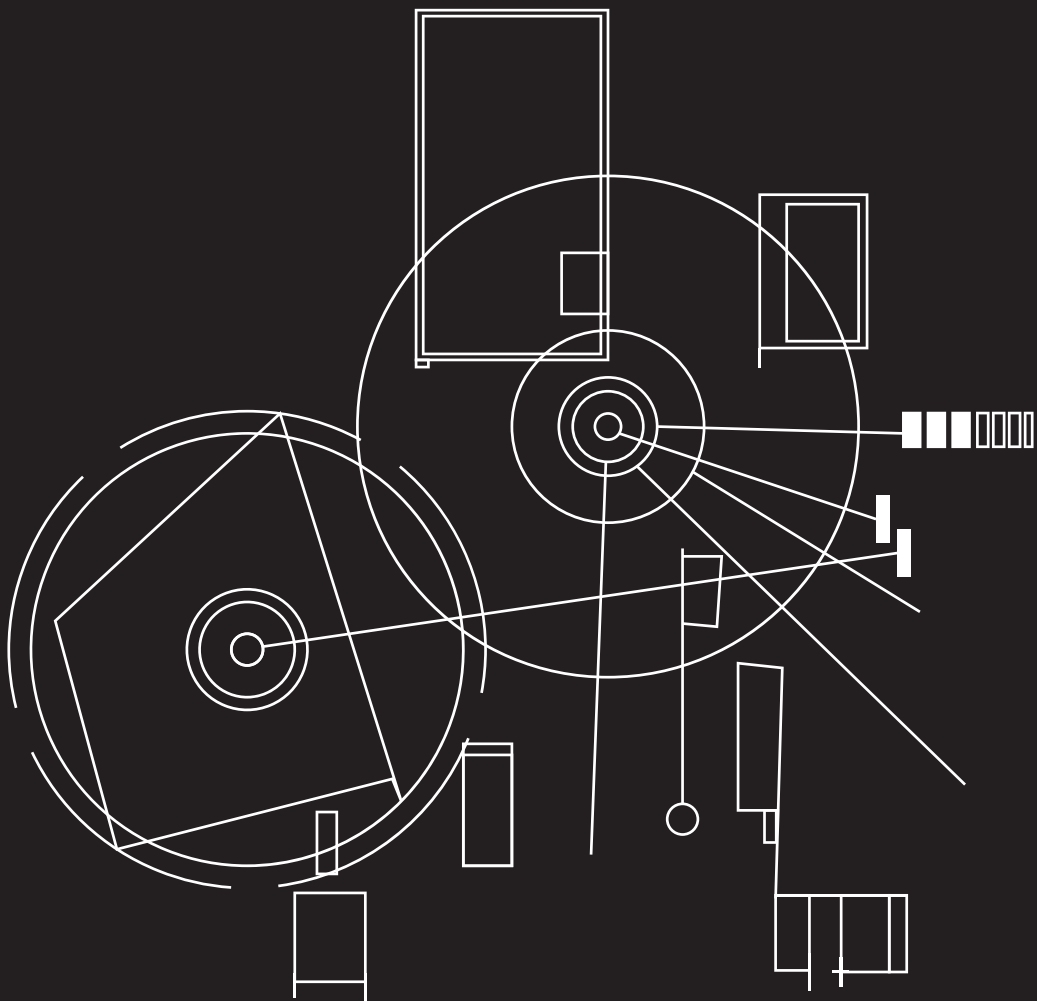


GIRLS' NEXT TOUR



u/CorrectGrapefruit





GIRLS' NEXT TOUR

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SPOILER ALERT

This work of fan-fiction takes place
AFTER the ending of the Girls' Last Tour manga.

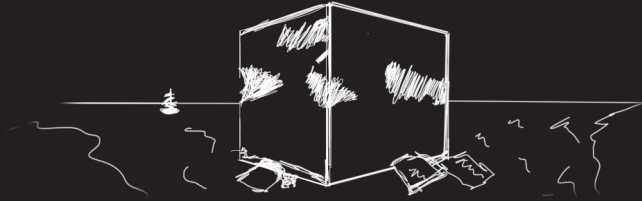
The story is based on the events
that transpired in the anime, manga and
some of the anthology comics.

Please support the original work by Tsukumizu!

Dedicated to all the fans that never
gave up on the inseparable hearts
of Chito and Yuuri!

Chapter 1

Message



It was already past noon when Chito opened her eyes, above the vast mechanical city they left behind just the day before. With barely any sleep, her vivid and strange dreams seemed to skip through a lot of the events that transpired after they left their home up to the last climb. She remembered some part of her dream where she was walking hand in hand through a wheat field together with Yuuri and it almost felt like they were happy and in heaven. A little bit dazed from the short slumber, it took her a moment to realize her current predicament. They spent what felt like a whole lifetime climbing up to the last layer to find just a strange derelict block settled long before their time.

Opening her eyes, Chito rose up from underneath the only blanket they had left in the world, careful not to wake Yuuri up. Although she was used to sleeping on hard surfaces, it always left her cramped the next day. Soaking the warm sun from above, she stretched her arms and yawned. “Mmm... the sun feels so much warmer up here.” Chito thought to herself as she stretched. Looking at the far distance, the sun vastly illuminated the derelict city beneath them, melting some of the snow from the night before on the top layer. She couldn’t help but enjoy the view of the unobstructed horizon as it went on forever in the distance of the deserted city below.

Yuuri was still in a deep slumber laying down on the cold ground, mumbling and smiling in her sleep as she always used to do. Chito with a smile kept watching her and couldn’t help but think about how she was probably dreaming about all the tasty food she could eat in her dreams. “Even after all we’ve been through, she still only has food on her mind.”

They spent the whole night climbing the exhausting and dangerous stairwell up to the last layer and a short hearty slumber was all that she needed for now to calm her mind. After Yuuri wakes up, they had to come up with a plan of what they were going to do next. For now, she didn’t have the heart to wake her up just yet, as her dreams were probably giving her more comfort than what this cruel existence could offer.

Feeling slightly peckish, Chito leaned to scour through their backpacks to see if she missed something the other day. Besides a few items they managed to keep, she could feel the solid edges of the package they found back on their journey, containing the bomb with the lightable fuse. “I guess... we could use this to blow ourselves up... in the end...” she thought to herself “I hope it will be painless, she doesn’t deserve to suffer...” closing her backpack, her expression changed to one of sadness at the thought of losing the only person in the world

that matters the most to her. The grim thoughts were always clouding her mind like the darkest and most frightful darkness that follows you around.

Still, the whole concept of death seemed sublime to her, even after they were surrounded by it from the very start of their lives. Friends and everyone else in the world are currently in their graves, perished from war and hunger. Some of them passed so quickly in their lives, that they never managed to remember their names and faces. The killing for what little food remained in the world, never seemed to stop. It felt like blind luck that they have lasted this long and managed to leave that war of hunger behind. Probably just like their grandfather, they had to eventually accept their fate. Food was just so scarce in this world that giving up and dying from starvation was a common occurrence. If the concept of heaven was true everyone they loved waited for them on the other side and she and Yuuri would eventually join them soon.

Nevertheless, even if this reality was hopeless and devoid of any happiness, she had that constant urge to keep fighting for her friend's sake. She would never abandon the only companion in the whole world that brings her happiness and a reason to live, even with all the incredible and painful memories they shared.

"I guess... our first priority is to look for food... We ate up the last ration packet last night." she thought to herself, looking down at the empty packet of ration they had the last night. Their backpack weighing even less could make the rest of their journey easier. "Maybe there is something edible up here on the last layer... I guess we will worry about that when Yuu wakes up... For now, I just want to enjoy the warm sun laying next to her."

Having her thoughts to herself, the next hour she kept repeating the same questions in her head. "What's next for us? - What is this place up here? - Could there be more to this layer that we didn't see last night in the darkness?" She knew that it was crucial to make a decision right here and now if they were going to go back down or continue their journey on the last layer. The option to just sit here and accept their fate and eventually starve or freeze to death was far from what she had in mind since last night, but no matter what they decide it still felt kind of hopeless. Living sure has been nice, but all she wanted was to make even more memories with Yuuri. However, unless they find a shelter or food up here, they would eventually starve or freeze to death.

Chito felt like she couldn't be selfish in this situation, she had to fight for Yuuri's sake. Even if she felt disheartened at this moment and everyone she knew was gone from this life, she wanted to spend what little time she had left with her friend. "I can't give up for Yuuri..." grasping her own hand beneath the blanket she thought to herself. "I just... can't..."

A short time passed before Yuuri woke up from her slumber, mumbling as she brushed her eyes and drool from her mouth... "Uhhhh.... hey Chii-chan... you are awake..." she softly mumbled and yawned stretching her arms.

"Hey, Yuu. I've been for some time now - I didn't want to wake you up. You looked so adorable sleeping and mumbling there next to me." Chito replied to her, as Yuuri continued stretching her arms. "Do I have to guess that you were dreaming about food again with all that mumbling?"

"You know me Chii-chan..." she smiled "It sure was a tasty dream. We were eating a lot of fish we caught from a lake just like the one we saw in a picture that time - I really want to have a fishy again... soooo tasty" slightly smacking her lips, the thought of eating fish was making her peckish again. "Ahh, the sun... it's so warm. Chii-chan, I love this view, I feel like I can reach the sky from up here if I just held out my hand." she smiled reaching up to the midday sky, covered with just a few clouds one could hope for on a clear day.

"Yeah, at least the view was worth coming up here Yuu!" Chito replied as she kept looking into the far distance. However, something kept worrying her and she had to talk to Yuuri about the questions that have been troubling her ever since she woke up from her slumber.

"So, umm - Yuu - What do we do next?" Chito with a worried look turned around to face her "I mean we got up here... but we have no supplies, food and we had to leave our broken 'Kettenkrad' behind. So far we only found this strange block. I thought grandpa told us to come up here for a reason but - we found no one and nothing..."

Yuuri looked back at her as her expression changed with a worrying look on her face. "Oh right - yeah - um..." sitting back on the cold ground she looked around, she felt speechless about their current situation as well "...maybe we can explore this layer or go back down and look for something? I mean we didn't see much in the darkness what's out there in the distance... there must be a place where we can call home Chii-chan" she replied scratching her head.

“But - hey, at least we reached the top together. Wasn’t that our plan all along?”

Yuuri seemed unsure what to say next as her eyes filled with worry staring back at Chito. It was the first time since they left their village that they were unsure what to do next. Up to this moment, they had supplies and a simple goal to survive as they reach the top of the city with the hope that they will eventually find a home, food or someone else, even other survivors that could help them out. But without any supplies and food left, she felt hopeless about what they would do next.

“Do you think we made a mistake climbing up here Chii-chan?” Yuuri asked her.

“I don’t know what to do - I just really don’t know Yuu - !” Chito replied with tears in her eyes as she looked back at her. “I was thinking of it before you woke up Yuu - even if there is no hope for us - I just - I am really scared...” Chito squeezed her own hands looking down on the ground with sadness in her eyes “I really don’t want to die Yuu...” slowly tears started clouding her eyes as little droplets fell down on the cold ground “Yuu - please promise me that - you won’t die too... Let’s just keep on trying to survive and have wonderful memories together - even if it’s for just a little while.” she could barely muster any words as tears streamed down her face, unable to keep herself from crying.

“Please... Yuu - Promise me - I don’t know what I will do, without you!” sobbing loudly she laid her head down on Yuuri’s chest, holding her tight. She felt as if the whole world fell on her shoulders and losing her only friend in the world, was the worst nightmare she could ever imagine. “Please Yuu... Even if the world and everyone else we know is gone, I know that we only had each other... Even if there is nothing after this - I know that while we were alive you were there by my side...”

Yuuri kept trying to hold her tears in, seeing Chito in a distress always felt like a sharp needle punching deeply through her heart. “Chii-chan, please don’t cry!” Yuuri said clinging her arms close around her. “We will figure something out - You are the smartest person in the world ... Don’t cry please...” She laid her head on top of hers, as tears started flowing down her face as well “You know that I will never leave your side - Chii-chan.” Yuuri gently wiped the tears of Chito’s face with her hands looking down at her and gently smiling.

“I never wanted to give up Chii-chan - Let’s explore this layer as well there

must be more here! We will find more supplies if we work together just like before - “Yuuri hugged her even tighter, sobbing as well. “Let’s continue our journey we still have so much to explore in this world together - I want to find that lake in my dream with all the fish, and catch tasty fishy with you.” gently holding Chito’s hand she placed it near her heart “as long as my heart beats, I will always be there for you Chii-chan.”

Looking up at Yuuri, Chito’s hand kept shaking from fear as she felt the rhythmic beating of Yuuri’s heart. The organic machine that pumped life through every human in their lifetime was beating only for her. Sobbing even louder she felt completely helpless and scared as she tightly held onto Yuuri’s chest. “Yuu... what are we - gonna do?!” It was like mountains of pain that she accumulated through their journey was rushing out of her, in a form of emotion that she could only feel for her close companion.

“I will be there for you Chii-chan - I promise.” Yuuri smiled through the tears, being close to Chito was comfortable enough in all kinds of situations. “We will figure something out - I want to spend the rest of my life on a journey with you - Chii-chan.”

Composing herself, Chito always felt serene holding Yuuri close to her. Just like when she squeezed her hand on that last climb, she felt a sense of serenity and safety every time she was close to her. It was a feeling she always had for her since a long time ago. She kept reminding herself of all kinds of vivid dreams she had of Yuuri where they were together and living a peaceful and comfortable life. With tears in her eyes, she felt that before they were gone from this life she had to tell her about one of this dream that she kept buried deep inside her for months.

“Yuu - do you remember back in that place - where we watched the moving pictures?” Chito said laying her head on Yuuri’s chest squeezing her jacket tightly “I - I was a bit embarrassed to tell you - but I had a really vivid dream when I fell asleep. In my strange dream, I felt like we were in a completely different world where we were happy. We had a place we can call home, and we made all these plans about getting married, traveling the world and try all kinds of delicious things we can eat. And at the end of the dream - you leaned to kiss me. But just before you did I woke up.” she gently smiled as her face flushed through the tears. “Yuu - Do you think our dreams are just our lives in an alternate reality and our happy versions of ourselves really exist somewhere? Is it that selfish of me that I only ask our reality to be a happy one as well Yuu?”

I want to be happy and alive with you, I really want that more than anything in my life.”

“Chii-chan, even if something bad happens to us, I will try to give everything in my life to make this a happy reality for you. Chii-chan - you are the only thing that matters to me in this world.” Yuuri replied and blushed still holding her close. “We will keep trying to live together even after everything - If not at least we will be together at the very end Chii-chan and... we can be happy after that too...”

“Yuuri... I just - I love you more than anything - in this empty world...” Chito replied flustered as she confessed her true hidden feelings for Yuuri that she held so tightly hidden in her heart. To her friend that she felt like she spent a whole lifetime with since she could remember. Being so close in her arms she always felt at harmony, even if she felt like the whole wide world wanted them erased.

“Hey, Chii-chan...” Yuuri said through her smile “I remember that scene from that moving picture where the guy and the girl did something they called a kiss... and I remember you told me that is what when someone loves another person they do that - kissing thing - “ she smiled as her cheeks flushed locking her teary eyes with Chito “- and Chii-chan... I wanted to do that with you ever since then... and I heard that when a person feels bad they also kiss too and - I know you feel bad at the moment and - I don't want you to feel bad anymore”

Blushing Chito looked at her through her tears and she let out a gentle smile, it was all that she could do laying peacefully in her arms. “Yuu - I want nothing else in this world right now but to kiss you as well...” Looking in each other's eyes she felt as if her heart would jump right out of her body. They slowly leaned towards each other and softly locked their lips together, blushing as if their faces would permanently stay red.

Kissing for the first time felt like the whole world stopped in its tracks. For them, nothing could ruin this moment, not even the cruel reality that these two lonely souls were born in. It was as if for a brief moment they were transported in the dream that Chito cherished forever, the one where they could plan their future together, where they would get married, travel the world and share mountains of delicious food they could find. It was where the warmth of their home and family gave them comfort, happiness and all they desired in life. And when they would eventually grow old and perish in each other's arms, they would

have something to show to the world that they were together and nothing could ever tear them apart. Not even the mountains of difficulties one individual could endure in their existence.

Shortly after they broke off from their kiss, both of them blushed and softly smiled as they looked in each other's eyes, embracing as they laid back down on the ground - The ground didn't feel so cold anymore. "Chii-chan - I am so happy every time I see you smiling," Yuuri giggled softly as she blushed a bright color of red "I feel so wonderful!"

Chito smiled back at her as this serene moment she shared with her friend, made her warm all over "It's like that time we drank that mysterious beer drink. It made me feel so warm and happy inside, I've never been happier in my life being here with you, even if it's up here at what seems like the end of the world _"

"Chii-chan - I love you more than food..." Yuuri replied and giggled, still embracing her. "Oh, Yuu... You always think about food, even now when we kissed. I swear you will eat me one day." Chito said with a wide smile on her face.

"Hey - it's Chii-chan first - then all the yummy food second!" Yuuri grumbled playfully in her embrace.

"Yuuri... you are sooo, crazy..." Chito replied unable to help herself as she laughed "I swear - I will drown you in a hotpot when I get the chance" they both giggled loudly laying down on the cold ground. Laughter felt like the right medicine at this moment.

"Hey, Chii-chan - I know!" Yuuri exclaimed as she kept looking at her "Let's get married when we find a home!" her face flushed even with more with this question out of nowhere. Chito with a surprised reaction on her face kept looking back at her not sure what to say.

"You remember in that moving picture, that guy gave the girl a ring and they got married and they loved each other forever - I remember you told me that marriage is when two people want to stay together for the rest of their lives and that is what I want us to do Chii-chan!" Yuuri said and smiled as she left Chito dumbstruck by the sudden request she made. "Look - I even found this thing that looks like a ring after we watched that moving picture." Yuuri pulled

out a grenade pin from her pocket that she found way back on one of the layers they passed before. “I was keeping it all this time to give it to you someday when we found a home. But - I want to give you the ring right now!” Yuuri kept smiling as Chito blushed even more.

“Yuu - “ Chito was left speechless as she looked at Yuuri who stoop up and got down on her knee presenting the ring to Chito “As I remember the man in that moving picture got down on one knee like this and held out the ring to the girl - I remember you told me it’s called proposing. So this is what I propose to you - that we will find a home and get married and we will be happy - Chii-chan...”

Chito with tears in her eyes gently held out her hand as Yuuri placed the grenade pin on her finger and held her hand “I promise you Chii-chan - we will always be together...”

“Yuu - I - “ Weeping again she fell down in Yuuri’s embraced and hugged her tightly as if she would have floated away otherwise “Yuu! I - promise you that we will find a home and we will get married!”

After some time passed both of them lay down embraced on the ground, Chito held out her hand up to the sky to inspect the grenade pin. The pin used to house a live grenade years ago as corrosion had to show for it, discarded in one of the wars that were raging on for years on the bottom layers. “Yuu, I really hope the grenade didn’t kill someone. Sadly, these are the remnants of the world before us. I will never completely understand why humankind was so spiteful to each other and every living being. Instead of happiness, they kept inventing horrible ways to destroy each other. I am really happy that the bomb we found was never used to kill someone. But it makes me sad that we had to destroy the construction machine.”

“Chii-chan, we had to do that to save the life of the fish.” Yuuri replied looking up at her and gently held her hand “When we find a home we will make it up for all the destruction we also caused below.”

“Yuu - I promise we will find that home - and I will find you a beautiful ring for you as well.”

Moment of tranquil washed over them as they laid up there on top of the

world, even at the edge of existence they could still find happiness in just being next to each other. Even if the world was hopeless, they still found strength in each other to make it work for them.

“Chii-chan. You know last night we couldn’t see what was up here it was really dark. But I think we should see if we can find something.” Yuuri got up from the ground as she held out her hand to help Chito up as well. “You are right Yuuri. Let’s inspect this stone. I had a strange dream that we could pass through it and we were in a wheat field or something...” Chito replied as both of them walked around the stone inspecting every corner. “But I am not sure what it could have meant.”

In the back of the ruined part of the stone, they found a strange inscription that was written in a language that probably belonged to the machines they found on the layers underneath.

“Yuu, I saw this in my dream but I have no idea what it means, I think I noticed it last night but...” Chito said as she trailed her hand along with the strange inscribed part of the stone. She could feel a strange vibration and a faint electrical sound coming from inside the stone that they never noticed before. “Do you think it means something Chii-chan?”

“I can’t understand the whole scripture - but I think this writing here says ‘Towada-Hachimantai’?”

“What does ‘Towada-Hachimantai’ mean Chii-Chan?”

“I have no idea Yuu. It’s maybe the name of the city?” Chito replied back as she ran her fingers on the smooth surface of the stone just trying to look for any other clues that might help them solve this new mystery. “Do you think that maybe there is something up here Yuu?”

“Chii-chan look - out there in the distance!” Yuuri replied as she pointed far beyond the staircase. The sun illuminated more of the world and it seemed like the layer went on forever in the distance. At first glance, the layer seemed empty, but if you looked carefully there was something in the far distance.

Chito and Yuuri felt that there was something strange about this layer, something that they couldn’t notice in the layers underneath them. “Yuu. Even the sound and the vibration of the layer seemed different from the ones below.

