the railway crossing opened up, but she didn’t even want to imagine what would have happened if someone had crossed.

It reminded her of the other day when Maki got everyone to walk through the forest path to Ashidori with him. There had been something there as well. She’d heard it. Not just her—Yuuki, Hikaru, and Yoshiki also heard the sound it made.

Hikaru had said it was a blank from a hunting rifle or deer scarer, but Asako knew it couldn’t have been that. They’d managed to come out of that unscathed, but Asako wondered what might have happened if they hadn’t been so lucky.

Today, Hikaru, Yoshiki, and Maki said they were all going to the arcade in Mion Mall, and they’d left the classroom together in a good mood. Asako could only hope that nothing happened to them. However, there remained an oddly foreboding feeling that she couldn’t shake—she could just sense that something bad was going to happen.

As Asako left the parking lot in front of the convenience store, she passed a woman and stopped in her tracks. It was a stout lady who wore a T-shirt with “Dance Club Life” printed on it, and had her hair tied back into a simple ponytail.

The woman seemed to have deliberately parked her car in front of the convenience store and walked briskly toward the railway crossing.

Asako wanted to call out to her and warn her not to go in that direction, but while she hesitated, the woman reached her destination and stood in front of the crossing. Less than a moment later, the train rushed past, and the railway crossing opened without incident.

The crossing signal stopped—as did the voices and the bad feeling in the air. It had all disappeared.

Asako hastily removed her earbuds. “Huh…?” she muttered.

The woman turned back toward her, and Asako hurried away.

It was only natural for Asako to run off, given the mixture of relief that nothing bad had happened and the eerie, uncanny feeling that had washed over her.

And no matter how hard she strained her ears, she could no longer hear the voice that had said, “It’s coming.”

3

“Yoshiki!” Hikaru shouted.

Water sloshed around in the bathtub, and drops of water fell from Hikaru’s—or rather, *Hikaru*’s—bangs. His sopping wet uniform clung to his skin, and he glistened gold in the light of the setting sun.

The warm taste of iron spread in Yoshiki’s mouth, and he realized that he had bitten into *Hikaru*’s arm.

“Huh…?”

Yoshiki’s voice was hoarse. He’d left a clear imprint of his teeth on *Hikaru*’s arm, and from the wound, the same insides that Yoshiki had seen once before broke loose, writhing and wriggling as they emerged.

“What…was I doing?”

Then *Hikaru*’s ominously colored insides slithered back into the bite mark, leaving only a dark red scar on his arm.

“Thank goodness…,” *Hikaru* said.

Hikaru took a deep breath and put his arms around Yoshiki’s shoulders. He glanced at something behind Yoshiki, causing Yoshiki to turn his head to look.

There was nothing there—just the bathroom ceiling.

“Hikaru…yer bleedin’…”

“Sorry.”

Hikaru heaved his shoulders up and down and hung his head. The blood that had seeped from the imprint of Yoshiki’s bite merged with drops of water into a stream that trickled down *Hikaru*’s arm.

Yoshiki realized that the deep scratch on *Hikaru*’s left cheek had also inflicted by his own hand.

“That thing got inside ya and used ya as a shield ’cause I let my guard down. I chased it out, so yer fine now,” *Hikaru* explained. He patted Yoshiki’s shoulders and stepped out of the bathtub.

“Sorry,” Yoshiki said.

He grabbed *Hikaru*’s outstretched hand and climbed out of the sloshing water. A sharp pain shot through his forehead again.

“What’re ya sorry for? Somethin’ about you draws attention from those things. This is on me for lettin’ it go before…”

Hikaru awkwardly pushed his wet hair off his forehead, but Yoshiki had half-ignored him; he was looking at his own hand instead.

He could still feel his hand forcing *Hikaru* into the water.

Am I gonna lay my hands on him again someday and take him out? Yoshiki wondered.

The mere thought made his face tense up.

Meanwhile, *Hikaru* shook his head like a dog drying itself off. He pulled a towel from a shelf in the changing room as if this was all routine.

Yoshiki’s T-shirts and shorts had been hanging on a clothesline in the yard, so the boys changed into those and replaced them on the line with their wet uniforms.

They were sitting on the veranda by the parlor and staring vacantly at the clothes they’d hung up to dry when *Hikaru* said, “I’m real glad ya came back.”

Yoshiki rummaged through a first-aid kit and applied a bandage to *Hikaru*’s cheek and gauze to his arm.

Outside, it was already getting dark, and the wind had become cooler. Before they knew it, the sun had started to set,

and from beyond the trees and bushes, they could hear insects chirping and buzzing.

"I was jus' sayin' how I was gonna protect ya, and then all this happened. I'm 'bout ready to cry," *Hikaru* added.

The gauze around his arm had a faint red stain. It took the form of an uneven ellipse… The exact shape of Yoshiki's bite mark.

"Why d'ya care about me that much?" Yoshiki asked.

"Not so sure myself. I just moved without thinkin'."

Yoshiki's gaze met *Hikaru*'s, and an incredibly frustrating and uncomfortable sensation came over him.

It seemed like *Hikaru* felt it, too. He sighed and scratched the back of his head, then quickly looked up at the ceiling.

"Let's change the subject!" he said. "Wanna go catch frogs or somethin'?"

They began to hear frogs croaking from the direction of the rice paddies.

"Naw. That's too country for me."

"Well, I love it. Lotsa stuff out here you won't find in the city."

"I know it ain't all bad. I just feel like it ain't where I belong…"

And there's Hikaru.

"Besides," Yoshiki added, "yer always havin' fun no matter where you are."

Instead of responding verbally, *Hikaru* flashed a peace sign and a toothy grin.

Then they heard a car pulling into the yard, followed by the front door swinging open. Yoshiki's mother and Kaoru had come home. As Yoshiki started to think of excuses for their soaked school uniforms, a chilling thought suddenly pierced his chest.

What if that monster had attacked Kaoru or Mom?

"Were you boys playing in the river or something?" Yoshiki's mother asked. She placed the grocery bags from Nozomi Supermarket on the dining table and looked out at the clothesline in exasperation.

Kaoru, who came in after her, had the same look on her face.

"Oh, Hikaru, you havin' dinner with us?" Yoshiki's mother offered.

Hikaru jumped up. "I sure will!" he said. "Hey Kaoru, what's fer supper today?"

Yoshiki studied *Hikaru*'s profile for a bit while *Hikaru* spoke to Yoshiki's mother and Kaoru as if he were part of the family.

Then *Hikaru* caught Yoshiki's gaze and looked back at him.

"Hey, Yoshiki! We're havin' Salisbury steak tonight."

Hikaru beckoned Yoshiki over with a grin so wide that you could almost hear it.

"Sounds nice," Yoshiki said.

He slowly got up, and a cool breeze, typical of summer evenings, blew in from behind him.



EPILOGUE

“Ugh, I really don’t like Kubitachi. It’s gloomy as hell,” Tanaka grumbled over the melody of an old J-pop tune playing through the car stereo.

His dry, bleach-blond hair swayed from the car’s air conditioner. Because his hair was dry, it allowed air to pass through easily, keeping him well-ventilated and cool.

The road to Nisayama was paved, but with so few people using it regularly, the surrounding grasses and plants had crept onto the path. Tanaka had heard that mercury used to be mined in the area, but it was currently off-limits due to loose soil and wild animal sightings, so few people went near the mountain.

The asphalt along the road was cracked in several places, causing the car to occasionally swerve and stumble along its path.

In the passenger’s seat was a cage containing a single hamster. Tanaka took a quick look through his sunglasses to check on the hamster and saw that it was twitching its nose just as it had been when they left Tokyo.

Right before coming onto a gravel road, the car hit a large bump and shook hard, causing both the hamster and Tanaka to bounce high in their seats. When Tanaka checked behind him through the rearview mirror, he saw a large fissure protruding from the road.

“You okay, little buddy?” he asked the hamster, but it didn’t respond.

They had already been in the sparsely populated village deep in the mountains, and now they had ventured even further into its depths. Tanaka stopped the car in a place devoid of any signs of humans. With the hamster cage in hand, he pushed through the thicket of bushes and branches, making his way down an unmarked path.

Cicadas buzzed all throughout the mountain. Their buzzing was incessant, and they continued without rest, just alive until the final days of the summer.

Tanaka thought it would drive him mad if he always had to listen to this. He resisted the urge to click his tongue in annoyance and ducked under a rope in front of an animal trail that was marked with a sign reading THE AREA BEYOND THIS POINT IS PRIVATE PROPERTY. DO NOT ENTER.