Like it is alive underneath all that snow.” Chito replied back at her as she kneeled down and placed her hand on the ground. The ground was a strange metallic construction filled with pipes and tiny holes that went off in the distance. “Chii-chan. Maybe grandpa told us to come here for a reason but he couldn’t tell us why. My last memory was that he shouted something back at us but I couldn’t hear him well because we were really far away.”

“Yuu... I don’t remember all the stories he told me, but I think I remember that he was telling me once about how the city was built and that he came from somewhere beyond our village. But after some time he stopped telling me stories about the outside world as if he was afraid of something. He always feared that if other people found us they could hurt us. He told us to come up here to escape them and that we would find more food, but maybe there was something else he knew...”

“Yuu... Maybe what we are seeing is not there, but far into the distance. Or inside the layer?” Chito replied back as she got up from the ground. “If I had the scope I would have checked out what’s out there but - I lost the scope too.”

“Sooo... Chii-chan... Let’s go see what’s out there before the night falls?” Yuuri replied smiling as she looked back at her “Even if there is nothing up here - we can always just go back and look for supplies below. Maybe we will be able to find another stairwell to go down or somewhere else - there must be a reason why this layer is up here after all.”

“Sure Yuu... but wait I have to do something first!” Chito ran at the back of the other side of the stone monument where they slept the night before. Grabbing the knife from her backpack, she ran back to where Yuuri was standing. “I remembered that once I read in a book that people in the past when they climbed a mountain always left a message of hope for their friends and family behind, and I want to do the same.” Chito placed the sharp edge of the blade on one part of the stone and started inscribing her message.

“What does it say?” Yuuri asked after she finished writing. “It’s just a message for our lost friends, that we made it and we are still alive!” Packing up what was left of their belongings and their helmets, Chito and Yuuri started their long hike towards whatever was there in the distance of the last layer. “Chii-chan, you better keep your word for drowning me in a hotpot!” Yuuri said smiling as they walked into the horizon, hand in hand towards their new journey to the center of the mysterious layer.

• • •

Years of mechanical advancement made these machines in the city virtually self-sufficient. It all had its own place in the circle. The atmosphere provided energy and water so that the machines can produce electricity to supply itself and run its own gears. The machines needed oil, as mankind needed food to run its course. To feed the machines, mankind stripped mother earth of its own creation, searching for oil and resources on every conceivable spot on this planet. Eventually, they ran out... It's what ruined the human race, their greed, persistent hunger for humanity to achieve self-sufficiency and toying with the course of nature through the use of machines, drained their home. It pretty much drove them insane. The lack of food played a gigantic role in the destruction of the human race. Suddenly mother earth couldn't feed them any longer as they depleted her of every natural resource they could. It was later when they resorted to violence. Every single weapon and tool of mass destruction that they produced, turned on them. It felt like the solution was simple, eradicate all other life so you can feed your own glutenous needs. Taking out humans and organic life out of the equation, meant that the machines might take every living corner of this world, making itself self-sufficient in a rudimentary kind of way. This in a way could be what was occurring in the layers of these cities and why in some way it continued to live on even without humanity's constant need for interruption. Once used to house mankind and their needs, they learned to adapt without their help and run on its own. It's the reason that there was still electricity, water, and oil and the machines continued to work even with the absence of mankind to bask in its glory. Some of the species and life that were left learned to adapt and even evolve to be able to devour humanity's last creation, Nuko's species could survive eating on human's dangerous garbage. Somehow the layers were consistent in a way to provide self-sufficiency, the top layer in a way could be the one that could use the atmosphere to its own needs and provide water, electricity or maybe fresh and clean air to the layers beneath.

Back at the stone,
the message on the concrete slab that Chito left read:

Kanazawa, Ishii, Ojichan, Nuko
We made it, we are up here!
Come find us, we miss you.
Chito & Yuuri.

Chapter 2

Blue Light



The mysterious layer was barely illuminated by the dying lights of the stars shimmering up in the cold sky and the 12 blue lights flickering in the far distance. The girls noticed those strange blue lights come alive in the evening as they hiked towards the center of the mysterious layer. Shivering from the cold and alone in the dark, Chito kept walking around in circles looking for Yuuri, whom she has lost a while back. Terrified, she kept shouting and calling out her name in vain. So far the only sound she could hear was the echo of her own voice in the far distance. Yuuri was deeply scared of the dark and she relied on Chito's support to get through it. Getting lost on the last layer could mean sure death from starvation or hypothermia.

As Chito kept walking for what seemed like an eternity, abruptly she noticed the eerie apparition of a tall person holding a rifle in their arms. The weapon strangely resembled the 'Arisaka' rifle that their grandfather gave to Yuuri back in the village.

"Yuuri? Is that you?" Chito asked to no reply. Startled she carefully stepped back, as the apparition raised the rifle aiming it at the far distance.

Wearing a dark blue yukata, the apparition with immaculate precision fired at the lights in the distance, reloading a bullet in the chamber with each shot. It hit all of the blue lights but only missed the ninth light on the far right. Afterward, the apparition threw the rifle down on the cold ground and took out a cigarette from the pocket of the yukata. Lighting it on fire with a safety match and inhaling the thick cigarette smoke, the apparition seemed to be transfixed into the only remaining blue light in the distance.

Chito curiously approached the apparition from the back. "Who are you?" she asked, still terrified if this person was here to hurt them.

Slowly the apparition turned around to face her, and with a smile on his face he replied: "Wow, you've grown into such a beautiful girl Chii-chan." Even though his face and voice were distorted she could immediately recognize the familiar features of someone that saved her and Yuuri's life what felt like a really long time ago.

"Grandpa? What - How!?" exclaimed Chito, bewildered that she saw him here up on the last layer. Even though their grandfather was the person that saved their lives, she still felt scared by his sudden almost ghostlike appearance. She couldn't believe her eyes that he somehow followed them up here.

Taking another puff of his cigarette, he smiled as he looked back at Chito and started speaking in the same distant voice from before “Chii-chan - I am so sorry for everything. I had to protect you both. Chii-chan please just go to the ninth light, you will see... and ... remember...” dropping the cigarette down on the ground he turned around and started walking in the dark distance. “I am so happy I got to see you one last time, please take care of Yuuri. I love you - my beautiful flowers - “ walking further in the distance he slowly dissipated from the light of the world.

“GRANDPA!” With tears in her eyes, Chito screamed after him and wept as she started running after him, she was gaining her momentum but no matter how fast she ran she could never reach him. “GRANDPA WAIT! PLEASE DON’T LEAVE US AGAIN! PLEASE!” screaming with all her might she couldn’t do anything else but keep on running and screaming into the empty dark distance.

The sky and the lights turned a dark shade of black... he was again gone from their lives!

• • •

“Chii-chan?”

“Chii-chan?!” Yuuri alarmed laying next to her kept trying to wake Chito up. “Chii-chan, please wake up! You are having another nightmare!”

Opening her eyes, with tears on her face and sweaty, Chito looked around to only see the terrified look of Yuuri laying huddled next to her. Her heart started beating so fast as she was still unable to comprehend if that was a reality or a dream she experienced. It was still late at night, the stars covering the dark sky like a carpet of shining glitter.

Since they woke up in the middle of the day on the last layer, they spent most of the time hiking towards the center. Exhausted and hungry they kept pushing on as much as their stamina could let them. Stopping only for brief intervals to rest their legs and keep hydrated from the water in their flasks, they were careful each time to restock their supply with the snow around them. The warm sun guided them forward through most of the day, however, once the

sunset in the far horizon, the cruel cold night once again chilled their bones to the core.

Looking for a place to sleep for the night, it seemed as if luck was once again on their side. In the distance they noticed the soft whirl of an exhaust vent pumping out warm air, cooling the endless machines that were underneath the last layer. With ease they could lay down on the warm mesh grid just above the vent, sleeping huddled next to each other in their undershirts.

“Grandpa!” shaking from despair Chito called out for him, the sight of the familiar apparition in her dream was nowhere to be seen. “I saw him Yuu - he was here speaking to me!” she said as she frantically looked around. Besides the frightened look on Yuuri’s face, the starry night sky and the 12 blue lights on the horizon, nothing else was visible in the dead of night.

“Where did you see him Chii-chan?” Yuuri asked holding her close as she kept turning around. “He was just standing there - he was here with us Yuu.” in a state of panic, her fast breathing slowly subsided as she was getting back her composure.

“You were having a nightmare Chii-chan. You were screaming and punching me in your sleep again. I didn’t see anyone else out here.” she kept trying to calm her down gently hugging her “It’s only us up here Chii-chan”. Still, with a bewildered look on her face, Chito kept looking frantically to find their grandfather. “It felt so real Yuu - he told me something about the lights in the distance. He was wearing some kind of a blue robe and he had the ‘Arisaka’ and fired at the lights... he told me something about one of the lights.” Chito pointed at the distance where they saw the lights last night.

Once they were nearing the center of the layer, they could make out 12 shimmering blue lights at equal distance scaling the horizon on top of what seemed to be a long wall. Counting the lights, Chito pointed toward the ninth light that their grandfather had missed. “He only missed that light with his rifle and said it was the ninth one. Every other light he shot with precision, even from this distance.” looking into the dark distance, the blue lights kept shimmering like stars that have fallen off from the sky. “He told me to - look for the ninth light. I have a feeling that maybe it was him Yuu - maybe we should go there tomorrow?” lowering her hand, she kept her gaze transfixed into the light in the far distance.

“Chii-chan, do you think it was him?” Yuuri asked holding her close. Chito couldn’t help herself again as she placed her hands on her face as tears flooded her eyes from fear. “I don’t know Yuuri - I really miss him. These last few days all I can do is cry Yuu - it’s no wonder I keep having these nightmares and can’t think straight. I am really scared.” The thought of their grandfather being close to them seemed almost comforting, just like when he was reading them stories from his books before bedtime down in their home.

“Chii-chan...” Yuuri embraced her closer. “Maybe he is still watching over us on our journey.”

“I wish that he is still alive Yuuri and here with us...” Chito replied laying back into Yuuri’s embrace. “In one of the books, I kept reading about the spirits of our dead family. When they pass away, our friends and family may still linger on before the afterlife. They might even keep watch on us on our journey through life, sometimes they might even appear in our dream to talk to us or warn us about something. I know he wasn’t our real blood relative, but he was the closest thing we had for a grandfather and I loved him very much.”

“I miss him a lot as well, Chii-chan - He saved our lives. I remember that he told me that he found me abandoned in a ruined house as a baby a long time ago.” Yuuri said as she kept huddled next to her, “I don’t remember my real family Chii-chan, but you and grandpa are the only ones I cherish... Chii-chan - do you have recollections of your real family?” Yuuri asked her as they reminisced about their past, the gentle whir of the exhaust fan giving a soothing flow of warm air and sound underneath them.

“Only short memories Yuu,” Chito replied “It was before grandpa took me in. I can’t remember their names or their faces at all. I know that someone in the village found me laying on top of my father and mother who were killed by a raider and brought me to him. I remember the first time I saw you, you were the cute girl hiding behind him as he introduced me to you. It was like he knew our destinies would somehow cross and we will be together.” smiling she closed her eyes and gently held Yuuri’s hand. It was another memory that she cherished like a treasure.

“I remember that day Chii-chan...” she smiled holding Chito’s hand back “I know I have bad memories of my past and can’t remember a lot, but I remember that I was so shy of the little girl standing there in front of me. After that when we got to know each other we played with a lot of toys, and you were

so fascinated by grandpa's books that you studied them all. You wanted to stay in his library forever." smiling she gently hugged her "Chii-chan for what it's worth, I am really happy that our destinies crossed paths and that we made this journey together." she leaned again to kiss Chito on her lips closing her eyes. Having her close-by she felt she could beat every obstacle in her life, even being afraid of the dark underneath the shining stars.

Chito smiled and felt calmer in the embrace of Yuuri, even laying there at the end of the world she never wanted to ever leave her arms. "Chii-chan, do you think grandpa and anyone else from the village down there is still alive?" Yuuri asked her looking up at the night sky.

"I doubt anyone is even alive down there Yuu. You remember how bad the situation was without ration at the village after the ration machines broke down. Everyone was at their throats ready to kill for just a little bit of food. I wish he escaped here with us Yuu. Even in the end, he saved our lives staying back to fight."

"Oh..." Yuuri left out a disappointed sigh. Gently she kept holding onto Chito's hand. "I don't know what to say, Chii-chan. I don't think anyone would survive the first part of the trip without a vehicle. We had grandpa's 'Kettenkrad' to thank for that." she said and yawned softly laying back down on the mesh grid.

"I really miss our 'kettenkrad' Yuu." Chito always felt sad when she reminisced about their old friend that helped them get through too much "I don't know how we would have survived without it this long. Maybe if it didn't break we would have been able to bring it up here and explore the last layer easily. I think you would have been able to carry it up to the stairwell with your strong arms Yuu." she replied humorously and smiled looking back at her.

"You better believe I would have Chii-chan, I am a GOD, after all!" Yuuri replied and chuckled, grunting as she flexed her arms. Chito kept blushing as she looked at her "You better carry me on our honeymoon with all that GOD strength of yours after we get married, Yuu."

"But like every god, I demand you drown me in A HOT POT first!" Yuuri demanded in a deep voice... "HOT POT... CHIII-CHAAAAN! HOOOOOT POOOOOOOOOT" Chito rolled her eyes and smiled looking back at Yuuri

“Shush Yuu! You are making me even more hungry talking about food. You know for now we only have boiled snow tea. When we find food we can eat all we want until our stomachs are full.”

“Mmmm... even boiled snow tea is tasty Chii-chan...” Yuuri mumbled as she closed her eyes, imagining eating all those tasty rations with warm tea “Let’s have some warm snow tea in the morning.”

“Sure Yuu, but you know we have to save what little gas we have in our stove, we can only manage to make warm water once in a while!” Chito replied with worry in her eyes, thinking that stove was the only source of fire she could use to light the fuse of the bomb she was carrying around. Unlike the bombs they used on the surface, the last package came with a long fuse that could be lit with fire. It was way more convenient than using a detonator or live ammunition to set off the bomb.

“Oh, Chii-chan - by the way, what’s a honeymoon?” Yuuri asked her as she kept looking up into the endless night sky.

“Well. I read it in a book some time ago. When a couple got married they used to go on a journey and travel somewhere in the old world. This used to be somewhere exotic and beautiful like the sea, the forest or maybe even a romantic city in Europe that used to be called ‘Paris’. It’s where they can be together in each other grasp for days and days. In the old culture and religion, it was when the newlywed ‘consummated’ their marriage making it complete, professing their undying love and connection to one another.” Chito recollected reading about the old traditions that their ancestors used to have. It was unfortunate how many traditions and cultures were lost throughout the years of wars that the world survived through. This reality that they were living in was a complete wasteland devoid of any life and happiness.

“Chii-chan, we must have been on our ‘honeymoon’ all this time, traveling and exploring the world with our ‘Kettenkrad’.”

“But the honeymoon is supposed to be in a beautiful place with beautiful sights and with a nice warm and cozy bed Yuu. So far we have only been sleeping in the uncomfortable Kettenkrad and down on the cold ground in the ruined city below.” Chito replied with a sad look on her face.

“Oh, Chii-chan - what does it mean to consummate?” Yuuri asked genuinely puzzled at the word, to the completely flustered sight of Chito as she

remembered what that word meant... “Errr.... ummmm...” left without words Chito was wondering how to answer that question. She forgot to mention ‘that’ part of the book to Yuuri.

“Is it when people consume a lot of food on their honeymoon after they get married?” Yuuri asked as she looked at the completely flustered Chito. “Goodness Yuuri... yes, it’s totally when newlyweds ‘consummate’ tons of food and drinks on their honeymoon to the point of being extra-fat together,” Chito giggled at a completely oblivious Yuuri laying next to her.

“Mmmm... then we should totally go on a honeymoon and get fat by ‘consummating’ our marriage Chii-chan.. with tons of hotpot, fish, beer and potato rations and food!” Yuuri replied as Chito suddenly turned into a flustered red color, she could almost be a light herself.

“Ummm... Should I tell her or not?” Chito thought to herself completely embarrassed “Jeez... I love how clueless she sometimes is.” she smiled laying on top of her and gently played with her hair.

Finally, she managed to answer “I would love that Yuu. Let’s get super fat when we ‘consummate’ our marriage with loads of food.” smiling she closed her eyes in Yuuri’s warm embrace, she was so exhausted that she could immediately fall asleep laying calmly in her embrace. “I wish this moment would never end - Yuu -”

Laying up there in complete darkness, just two lonely souls could only find safety in one another. The shining lights of billions of stars that watched over them probably died a long time ago at the cruel concepts of time. Maybe someone up there was also sleeping under the stars, covered in a blanket with no worry in their life. For now, the gentle whirl of the exhaust fan, probably built a long time ago was warm enough to lull them to sleep, keeping them from harm’s way of the cruel cold night.

“Chii-chan. I am really scared.” Yuuri replied laying down on her backpack that she used as a pillow. Cuddling close to Chito underneath the blanket, she slowly closed her eyes before looking up in the starry horizon above. “I will really miss our conversations when we are gone - from this life.” Exhaustion has once set in as Yuuri quickly fell asleep in her embrace.

“Me too... my Yuu...” Chito replied as she closed her eyes as well. The rest of the night went uneventful as they slept snuggling next to each other.

• • •

The next morning Chito woke up freezing as the machine underneath them stopped pumping out warm air for the night. It seemed like the exhaust has run out its course during the night and it no longer needed its function during the day. The sky was completely covered in overcast clouds with darkness sprouting on the horizon. It looked like it was slowly brewing a huge storm. Shivering she got up to put on the rest of her clothes and immediately turned to wake Yuuri up.

“Yuu... wake up... we need to move” she placed her hands on Yuuri’s shoulder gently waking her up. “The weather looks really bad, I am really worried!” she said as she kept looking in the far distance.

“Mmmm... good morning Chii-chan... I’m freezing...” slowly waking up, Yuuri covered again with the blanket. “It’s... so cold...”

“I know... the fan underneath us stopped spinning and I am freezing as well. You need to put on your clothes immediately. Should I boil some warm water Yuuri?” Chito asked her, grabbing her backpack to pull out the stove they had taken on their last journey. “Mmm, yes... sure Chii-chan...” she replied back coughing as she covered with the blanket for warmth.

Pulling both of their flasks out, she poured out all of the water they managed to ration inside the pot she placed on the stove and some of the snow that was left around them. Turning on the valve to release the gas into the sparks, the flames shimmered lightly as the content inside the pot started boiling in due time. Chito could feel that the stove had only a little gas left in it, enough for one more round, or when the situation abruptly changed to use it to light the fuse of the bomb.

“The water is ready Yuu...” Chito said pulling the pot out of the stove, as she carefully poured the warm liquid inside their flasks. “Mmm... let me rest for some bit... I don’t feel so good Chii-chan...” Yuuri replied as she shivered under the blanket.

“Yuu... what’s wrong?” Chito said rushing towards Yuuri, she grabbed her clothes and gently helped her to stand up. “I don’t know- I feel so cold and my throat hurts really bad...” Yuuri barely could speak as Chito helped put on her jacket and struggled to put her pants on.

“You might be coming down with a cold Yuu. Please try to drink the warm water it will help warm you up.” Yuuri reached to grab at the flask and gently sipped the warm liquid from the flask careful as to not burn her lips. “Mmmmm - Even warm water is so tasty right now - when I am so hungry - Chii-chan...”

“Yuu - we have to go - I know we are close to the lights, we will find shelter there to warm up and rest... and look it seems like it’s going to be really bad weather.” she looked up at the sky above, the dark clouds were slowly moving towards them.

“I know... I will tie the rope around us and if the weather goes bad we won’t get lost this way. “ Chito said as she took out the rope from her backpack and her knife. “Chii - you really like tying us around with that rope!” Yuuri softly giggled still shivering from cold as she looked at her.

“Please Yuu, we have to go now! We need to find shelter.”

Looking at the empty backpack, Chito thought of a way to fashion it in a vest to keep Yuuri warm. She grabbed the knife and gutted the backpack that their grandfather gave them for their journey. “Here you can wear this Yuu... it might keep you warm...” she helped her put the fashioned backpack on over the chest. “You can cover yourself with the blanket as well Yuu.”

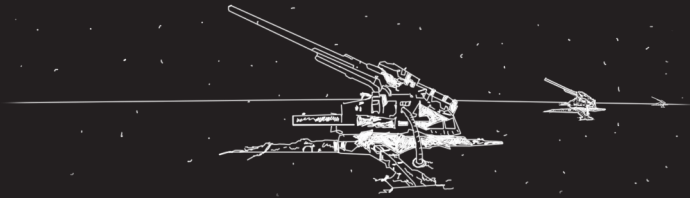
Tying the rope around their waist, Chito leaned down to pack her backpack with the rest of their belongings, which was only the bomb, her knife, and the stove. She didn’t want to believe it but it felt like this was the day that she had to finally light the fuse of the bomb, to quickly end their suffering once and for all. Reaching in her pocket she could feel the grenade pin that Yuuri gave her as an engagement ring and she squeezed it tightly. “Please - at least not today - just please let us live a little longer.” she thought to herself placing the backpack with the bomb on her back. “I will be strong - for Yuuri... I won’t lose her - “

“I am really scared Chii-chan!” coughing and shivering Yuuri huddled close to Chito for warmth, trying to gather her strength for the last part of their journey together to the ninth fallen ‘star’ hanging above the wall.