As he walked, he held the hamster cage at eye level.

"…The hamster…isn't making a fuss."

Not only was the hamster not making a fuss, it appeared to be totally free of stress as it nibbled away on a sunflower seed.

"Hey, is this really okay?" he asked the hamster with a slight smile on his face, but all it did was stuff its cheeks with food.

Just as Tanaka had walked a considerable distance down the unmarked path, the calm hamster squeaked out of nowhere.

As he pushed aside the surrounding bamboo grass, he came across a mud-stained crossbody bag lying there as if it had been waiting all this time to be discovered.

Tanaka carefully picked it up and checked its contents.

"Ahhh, I see. So that's how it is."

Tanaka scratched a red bump on the back of his right hand—a mosquito bite. Then he started making his way back down the path he'd come from.

As he drove toward the Takeda residence, he mentally prepared for the potentially difficult task ahead.

His grip on the steering wheel was oddly tight, though not from nerves. It was from excitement—or, more accurately, exhilaration.

It was going to be a troublesome job, but this could also be what he had been looking for. The key to his long-standing goal could be within reach. How could he not feel excited about it?

After passing through a country road filled with the cacophonous buzzing of cicadas, he came upon Mikasa, the man who had requested his help, waiting for Tanaka in front of the Takeda residence with Takeda himself.

Both men wore expressions so serious that Tanaka almost laughed at the sight of them.

"I see you ain't changed none—always lookin' a mess…," Mikasa muttered under his breath. As he spoke, the sun reflected in his glasses, whiting out his lenses and obscuring his expression.

“Oh, this? It’s on purpose. *Those things* are more attracted to me when I’m lookin’ rough, y’know?”

Tanaka burst into loud laughter but stopped when Takeda cleared his throat in irritation. Takeda, who already spoke loudly, was the type of guy whose voice grew three times louder when he got angry, and it took a long time for his temper to subside.

“Enough chitchat,” Mikasa said. “You comin’ in or what?” He jerked his head, using his chin to point to the main house of the Takeda estate.

“Yes, sir. Please fill me in on the details. Also, I found something nice up in the mountains,” Tanaka said before adding, “Ah, but is it all right if we change locations?”

Takeda turned back and looked at him in annoyance as if to say, “Whassat now?”

Even as they descended into the inhabited areas of the village, the cicadas buzzed as loudly as ever.

Deep within the premises of Nisa Shrine, in a room of the Mikasa residence, Takeda, Mikasa, and Matsushima were gathered in front of Tanaka as he dropped an absurd amount of sugar into the green tea that was put out for him. Mikasa had knowingly brought out a jar of sugar cubes when serving tea to Tanaka—something that would never have happened in Takeda’s house.

But that wasn’t the only reason Tanaka had insisted on changing their meeting place to Nisa Shrine.

“Now, why the hell didja make us move to Mikasa’s place in this heat?!” Takeda demanded, the bulging veins on his temples clearly visible even through Tanaka’s sunglasses. Tanaka wondered how this man could possibly manage to stay angry in such sweltering heat.

“I’m not trying to mess with you guys or anything! It’s just that it’s safe here,” Tanaka said.

The sight of Tanaka sipping his sugar-saturated green tea had Matsushima staring at him in disbelief—despite the fact that Matsushima had come to the meeting himself with a huge bottle of liquor.

Tanaka looked around at the three men and asked, “So, how are things in the area?”

A brief pause followed before Mikasa, knowing his role, broke the silence.

“Well, they ain’t goin’ great. Old Lady Matsuura died in an unnatural way. Her death was a strange one despite never steppin’ foot in the mountains.”

“That lady with the scary face, huh…? I see. And what about your father, Takeda?”

“He keeps sayin’, ‘I’m next.’ An’ he’s been holed up in his room ever since.” Takeda’s brow creased into a pained expression.

Tanaka couldn’t hold back his laughter. “Da-ha-ha! I knew it!” he shouted.

“Now, you listen! Someone died here! And it might well be ’cause you an’ that dang company of yours keep interferin’ in our affairs!”

“Well, I’d think having a large corporation push forward with development despite having no knowledge of the area would be more concerning…”

Tanaka didn’t remember the exact details, but he felt like the people from that other company had said something about compact city planning. If something like that had happened in Kubitachi, he couldn’t even begin to imagine what things would look like now.

“I wish you’d show a little gratitude to my ‘company’ for putting a stop to all that.”

Tanaka knew full well that Takeda, Mikasa, and Matsushima harbored a deep mistrust of his “company.” People in places like these already despised outsiders as it was. They couldn’t handle things that were unknown or unfamiliar—they were wary of those things and had no desire to bridge any gaps in their understanding.

“I’m just conducting a little research in exchange…”

Tanaka directed his attention to Mikasa, the head priest of Nisa Shrine, who adjusted his glasses and reluctantly nodded.

“You know how the Indous’ son went missin’, don’cha?” he said. “Well, I reckon their ritual failed. And that’s why somethin’ strange happened with…that thing…”

Tanaka had figured as much. He chuckled softly and placed the crossbody bag he had picked up on the mountain onto the

table. “Well, I went to that mountain…and found this on the ground.”

The first one to react to the mud-stained crossbody bag was Matsushima. “That’s…the bag Kouhei used to use. So his son took it with him?”

Incidentally, Kouhei Indou had worked at Matsushima’s sawmill. And so, to make things easier, Tanaka handed the bag over to Matsushima.

“Open it and see what’s inside.”

Matsushima kept his eyes on Tanaka as he slowly unzipped the crossbody bag, then carefully pulled out the contents.

“What the—?!” he screamed. “The heck is this…?”

The object that fell from Matsushima’s hand was a black lump small enough to fit in his palm. It made a wet, almost squelching sound as it dropped and rolled onto the table. Tanaka picked it up and held it between his index finger and thumb.

“A black…stone?” Mikasa said, leaning in.

Tanaka showed him the “front” of the lump. It had two small, round holes and a crooked slit, and on its sides were two holes that appeared to have been gouged out.

“This probably used to be a human head, I think,” Tanaka remarked.

The other three men shuddered. Both Mikasa’s and Matsushima’s faces became frozen with fear, and even the combative Takeda took a few steps back on the tatami floor, saying, “What’s a thing like that doin’ in there…?!”

“Beats me! But it has powerful protective powers. Having this on hand prevents most of the nasty ones from getting near you. At first, I thought this little guy was the reason the mountain’s been cleared of its impurities…,” Tanaka explained with a chuckle.

“Wait…,” Mikasa cut in. “The impurities ain’t there no more?”

“That’s right. The impurities that used to permeate the entire mountain are no longer there. Now you can enter the area just fine, but it’d be a bit of a stretch to say it’s all because of this thing. Also, I went and set up a barrier of sorts at the shrine here on the Mikasas’ property. I wanted to create a *safe space*. When I went to check on it today, that barrier was pretty banged up.

That's not a good sign, y'know, seeing as it was quite the special barrier."

Tanaka had come to Nisa Shrine partly because he'd wanted to check on the condition of the barrier he'd set up. The extent of the damage had nearly made him laugh out loud as he passed under the torii gate leading to the shrine grounds.

"So…what're you sayin'?" Takeda asked.

Tanaka looked around at all three men's faces.

Mikasa, the head priest of Nisa Shrine, which took its name from Mount Nisayama.

Takeda, a landowner and the leader of Kubitachi's volunteer fire brigade.

Matsushima, the owner of a sawmill in Kubitachi, a place with flourishing farming, forestry, and lumber industries…or, to put it more accurately, the village's *only* industries.

In front of these three men, who could be said to be key figures in Kubitachi Village, Tanaka made a declaration.

"Something's come down from the mountain."

This left the men completely speechless, but Tanaka pressed on.

"My guess is it's hiding out somewhere in some other form."

"What…should we do?" Mikasa asked, looking Tanaka in the eye.

Perhaps the reality of the situation still hadn't settled in for Mikasa, or maybe he was still telling himself that this all had to be some kind of mistake.

But it wasn't enough to just ask what they should do. Tanaka knew dealing with this *thing* wouldn't be as easy as the villagers imagined.