“Me too - Yuu.”

Chapter 3

Desperation



As the second day on the mysterious layer went by, the weather changed for the worse. Dark clouds engulfed the vast horizon bringing a heavy blizzard down on Chito and Yuuri, still trying with great difficulty to keep on their path to the last goal. In just a few moments the whole layer seemed to have changed into white, as thick snow piled up taking every corner of the world. The snowflakes felt like sharp needles piercing their skin as the wind swept them across.

Hiking most of the day Chito and Yuuri with all their might kept pushing through. Starving and exhausted, hand in hand leading her unwell friend towards their new goal. They had to hold on for just a bit longer, the wall felt so close in the gloomy distance. The blue ninth light was still shimmering up there on the horizon, barely noticeable from the blizzard.

“I won’t give up for Yuu - I won’t! I won’t give up!” Chito kept repeating those words in her mind like a mantra holding Yuuri’s grenade pin tightly in her hand. She felt like she would lose Yuuri in the blizzard the second she let go of her. Chito made a promise not long ago that she would stay strong for Yuuri no matter what the circumstances were. In this situation, she had to give the best for her, as Yuuri was sick from the extreme weather change and needed her help to keep pushing forward until they find shelter. Not even exhaustion and the harsh cold weather would bring her will to live down. She had to stay alive for Yuuri!

“Chii-chan - I am so sorry that I am dragging you behind..” exclaimed Yuuri shivering and coughing as she covered herself with the only blanket they had in this world. “It’s not your fault Yuu, the fan stopped pumping out air and we were sweating all night. You must have caught a cold.” she was thinking that they probably made a huge mistake the night before, allowing to sweat their bodies from the warm exhaust of the fan. They had no premonition that the fans would eventually stop pumping out warm air while they were asleep, and the freezing cold just made everything worse.

“I am so cold Chii-chan...” moving closer to Chito as she snuggled behind her, Chito could feel her shivering body against hers and there was nothing else that she could have done to keep her warm. “Hold on - Chii-chan... I want to put some snow in my mouth. I am so thirsty and hungry.” Yuuri said stopping for a bit as she tried to reach the fresh snow on the ground. “Yuu - please don’t eat the snow you will only feel colder.” holding her closer she pulled out her flask and handed it to Yuuri, “I think it’s still warm from earlier. Drink everything if you want Yuuri, don’t worry about me.”

With a few gulps, Yuuri finished the warm contents of the flask and that was all they had left from the water they managed to boil earlier this morning before starting their journey. All they could rely upon was snow to keep hydrated, but eating snow in this cold weather could easily accelerate the process of hypothermia.

Chito was concerned for Yuuri, she read in a survival book about the effects of hypothermia and was wondering if Yuuri was actually coming down with it since that morning. The signs were there, but she wanted to be in denial. “It’s probably just a cold” She couldn’t imagine that she only had little time left with Yuuri in this world before she would pass away from this horrible condition. “I can’t think about that now! We have to keep pushing forward and find a shelter”

They had lost track of time earlier in the day, the clouds were obstructing the sun above them. It could have been way late in the evening, but they had no way of knowing for sure.

“Chii-chan - I am so sleepy...” Yuuri said as they kept walking forward, snuggling into Chito for what little warmth they could share. “Yuu, please hold on a bit longer. you can’t fall asleep. It’s really dangerous, We will be there soon, we will find shelter and I’ll make fire from something to keep you warm, even if I have to burn all my clothes - Please just hold on a little longer.”

Walking forwards huddled together in one brief second, the exhaustion was too much for Yuuri as she suddenly collapsed down on the cold snow. “Yuu! No! Please, get up, we have to move!” Chito was horrified from seeing her collapse down on the cold snow, and reached down to help her stand up.

“I can’t Chii-chan! I can’t go on...my leg... it hurts so much!” she replied freezing and laying down on the cold ground with tears in her eyes. “Please Yuu, you must!” she helped Yuuri up and snuggled her closer with tears in her eyes “Please Yuuri... we are so close... I can feel it... Please, just a little while... I’ll lead you and carry you if I can. But - we can’t stop now.”

“I’ll try Chii-chan - I’ll try to carry on... for you...” Yuuri replied as she struggled to get up, and managed to start walking again towards their goal.

It took them grueling hours of hiking to reach towards something in the distance, the beacon that led them there on the final part of their journey was shining much brighter. The desolate layer suddenly was brimming with all new

kinds of different new machines. Chito could recognize the design of one of the machines in one of her books she used to read a long time ago. It seemed like even up here the war caught on, but there was something really different about it. There were no signs of severe struggle, discarded weapons and old machines. It seemed like even if wars were raging on up here, everything was swiped clean and repaired afterward. The layer no matter how desolate seemed to be breathing with the lives of the machines, but for now, they couldn't see anyone or anything that might control these machines.

“Some of these look like - anti-aircraft guns...” Chito stated as she noticed them through the thick snow, pointing their barrels upwards in the sky indefinitely waiting for the inevitable air-raid. “What’s that... Chii-chan?” Yuuri asked shivering as she was still buried into Chito for warmth “It seemed like these machines were protecting the layer from something in the sky... they look almost ‘new’ unlike the machines we saw on the layers underneath them. Could someone or something have been taking care of them even after all these years?”

“Were they shooting down - aircraft just like the one... Ishii-san made?” Yuuri asked as they kept walking towards the beacon, coughing loudly with each sentence she made.

“Yes, but these aircraft were capable of causing so much death and destruction. Ishii-san believed her aircraft was her hope of escaping this cruel city. I wonder if these guns were going to shoot her if she flew up here.” Chito replied as she let out a sigh. “I am somewhat relieved Yuu... she would have been killed instantly if these still work.”

“Maybe Chii-chan... but she is smart... she would have jumped with her parachute and survived at the right time...”

These machines even after all these years were ready to protect the layer from an air-raid that was never going to be carried out. After all this time they were still here outliving most of the humans in this world. They were ready to fire their rounds at the sky, shooting down anyone or anything that was a threat to whatever was there on the last layer. Maybe even if the last of the humans were completely wiped from existence, these machines would continue to guard the layer against nothing, indefinitely until the end of the universe.

“Do you think they still work Chii-chan?” Yuuri asked looking up at her as they continued walking... “I don’t know Yuu, I really don’t want to find out... so far it hasn’t blown us up thankfully...”

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Continuing their hike onwards, Chito could make up the construction of the huge wall, going off endlessly into both directions. Riddled in bullets, holes and cracks the wall, it looked identically like the stone slab they saw at the beginning of their last journey. After all these years the wall still stood strong protecting with perfection whatever was behind it. The wall on some parts seemed to be sewed with metal sheets almost like the ones the whole layer was covered. Maybe they were trying to fix the holes and cracks from wars fought a long time ago, but done in a crude almost faulty machine-like fashion. On top of the wall, Chito could make up the huge writing of the number 9 done in blue paint.

“Yuu - we are so close...” Chito exclaimed walking faster pulling her towards the outer layer of the wall. “We will be safe!” Almost with a hopeful smile, she kept walking towards the outer rim of the wall, but once they reached it, there was nothing there once again.

Chito wanted so badly to believe with blind hope, that she would have been able to find a door or some kind of shelter where they could wait out the blizzard and get warm. But again nothing was indicating an entrance inside the wall. The giant wall scaled all along the horizon and the snow covered almost every inch of the ground, barely visible to see if anything or anyone was in the distance. Almost like this cruel life was toying with them once again, before they passed away from hypothermia.

“No... NO! There must be something here!” Chito placed her hands on the wall, trying to look for a hidden door, valve, button... anything she could open a hidden door. “Grandpa said - to come here, Why?” The wall felt smooth to her touch and beside a few cracks and metal sheets fixed on this part of the wall, there was nothing else. They reached the ninth light, the ninth sector of the outer rim of the wall.

But for what reasons?

“Yuu - there is nothing here!” Chito shouted from frustration and started crying her eyes out once again. Yuuri with substantial pain in her leg was unable to continue any longer. She was sure that this was the end for them and she sat down on the ground beneath Chito, covering from head to toes underneath the blanket. Laying her back on the cold concrete of the wall, shivering from the cold, with barely any energy she called out to Chito.

“Chii-chan...”

“There must be something, anything... why?” with all her might she started smashing her hands on the wall. The black core material that was behind the concrete could probably withstand the full blast of a weapon, it definitely wouldn't ever budge by Chito's hands no matter how much she hit. “WHY GRANDPA? WHY DID YOU TELL US TO COME HERE?” screaming in frustration, she felt she wanted to blame her grandfather for everything that has happened to them up to this point. “WHY DID YOU SEND US HERE? WHY DIDN'T YOU LET US DIE IN THE VILLAGE?”

“Chii-chan... it's not his fault...” Yuuri replied with what little energy she had left, coughing as loudly as she could. “You were dreaming about him and the lights... last night. It's nobody's fault... we wanted to come here on our own...”

“Yuu... please, get up... let's go back!” Chito turned to face Yuuri with panic in her eyes. Yuuri was laying down on the cold ground unable to move any longer from exhaustion. “We can go back to the staircase ... Let's go back and down the layers... there must be someplace warm... it's just a short hike Yuuri... please” with a pulsating pain in her hands she never noticed the blood pouring from her open wounds, she could barely even move her left hand as the pain was almost unbearable “Please... Yuu... Please!”

“Chii-chan...” Yuuri said looking up at her, coughing and shivering from the cold with a blank stare in her eyes. “Chii-chan - Let's just - rest... I am so tired.”

Unable to stop weeping, Chito held out her hands and started softly shaking Yuuri as to make her get up...”No Yuuri - no - no - you will die! don't fall asleep - Please!”

“Chii-chan... It’s ok - I promised that I will be with you until the end...” she replied with a smile on her face. Her spark seemed to have been coming to an end, as her beautiful face was turning white from the cold, shivering she kept looking into the horizon with her blank blue eyes “The snow is such a beautiful thing Chii-chan... you can even eat it - play in it - but now its just so painful - I am glad we shared with it these moments - you and me... Chii-chan”

“Yuuri... no -please don’t close your eyes... please, Yuuri!” Chito wailed laying down and hugging her close, weeping loudly “Please... Yuuri... don’t go, please - I made a promise to protect you... I made a promise to grandpa that I will protect you.” shaking her softly in desperation to keep her from drifting off. “No Yuu - my love - please”

“Chii-chan... I love you - so much. You kept your promise... you saved me... It was a beautiful life with you!” Yuuri with difficulty managed to say her final words before she closed her beautiful blue eyes laying down on the ground. Yuuri was no longer shivering, she seemed to have lost her consciousness from exhaustion into a deep slumber slowly breathing in and out.

“YUUURIII... NO... DON’T LEAVE ME... DON’T PLEASE... Yuuri, open your eyes... My love WAKE UP! PLEASE!” she kept screaming and weeping as loud as she could hugging her close and trying to wake her up “NO MY LOVE... PLEASE DON’T LEAVE ME!” she kept kissing her and trying to warm her up... “I promised you! To keep you safe! I never even gave you a ring... my light... don’t leave me, PLEASE! WHY?”

“What... do I do... what will I do???” she shivered looking around the wall for anything she missed... in midst of panic she forgot about the heavy contents of her backpack. Weeping she reached around and placed her backpack down on the cold ground, unbuttoning it...

“I know what I have to do...”

Shivering she pulled out the package and with her knife, she opened the content. The bomb came with a slow burnable fuse that she could easily light up with the gas that was left in the stove. “I am so sorry Yuuri... please forgive me.” with her knife she cut the rope that she used to tie herself to Yuuri during their last hike. Leaving her unconscious friend behind on the ground she went to look for an opening at the wall.

She found the best spot to stick her bomb into one of the deep cracks of the wall as she pulled out the fuse to a correct length. “I really hope this works for Yuuri” taking out the stove from her backpack she kept trying to light what little of the gas was left. Every time she tried the wind blew out the flames. It was only for a brief moment that the wind quieted down and she managed to light up the fuse.

The fuse took its time burning slowly, nothing could have stopped it now, not even the snow or the wind... it took its time but when it reached inside the charge, a loud ball of fire engulfed the wall, leaving out a huge explosive sound that could be heard in the distance echoing throughout the layer. Ripping apart some of the outer layers in the wall, concrete, and fragments hovering around the area... a faint barely audible alarm started blaring behind the wall.

Once the flames seemed to have settled down, Chito hiding in the snow ran to the crack in the wall to see what happened. After the smoke cleared she could see clearly what kind of damage the explosion has done. Besides leaving a small blast radius around the dark stone, it was mostly left unscathed. Rubble of concrete and stone fragments laid around in the snow around the blast.

Falling down to her knees in the snow Chito looked in disbelief at the wall... It seemed the wall was able to withstand most kinds of destructive force that was thrown at it. It was almost unbreachable, maybe that is why it survived all of those years standing strong up here protecting whatever was behind it. She was way too distraught to notice the faint alarm behind the wall.

“Oh...” Chito uttered as she almost wanted to laugh hysterically, the huge explosion was so satisfying to watch. She always thought about the moment that she would use the bomb on themselves and go out with an explosion, but trying one last thing before she passed away with Yuuri was almost satisfying... they have used all of their supplies and there was nothing afterward.

“I only wish Yuuri was conscious to witness this. She would have loved it.”

All she could do for now was wait to see if anyone comes and inspects the explosion. She got up and went back to Yuuri who was at a safe distance from the explosion. Chito was way too exhausted to search for anything up here or even carry her. With little to no hope, she would never allow herself to leave Yuuri's side. Yuuri was sleeping peacefully down on the ground covered in the blanket, barely breathing as her light was slowly going off. Chito gently cleaned

out the snow that has accumulated on top of her sleeping lover with her shivering and bloody hand. Looking down on her she smiled “You are so beautiful my love...” laying down next to her embrace with her health hand she covered the blanket on top of them. Her heart was beating much slower from before, softly inhaling as she was probably dreaming about something beautiful before she passed away. Chito leaned and kissed her lips again, gently caressing her cheeks. “I will give you the most beautiful ring in the world when I meet you in our new home - my love.”

Chito couldn't do anything but snuggle her dying lover, she wanted to go together in the afterlife with her more than anything in the world. “Grandpa, I am so sorry for shouting at you... I didn't mean to... I love you...” Chito closed her eyes laying in the arms of her lover. “This life was beautiful indeed! Yuu my love... Goodnight...”

• • •

Brief parts of consciousness were the only things Chito could remember from that point onwards. She could swear at some point she heard the voices of a man and a girl and opening her eyes for a brief moment, Chito saw the faint image of someone that oddly resembled someone she knew...

Chapter 4

Nara



“Hey, Chii-chan, come take a picture of me with the gate in the back!”

Yuuri posed for a picture in front of the huge Nandaimon gate leading up to the big wooden Todaiji Temple. Chito was at the standby with her camera to take pictures of Yuuri pretty much most of the day. It was a fine humid summer day in mid-July at Nara Park, crowds of tourists, families and high school students roamed the grounds checking out the beautiful surroundings and the large temple. The sound of the chirping cicadas and the happy laughter and hubbub of people filled the comfortable atmosphere of the park.

“Alright - say, cheese!” pointing her camera, she snapped a picture of Yuuri smiling with the gate in the back of the frame. Yuuri was wearing a floral tank top with a summer skirt, keeping her long blond hair tidy with hair clips. Her cheeks flushed with life and happiness. “Ooooh, Chii-chan let me see!” Yuuri rushed over to Chito to look at the little screen of the camera, softly she giggled at her picture with the large gate in the back. “I love this one!”

“Yuu-chan, It will be nightfall until I take every picture of every spot here with you!” Chito responded with mild annoyance, she’s been following her like a paparazzi all day with her camera.

“Chii-chan, I can’t help it. It’s such an amazing place, I am so happy that we came here too. And you won’t give your camera to someone to take a picture of us.” She smiled hugging Chito from the back.”Well, of course, I won’t. It’s an eighty thousand yen DSLR camera Yuu-chan, I won’t even let you use it - “

“Selfie time!” Yuuri pulled out her phone and snapped a picture of themselves. It was sort of blurry with her wide smile in the back, Chito was in the front with an annoyed face. The gate was barely even visible in the frame.

“Yuu-chan, this has been going on for 2 hours now! That one deer nibbled my handbag and almost ate my camera because you wanted to feed it while I was taking a picture. Please, let’s go inside the temple before my clothes turn into food!”

Earlier in the day after they checked in their hotel, they went walking around the famous park petting and feeding the cute deer, however, Chito never knew that if you buy a whole packet of deer food, a herd usually went rushing after you trying to eat everything. It was really nothing new as she had a glutenous girlfriend to feed almost every day. Chito always wondered how Yuuri

hasn't eaten her whole yet. For now, she was suspicious of all the deer in the park, she was worried that by the end of the day the rest of her clothes would have turned into food.

“One-second Chii-chan, Akari-chan wanted me to send her some pictures of us today. She wanted to come here with her fiance next month, but it looks like they are too busy planning their wedding in ‘Nagoya’ for September.” Yuuri was typing on her phone and sending pictures of themselves, as Chito grumbled softly with annoyance. “You can do that in the hotel Yuu-chan, she can wait you know...” even though the mild annoyance her girlfriend sometimes was, she was always happy seeing Yuuri enjoying herself.

They were both busy through most of the year juggling a job, along with their studies at the university. Yuuri was stressed out from continually flunking her Russian tests and kept trying her hardest to pass some of the subjects at her university. During their summer vacations, every chance they could they planned to travel around to see the sights of their homeland. Once they could save enough money for plane tickets, on their plan was their trip to Europe. It was their dream to rent a motorbike and visit the beautiful picturesque cities in the Czech Republic, Poland, Germany, Netherlands and the rest of Europe. They've heard from their colleagues at the university that Europe was beautiful and warm in summer.

For now, all they could afford was to see the beautiful sights their homeland had to offer. They both had managed to save some vacation days from work and money to go on a small trip around Japan. With a student discount, it was even easier to plan the trip, and they started in Hakone to see the beautiful view of Mount Fuji. After that their stops were in Nagoya, Kyoto and finally they were here in Nara Park, before going further on their journey to Osaka and Hiroshima. Chito and Yuuri were beyond excited to see Nara Park and it had been in their plans for a long time now. The idea of petting and feeding friendly cute deer in a beautiful park was pretty much what brought them here, before realizing the horrors of buying deer food.

“Sooo Yuu-chan - let's go see what's inside the gate.” hand in hand they walked towards the gate, moving carefully through the crowd. Tourists from around the world came to the famous park to see the deer, the huge wooden temple in the middle of the park and gasp in awe of the huge statue of Buddha that humans a long time ago sculpted with their own bare hands. However, to reach the huge temple, you had to first walk through the spectacular Great Southern

Gate where the two big statues of terrifying muscular guardians stood frozen in time guarding the temple.

Once inside Chito paused to look up at the statues, with Yuuri standing right behind her. “Wow... they are so big and scary Chii-chan!” gasping in awe Yuuri stared at the marvelous statues of the two guardians. “Let’s take a picture with them as well!”

“Do you think they like their pictures are taken every day, Yuu-chan? They might get annoyed and eventually kidnap you.” Chito smiled as she raised her camera pointing it towards Yuuri, who was posing with one of the guardians just in front of the net. “Chii-chan - then you have to come to my rescue again. Just like that time I stuck my leg in a barrel.” Chito snapped another picture of her, with the statue of the guardian who had his mouth closed behind her.

“Where else would you get your leg stuck but in a barrel Yuu-chan? I mean how on earth did you manage that?” Chito chuckled and waited for her moment by snapping another picture of a softly annoyed Yuuri from the mention of the barrel incident. “Yessssss... I am going to print this out in hundreds of copies!” she kept giggling as Yuuri pulled out her tongue at her. “Oh shush Chii-chan, it wasn’t that funny!”

“It wasn’t funny Yuu-chan. It was hilarious!” Chito laughed, even more, holding her sides. “Yeah right... you ran to the shed to get a hacksaw, chasing me around with it saying you will hack my leg off... then you buttered my whole leg up to pull out the barrel. We didn’t have enough butter for Crepes night Chii-chaaaaan. Imagine the horror!” Trying to contain herself from laughing Chito replied. “Well, you should have just scrapped the butter off from your leg, and we would have had crepes to feed the whole neighborhood.”

“Or a very hungry Yuu-chan!” Yuuri replied back at her smiling as she started feeling peckish. “I’ll feed you crepes later tonight to make up for me chasing you with a hacksaw!” Chito replied and smiled looking back at Yuuri.

“Mmmmmmmmm sure, but first - I want to try tempura udon at Nara as well, Chii-chan.” Yuuri mumbled feeling peckish from all that food talk “Let’s have some later... you are buying the Udon too, to make up for chasing me with a hacksaw.” she smiled checking out the surroundings of the gate looking back at the two statues that stood guard at the entrance.

“Sooo Chii-chan, what do you think these statues are of?”

“Well as I remember in the guide book, the statue with the open mouth is of Agyo, he is the one that represents the start of the universe itself. And the statue I took your picture with is called Ugyo. He represents the end of the universe and that is why he has his mouth closed. They both served as the protectors of Buddha and most importantly they ward off evil spirits from the temple.” Chito recalled as she looked up at the silent protectors, who were standing frozen almost as if like time has completely stopped for them.

“Wow, do you think he is the one we see before the universe ends Chii-chan?” Yuuri asked her as she looked up at the large terrifying statue of Ugyo.

“Maybe, but I don’t think we will ever know in our lifetime. Perhaps our ancestors and the dead know if he will ever appear at the very end of our time. But we will never know as long as we are alive, and the dead will never give us an answer no matter how much we keep asking them.” Chito looked back at Yuuri and held out to her hand as they started walking forwards to the next gate inside the grounds of the temple.

“Chii-chan, do you think the universe eventually will end one day?” Yuuri asked as they continued walking hand in hand.

“Nobody will ever know Yuu-chan, the concept of time and the universe is so inconceivable to us. When you look at it in a way of the grand scale, no one will ever be able to find an answer to our reality. People throughout history have made their own versions of why we exist, and it made it’s ways to all kinds of religions and beliefs in our world. So far to the point that people would give up their own lives for these tales and their deities up in the sky. But maybe if our universe and time end one day, there might be countless of other realities and plausible existences that might still live on, maybe even the past and the future still lives on. I think our world is just a small cell structure in an infinite universe, Yuu-chan. Maybe after we are gone from this reality, we will live in another one, and who knows... maybe we might be able to meet again further on.”

Chito loved to contemplate about existentialism and the life of the universe. Even at her philosophical studies at her university, most of her essays and research papers were about existentialism, believes and quantum physics always looking in a semi-skeptical way. She was so obsessed with the subject that she could almost read all kinds of different books and make up wild theories

even of existence itself. She was inspired a lot by the recent vivid dreams she had of her and Yuuri where they lived in a post-apocalyptic world.

At some point, since they met together at a party 5 years ago, she always feared that Yuuri would get bored of her and leave her because she always tended to get lost in books and random thoughts, but Yuuri always stood by and listened carefully to her train of thoughts with conspicuous fascination. She was always patient when Chito was lost in her books for hours at times reading her books. Maybe because in a way that they were opposites, they loved each other so much.

“So, Chii-chan... Do you think in one of these realities I can eat all the food without getting fat?” Yuuri asked as she held her belly, as they kept looking around the temple grounds.

“Yes! I swear in one of these realities you can eat mountains of delicious food without getting fat Yuu-chan. And one plausible reality is where you are a cheetah and I am just a puny gazelle running for her life! Oh noooo... Yuu-chan is going to eat me again!” Chito chuckled again still holding Yuuri’s hand as they walked towards the temple.

“But Chii-chan, wouldn’t you be the cheetah? Your name is so closer to a cheetah.”

“Ooooh right... I’ll be a Chito Chita (small cheetah). I’ll roar at you with my small fangs and scratch you if you try to eat me!” she chuckled again as they reached near the inner entrance of the temple. “So, Yuu-chan lets hurry up and check out the temple now, you are only making me hungry from all this food talk.”

“Sure but... SELFIE TIME!” Yuuri pulled out her phone again and snapped another blurry photo with an annoyed Chito barely even in the frame.

The rest of the afternoon they spent checking out the beautiful wooden temple that was originally built centuries ago that housed a huge statue of Buddha inside. After a few more incidents with deer in the park later, Chito gave an option to Yuuri to either go find an udon restaurant or hunt for venison. Lacking the proper equipment and the probability they could be facing up to six months in prison from all that tasty venison meat galloping around in the park, they instead went for the udon restaurant option.

“Itadakimasu!” both of them jumped hungry right into the food they ordered earlier. Yuuri couldn’t help but mumble with pleasure as her taste buds were enjoying every bit of the tasty tempura udon bowl in front of her, slurping the contents almost like a vacuum cleaner.

“Mmm... tastyyyyyyyyy!” she kept slurping on as she looked at Chito who was looking down in her bowl with confusion in her eyes. She was yet lost in her thoughts once again. “Do you like your portion Chii-chan?”

“Mmm... Oh! Right - sure...” holding her chopsticks she played softly with her food. The warm bowl still steaming from the warm broth, full of tempura and udon noodles. She seemed to have recalled a weird dream she had last night and it was only now coming back to her mind.

“What’s wrong Chii-chan? Is it too warm?” Yuuri asked her with a full mouth, as Chito sighted looking blankly into her bowl.

“No, no - the food is perfectly fine. But I just remembered something from last night. Yuu-chan, do you remember the vivid occurring dreams I’ve been telling you about?” Chito asked her who was still slurping on tasty Udon.

“Mmmpphh.... sure Chii-chan. Was it the one you had of the two of us in some kind of a post-apocalyptic world, riding a motorcycle? Something called a ketten-”

“Yes, that one with the ‘kettenkrad’!” Chito replied as she looked back down in the bowl. “I’ve been having them more vividly before almost twice a month before tonight, but last night it almost escaped my mind. This one was so faint, we reached some kind of a wall with a glowing blue light and we just fell asleep. But in the dream, I felt that we were in grave danger. We were starving and freezing, and the world was completely covered in snow. However, instead of a scary dream, it just felt... kind of calm. Don’t you find it curious that all of those dreams before this one were vivid, but the one from last night I completely forgot about?”

“Chii-chan, it’s only a dream, you shouldn’t give it too much though. I think you read too many of those books by ‘Isaac Asimov’ and those ‘Stru-

gatsky' brothers, your dreams are directing its own strange movie with the two of us." Yuuri replied as she ate the tempura in her bowl.

"I've been thinking about it for some time Yuu-chan. Do you think in a way we are connected to our different realities or futures? I find it odd that in my dream I could make up this strange German vehicle from World War 2 era called a 'kettensrad', even though I've never even heard about it before. I kept reading into this vehicle and I found it weird that it actually exists. Maybe I've read about it somewhere in my books and it just decides to appear in my subconsciousness, but I can't recall ever seeing that vehicle anywhere before the dreams, not even on the internet. Yet in my dreams, it appears to have some similarity as the photographs I found in a World War 2 book." Chito replied taking a small bite of tempura from her bowl.

"Mmm... as you said Chii-chan, there could be infinite realities. Maybe you are somehow bound with the Chito in the other reality and you can see her in your dreams. Maybe even experience her life somehow when you are sleeping?"

"I am worried about them Yuu-chan. Do you think they might have died from the cold weather or hunger? I guess after those dreams, I kinda started reading into alternate realities and maybe they are in grave danger, but there is really nothing I can do." Chito spoke with sadness in her eyes, eating a bit of the bowl "I kinda feel bad sitting here in this restaurant in comfort of the air conditioning and eating udon, while they are out there starving and freezing to death."

"Well, Chii-chan maybe you can write their story and come up with a happy ending? The way you've been telling me about their adventure you can base a whole book or movie on their life. And don't worry, they are strong. Just like us!" Yuuri replied, leaving her empty bowl on the side with her chopsticks. "They've been through too much to just give up on each other."

"Yeah, you might be right Yuu-chan. Maybe I could write my dreams sometimes as a book about their life and finish their story in a good light. I swear we are such a cute couple and people would hate me if we kill each other off in the end!" Chito grinned taking a sip before Yuuri decides to eat her bowl as well. "Mmmmm... you were right this is sooo tasty!"

"Told ya, tempura udon is the best thing ever. I keep telling you that if I open a restaurant one day with my sister, I'll try to perfect my family recipe and

serve udon all day!” Yuuri replied as she took a sip of her beer. “AAAAAAHHH-HH... and a cold ‘Asahi’ on this warm day is the best thing ever!”

“Well... you know I’m such a lightweight with alcohol Yuu-chan, and in this humid and hot weather, you’ll probably have to carry me back to the hotel.” Chito replied as she finished her bowl as well. “So... we still have time left. Let’s pay and check out the city.”

“Don’t forget, you are paying and I’m forgetting about the ‘hacksaw incident’.” Yuuri smiled as they got up from their stool, and left the restaurant before paying. “And later we eat CREPES CHII-CHAAAN!”

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Walking around the city of Nara, as evening was nearing the girls managed to find a hot spring where you could walk in and have a nice warm dip. Passing through the female section, they took out their clothes and in the nude entered the bath. The warm air of the spring felt so comfortable and nice to their skin and after taking a shower they got into one of the warm pools that weren’t crowded.

“Aaaahhhhh... I can sit inside here forever! I needed this after a long day.” Yuuri said as she sat close to Chito, the hot springs were a bit crowded with tourists in summer but that didn’t mean they couldn’t enjoy their time alone together in one of the pools.

“Ohh Yuu-chan... please remind me to check out the record stores in Osaka tomorrow, I wanted to buy that ‘Asobi Seksu’ album from one of the record stores. I swear I will tattoo the lyrics of ‘New Years’ on my body one day... I just looooveee that song so much!” Chito said relaxing in the pool. “I forgot to check today in Nara if there are any record stores.”

“Ooooh right... it’s that dream-pop band you love with the cute girl on the vocals.” Yuuri responded smiling as she relaxed in the tub, she could almost fall asleep from the nice warm water and tasty udon she ate earlier. “I liked that ‘Mai Chimamire Barentine’ band we saw last year at Sonicmania, the vacuum cleaner music.”

“It’s ‘My Bloody Valentine’ and no it’s not music made by vacuum cleaners you silly girl... just tons of pedals and guitars...” she couldn’t help but laugh at the mention of the vacuum cleaner music, it was such an obscure reference she found about the band on the internet that made her wonder how Yuuri even knew about. “That band was AWESOME, I swear my ears still ring. And seeing Boris last year was amazing as well. But hey, you finally liked something I listen to Yuu-chan, you only listen to J-Pop bands”

“You know I love those J-Pop bands Chii-chan like Nano Ripe. But I enjoy listening to your weird music equally. I also enjoy going to these festivals together with you Chii-chan.” Yuuri replied as she held Chito’s hand underneath the warm water.

“We can always go to more festivals this year Yuu-chan.” Chito replied and smiled as she closed her eyes enjoying the serenity of the warm pool. “I still want to see sooo many foreign bands like Snail Mail, St. Vincent, Bon Iver, Sigur Ros, James Blake, Low, M83...”

“I only remember James Blake Chii-chan...” Yuuri stopped her mid-sentence “Oh right... you thought there was an earthquake from the bass of ‘Limit to Your Love’ that time we listened to the record... that was so funny” Chito giggled as she splashed around in the warm pool, both of them relaxed they could almost turn into a melted potato.

“I really enjoyed our day at Nara - I am super excited that we are going to Osaka Castle tomorrow.” Yuuri said still in a relaxed mood “But hey... Chii-chan. I forgot to ask you, did you tell your mom yet that you are going to be moving in with me before the semester starts?”

“Not yet Yuu-chan I am sorry... you know how she was when she found out about us, I think after dad passed away, she always wanted me to settle down, get a ‘respectable’ job and find a husband. But I am glad she learned to be more welcome to our relationship. I am happy that she saw how much I love you. Your parents are so cool about it though, I mean I’d rather move in with you and plan something crazy for our future and maybe even go on a journey around the world than settle down with kids and a ‘respectable’ job whatever that means in this day and age.” Chito replied as she held Yuuri’s hand underneath the water, the gentle sound of the warm flowing water could easily put you to sleep if you are not careful. “But yeah, eventually I will tell her next week when we are back in Tokyo... let’s enjoy our vacation for now Yuu-chan.”

Chito smiled closing her eyes, feeling comfortable sitting next to her in the warm pool. Today was such a delightful day at Nara, and they were hoping to visit so many other places in Japan or the world. Hopefully, go on endless journeys together once they settled in. After all, she felt that Yuuri was the right person to have in her life as a partner, one day if she decided to propose she could hope that she would say yes, but for now they just wanted to enjoy their life as it was and Chito had to finish with her university studies as well.

She felt that the future comes in its own time, no matter how short life is.

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Exhausted Chito must have fallen asleep in the pool because when she suddenly woke up she was unable to breathe. She felt like she was drowning in an endless pool, falling deeper and deeper in the vacuum of black space. Unable to call out to Yuuri, she looked around trying to find her, she was nowhere to be seen. She was not at Nara anymore and in the hot spring that she enjoyed earlier. Slipping between a different kind of consciousness, Chito was opening another set of eyes belonging to a different kind of “reality”.

In this one, she was tied to a bed in a white room, with shining bright light on the ceiling. Stuck to a machine that continuously beeped an unsteady rhythm and tubes running out her mouth and attached to her body. Her left hand was immobilized in some kind of tight bandage, and again she could feel the familiar pulsating pain running through her left hand.

Chito wanted to scream, as loudly and as much as she could, but the tube down her throat obstructed her voice. Too weak to even move and break her chains, she kept trying to scream and scream, she could only mumble and cry from fear. The beeping machine went haywire as she entered into a state of panic. Chito felt like she would suffocate, her chest was in continuous pain and her breathing was difficult. Some moments passed before she could hear the voice of a young girl who came running through the door of the room where Chito was in.

“Oh my goodness...” At the corner of the eye, Chito could see the concerned look of a girl that looked about her age with short brown hair running inside the room.

Coming closer to her bed the girl said “Ummm, please calm down little girl, you are having a panic attack...” the girl in a state of panic was trying to calm Chito down as she continued trying to scream. Chito looked like an exhausted and wounded caged animal who has just woken up in a state of panic after fleeing for her life. “You went through too much, but you are safe - Please calm down. I will pull the tube out of your mouth so you can talk.” she pressed a red button on top of her bed before pulling the endotracheal tube of Chito’s mouth.

Chito could suddenly breathe in on her own, taking a large gasp of air she continued crying and struggling to escape. She could only let out a single shriek, fearing for her life. The young girl took a syringe and injected her with something through the IV.

“It’s just something to help you relax.” the girl said as she looked down at Chito who was beginning to calm down. From the desk nearby, she took a sponge and wiped Chito’s sweaty face as she continued crying in a terrified state. “Who - who are you? What is happening?” she kept asking “Where am I?”

“Please try to calm down, we will explain everything. I’ll take out the straps when you have calmed down because you will hurt yourself.” she continued wiping her forehead with the sponge carefully. “What is your name little girl? Do you remember how we brought you here?” the girl asked Chito who was beginning to compose herself.

“Umm... no... I don’t remember anything... just the snow... my ... my name is Chito.” she said shivering from fear as she lay back down on the bed, trying to breathe in normally. The young girl’s expression suddenly changed at the mention of that name, she dropped the sponge on the ground looking in disbelief at the girl that just woke up from what seemed to have been a long sleep.

Coming to herself, Chito realized someone was missing in the room lying next to her. She looked around but she couldn’t see Yuuri anywhere. “Wait... Yuuri?” suddenly fearing the worst as she was unsure where her lover is, she started weeping again “Noo... Yuuri! Where is she? Yuuri?!”

“Chito, please calm down. Don’t worry... but...” the girl in a panicked mode, ran to the door again calling out for someone out there.

“Father! Please hurry up!”

Wearing a white doctor's robe, a man in his 40's breathing heavily ran through the door. "What happened Mieko-chan?" he asked looking at them both. His eyes were fixed on the crying young girl that just woke up. Chito's expression changed as she looked back at him... she could swear that she saw this person briefly in some flashes of consciousness but she couldn't place when or where that was. The person standing in front of her resembled someone she knew dearly but he looked younger. Crying she looked at him and said "What? Grandpa? How? Is that you?"

The man's expression changed with a bewildered look on his face. Looking at Chito, the man looked like he has seen a ghost from his past "Oh my goodness... it's really her Mieko-chan!" he said looking back at his daughter. "It's her... the dark-haired girl from Itsuki-san's letter... but... we kept searching he wasn't out there... in the blizzard. That means he is still out there!"

Chito with a puzzled expression on her face kept looking at the girl and the man standing in front of them, trying to compose herself she asked them "Wait how? How do you know that name?"

"How do you know grandpa?"

Composing himself, the man in the white robe answered.

"Itsuki... he is my father."

Chapter 5

Outside



“Itsuki, what else do we need besides piston parts, bolts, metal fragments, and fuel pressure regulators?”

“Hmm... check your list what kind of parts they asked at the garage. This layer is supposed to be filled with these parts from the old era machines. I always wondered why they used these old machines instead of the modern ones?”

“Sensei told me that it had to do with the EMP bombs and rifles people used many years ago, most of the electric machines were not reliable in war. With just one hit you could disable the electronics pretty easily, and they relied on old machine technology and fuel to carry out attacks and defenses on the layers below. So Itsuki, what does Daishi needs the parts for?”

“He took to restoring some old era vehicles from way back in the 20th century to use for outer layer scouting. He is fixing one for me to use, something called that they used to call a ‘Kettenkrad’... said it would suit us for when we go on our supplies run.”

“Yeah, that’s a good idea. Sensei fears that the raiders might still have EMP weapons out there. Those vehicles are better out here than decaying in the old museum, considering that we still find fuel down here. So did you get to see your vehicle yet?”

“Nah, he told me it’s a surprise. He only said it looked like if a motorcycle and a tank had a baby.” Itsuki replied as he scoured through the metallic garbage left by the machines from a war long time ago. Itsuki was in his early twenties and wearing a green military outfit with a helmet on his head. On his back, he wore a backpack and an Arisaka Type 38 rifle around his arm that he used for protection against dangerous people. Down here, their group was sent on a mission to scour the layer for broken machine parts and resources to help fix some of the machines back at home.

“Haha, how would that work? The tank would instantly obliterate the motorcycle.” The other guy who went by the name of Yasuo also helped look around for the parts, he was about the same age as Itsuki, but then in this world, one wouldn’t know their real age or birthday if they were born on the outside. Usually, at the ‘unit’ most of the orphans were given the rough estimate of age by how they look and were given the same birthday. All of the orphans and refugees that were born on the outside were given the 9th of September as their birthday, as to commemorate their home they called the “Ninth Sector”. It

seemed like only the atomic clock at the ‘unit’ could correctly measure time and date, It was based on an old era technology that could potentially work for 30 million years. Most of the regular wristwatches and pocket watches from the archive have stopped working a long time ago, and some digital watches seemed to have stopped from EMP interference on the outside.

Yasuo and Itsuki were both orphans from the outer layer that the survivors of the ‘unit’ found many years ago. They both had no recollection of their real family, but since they were alive they felt a close bond to each other as if they were brothers by blood.

“Well, thanks for putting that image in my mind now Yasuo. A tank and a Motorrad...” laughing, Itsuki continued scouring through the garbage, carefully passing it with his Geiger scanner as to not pick any dangerous-radioactive material by mistake.

“Oh... Here! I found something, it looks broken though.” Yasuo held a piece of a metallic material that looked like an old engine piston.

“Be careful to scan the piles first Yasuo, you know those iodine pills don’t always help unless you want to spend a week in the infirmary on the dialysis machine. If it’s good put it in your backpack, I am sure Sensei can feed it to the replication machine.”

“Ughhh... but my backpack is getting so heavy Itsuki.” struggling Yasuo jammed the part in his large backpack, weighing him down from the heavy parts he collected earlier.

“As the old folks say, finders keepers!” Itsuki replied and smiled as he continued scouring for parts. “Hey, do you want some rations? I brought some extra ‘Soylent Green’ with me.”

“Why do you insist on calling it ‘Soylent Green’ Itsuki? Are you still that obsessed with that 20th-century movie from the archive we saw a few days ago?” Yasuo asked as he stared back at Itsuki, who was taking out a green bar ration from the pocket of his uniform.

“Well, it’s ridiculous how similar is the process to make these bars as in the movie. Except its not people, but recycled waste from plants. Besides, it sounds better than ‘Gramineae Bar’ as they like to call it up there.” Itsuki replied as he

playfully grabbed Yasuo by his shirt “You tell everybody! Listen to me, Yasuo! You’ve gotta tell them! Gramineae Bar is plants! We’ve gotta stop them!” Itsuki chuckled as he let go of his shirt “See Yasuo... Soylent Green has a better ‘knack’ to it.”

“Maybe you should jump in the machine yourself and see what comes out. Maybe you will be tastier than a ‘Gramineae Bar’.” they both laughed reminiscing at the old archive movie they watched some time ago, as Itsuki took another bite of the green ration bar.

The ‘archive’ from the old world seemed to be still working through many nodes in the city, one could easily access thousands of exabytes of information from the nodes that never seemed to go corrupt with age. This information was safeguarded behind blast-proof solid frames that no one could access in centuries all around the city, but to connect some of these old lost nodes, the survivors of the ‘unit’ had to go on dangerous missions and repair a lot of the broken links throughout the city. Music, videos, movies, books, information, scientific studies, history ... almost everything they could digitally store was on these nodes. Children and adults of the ‘unit’ could learn anything from the ‘archive’ and this information was widely used for education and entertainment.

“What do you think sensei would say if he finds out I got turned into food, Yasuo?”

Taking a bite of the green bar Yasuo said “Mmm.... such a tasty bar! But wait I’VE BEEN EATING ITSUKI ALL THIS TIME!” he continued biting into the green bar imitating their guardian, as both of them laughed. “I better wash this Itsuki taste with beer!”

“Oh - man! Your sensei’s impersonation!” Itsuki laughed in tears holding to his sides “But yeah, those old movies were great, maybe we should make our own movie at the ‘unit’ with the cameras Yasuo.”

“Yeah, but if we ever recreate ‘Soylent Green’ can I be the one that kicks you inside the ration machine?” Yasuo burst from laughter again imagining if Itsuki actually fell in the machine while they were making their own movie.