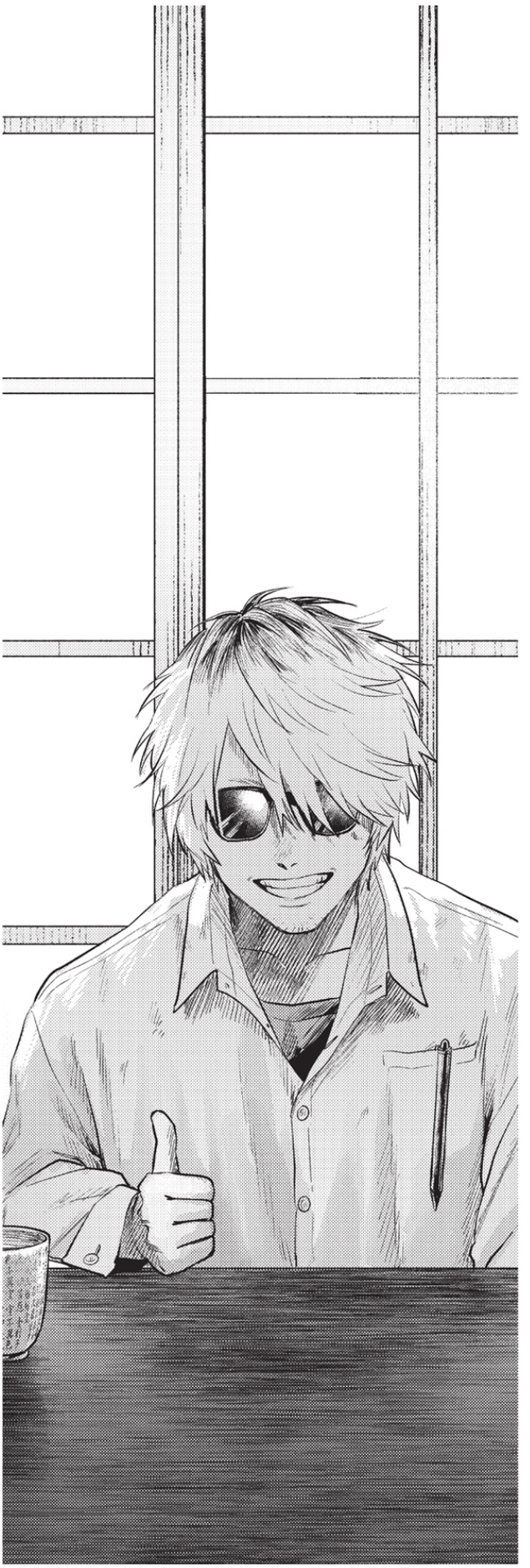
"Well…," Tanaka began.

He drank the last of his sweet green tea, and the gritty sound of the undissolved sugar in his mouth followed.

Some of the sugar had half-melted into a slurry that clung to the bottom of the teacup. The slurry formed into what seemed like a head, arms, a torso, and legs—the shape of a person.

Tanaka then snorted slightly and gave the three men a thumbs-up. "How about we smoke it out?"

END OF VOLUME 1





AFTERWORD

Mio Nukaga

I believe that for many of you, this will be our first time meeting. My name is Mio Nukaga, and I'm the author responsible for adapting *The Summer Hikaru Died* into a novel.

The pronunciation of my name is "Mee-oh New-kah-gah." Some find it surprisingly difficult to pronounce the *Nukaga* part, but it's similar to how you say *Utada*, the surname of the famous singer Hikaru Utada. Usually, I write coming-of-age and sports-related novels.

I first read *The Summer Hikaru Died* in July of 2022.

I'm a novelist, but I sometimes teach at a university. My classes mostly consist of creative writing workshops aimed at students who want to write novels.

I often exchanged recommendations for prose, manga, and anime with a student named K, who was enrolled in my course at the time.

One day, just before summer break, K approached me, saying, "I've found this super interesting manga. The first volume just came out, but I've been following it online ever since it began its web serialization because of how interesting it is, and it's just so good—I wish I could write a novel like that."

The manga that K introduced to me with such enthusiasm was *The Summer Hikaru Died*.

"Please read it," he'd said. "I'd like to hear your thoughts."

With K's strong recommendation, I went to a bookstore on my way home and bought the first volume of *The Summer Hikaru Died*.

K's ability to both find interesting works and present their greatness in a way that resonates with others is second to none, so I clearly remember being really excited to read *The Summer Hikaru Died* as I made my way back home.

And when I did read it, I found *The Summer Hikaru Died* to be incredibly entertaining and felt truly happy to have been introduced to such a great work.