“You wish Yasuo. Believe it that I will first trip and fall in myself, considering how clumsy I am.” he chuckled

“It’s so odd how some of those movies and books accurately portrayed our present Yasuo. It’s like our ancestors knew about the great wars, hunger, the overpopulation and the constant greed for more power and technology would ruin this planet. The world our ancestors lived in looked so beautiful, yet they destroyed it for their selfish reasons.” Itsuki spoke, taking more bites from his ration bars and a gulp of coffee from his flask.

“So hey Itsuki, have you ever wondered what happened to those people that left the planet in the rockets centuries ago? Do you think they managed to populate and cultivate Mars with the plant specimen?”

“As from what our ‘unit’ has managed to accomplish, I’d like to think their mission was a success. Unless the same never-ending loop of hatred and greed humanity brings ruined the settlements up there. Humans are the plague of our solar system Yasuo - they would keep searching for new worlds to rip it out, right of its core. But yeah, in the end, I guess they left us here to clean up after their trash while they probably continue to destroy their new home.” Itsuki looked up at the distance, up above them was another layer of the city and down here you couldn’t see the sky. Just the ruins of the world before them.

“Let’s finish up here and meet up with the others at the elevator.”

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As soon as they stood up from the ground, abruptly near where they were sitting they could hear someone sliding through piles of rubble and running away in a rush. Someone was spying on the two of them from the near distance. “Huh? Did you hear that? Ready your rifle Yasuo!” both of them took out their rifles from their back, aiming towards the sound in the distance. “Shit! Could it be ‘raiders’ again?” Yasuo exclaimed hiding behind the pile of garbage for cover. “I don’t know, but just in case get ready for a shoot out. We barely got out alive last time and we lost Motoyasu.”

“Let’s go check it out but be careful. Get behind cover at the first sign of trouble and I’ll fire the flare to alert the others!” Yasuo replied as they got up and carefully moved up to the distance. Scouting the horizon they couldn’t find anyone in their sight, but from the pile of rubble that slid down the hill, it was obvious that someone was there watching them all this time.

Suddenly at the corner of the eye, Yasuo could see the shape of a person getting up from cover and running away. “STOP!” he exclaimed as he aimed the gun. “ITSUKI! THERE! HE COULD ALERT THE OTHERS!” both of them began running after the person, careful as to not slip and fall in the piles of metallic garbage.

“I SAID STOP!” Yasuo aimed his rifle to the right of the person and fired a warning shot. He missed by just a few inches as the bullet hit the metallic trash, ricocheting into the distance. The loud echo of the shot could be heard throughout the whole layer, breaking the still silence of the dead city.

Alarmed, the person dropped on the ground, as Itsuki and Yasuo got closer aiming their rifles. Itsuki’s eyes suddenly opened wide as he lowered his rifle. The silhouette belonged to a malnourished girl with blonde hair, as she covered herself with her hands sobbing for her life. She seemed to be about 2-3 years younger than them with only her ruined clothes on her body. “WHO ARE YOU? WHY DID YOU SPY ON US?” Yasuo shouted at the girl pointing his rifle at her head, ready to fire at the first sign of movement.

“What the hell are you doing Yasuo? Can’t you see the girl is terrified and unarmed?” Itsuki yelled at him, as he lowered the rifle to the ground.

“I don’t give a shit! She was spying on us and ran to alert her friends!” Yasuo moved closer looking down at the terrified girl, still pointing his rifle dead center at her eyes. “They killed Motoyasu for what? Rations?”

“Does she look like a raider to you? Lower your gun now or I swear I’ll shoot you myself.” Itsuki shouted back at him as he fixed his gaze continuously at Yasuo and the girl on the ground.

“Please! Don’t kill me!” the girl barely spoke as she wept loudly begging for her life “I am hungry... we are all hungry and sick... please...”

“Pff fine, if she kills you it’s on you... idiot.” Yasuo lowered his rifle looking down on the girl with caution in his eyes.

Sitting down beside her, Itsuki took the rest out of his green ration bars and handed it over to her. “It’s ok, please tell us who you are?” Petrified, the girl took the rations and started biting into one of the bars, shaking from fear she could barely manage to place the other bars in her pocket.

“Umm.... my name is Yuriko... we’ve been on the run... from the raiders... they kept killing our family and friends... and kidnapped some of the kids in our village... they wanted to use us some of us as slaves to work in their recycling factories, and they wanted to kill the weak... so our group ran away from home... I went to look for food, but I saw you two and I thought you were raiders... and then I fell... and you ran after me... Please, I am so scared, I have to look after my friends... they are hungry and sick...” the girl wept again barely eating her ration bar “Please... I am so scared I can’t go back to that life... please find it in your heart... please don’t send us back...”

Itsuki sitting beside her, carefully placed his hand on her shoulder to comfort the girl. “Where are they hiding Yuriko? We can help-”

“Wait wait wait! Itsuki, you know our policy of exposing our home and taking in refugees over their teen years don’t you?” Yasuo said fixing his gaze at Itsuki who was turning red from frustration. “They will punish you if you break that rule - “

“Are you serious Yasuo? She is just a girl who has been through too much. LOOK AT HER! She can barely move... We are up there living in ‘luxury’ like some gods while there are children and families still out there being murdered by those scum. Get it in your dull heads all of you up there... We have homes, we have to let people in! We need more people to survive as a society, we can’t always rely on the ‘traveler’ to babysit us... What if the circumstances were different Yasuo and we were in her place instead?”

“Hey don’t snap at me Itsuki... I don’t make the rules. You know how history went at the ‘unit’ with all the refugees before don’t you?” Yasuo replied shouting back at Itsuki in an equal fiery tone. “Yasuo... that was a hundred years ago, you saw our numbers yourself, by the end there will be none of us living up there... I am sorry for snapping at you but seriously, fuck the rules! I’ll gladly accept any punishment I receive.” he faced the girl again lowering his voice to not frighten her any further “Please Yuriko, tell us where your group is hiding, we promise we are not raiders... we have a home, we will try to help everyone out.”

“Umm... you have to follow me, we are hiding over there...” the girl pointed to an old ruined factory in the distance “They are waiting for me, some of the adults are armed so please be careful. Please just have mercy, we would rather die than go back to that life...”

“Lead the way Yuriko. I will follow you.” Itsuki got up taking his rifle in his hand, helping the girl stand up by her arms. “Are you coming to Yasuo? Or you are going to just stand there like an idiot with your rifle?”

“Well, I’ll come with you so we don’t get lost again, but I am keeping my rifle ready... I don’t trust outsiders anymore Itsuki. Motoyasu was our friend if you don’t remember. He was so full of life and happiness... and they... just shot him... for what? ‘Graminea Bars?’” Yasuo replied as he raised his rifle again at the ready, following behind the girl and Itsuki.

Walking through the ruins, Itsuki, Yasuo, and the girl quickly approached the entrance to a large abandoned factory. The factory ceased production a long time ago from the absence of humans. Even if the machines were self-sufficient, they still sometimes relied on the help of humans. In a way, their AI was programmed that if their purpose was fulfilled or nonexistent they would shut down. However in the long run of events, through adaptive learning, the AI learned to look for new purposes to fulfill across the city. It might have been a difficult task to accomplish due to some of the communication and node grids being down in the city, but they learned to take the most approaching work they could for what they were programmed as if the city was still alive and thriving.

Itsuki, Yasuo, and the girl threaded carefully through the dark corridors before they reached the large room lit by lanterns and campfire. Walking inside the room, their eyes opened even wider as they lowered their guns to the ground.

The factory housed families of malnourished and sick adults and children, there must have been about hundreds of poor souls who made their journey looking for a better life within the ruins of the city. Some of the adults stood guard with rifles in their hands as children slept down on the cold floor, dreaming of a better reality and their bellies full huddled next to their brothers and sisters. Couples of all ages, trying to ration little bit of food that they could save from their trip, sat huddled around the campfires.

Nearby, a family was sitting in mourning after they lost their family member who succumbed to exhaustion and hunger. She was a woman in her 60’s, who couldn’t hold on her journey any longer. Even in this world, she managed to have some kind of happiness and life back at her village, but running away she lost her life here on the cold floor in this abandoned factory. With closed eyes, she laid peacefully on the ground in an eternal dream surrounded by her family.

In shock, Itsuki and Yasuo both took off their helmet as they looked around the large room. This was the first time they have seen such a large group of outsiders trying to survive out here in this harsh devastated city.

At the ‘unit’ everyone followed a rule that you were only allowed to disclose the ‘unit’ only to help orphans, children, and teens along with their guardians and family, anyone else was considered an immediate threat. However, if you were shot at you were allowed to shoot back to protect your life. If you break the number of rules inside the ‘unit’ you were treated as a criminal who could be exiled, or you get to spend your life behind bars. Finding out the location of the ‘unit’ or the elevator system that connected it with the rest of the city, could mean frequent raids from the raiders and the aggressive outsiders who were always on the lookout for food and supplies. These rules were enforced due to decades of uprisings and issues they had with the other humans and sectors of the ‘unit’. Present a human with a permanent luxury of a ‘home’ and even a way to work for their food, they would still cause all kinds of problems and chaos they would imagine. Even with the confusing elevator system and the large blast walls surrounding it on every side and protecting them, they had to make sure they were safe from the harsh reality of the outside world.

Brushing his tears off from his face, Itsuki turned to the girl and still in a shocked state he managed to bring out some words... “Oh my goodness! You’ve all been living down here all this time?”

The girl looking back at him replied “No, we just recently arrived... we were hoping to go south of here to the ocean and see if we can find a boat and sail away from this dreadful city. Maybe there is food out there in the rest of the world or someone alive that can help us but... most of us could barely make the journey...” the girl said holding her hands together and looked down to the ground with tears in her eyes. “These are all who have managed to run away from the village. We had enough to survive for years, and we learned to be self-sufficient with the help of the AI and our Hydroponic Machines and farms. But the raiders, they always demanded we give them a share of our food. Then they came and took every able-bodied adult for work in the garbage dumps and factories... then they took the children... one day they came, stole our machines and started killing all of us who were deemed unfit for work. They killed half of the citizens in our village. Kids, mothers, fathers, grandmothers... anyone that crossed their path... for fun... The rest of us who managed to escape were hunted down for 3 months, then they left us alone to die from starvation.” raising her hands to her face she started weeping loudly... “My mother... she died in

my arms.... from a bullet wound. I tried to help her... I couldn't do anything..." crying loudly the girl fell to the ground "Mommy... why did you leave me..."

With a broken heart, Itsuki turned to Yasuo who was standing next to him looking in disbelief. "Yasuo, we have to help them... I don't care if they hang me at home, I can't find it in my heart to leave them out here. We can't be selfish anymore, I know we can share our resources. I will take full responsibility and accept my punishment... even if they exile me..."

"Itsuki, I don't know what to say... We came here to collect resources but... we found all these people... You are right, we can't leave them. And no, you are my only brother and friend in the world. I won't let you go down for this, and if we do I'll gladly share your punishment whatever it is." Yasuo replied as he took out the rest of his rations and flask, and walked around the campfires handing it out to the hungry and thirsty children and adults.

"Yuriko..." Itsuki faced the girl as he leaned down helping her get up "I promise we will help you, we have a home and - it's so much different than the world out there. I am so sorry about what happened to your mother and your home. We've had problems with raiders and outsiders for many years before and we don't trust anyone that comes from the outside. Some of them, they killed our best friend just a month ago. His name was Motoyasu and his beautiful daughter was just born 2 weeks ago. Yuriko... please tell your friends to gather their belongings... I am taking you all to your new home..." "The girl leaned and hugged Itsuki falling in his arms..." "Thank you...I will never forget this... there are still good people in this world..." the girl wept even louder. All Itsuki could do was hug her back, wanting to assure her that everything will be alright.

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Some time passed before the refugees took down their camp in the factory. Itsuki holding the girl by her hand, led the large crowd of exhausted and malnourished people out of the factory, Yasuo walking just close by holding two orphans by the hands. Emerging from the factory, it took about 30 minutes to get to the hidden elevators that the 'unit' uses to get through the layers. Waiting there were the other gatherers from their group, in disbelief looking at the large crowd walking towards them, with Itsuki and Yasuo in the front.

One of the boys from their supplies group walked close to Itsuki with confusion in his eyes... “Ummm.... Itsuki... I thought the plan was that we only get machine parts and resources?”

“Well.. plans do have a tendency to change don’t they?” Itsuki smiled as he held Yuriko closer by her hand.

“Soooo... care to explain?” the boy asked him back looking around in disbelief at all the people they managed to find at the factory.

“Well... I’ll explain everything later. Just help them with food and water, they’ve been through a lot... we have to get them up there... and yes, before you ask. We are taking full responsibility.”

“Itsuki... You know they will burn you for this?” The boy told them, still confused from this turn of the event “We can only bring in small groups of children and their guardians... but this?”

“Well, I hope they will make a great bonfire of us then, I’ll be happy when these children dance around the fire in the safety of their new home. Oh and here...” taking off his heavy backpack Yasuo slammed it to the boy’s hands. “Take this, I’ve been carrying this shit all day.”

The rest of the day the group coordinated the refugees, up to their new homes, in the ‘unit’.

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“Sensei, I hope you took care of my Kettenkrad?” Itsuki spoke as he looked at his guardian lugging the vehicle towards him. Itsuki and Yasuo were waiting for him at the entrance of the elevator, as a large crowd of people gathered to send them off on their journey.

“It’s like new, Itsuki, I changed the oil, the lamps and tightened the tracks. It should last you for ages if you both take good care of it. I bet you still remember all those engineering lessons you took with me.” Smiling he handed over the vehicle to Itsuki “It’s in your hands now, I also put in an extra toolbox in case you lose your other one, like the last time - Oh and don’t lose your rifle again!”

“Hey don’t worry, your lessons are all fresh here in my mind.” Itsuki replied as he placed his hand on Yasuo’s arms “I’ll have Yasuo take care of the stuff I lose and the hydroponic machines instead of lazing around all day.”

“Well as clumsy as you are, you were still the best student of the class Itsuki, I’ll leave the mechanics to you. You know my specialty was always hydro-culture and being a good shot also with the girls.” Yasuo smiled helping Itsuki push the Kettenkrad inside the elevator, along with their supplies, weapons, clothes and all the luggage they could carry with them on their journey.

Daishi, their sensei, and guardian since they were found on the outside, with sadness in his eyes approached them and spoke. “Itsuki, Yasuo... You know I tried everything I could to make them change their minds. You know we fought for years and years to give you immunity, but they were all determined to go with the exile for you both. Even after all these years, these stupid archaic rules -”

Itsuki smiled back at him and replied “It’s alright sensei... I want to do this. All my life I’ve known the luxury of the ‘unit’ while out there are still families and children surviving with no food and homes. I know I might not be welcome here for the next 20 years but, I will be happy that I will be happy all of those unfortunate people on the outside and even send families with their children here to live in peace. If not at least I know how to repair some of those dreaded machines.”

“Itsuki, Yasuo... I am so sorry... I want to come with you but you know that I am old and weak now... I’ll just slow you guys down.”

“No, sensei... You have to stay here and take care of your students, and Itsuki’s family. As long as we live, we will never regret my decision to save all of those 367 souls from certain death.” Yasuo stated, “I know you always wanted me to get married, but I am sure I’ll meet the girl of my dreams down there as well, just like Itsuki.”

“Sensei, that day was when our destiny changed. That day was also when I met the love of my life.” Itsuki spoke “All my life I knew one day that eventually we would go out on the outside and try to help the unfortunate people there. I hope the ‘unit’ comes to its senses and opens its doors for the outsiders one day when we come back from our exile.” Itsuki smiled as he lean to hug him “Sensei - you were like a father to me, thank you for everything.”

“Same here Sensei...” with tears in his eyes Yasuo went in for a group hug with both of them. “I will miss you all up here, I promise I will take care of this delinquent for Yuriko and Reo.”

After they broke off from the hug, Itsuki turned around to see Yuriko and his son Reo walking towards them from the distance. With tears in his eyes, he quickly approached Yuriko who started sobbing and hugged her tightly.

“My precious... Yuriko...” Itsuki said hugging her even tighter “Please... don’t cry and please don’t come after me... It’s dangerous out there and I know you are scared of the outside. I promise I will come back to you and Reo in 20 years.”

“Itsuki... I am so sorry... I never should have met you back then, it’s my fault that you are exiled from your home...” Yuriko sobbed loudly in her husband’s arms. “If it wasn’t for me you would still have your home!”

“Hey...hey...hey that’s not true. My love... it’s not your fault, my beautiful flower.” he leaned and kissed her softly on the lips gently caressing her cheek. “You know that I love you and Reo more than anything in this world. I will always love you both. But I have to help other families and children who are not as fortunate as us. It was either this or rot in a cell for 20 years. I will be back in 20 years...”

Weeping she broke from the hug, as she took out a picture from her pocket of the three of them having a picnic in front of a sakura tree smiling for the camera. “Please... don’t forget us... Itsuki... I will wait for you, my love...” Next to them carrying a stuffed toy with teary eyes was his son Reo waiting for his turn to say goodbye to his father.

“Dad... please don’t go... please stay...” he was trying to stay brave for his father but couldn’t help it as he started weeping loudly hugging his legs “Otoosaan... don’t go... please....”

Leaning down Itsuki hugged him tightly “Stay strong for me and your mom please, Reo-chan... I know you will grow into a beautiful strong boy one day and you will be really smart. I will be back as soon as I can and I will have so many stories to tell you, I will bring you a gift from the outside and I will send you both letters whenever I can. Reo-chan... please... I didn’t have a choice, there are so many little girls and boys like you down there who have

never experienced happiness, a warm bed and warm curry with rice. You know how much you like mama’s curry with rice?” Reo nodded with tears in his eyes weeping into his father’s arms. “She will make it to you almost every day... and I will help make it for other children and families out there.”

Breaking off from the hug, Itsuki looked at him with a smile on his face and brushed the tears of the little boy’s face. “I will be back for you and mom, one day. Just wait for me and we will go again to the sakura tree for a picnic the same day I arrive, and she will make us her world-famous curry. I promise you, we will laugh and smile all day. Just know... I love you so much... my sweet flower...”

Getting up from his knees he hugged them both again before saying his final goodbye, he couldn’t stop himself from crying before turning around and walked to the elevator with Yasuo ready for their next journey.

Suddenly a group of men broke off from the crowd and went up to both of them, carrying old era motorcycles and backpacks filled with rations, tools, parts, weapons...

“Itsuki-sensei! Yasuo-sensei! We request your permission to come with you!” the men bowed to them and asked for their permission in unison. “We can’t let you go out there alone!”

Itsuki and Yasuo looked at them in sudden confusion before Itsuki spoke...
”No. You can’t, you have families here-”

“We have families here because of the two of you. Your selfless acts saved our lives 12 years ago, and we feel responsible for your exile.” one of the boys said still bowing to them. “We can’t leave you out there alone. We are coming even with your protests!”

“YEAH!” all in unison said still bowing down to their heroes. Itsuki smiled as he looked at them “You know we can’t come back for 20 years... But anytime you want to come home to your families, promise us that you will do so.”

“Itsuki-sensei. You and Yasuo-sensei showed us your selflessness to help our families that day. We want to help you on your journey even if it means we are 20 years outside there with you!” the boy said still bowing.

“Alright, alright... I see you all have already made up your mind.” Itsuki said with a smile as both of them went and helped them with their stuff up to the elevator.

With large applause, the voice of over 400 people echoed throughout the ‘unit’. It was the voices of the families, the children and the new generation of kids born in their new homes, who came to send their heroes off, to the next journey.

Before the gates of the elevator closed, Itsuki faced his wife and son and with tears in his eyes and smiled as he waved them goodbye.

The elevator alarm rang signaling the start of its electrical engines, moving down to the layers below.

• • •

“Are you going to carry all those books and records to the house Itsuki? You know we came here to find rations for the village. We can’t eat hydroponic vegetables every day, and books aren’t that edible last time I checked.”

“What do you think? I’ve read every book, manga and I was hoping to finally fix that record player. What else am I gonna do for 10 more years down there beside hang myself? The screens won’t connect to the archives. And I am glad I finally found some glasses so I can read, my eyesight is getting so bad.”

Leaving their Kettenkrad outside, Itsuki and Yasuo were scouring through an old library full of old phonograph records and books that somehow survived centuries of war, enclosed in a machine that managed to preserve them from time. With an endless supply of electricity, the machine was able to preserve a whole library of books, records and almost anything their ancestors could store, even food.

Suddenly as Itsuki scoured through the records he screamed “AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH!” Yasuo next to him jumped taking out his rifle from the back “WHAT? WHAT HAPPENED?”

“It’s her!” Itsuki was holding a phonograph record with a picture of a smiling woman with brown hair from the old era, the words on the record were unclear to Yasuo as he never managed to learn the old western alphabet and language like Itsuki. “VERA LYNN! Yuriko loves her a lot!”

“What who?” Yasuo still stood at ready holding his rifle in his hands, his heart pounding. “She is an old singer from way back in the old era... She was famous in Great Britain and sang for the soldiers who went to war. How did this record even find its way here?” Itsuki with a wide smile held the record tightly examining it carefully on each side.

“Itsuki, you scared the shit out of me... idiot!” Yasuo replied placing his rifle on his back, as he turned to face Itsuki who had tears in his eyes.

“We danced to her music all the time, even though Yuriko-chan couldn’t understand what she was singing about, we still danced and danced. There was so much music in the archive we wanted to hear Yasuo... I’ll keep this record as a gift for her when we meet again in 10 years.” Itsuki smiled hugging the record tight, with tears streaming down his face.

Placing his hand on Itsuki, Yasuo spoke “Hey Itsuki, what’s 10 years? It will pass fast! Look on the bright side of what we have done these past years. We helped so many kids and families down here establish their hydroponic farms and even fix the machines with recycled parts. I am sure even all those families and children we have sent up there with our letters survived and Dai-shi-sensei, Yuriko and Reo-chan know we are still alive down here. And don’t forget all those messages we sent through some of the nodes.”

“Reo-chan would be about in his 30’s when I come home, he will be an adult and probably will have children of his own. I’ll be a ‘grandfather’.” Itsuki replied as he brushed the tears of his eyes storing the record carefully down in his bag. “Don’t worry Itsuki. They will be so happy when they see their ‘grandpa’ finally!” Yasuo said as he suddenly changed his tone to a serious one. “So hey... I know why Haruhi was sick in the morning these past few days. I wanted to tell you all day, but this is a good time just like any. We found out she is pregnant!”

Itsuki’s eyes widened and suddenly jumped hugging him tightly screaming again “AAAHHH YASUOOO... You better marry her soon or I swear I’ll kick your ass!”

“Sure sure... soon soon!” Yasuo smiled “We even came up with names for the baby. If it’s a boy we will call him ‘Itsuki’ after his uncle, and if it’s a girl... ‘Chito’. In 10 years when our child is older, we will all go together up to the ‘unit’.”

“Chito-chan... That’s such a beautiful name! I am so happy for you both! I am sure it will be the cutest baby ever, Yasuo!” pulling out a cigarette from his pocket he lit it and handed it over to Yasuo “Hey I didn’t bring any hydroponic whiskey with me, but we should light a cigarette to celebrate.”

“Nah...” turning down the cigarette Yasuo said “Those cigarettes will be the death of you Itsuki. I can celebrate with my coffee though.” he smiled taking out his flask.

“Yeah, I’m sure my lungs will just give up one day. But until then, here is to life down in this shit-hole!” They both cheered to the creation of life, Itsuki smoking his cigarette and Yasuo drinking from the flask.

Later in the day after their visit to the old library system, Itsuki struggled to drive the Kettenkrad as it was overcapacity with books, records and supply boxes they managed to find in the ruins just at the outskirts of the city, with Yasuo sitting in the back on piles of books.

“Why don’t you just throw some of the books away Itsuki?” Yasuo asked him struggling to find comfort in the piles of books he was sitting on, as Itsuki drove on. “Why don’t I just throw you away instead?” Itsuki replied annoyed in defense of the books and records he found, still trying to drive the Kettenkrad as fast as he could. The weight was too much on as he struggled to drive it onwards, Itsuki couldn’t help but curse “Cmon you piece of junk!”

“Well, I probably weight less than all these stuff you decided to take with you. I’d probably walk to the village faster than you!” Yasuo responded as he kept looking in the far distance... The sun slowly was setting down as the street lights illuminated the way of the ruined city behind them. “We are close, stop complaining Yasuo... I’d rather throw away the food than the books.”

“Pff... you are such a bookworm!” Yasuo sighted sitting in the back, irritated that he couldn’t get into a comfortable position.

“So hey Itsuki, do you think the others from our group managed to reach the ‘unit’ with the families we sent a few months ago?”

“I really hope they did, I gave them clear instructions on how to find the elevator up there. Even though it’s confusing as hell I still remember the area by heart and where to find the secret entrance. If not they could always make their way to the stairs to the top layer and walk to the walls of the ‘Ninth Sector’.” Itsuki replied as he kept struggling to drive the Kettenkrad forward.

“So, do you think that Kanazawa kid we met at the other village might be of use yet?” Yasuo asked facing Itsuki from the back.

“Well he’s still young and kinda useless, but I hope he can give us fresh maps soon to coordinate supplies. Unless he gets lost again... Imagine a cartographer that gets lost!” Itsuki smiled still driving on “But at least his services are cheap. He works for a bag of rice and tuna cans. I hope one day he gets to be the best cartographer around, we can use his skills if we take him up to the ‘unit’.”

“Hey, takes a clumsy person to know a clumsy person.” Yasuo laughed as he teased Itsuki from the back “I am not that clumsy!”

“Well... you even managed to lose the spare toolbox that sensei gave you.” Yasuo replied laughing even more before Itsuki raised his hand with only his middle finger pointing up. “Hey, I’ll give you homework to find out what this hand sign meant in the old world Yasuo.” Itsuki chuckled as he continued driving on.

Some time passed in silence as only the engine of the Kettenkrad rumbled on, however, even throughout the loud engine, Yasuo could hear something else, something faint that was different from the engine’s sound “Wait... stop the engine Itsuki!”

“Huh?”

“Just stop it!”

Itsuki turned off the engine and hit the breaks coming to a full stop. They could indeed hear something in one of the ruined houses, it was the faint cries of a baby.

“Take your rifle Yasuo, let’s go check it out!”

Walking carefully towards the ruined house with their rifles pointed up, the faint cries were getting louder and louder. Walking into one of the rooms they found an old ruined baby crib, something inside it was crying. Laying down there was a baby wrapped in a cloth, malnourished and it's face red as it has been crying for hours and hours.

“Oh no... it's a baby!” Itsuki exclaimed as he reached down and picked it up carefully in his arms.

Yasuo at the same moment ran outside the house and started shouting at the top of his lungs “ANYONE OUT THERE! YOU IDIOTS FORGOT YOUR CHILD HERE! HEEYY!” he continued shouting to no reply, just the constant dead silence of the city. “HEEEEEYYYYY!” he shouted again but to no avail.

Walking out of the house, Itsuki was holding the baby tightly, as it continued crying in his arms “Quick Yasuo, go grab that powdered milk ration we found, the poor thing is starving... you remember how to prepare milk for a baby?”

“Of course, I've done this countless times Itsuki... What kind of a father I would be If I didn't know how to do that.” Taking out the gas stove from the Kettenkrad, he lit it on fire as he placed water and powdered milk in the pot.

“It's a beautiful baby girl, Yasuo... How could they just leave her out here?” Itsuki said gently swaying the baby to calm it down.

Taking out the warm milk from the stove, Yasuo checked the temperature before pouring it in a feeding bottle they had for emergencies when they were out with the orphans. Sadly the orphans were a common sight in the ruins, as people were abandoning these children if they lacked the rations to feed them. Babies never survived this long, but this girl's luck abruptly changed.

Gently, Itsuki put the teat of the bottle into the baby's mouth as it started suckling on the lukewarm milk inside. “There there... you are safe now... beautiful girl...” Itsuki said swaying it softly around, as the baby drank the whole content of the bottle before falling asleep safely in his arms.

“Itsuki! We managed to save another life!” Yasuo said looking up at Itsuki with relief, who held the baby carefully in his arms “Oh... I came up with a perfect name for her. In honor of my wife, I will call her - - -”

“Yuuri.”

• • •

It was early in the morning when a loud continuous knock on the door woke Itsuki up as he was sleeping in the room together with Yuuri who fell asleep cuddled next to him the night before. “Mm... grandpa?” Yuuri spoke as she woke up looking at Itsuki getting up from the bed. “It’s ok sweetie, go back to sleep. I’ll go see who is at the door.”

Opening his eyes and yawning, Itsuki hurried to the door “Mm... who could it be at this hour?” he asked himself as he opened the door. On the other side was the bewildered look of one of his friends from the village. “Itsuki-sensei... I am sorry for waking you up but... Yasuo and Haruhi... after 2 months they found them... I am so sorry...”

Itsuki with a sudden fright in his eyes asked “Wait wait... what happened? Are they safe?” Itsuki hasn’t heard anything from Yasuo, his wife, and their daughter for about 2 months. Both of them went to the neighboring village to take care of the machines and the orphans with their families that have arrived the months before. They were supposed to help them with supplies and directions up to the ‘unit’.

“Itsuki-sensei... They were being chased by raiders. I am so sorry but, they shot everyone... Yasuo and Haruhi were executed right there on the spot... Chito was laying on top of them... she wasn’t even crying when we found her. She is alive...” the villager replied trying to compose himself, a little girl with dark hair was standing just behind him. She was dirty and slightly covered in blood that probably belonged to her parents.

“No... No...” Itsuki started shaking and held one of his hands to his face, bawling his eyes out as he slammed the side of the door with his fist... “FUCKING HELL! NO!” he continued cursing and crying “What about the orphans?”

“The raiders... they all took them and only left Chito-chan to die from hunger because she was way too young for them...” the girl behind the villager looked up at Itsuki with curiosity in her eyes, unable to understand why the old man was crying. “She is all alone now Itsuki-sensei, you are the only one she has in the entire world!”

“I WILL MURDER THEM, ALL OF THEM!” Itsuki ran inside and grabbed his rifle storming towards the door. However, the villager managed to hold him tightly from running out “No Itsuki... you must stay here... the girl

lost her parents, you must stay strong for the little girls... they have to count on you... you can't just go out there and get killed by them... you know they are on to you and will kill you if you step outside the village!"

Sobbing even harder he leaned on the villager's arms and cried his eyes out. Yuuri was standing in the back of the room in her pajamas looking at Itsuki, unable to understand what was going on. Her eyes fixed on the gaze of the little girl behind the villager, as she stood there dirty and covered in blood.

Composing himself Itsuki leaned down to look at Chito. "Hey... Do you remember me? I am a friend of your mom and dad. They told me that you will stay with us for some time until they feel better... Chito...." he leaned down and hugged her tightly with tears in his eyes. "You will be safe here, little girl."

Yuuri approached closer to the door hiding just behind Itsuki, looking shyly at the little girl as Itsuki hugged her.

Taking Chito by her hand he stood up and looked at the villager "Thank you so much to all of you for rescuing her... you know that Chito is so precious to me." with tears in his eyes they said their goodbyes and Itsuki closed the door. Inside, he turned to Yuuri who was shyly looking at both of them and said "Hey Yuuri... this is Chito. Her parents aren't feeling so well and she will live with us for some time now. Is that ok?"

Yuuri with a wide smile on her face said "Yay... a new friend!" as she raised her small arms above her head.

"Please show her around. I have to go get the bath ready for Chito, she is a bit dirty." Itsuki spoke as he walked inside the bathroom. He kept trying to turn the faucet on the bath before he collapsed down on the bathroom floor unable to keep himself from sobbing.

Smiling Yuuri looked at her new friend from across the room as she approached her "Hey... your name is Chito?" Chito shyly looked at her and quietly replied "...mhm..."

"My name is Yuuri... I know! I will call you Chii-chaaaaan!" Yuuri gently grabbed her hand "Chii-chan come I want to show you my toys..." smiling she led Chito to her room chanting her name playfully "Chii-chan... Chii-chan... Chii-chan..."

Chito with a smile on her face joined her repeating her own name playfully along with Yuuri “Chii-chan! Chii-chan! Chii-chan...”

• • •

“One adult and two teenagers.”

“Hey, Shithead! Did you get more than enough food?”

“I... I have two girls at home they have to eat as well.” Itsuki held tight to his bag before someone came close to him started grabbing on the bag wanting to take it away. “HEY! I DON’T CARE YOU CAN’T GET MORE THAN THE REST OF US!”

Itsuki swiftly pushed the person away and started running away before the angry mob attacked him. The commotion in the village was getting more heated. The ration factory stopped working 3 months ago and a group of raiders arrived in military vehicles to ask for their portions. The groups kept killing each other for years until they came to a settlement shortly after, however, no one was left who was able to fix the machines at the factory. He knew it was a time to go and in the case of an uprising, he knew he had to send the girls away from this place.

Itsuki planned on this journey a long time ago but he was afraid to leave the village. He was wanted by the raiders for constantly causing them problems in the past and due to fear of the girls getting mixed up in his past ordeals, he could never find the strength to carry out the journey back home, not when the girls were so young and precious to him. He would never let the raiders get a hold of them and suffer due to his But with time and his age, his plans to return home slowly diminished, in time he forgot about his home and only had the elevator system written down in a letter he hid away, just in case this day came.

Opening the door to his home, he placed the bags on a table nearby and ran to check on Chito. Only Chito was at home sleeping on top of a book at her desk. He knew he had to be calm and pack up their backpacks for the long trip to the ‘unit’.

“...Chito.”

“Chito!”

Waking up from her desk she looked at Itsuki who was staring out the window. “Yes?” she replied still opening her eyes.

“Please go and get Yuuri!” he replied still trying to keep calm as to not worry her.

“But where is she?”

“She went outside to help me get rations but she got lost. Please go find her, and stay away from anyone else.”

Chito put on her jacket and ran away from the house as Itsuki still tried to keep calm. “Right! I need to get their bags!” he scoured through their belongings packing up their clothes, along with all the food supplies in the house they had left and all kinds of survival supplies he stocked on before he ran to the bookcase and took out two letters neatly hidden inside one of the books. One was addressed to the girls and another to his family. He knew that he wasn’t able to come on this journey with them, but the letter would help them find their way to the ‘unit’.

“Right, I hope they understand the directions to get up there...” he placed the two letters inside his pocket and went to pack up the rest of their belongings.

“Grandpa! I found Yuu... what’s going on outside?” Chito just ran inside the house holding Yuuri closer by her hand. Itsuki was inside holding their backpacks in his hands with the rest of the supplies.

“Girls... It’s time to go. It’s not safe here anymore. Something is going on outside...”

“Why? What’s happening, grandpa?” Chito asked him as she looked up at him. He tried to stay calm but there was visible panic in his eyes. “There are no more rations. The villagers and the raiders are angry. They are outside - they found out our factory stopped working some time ago and we are not able to produce rations anymore. Please get ready it’s not safe here anymore. You know our drill when things go bad right?”

Taking his trusted Arisaka Type 38 rifle from the wall, he and the girls started walking swiftly down to the garage, and just before the entrance he

turned to Yuuri and gave her his rifle. “Yuuri, you know how to use this right? We practiced so many times!.”

“I know grandpa!” Yuuri replied holding the rifle tight in her arms, she was still confused as to what was happening and why did they have to go away.

“Tell me! Now!”

“Ummm... open the breech, insert the clip with the bullets, reload, lock the rifle in your shoulder, aim and shoot...”

“That’s about right Yuuri... don’t hesitate to shoot at anyone that might want to hurt you both. And never point it at Chito, Got it?” he exclaimed as he took the rest of the backpacks that he carried inside the garage.

“These are old uniforms, but I’ve adjusted them to fit you,” Itsuki said as he pulled out two helmets and two winter uniforms that he and Yasuo used to wear a long time ago when they were younger, and handed them to Yuuri and Chito. “It’s really cold on the outskirts as well so please wear them. If there’s anything else you want to take with you, go and get it now.”

“Grandpa?” Chito looked at him as he placed the supplies, rations and their backpacks on the back of the vehicle. Then Itsuki took out his key from his pocket and handed it over to Chito. “You remember how to drive Chito?” with a confused look on her face she took the keys looking up to him as Yuuri asked him “What about you? You are not coming with us?”

“Yuuri, I can’t. The provisions will last longer for just the two of you. If you escape towards the west there’s a tower beyond the slope. Go up there, towards the top of the layers, the top of the world, you’ll be safe there... There is bound to be food up there! I’ll stay here and keep them off from you. Chito, remember those stories, don’t forget the ninth...”

Suddenly a gunshot was fired close to where they stood by and the whole village seemed to go up in flames...

“Grandpa?”

“Hurry up and go!”

Already far in the distance, Chito and Yuuri at full throttle drove away from the village, they both looked back at Itsuki who was waiving at them. The commotion between the villagers and the raiders was heating up as the guns started firing. He kept waving to the girls but in all the confusion he completely forgot about the letters inside his pocket. He never gave the letters to the girls as it contained all the information on how to get up to the 'unit'. In his old age, he felt that he was always forgetful at the worst possible time. Itsuki planned to go on his last trip together with the girls, but the circumstances over the years delayed their trip and on this day they changed for the worst. However, the girls were already far in the distance. They never even managed to say proper good-byes, they never knew this was the last time they would see their grandfather in their lives as they waved back.

“No... no... no... I forgot the letters” suddenly he started running after them and shouted at the top of the lungs “CHITO... YUURI... GO TOWARDS THE NINTH SECTOR OR THE NINTH LIGHT AT THE TOP OF THE LAYER! YOU’LL SEE WHEN YOU GET UP THERE. DON’T LOOK BACK!”

Unsure if he heard them Itsuki stopped running and started pulling on his hair... “How! How could I be so stupid! How could I be such an idiot and forget the letters!” running back to the village he frantically was trying to look for a vehicle to go after them “All I have to do is reach them somehow!”

Running amidst the firefight, he saw one of the men that decided to come on their journey all those years ago getting on a motorbike. “Isamu... I have to use your bike it’s really important! Please!” Itsuki said as he got closer to him.

“No... get your own bike... back off!” the man shouted back at Itsuki, pushing him off as he tried to start the bike.

“Please... Isamu it’s really important... I need to borrow it!” Itsuki reached for the handles of the bike before the man with all his might pushed him off again, “I said.. back off...” the man took out his gun, but accidentally fired it. Looking back at Itsuki, the man realized his mistake “No... Itsuki-sensei! I... I... I am... so sorry!” the man dropped his gun on the ground before he drove off with the motorbike in the distance, leaving him standing there.

Up to this point, Itsuki fired his rifle so many times to defend his life, but this was the first time he was at the endpoint of a receiving bullet. Holding his

hand close to his body he noticed that blood was sprouting out of him. The bullet hit his lung and was lodged deep inside him. "Oh... so this is how it feels..." he thought to himself squirming from pain. Grabbing the gun that his friend dropped on the ground, he started walking towards his home, careful not to fall down. At this point he didn't care about the firefight outside, all he wanted was to go home and say his goodbyes to his wife. Walking through the village with flying bullets around him, riddled with bodies, weapons, and shells, he somehow managed to reach his house and sit down in his chair, holding the gun closer to the wound.

Next to him was the gramophone that he never managed to fix, and just nearby was the record he planned to gift to his wife the day he returned home. In all the time he was outside he could never manage to listen to music again, another thing in the world that brought him joy beside the girls and his family. Sitting still on the chair, with a smile on his face he took out a cigarette and lit it on fire "Killed by cigarettes... Yasuo you stupid idiot! I'll kick your ass for leaving... Chito by herself..." he said to himself before he took out the worn picture of his family from his pocket looking at his son and wife sitting under that sakura tree all that long time ago. "I am sorry I never fulfilled my promise... Please take care of Chito and Yuuri. Good luck to the - two of - you - "

After a short time, the firefight finally stopped. Sitting in his favorite chair with a half-extinguished cigarette, the lifeless body of Itsuki held tightly onto the photograph he cherished all those years.

Chapter 6

Affliction



“What do you do in case the victim suffers a third-degree burn?”

“If it’s pretty severe you need to protect the burn area by covering it loosely with sterile gauze. To protect them from going into shock, have them lay on the ground, lift their legs up and cover them with a blanket, until we can get them to the infirmary. It’s always important to monitor the victim’s pulse, breathing, and blood pressure.”

“What’s the meaning of triage?”

“Determining the priority of which patient has to be treated first during an emergency or disaster, by the severity of their condition. So for example, someone with a gunshot wound gets priority over a person with a small incision on their finger.”

“What if the victim suffers from a heart attack?”

“You first check if the symptoms of a heart attack are there. Have them sit down, rest and try to keep them calm, if they are unconscious and unresponsive begin administering CPR and immediately transport them to the infirmary... are you going to keep asking me First Aid questions or are you going to play?”

“Even if you are my daughter, I am hoping you would pass the exam tomorrow if you are going to be a ‘certified’ nurse at my hospital Mieko! Oh and - CHECKMATE!”

Reo and Mieko were sitting in the cold hangar opposite each other playing chess. Two days of the month every citizen of the ‘unit’ has to volunteer for service at different kinds of jobs around the sector. For this month it was Reo and Mieko’s turn to be on guard duty at the hangar that was used to access the outside either through the blast doors that leads to the top layer or using the elevator systems to get to the layers below. Besides the retrofitted old era vehicles it houses, there are also monitoring stations to observe the layers just outside the blast doors and the elevator. However, with the sensors and camera systems down from the blizzard, they were sitting blind for a few days.

“Daaad, that’s your 5th win in a row!” Mieko pouted as she rested her head on the table “Arghhh...I’m never gonna win against you!”

“Your ‘dad’ is the ‘unit’ champion 4 years in a row.” Reo replied as he was

placing back the pieces on the chessboard “And that was my personal best in 10 moves. You had your king out in the open with that last move, it was so easy to checkmate you with the rook and the horse.”

“Oh! You’ll see who will brag about beating the ‘unit’ champion! I’ve been practicing with Kazuo almost every day and I am soooo close to beating him!” Mieko exclaimed still resting her head on her table.

“Who do you think taught Kazuo all this time?” Reo spoke with pride as he loved to brag about his chess skills every chance he had. “Ready for another round?”

“Naaaa... I don’t want you to win 6 times in a row! We should play something I am good at, like ‘Ludo’.” She smirked still resting her head on the table “Ughhh... guard duty is sooo boring! I will be more useful at the hospital, dad!” Mieko complained as she lay back on the chair, her gaze fixed up at the lights that lit up the large hangar.