As it so happens, when I was writing this afterword, I messaged K, saying, "Sorry if this is sudden, but would it be okay to mention you? I won't use your real name," to which he immediately replied, "Please go with 'K'!" That's how I was able to write this anecdote.

After reading Volume 1, I eagerly awaited the release of Volume 2 as just another reader.

It was right around that time that I received a request from an editor at Kadokawa to write the novel adaptation. Writing a novel on my own from scratch and adapting a manga, anime, or movie by another creator into a novel are two very different processes, despite the fact that novels are the end product in both cases. With an adaptation, there are more things to be mindful of and cautious with, and it feels like I'm using my brain in a slightly different way compared to when I'm writing my own work.

The creature known as a novelist is one that wants to do everything it can to send the stories it's conceived out into the world, so when it comes to adaptation work, I try to only accept projects that I find to be genuinely fascinating or ones from creators that I truly love.

I have to feel like I won't regret using my time—time that should have been spent writing a volume of an original work—for that particular work or creator. If I can feel like that about a work, then it's one that I can enjoy adapting into a novel.

So when I was asked to novelize *The Summer Hikaru Died*, I instantly replied, "I'll do it. I'll make the schedule work."

Writing a lengthy review of *The Summer Hikaru Died* as just another reader would make me come off as some annoying fan,

which would be a little embarrassing, so I'm happy to let you know it was *that* enjoyable to me.

And so, I somehow made the schedule work and successfully completed the novel version of *The Summer Hikaru Died*, but I'll leave it to you, the readers, to judge whether or not I've stayed faithful to the original or have expanded on it uniquely through this novelization. I've also been asked by my editor to share my thoughts on the adaptation process, so I'll go ahead and do so, but I'll keep it brief.

Personally, I focused on capturing what *The Summer Hikaru Died* can evoke uniquely through the medium of a novel. I believe the appeal of novels lies in their ability to depict emotions through detailed descriptions of things like the scenes a character sees, the sounds they hear, and the temperatures and sensations they feel with their skin. I was particularly focused on those points when adapting this work.

The time I spent writing was mostly occupied by the protagonist, Yoshiki Tsujinaka (I used the kanji for his name in the Japanese version for better visual recognition and readability), so it was almost like my writing process was spent entirely in conversation with him.

I spent a lot of time thinking about the destination of his casual glances, picking up on the true intentions lurking within his subtle expressions, and exploring how he might perceive the world beyond the manga's panels and story. It was a lot, but also very fun.

Also, one memory from this project that's stayed with me is when I asked the original author, Mokumokuren, about the color of *Hikaru*'s "insides." The reply I got was, "There's no clear color, but it's a hue that would wear away at your sanity just by looking at it," and after that, I remember thinking, *Oh, this is where a novelist can really show off their skills*.

If you happen to be reading this afterword before starting the main story, I encourage you to pay attention to *Hikaru*'s "insides."

I was debating with myself on how to close out this afterword, but it looks like the latest chapter of *The Summer Hikaru Died* just went up, so I think I'll end things here.

This adaptation ends in the middle of the story, and there's a lot more to go, so I hope to see you all again.

AFTERWORD BY THE ORIGINAL AUTHOR

When I read the draft that Ms. Nukaga had written, I remember being completely absorbed in it, even though it was my own story. The characters and the world had even greater depth in prose format, and I felt as if it reached those hard-to-scratch areas that the manga couldn't fully depict. It felt incredibly reassuring to know that there's someone in the world who understands the characters of Yoshiki, *Hikaru*, and Hikaru so well. Ms. Nukaga is amazing!

When I create manga, I actually often start by imagining things in writing. I clearly describe the staging, scenes, emotions, and other parts that don't make it into the text of the manga before putting them out as art. I want to use almost no words to express things that can easily be explained in words, so as I create, I always struggle with how to draw things in a way that conveys what I'm trying to express. However, after reading the novel version, I felt like it depicted all the parts that, in most cases, I had to reluctantly cut from the manga. That was incredibly satisfying. It's fascinating how the same story can offer a wealth of perspectives between the manga and novel versions.

Allow me to express my heartfelt gratitude to Ms. Nukaga and everyone who dedicated themselves to this novelization project. Thank you very much.

Mokumokuren






THE SUMMER
HIKARU
DIED
2
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