“Be lucky you are not on sewage duty this month, and beside Midori’s fever there were no other patients there these past few days,” Reo said as he placed the chessboard away from the table.

“Shoveling shit is more fun than this!” Mieko replied still pouting as she looked around the cold hangar. “So when do you suppose they are going to fix the cameras and the sensors outside? They haven’t been working for 3 days now.” Mieko asked and sighed as she looked at the blank monitor near them with just the words ‘1 - 97/ Lost Communication!’ written on the screen.

“They should commission one of those useless apparatuses to go out and fix the grid. Besides, I don’t think anyone from the engineering unit will go out in this weather. The forecast station said that the storm will pass us in 7 days. Its the biggest one of the season.” Reo replied as he also looked into the blank monitor.

“Yesterday was a nice day outside. Someone could have fixed the cameras then, what if someone is out there?”

“Who knows, the last time someone came from there was 6 years ago. If my memory serves me right I think it was one of dad’s refugees. I am glad people still manage to find this place after all this time.” Reo replied before he

grasped the metal mug sitting next to him, taking a sip of warm green tea. “You should drink your tea Mieko, you will feel warmer.”

“Ugh.. it might just make me sick again like this morning!” Mieko replied placing away her mug aside as even the smell of green tea could send her back to the toilet.

“Do you still get morning sickness?” Reo asked her after taking a few more sips.

“Sometimes... I really want to kill that useless boyfriend of mine for making me pregnant!” she said laying back down on the chair.

“I should get my shotgun and make that boy marry you!” Reo replied jokingly with a grin on his face. He read somewhere about an old practice called “shotgun weddings” and has been fascinated with it ever since he found out his daughter was pregnant.

“You watch too many movies dad, I don’t think anyone even in the 20th century got married, with their father pointing an actual shotgun at the groom.” she chuckled looking back at him.

“Well, this will be the first one in our century. I’m gonna make him an offer he can’t refuse!” Reo said imitating the voice of one of the characters from a 20th-century movie he watched some time ago.

“DAD! I swear you and how you described grandpa are like cliché ‘science fiction’ characters that are so badly written that they are only obsessed with 20th-century classics. You know there are movies, music, and literature in the ‘archive’ from the 21st and 22nd centuries? I mean there is that one fascinating movie from 2113 just before World War 3 that they filmed in actual space.” Mieko spoke reminiscing of an old science-fiction American movie she saw filmed back in the 22nd century.

“If you’ve been actually watching the ‘20th-century ones’, you will know that one is just a remake of ‘2001: A Space Odyssey’. Just compare the two and you will see that the director of the first one ‘Stanley Kubrick’ was one of the best directors of the century.” Reo replied as he went into another movie discussion yet again “But still what I find fascinating about the 2113 movie, is that they actually sent a film crew of about 25 people on a 365 days expedition

to the successor of the International Space Station after it was decommissioned and sent to crash in the Pacific Ocean. But all they could do was remake the old classic. They hardly even used computer graphics for ninety-five percent of the scenes in space, unlike the rest of the computer-generated movies they used to make in the 21st century... Back then they spent the whole budget on generic computer renderings instead of talented actors and writers. People lost their jobs due to those machines.”

Besides chess, filmography was another one of Reo’s passions as he loved to ramble on for hours about all kinds of movies from the past centuries he’s seen from the archive. “But anyway! MARK MY WORDS YOUNGLIN! I am going to get my shotgun and you will marry that boy! I will not have my daughter bring shame to our family!” he laughed as he just loved to tease Mieko about her current predicament. “Ugghhh daaaaad... you are only going to get me embarrassed on my wedding day! Do you think Kazuo’s father will bring his shotgun as well?” Mieko replied and chuckled as she looked back at him “Maybe you two will go on a duel about which family name I should take? I will bring the popcorn!”

“He is my best friend, He would probably let me shoot first.” Reo smiled again “You know I am just teasing you, I couldn’t be happier about you and Kazuo starting your own family in your time.”

“Thanks, dad, but you know we’ve been planning to get married for some time now, Kazuo is still so busy with his culinary studies and we never found the right time. He has a lot of hungry mouths to feed up here, also you keep forcing him to perfect grandma’s curry recipe.”

“That recipe has kinda a sentimental value, it reminds me of a lot of my family.” Reo replied as he put away his empty mug to the side. “After all these years, I hope dad will make it up here before your wedding as well. He will be so happy to find out he is a grandfather and a great grandfather at the same time.”

“Yeah, I’ve really wanted to meet him for years now, and the two girls from his letters that he’s been taking care of. I doubt he probably even know he has a granddaughter.” Mieko always enjoyed talking about her grandfather who was exiled a long time ago from the ‘unit’. She was fascinated with his life and his bravery to go out in the world and help so many people. “I don’t remember grandma that much though.”

“You were just a little toddler when she... errr...” Reo replied before he abruptly paused. Speaking about the tragic circumstances of his family always felt like a sharp needle stabbing him right in the heart.

“I know dad, it’s really sad... grandpa will be so heartbroken when he finds out, she was the love of his life.” Mieko replied as she looked back at him.

“She was struggling a lot with post-traumatic stress disorder, even for years after Itsuki found her on the outside. She suffered a lot on the outside and even here on the inside after dad left. We tried to help her for years. I studied every kind of medication available from the ‘archives’ and for a long time she was drinking ‘synthesized paroxetine’. It helped with the other patients that came from the outside with similar mental health issues like her. We even took a large portion of the hydroponics bay to grow cannabis that we found in the seed bank, to turn it into medication. At one point in her life her mood changed drastically, she had the most beautiful smile when you were born. She even went back to her painting and listening to the old era music from the ‘archives’. But I guess that’s just what we saw on the outside. Inside her, she was battling all kinds of demons with her emotions and mental health. In reality, when Itsuki was exiled from the ‘unit’, her heart shattered into millions of pieces and she couldn’t go on without him” Reo replied as he looked back at Mieko before he continued talking.

“But you know... the ‘archive’ can be such a good thing to us at times. It gives us happiness and some kind of sanity up here in our own little isolated world. But later we found out that she used the ‘archive’ to learn how to synthesize ‘potassium cyanide’. She and dad used to watch a lot of World War movies back in the days and even listen to music from that period. She found out about those suicide pills that soldiers used in war and - I guess that is how she got the idea. It was too late, we found her lying on the sofa - “ Reo replied as he brushed a tear from his face, he always felt down telling the story of his mother. “I don’t think dad even knows that she passed away a long time ago. Yet he keeps sending her letters from down there, and even if I am so eager to see him again, I am happy that he is helping those two girls for the journey up here.”

After all these years Reo couldn’t help but feel that he could have done something more for his mother and father who sadly suffered so much in their life apart from each other. “Last night I had a dream that they were sitting together with a large smile on their face... just underneath a sakura tree, and he told me everything will be alright and that we will have visitors soon... I don’t

know what he meant by that, but it was probably just a silly dream. I haven't had a dream of him in a long time..."

"Dad, do you think they are still alive down there? I know in his letters he said he was supposed to come 5 years ago and we kept sending search parties but we never even managed to find the first village where he stayed at." Mieko asked him.

"I hope so Mieko-chan. From the 25 people that went with him, only 14 came back with outsiders and orphans and none of them wanted to go out again. What hurts me most is that he didn't even know that the 'unit' decided to drop that rule that got him exiled, after the 'traveler' finally stepped in to have a say. Dad and Yasuo were welcome to come back home anytime they wanted. I really wanted to go on those search parties that were looking for them so much but the hospital needed me. Especially after the few altercations with some nut-heads outside after the few supplies run." Reo replied as he looked back at her, laying back on the chair. "Those two sweet girls from his letter also deserve a happy life Mieko, and even though I miss him so much and I feel selfish that he didn't deserve to have this kind of life in the outside ... I am so happy that he saved two more lives from the cruel world outside. I hope the little girls know that Itsuki and Yasuo are heroes."

"Dad..." Mieko held out her hand to him, as she gently squeezed his hand. She loved her father and mother more than anything in the world and was happy that she was given this life in the safety of their home up in the 'unit'. She hoped she would share that love with her fiance and her baby as well soon. "I am sure they will come here in due time. No one would call you selfish you that you want grandpa back in your life after all those years on the outside." she looked at him and smiled gently holding his hand. "So! Want to play another round of chess?"

"Well, I am just going to destroy you again!" he smiled placing back the chessboard on the table.

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Waiting for their guard shift to end, Reo and Mieko continued playing a few more rounds of chess and spent the rest of the day discussing the old mov-

ies from the ‘archive’. The evening was already at a start when suddenly they heard a soft thump coming from the outside of the wall, slightly shaking the lights inside the hangar as bits of mortar fell from the ceiling. The familiar alarm sounded blasting throughout the unit when they were in danger.

“Huh? What on earth was that?” Mieko stood up quickly from her chair, by instinct she turned to the monitors which still had the words ‘/1 - 97/ Lost Communication!’ written on them, they were still blind from the outside as the whole grid of sensors and cameras stopped working.

“I think that was an explosion from the outside! Shit, could it be more of those nutjobs outside?” he said as he ran towards the weapon rack and pulled out his ‘Maschinenpistole 34’ he usually used to defend himself on the outside. “Quick call the others we are going outside!”

“What in this weather?” Mieko asked him still confused. “We have to check out what that was Mieko. The safety of the unit depends on it.”

Six people came running into the hangar from the outside who were also on guard duty that day. Perplexed, they looked at Reo and one of the men asked him “What happened? We heard something even out in the yard!”

“I don’t know, it sounded like an explosive device someone set outside on the wall. Gear up in your winter suits and bring your weapons, we have to check it out. Tell the rest of the ‘unit’ to stay cautious...” Reo stated as he went putting on his winter uniform and a kevlar vest. Turning his head he saw his daughter who was doing the same.

“No young lady, you are staying here! You are pregnant and your mother is going to kill me.” Reo spoke as he tried to stop her from dressing up. “Dad... you know I am not a little girl anymore, I am coming with you in case anyone needs help. Besides, Kazuo didn’t only teach me chess you know... I might be the best sniper in the unit thanks to him.” she smiled running up to the weapons rack and pulled out her modified Type 99 Arisaka rifle with a scope. The rifle was almost as big as her, but she knew how to handle it pretty well. Checking out her ammo she reloaded it before she turned to face her father. He couldn’t help but almost burst into laughter at the sight of his daughter holding an oversized sniper rifle in her arms, she was ready for battle. “Well, those outsiders better be careful, Mieko is coming!” he replied smirking as Mieko punched his arm playfully.

Geared up for a confrontation, the squad led by Reo ran to one of the machines they used for extreme weather. It was a modified German snow-plower from the old era called a “PistenBully 600”. The crane in the back was ripped apart to make way for an armored caravan filled with medical gear and ammo. A spotlight with a machine gun next to it was retrofitted on the top of the vehicle for defense and search and rescue missions. This vehicle got them through too much on outer layer explorations and it still worked for centuries after it was built.

Starting the engine they drove up to the tunnel up to the hidden blast door that leads to the outside just about 500 meters in front of the wall. Barely opening the blast doors as snow has accumulated on the top they could see how harsh the weather outside has turned with barely any visibility at all.

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“DO YOU SEE ANYONE?” Reo shouted from underneath the vehicle sitting on the passenger seat, as he aimed his weapon through the opening of the window. Some time passed as they reached the wall looking for anyone that might have set off the explosive device.

“NO... NO ONE!” Mieko shouted from the top of the vehicle as she stood ready with her sniper rifle scanning the horizon, two men from the group mounted the spotlight and the machine gun next to her.

“SCAN THE HORIZON AND BE CAREFUL, COULD BE ANYONE OUT HERE!” Reo shouted to her before he turned to the driver “Drive carefully along the wall, we need to see where the explosion came from.”

Driving through the piles of snow that accumulated on the top layer, they reached the point of the wall where the explosive device was set up. While it was insignificant, there was still concrete and fragments laying around on the ground gradually gathering snow. The wall absorbed most of the shockwave, but they could still feel the vibration and the sound on the inside.

“I STILL DON’T SEE ANYONE OUT HERE DAD!”

“BE CAREFUL AND KEEP LOOKING!” Reo replied back at her as he

continued scanning the horizon. They were sure that someone could be out here, walls don't have the tendency to just explode by themselves. "COULD IT BE A STRAY SHELL?" Mieko asked him back, as she continued looking into the blank horizon with her scope.

"NO! NO ONE COULD FIRE UP HERE AND HIT THE WALL! IT'S TOO FAR AWAY FROM THE BOTTOM OF THE LAYER!" Reo replied, however as he looked into the distance he could see something down on the ground.

"WAIT..." turning to the driver he pointed at the distance. "Drive over there, I think I see something... Pulling out his head through the window he shouted back at Mieko "MIEKO! CAN YOU SEE WHAT'S THERE IN FRONT OF YOU?"

"SURE," she said scoping the horizon with her sniper rifle. Barely visible, she noticed two silhouettes laying still on the white ground. She could make out only two helmets and the rest was covered in snow. "DAD! THERE IS SOMEONE OUT THERE ON THE GROUND! COVERED IN SNOW!"

"Oh no..." Reo exclaimed as he faced the driver "QUICK! We need to get there!"

Driving as fast as they could through the heavy snow, they stopped just outside where they saw the two bodies. Reo opened the door and ran out of the vehicle with his weapon pointed. He treated carefully, suddenly lowering his weapon as he saw two little girls laying cuddled under a blanket next to each other.

"MIEKO... EVERYONE... COME QUICK!"

Reo shouted back facing the vehicle, as he placed the weapon back on his arm and leaned down to check on the girls. Mieko and two men from the group ran out of the vehicle with their weapons ready.

"IT'S JUST TWO LITTLE GIRLS... THEY ARE FROZEN!"

Reo quickly brushed off the snow from the two girls laying huddled next to each other underneath the blanket, he kept trying to wake them up to no response. They barely looked alive, and he could swear the two little girls fit

the same description in his father's letter. "Oh.. no... no... could it be them?" he softly mumbled as he placed his finger on the bloodied hand of the dark-haired girl. Luckily she still had a pulse and was breathing, which wasn't the case of the blonde girl. She seemed to have stopped breathing and he couldn't feel her pulse.

Just behind them were Mieko and the two men from the group who were waiting for his instructions. "They are dying! We need to get them inside now!" Reo carefully grabbed the blond girl in his arms as she was still covered in the blanket and started running as fast as he could through the thick snow up to the back of the modified vehicle. Mieko and the two men from the group were just behind him carrying the other girl along with her backpack.

Once inside the vehicle, Reo placed the girl on the makeshift table and started taking off her clothes to perform CPR. Trying to keep calm, he turned to the driver "As soon as Mieko and the others get inside, drive as fast as you can back home! We don't have time to check if there is anyone else out here!" placing his hands on the girl's chest he started pumping her heart...

"Shit, I am so sorry dad! I don't know if you are still out there - "

As soon as Mieko and the other two from the group went inside the vehicle, the PistenBully came to life driving back full speed to the hidden blast door before it was too late. Placing the other girl on the table, Mieko turned to her father who called her over for help as he was trying to resuscitate the girl and grabbed a CPR Mask.

"Cmon... CMON! Please be alive!" Counting up to 30 he faced Mieko and gave her a sign to use the bag on the CPR mask. She squeezed it two times, breathing in the air into the girl's lungs. Sadly she wasn't giving any signs of life yet. She still had no pulse, but that didn't stop Reo from continuing with his chest compressions.

"CMON! Fight little girl please!" he continued as sweat started flooding his face... "FIGHT FOR ME PLEASE!" Counting again up to 30, Mieko was ready again with the CPR Mask and squeezed it two times. Still, with no pulse, Reo was never going to give up.

"PLEASE, LITTLE GIRL! JUST, FIGHT FOR FUCKS SAKE!"

A few days have passed since they found the girls from the cruel blizzard outside. Reo and Mieko both stayed at the unit's hospital day and night waiting for any signs of improvement. In the dead of night, Reo was sitting still awake in his office going through Itsuki's letters to see if he's missed anything. Itsuki always mentioned the two girls called 'Yuuri and Chito' and described them in detail in his letters, however, Reo wasn't completely sure that it was really them. In his father's letters, Itsuki explained that he planned to come with them on his last journey from the bottom layer. Something might have happened in the meantime and maybe Itsuki lost his life, or maybe it could have been two other girls that made this journey. It wasn't the first time that Itsuki sent outsiders to the last layer, they all knew about the ninth sector or the hidden elevator beneath because of him. That is why they never sealed off the entrances at the far corners of the layer because unfortunate people were still seeking refuge and life from the world beneath them. For days they sent out search parties to look for his father who might have been lost on the last climb, but they never found anyone else out there.

"If it's really them... then where is Itsuki?" he kept thinking to himself. Unable to eat and sleep for days, he was still pondering whether Itsuki was still out there, malnourished or even dead. But his priority was the life of the girls, he had to make a really hard decision for one of the girls on the day they arrived and it kept him awake almost every night with guilt studying the archives if he could have done anything else. Reo has been helping people in all kinds of emergencies, but this was completely different. He felt almost a fatherly obligation towards these two girls they found freezing out just the days before. He would never know what he would do if something similar happened to his daughter.

Reo must have drifted off to sleep in his chair as suddenly he was woken up by an alarm usually the nurses use in case of an emergency with one of their patients. Coming to his senses he got up and started running through the dark corridors towards the room where one of the girls was located. His daughter was inside the room calling out to him. Wearing a white doctor's robe he stopped just outside the room to take his breath "What happened Mieko?" Reo asked as he looked at her, suddenly his eyes fixed upon the terrified young girl crying on the bed. With a puzzled expression, the girl looked back at him and asked him, "What? Grandpa? Is that you?"

All of a sudden it occurred to him that this was indeed the girl from his father's letter, both of the girls called him grandpa and Reo strangely resembled his father's looks. Deep in his thoughts, he wanted to yell as loudly as he could, Itsuki was still outside in the blizzard. He turned to Mieko with a panicked look on his face.

“Oh my goodness... it's really her Mieko!” he said looking back at her. “It's her... the dark-haired girl from Itsuki's letter... but... we kept searching he wasn't out there... in the blizzard. That means he is still out there!”

The girl with a sudden puzzled expression on her face kept looking at both of them before she asked “Wait how? How do you know that name? How do you know grandpa?”

Reo trying to compose himself answered her calmly... “Chito... Itsuki, he is my father”

Staring at her he resumed talking “He was supposed to help you come here with you, but we couldn't find him. Is he still out there?” he asked fearing for the worst answer.

Chito still confused tried to calmly answer him back “No... he stayed back at the village and people started shooting each other... we don't know if he made it out,” she said still terrified with a puzzled look on her face “Wait - how... Who are you?” she questioned him again.

“Chito... it's a really long story but he is my father. He was exiled from our home and he planned to bring you both up here... to give you a proper life, both you and Yuuri... He sent so many letters to us through refugees and families... I am so sorry Chito... My name is Reo and this is my daughter Mieko...” he replied still trying to keep his composure as a doctor.

“Chito you two have been through so much out there, whatever you both did outside with the explosive device saved your lives, we would never have known that you were outside... I am so sorry”

Chito in the whole confusion again forgot about Yuuri as she was not in the same room as her.. “Wait - Yuuri? Please tell me where she is?” Chito's heart started beating even faster waiting for the answer from Reo. She couldn't stop crying laying down on the bed, she was worried about her lover.

“Chito... Please, you have to understand when we found you two you were in really bad shape. When we found Yuuri... she was dead... but we brought her to life, however - she is in a coma.” he replied almost with tears in his eyes, looking back at Chito who’s little heart was shattered in pieces.

“What... what is a coma? She was dead?” she asked him almost wanting to weep again... “Wha-”

“Chito... you were also in a short coma from exhaustion and you woke up... Yuuri is alive but she is just in a deep sleep... but please you have to be strong for her!” Reo with tears in his eyes still tried to compose himself, In all his life doing this job this was the hardest thing he had to do and he felt that Chito and Yuuri were his family. “I am so sorry Chito... But Yuuri, we tried everything, however - she lost her leg... you broke your hand and she lost her leg from frostbite. We tried everything and we had you both on a tissue regenerator machine... but... we had to eventually cut her leg to save her life.”

Chito suddenly burst into tears as she wept loudly...”Noooo!” she screamed trying to hit the bed with her hands... the pain from her broken hand pulsed through her body, but she continued weeping... “What did I do!? It’s all my fault! I pushed her through the snow! Why?”

Mieko with tears in her eyes tried to console her as she gently placed her hand on her head “Chito, it’s not your fault! You were really lucky - the weather is still really bad outside you did the right thing. Yuuri still has a chance of life but only time will tell when she will wake up... please, you have to be strong for her, you can’t ever give up for her - you went through too much to make it up here for a better life and you are finally in your new home.”

“No... my love... Yuu... what did I do?” she cried laying down on the bed, the medication that Mieko injected her was taking in effect as she started calming down and closing her eyes “Why Yuu... What did I do...” from exhaustion she fell asleep again with tears in her eyes.

Even though Mieko learned all her life to deal with patients and to always have professional composure, she couldn’t help but start weeping as she hugged her father tightly who was standing there still in shock. The sudden realization that her grandfather was never going to come back home was too much for them to bear. “Dad... Itsuki...” he said to himself as he started weeping as well, hugging Mieko even tighter. “No... - “

This was the day that he lost all hope of ever seeing his father back home. Deep in his heart, he wanted to believe that he was now finally together with his wife in heaven. Itsuki lost his life, but he gave life to two girls that never had the happiness of a happy, warm and safe home.

The storm outside raged on for days, completely covering the world in white. It seemed like it was the last storm of the season.

One would ask himself that maybe this wasn't really a nuclear winter and spring will be coming soon?

Maybe the world outside was beautiful in its own way even from the mountains and piles of excrement that humanity left behind for what?

That constant greed for self-improvement and power?

Maybe anyone can find happiness and love just like the inseparable hearts of Chito and Yuuri out there, and just like the hearts of Yasuo, Haruki, Itsuki, and Yuriko they will beat for one another until the very end. They all shared a similar destiny to reach the top of the world together through life and death. In some way, Chito and Yuuri carried Yasuo, Itsuki and Haruki home in their hearts.

They reached their new home, but it cost them a price.

Reo has seen the same spark in Chito's eyes for Yuuri before. It was the same that he has seen so many times in his mother's eyes and the way she felt about Itsuki. Reo knew her little heart wouldn't be able to survive without Yuuri by her side, and he felt that he had to do something to help them, he had to give more than what he could have ever done for his mother and father. "I won't let Chito go through what my mother did... I will help both of them get through this, even if it takes years..." Reo said to Mieko as he was hugging her tightly.

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Sleeping peacefully in her bed, Yuuri was still in a coma after a month since they were rescued, however she was doing much better since they found her. Yuuri didn't need the help of the machines to breathe anymore and it just

showed how strong she really was. Even in a coma, she never lost her will to live as long as Chito was by her side. Every day next to her, Chito never left her bedside as she waited patiently for her to wake up. Itsuki, Mieko and the staff from the unit's hospital couldn't find it in their heart to separate the two girls, and Chito was allowed to stay in her room and sleep next to her on the same bed. They only hoped that this room was only their temporary home for now.

Chito's strength and the strong spark in her eyes have also returned. With her medication and daily nourishment, she was able to function on her own, but she refused to leave Yuuri's bed-side and always left half a portion of her food next to her bed in case Yuuri woke up hungry. She was always there taking care of Yuuri and snuggling close to her waiting for any reaction. Chito's hand was also getting much better since they removed her cast, however, she still had trouble to make a fist. It would take a long time for her hand to completely heal. She couldn't ever leave her side and her room.

It was late at night, Itsuki and Meiko checked on them before they went home for the day as Chito laid there on the bed re-reading all of Itsuki's letter that was addressed to the people of the 'unit'. Outside the window of their room, it was raining, everyone was asleep as just the street lights illuminated this wonderful isolated world of the 'unit'. Chito learned of Itsuki's heroics, his real home, how he came to be exiled from his home and she finally knew about her real father and mother. All of these letters were addressed to Reo and Yuriko... All of them were sent through these strange nodes scattered throughout the world, and even families and outsiders that made the journey up to the last layer to find their new home. One short letter, in particular, was addressed to Chito and Yuuri, she kept rereading it with tears in her eyes.

“My Dearest Chito and Yuuri,

I am writing this letter to you in case I never make it on the journey with you.

After Chito arrived at our house on that day that my brother was killed, something snapped in me. I had to protect you both from the world outside, from the cruelty of the hungry and desperate bad people outside. You two were my only family here in the outside world. That is why I wanted to wait until you both were older and ready to make the journey up to our new home. You are both so precious to me and I never want to lose you.

The reason I kept my life hidden at the unit was that it was a really painful memory for me after I was exiled. I lived in the safety of the unit after they found me and Yasuo outside. I had a happy childhood and I tried all that I could to give you a happy childhood down here until you were ready to make the journey with me. I worked so hard every day for bits of ration so that you both can have the best food the outside world could offer and toys to play with. All that time I had you both, Reo and Yuriko on my mind and I kept writing to them about you two so many times. I only hope they will accept you as our own, Reo will probably be in his late 30's and my beautiful wife about 70 when you reach your new home up there. I admit that you both will have to work hard to help out the 'unit', but you will have a happy life and a roof over your head.

Chito, your mother, and father were the most wonderful people I knew. I loved them so much, and the day you arrived at our house I felt like a part of my heart died with them out there when I heard about their demise. I was so happy that you were living with us, but deep in my heart, I wanted your parents to be alive so that we could all have made the journey up to the 'unit'. I am sorry that I never told you much about them but my heart was broken after that day. I knew I had to be the best father or 'grandpa' as you both liked to call me, I had to do it for them after they left you alone in this cruel world. Please remember their names Yasuo and Haruhi, they were strong, beautiful and selfless heroes just like you are.

Yuuri, I told you the story that I found you out in the ruins so many times. I am sorry I never knew your parents, but I am so glad that day I met you out there together with Yasuo. It was the same day that I found out that Haruhi was pregnant with Chito. I always said you both shared a similar destiny to be together and strong. You were such a beautiful and strong baby, and I am so happy that I found you out there. You are such a wonderful person and a beautiful soul, I know that you will do so many amazing things in your life. If you could survive to be out there alone as a baby, you can survive anything life throws at you.

Chii-chan, Yuu... Please take care of each other.
I love you both so much.

Your dearest grandpa,
Itsuki”

Placing Itsuki's letters aside, Chito turned the bedside lamp off and huddled close to Yuuri, careful as to not pull the IV off from her hand. Gently stroking her hair she leaned close to her and slowly whispered in her ear.

“Hey, Yuu... It's been a month since that day. So... I really miss you...” Chito said as she snuggled close to her underneath the blanket. “I really miss our talks, I miss your beautiful smile, and I miss how you talk about food almost all the time. I wouldn't want anything more in life than to see your beautiful blue eyes open again...” she smiled closing her eyes. She cried so much every day that she was left with no tears anymore, just red spots underneath her eyes. “Yuu, I really hope you will wake up soon. You have to see the world where ojii-chan came from. It's so much different from the outside. They even have all kinds of food that we've never even dreamed of... we even have a family here, they are all beautiful and wonderful people and they will never ever hurt us.” underneath the blanket she reached out her right hand and gently squeezed Yuuri's hand. “Yuu... please if you can find it in your heart to forgive me about your leg and everything else.. I was a horrible person to you and just thinking how I hurt you, hurts me even more... I swear when you wake up I will help you with everything. Please, Yuu... please just wake up... My love, I can't go on without you...” closing her eyes she quickly fell asleep cuddled next to her. She just wanted to sleep next to her and never wake up anymore, not without her.

Deep in her mind, Chito was in a deep emotional turmoil, every night she would wake up screaming and it was the same dream as always. They were outside dying in each other's arms in the blizzard. The bomb was just sitting next to them with the fuse lit and just before it went off Yuuri always looked at her with disgust in her eyes, she never forgave her for losing her leg, it was Chito's fault all this time. Every night they kept dying in her dreams, over and over and over again... no matter how much she screamed, the bomb went off and it was...

The End!

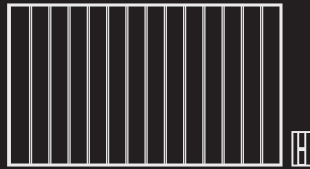
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Early in the morning just, Chito felt that someone was softly nudging her while she was still sleeping.

“Chii-chan - Chii-chan, wake up! Where are we?”

Chapter 7

Window



Early in the morning the sun-rays gently illuminated the room through the shutter blinds where Chito and Yuuri were sleeping. Chito slept tightly most of the night when she felt that someone was nudging her and trying to wake her up.

“Chii-chan - Chii-chan, wake up! Where are we?”

Opening her eyes she found a pair of confused blue eyes looking back at her. Brushing her eyes, Chito was still unsure if she was still dreaming. After all this time Chito felt that she would never see those two beautiful blue eyes ever again. Yuuri with genuine confusion in her eyes kept looking at Chito, feeling refreshed as she had just woken up after a long nap.

Chito couldn't stop sobbing as she jumped into her hugging her so tightly that she never wanted to let go of her ever again in her life.

“Yuuriiii!!!”

Chito could barely speak as she kept weeping in her chest. “Please... tell me you are awake...”

“Chii-chan... What's wrong? Why are you crying?” Yuuri couldn't understand where on earth she was. Her memory was a complete blank on how she found herself in this mysterious room, she still couldn't recall that day outside the wall, everything seemed blurry to her. For some reasons she couldn't get out of her bed, as she felt weak with persistent pain in her leg.

“Please, Yuuri... don't ever leave me alone again...” Chito kept crying loudly in her arms. “I...I... thought I would never hear your voice again... I thought you would never wake up... please, I don't want to spend a single moment without you again... Please... Yuu...”

“Chii-chan, no... please don't cry... you are not dreaming I am here... but what happened? Where are we?” she was still puzzled looking throughout the room. This was unlike any room she had seen before in her life, the walls were covered in white plaster and on the left of her bed, there was a window with shutters that the sun lit up from the outside. She had no idea why in her left arm there was a tube attached, which led up to a bag filled with some kind of fluid just above the comfortable bed.

“Oh... I don't know how to tell you...” Chito slowly tried to get her com-

posure, as she cried into Yuuri's chest. "You were in a coma... after we reached the wall... I am so sorry..."

"Chii-chan... what's a coma?" Yuuri asked her back, still sitting on the bed as Chito hugged her tightly. "It's when you sleep for a really long time... you slept for one month and... I was here right next to you waiting... for you to wake up almost every day... I couldn't leave your side and... I - I kept crying and talking to you every night - sleeping next to you... hoping you would wake up..."

"But Chii-chan, why didn't you wake me up?"

"It's really difficult - it's not like you can wake up easily from a coma - I spoke to you every day, but... you weren't waking up, but... I am so happy you are here with me again... Yuu... please never leave me again..." she leaned up and kissed her lips closing her eyes. Chito waited for what felt like an eternity for this moment to see her conscious again, she had so much to tell her about their new home and their new family. Chito kissed her so deeply that she felt it could have been her last kiss ever.

Opening her eyes she looked up again at Yuuri, she was smiling but still had that same disoriented look in her eyes... "Chii-chan..." Yuuri replied blushing deeply, she loved Chito's lips so much and it felt like she hasn't kissed them in ages. "I'm sorry... I must have been very tired that I slept for a whole month. And look how long my hair has grown." she smiled running her hand through her blonde hair, before she asked her "But Chii-chan... how was I alive all this time?"

"Do you see that tube that runs in your arm?" Chito pointed towards Yuuri's arm where something that looked like a tube was attached to her "They told me that its called an IV infusion, I also had it for sometime after I woke up because I was also very weak. It's supposed to provide something like a liquid food for your body and keep you alive and strong while you are in a coma. And you are not supposed to pull it out or touch it."

"Mmmm... I never know you can eat food through your arm Chii-chan... but still, I am sooo hungry..." Yuuri mumbled smiling. "But Chii-chan - how did we get here in this weird room? And why does my leg hurt so much?"

"Oh... Yuu..." Chito started crying again in her arms. She was not sure

how she was going to tell her what happened, she felt it was all her fault that she forced her through the snow and that Yuuri lost her leg.

“I am so sorry Yuu - It was my fault for pushing you out through the blizzard while you were sick. The last thing I remember is that we reached the wall outside and you were so exhausted that you fell asleep on the cold snow. I was so scared Yuu... I used the explosive to try and breach the wall so we can go through and look for a shelter... but then nothing happened. I just... I gave up - and went to sleep next to you outside because I thought that was the end of our journey - and that’s when I woke up in the room opposite yours, we were saved... by the wonderful people that live inside here. Yuu that was the worst moment of my life - I thought you were dead... .. I... thought you...died... I...I... at that moment... I didn’t know what I will do without you... I... don’t...” she continued sobbing as Yuuri leaned her head on hers and gently hugged her “Chii-chan...”

“- but... I broke my hand and I can’t move it that much” with teary eyes she took out her left hand from underneath the blanket, showing to Yuuri that she struggles to even make a full fist... ”but... Yuuri... you... you lost your leg... I am so sorry Yuu... please forgive me...” Chito kept sobbing, she couldn’t ever forgive herself for Yuuri’s leg and she felt that everything was her fault.

“What are you talking about Chii-chan, my leg just hurts a bit, I never lost -” Yuuri replied before she pulled off the blanket, and saw that her left leg was indeed gone.

“...oh...” with grief Yuuri kept looking down the bed, she was missing the lower part just underneath her knee but she could still feel pain as if it was still there. She felt a bit relieved that she could move her right leg, but with some difficulty as her muscles have atrophied after being in a coma for this long.

“But... what happened to my leg Chii-chan? I can still feel it... but--” she was still bewildered, it was coming back to her that outside on the last layer she had constant pain in her left leg on that day, but she kept pushing on towards the wall with Chito through the intense cold and mountains of snow that piled up on the layer. She could never imagine that she would ever lose her leg due to the harsh weather outside.

“Yuu... the doctor Reo... he said he had to cut your leg off because of something called frostbite that you can get outside in the snow. He said we both

suffered from hypothermia... and frostbite on our legs, fingers, and toes, but he couldn't save your leg and you wouldn't have survived if he kept it. He said you might feel something called a 'phantom pain' as if your leg is still there... I am so sorry Yuuri, if it wasn't for me you would still have had your leg..." she continued weeping in her chest, still cuddled close to her.

"Chii-chan... " Yuuri replied as she looked down at Chito and gently held her damaged hand "If it wasn't for you, we wouldn't have been here in this room alive." leaning down she gently pressed her forehead to her's. "You saved our lives... you are my hero Chii-chan... I'd rather lose both my legs and arms than ever lose you... even if it cost my leg I am so happy that we are safe..." Yuuri's eyes softly filled up with tears as she embraced Chito close to her. "I love you... Chii-chan... and I will never leave your side..."

"Yuu..." Chito replied as she slowly composed herself buried in her arms. "I - I love you more than everything... I promise I will be by your side. I will be your other leg..." she gently smiled as she brushed her tears from her eyes. "I will help you bathe... I will prepare food for you... I will do everything for you... my love."

"Chii-chan... please promise me that we will not cry anymore. We are safe... I just want you to be happy from now on. I think we've been through too much already and I just want us to be happy, together..." Yuuri said with her beautiful and sad smile. Yuuri had to learn to accept the fact that she would never have her leg back, but she felt she could give all her legs and arms just so Chito could be happy and alive by her side.

After some moments passed and they slowly composed themselves in each other's arms, Yuuri had a lot more questions to ask, she was still confused. "So Chii-chan... are we still up on the last layer?" she asked her.

"Yes... we are inside the place they called the 'unit'... but I still can't explain what it is... I am so confused as well... you have to see it for yourself Yuu. I can show you." Chito replied as she left her embrace and got out of the bed. Walking barefoot towards the side of her bed she leaned to help pull Yuuri up on the bed... "Ok... One...Two... Three..." with Chito's help she sat on the bed facing the blinds towards the window. "Oh - What do you want to show me Chii-chan?"

"Are you ready?" Chito smiled as she moved towards the side of the win-

dow. There were two buttons just on the side of the shutter blind there were used to control them, the previous night she closed them so the sun didn't wake her up.

“Huh? Ready?” Yuuri asked before Chito pressed one of the buttons. An electronic whir started moving the blinds to the sides of the window. The shutter slowly opened as the sun rays blinded Yuuri for a second. Just as she was starting to get used to the light, Yuuri looked through the window again - her blue eyes full of spark opened widely again gasping in awe.

The whole layer was home to an isolated civilization brimming with all kinds of organic life. From plants to all kinds of beautiful and colorful trees, up to the visible horizon. It was the first time in her life that she has seen an actual tree in person. Up until now, they have seen them in pictures and the videos down at the nuclear submarine, and now there were so many outside their windows. The sun and the sky shined brightly above the world, but it was just an illusion consisting of thousands of holographic screens that emulated the perfect condition of the world outside. Maybe this was the last place on earth that had life, and the reason they built this strong fortress up in the sky was to protect the last living lifeforms on this planet.

Gasping in awe, Yuuri in disbelief looked through the window from her bed, as Chito sat beside her, leaning her head to her shoulder. “It’s amazing isn’t it Yuu?”

“CHII-CHAN, WOW! Is that - what they call trees?” Yuuri was still in disbelief as she looked through the window.

“Yes, they are real trees. Mieko and Reo told me that sadly there are only 36 kinds of trees that survived the extinction, they also have flowers and even plants that grow food. They have been able to survive up here for hundreds of years - after the world below fell apart.”

“CHII-CHAN, THAT IS SOOOO AMAZING!” Yuuri giggled as she looked through the window “Chii-chan, how didn’t we know this world was up here? Do you think we are finally in heaven?” Yuuri asked still looking through the window with her eyes wide open.

Chito smiled and turned her head looking at her... “We might as well be Yuu, this sure does feel like heaven. I could never have imagined this place existed even in my crazy dreams.” Yuuri slightly surprised, wiggled around in

her bed as she pointed towards something in the distance, she was still too weak to even get up from her bed... “CHII-CHAN, WHAT’S THAT FLYING OUT THERE?”

“Oh.. those are called birds. I am not sure what kind of species these are, but there are a lot, some called are called pigeons, some are called cranes, crows and geese, some are called chickens but they don’t fly that high. They told me they even have other kinds of animals, livestock, cats, dogs...” Chito replied as she kept looking through the window together with Yuuri. ”That’s what they told me but I haven’t seen them yet. I just kept looking out the window while I was waiting for you to wake up, and only ever noticed the birds on the horizon. I also saw many other humans outside on the streets, they all seemed happy living their lives. I was so glad that unlike the outside, everyone seems so carefree.”

“ARE THERE FLYING FISHY AS WELL? CAN WE EAT THEM?” Yuuri kept wiggling on the bed with the widest smile on her face asking all of those questions. “Heyy... you’ll break the bed Yuuuu... and no, I don’t think there are flying fish... But Reo told me they also have fresh and seawater tanks and even a lake where lots of fish live and we can eat them sometimes as well. But even with all that food, people still ration it up here as well so they don’t run out of it and have food for generations.”

“MmmmMmm...Yummyummm...” Yuuri mumbled with drool in her mouth as she continued swaying around on her bed “I want all the fishy in the world!” Seeing her so happy only brought a smile on Chito’s worn face. They have been through too much since they left the village, and they never thought through all the hopelessness that they would find happiness and a place they can call home. Even if this was an isolated and such a small place from the outside world, Chito and Yuuri only hoped that they will be welcome here - they never want to leave this beautiful place ever again.

Yuuri smiled and suddenly jumped into Chito pinning her gently down on the bed as she laid on top of her. Even though she was atrophied and still weak, she managed to pin Chito with a surprised look on her face down on the bed somehow. “Chii-chan, I am so happy! Thank you for bringing me here!” she exclaimed looking down on her as both of them blushed. “He...he... well... both of us made the journey... so in a way, you also brought me up here. Yuu...” Chito replied looking up at her eyes and gently smiling.

Their spark was once again alive and burning with lots of love and life. It

was a wonderful feeling that they no longer had to fear for their lives or ever go hungry again. What mattered was that they were happy and safe.

“Chii-chaaaaan... we can finally get married!” Yuuri exclaimed before she leaned over and kissed her so deeply, almost as if she was trying to devour her whole face. “mmpphhpmmm....” Chito was startled even more as she wasn’t expecting this kind of reaction from Yuuri. Completely blushed, she mumbled underneath her kiss wagging her arms and trying to get up. “Yuuriii... STOP... be carefu...l or... you wil... rip your IV... offffwwllwl..mmhhwfff’

Seeing Yuuri’s beautiful eyes and smile again brought back her will to live, she was so happy once again. No matter how short and hard life might be, she wanted to spend an eternity in her arms, at their new home.

• • •

“Mmmphmpmm... it’s fooo tawsty!!! Wat if thwis?” Yuuri kept trying to speak with her mouth full, still laying down on the bed as she looked at Mieko who sat on a chair opposite her bed. Laying next to Yuuri was Chito snuggling her arm.

“It’s called chicken curry with rice Yuuri, and if you want you can have a fifth bowl!” Mieko replied smiling as she and Reo dressed in a hospital uniform, watched her go through the fourth bowl of curry.

“This is the tawstiewt twing I’ve eer eafen in my liwe. Werr did you fwind it?” she replied with her mouth full. “Well... it was my grandma’s recipe and my fiance cooked it for you both. It’s all from ingredients that we can grow in our fields and the hydroponics bay. Didn’t Itsuki prepare this for you on the outside?”

“Mmpmmhpm...” swallowing the rest of the food she placed the bowl on the table next to her bed ”No - he never did, we could only eat rations and whatever the hydroponics factory could produce. He also baked really tasty bread and we helped him with Chii-chan.” Smiling she gently rubbed her tummy...”Mmmm... I could eat this every day” before she turned to Reo who was sitting right next to Mieko “So, Itsuki was your father? And his brother Yasuo was Chito’s father?” she asked him.

“Yes, Yuuri. I was just a little boy when sadly they were exiled from our home. They went together with a group of outsiders that they rescued many years ago from the outside, to look for children and families who were all alone out there, just like you.” Reo replied as he kept looking back at her. “They sent us so many letters through the ‘archive’ nodes and with anyone who came back here, and both of them were speaking about you two a lot. Sadly we heard of Yasuo’s passing in one of Itsuki’s letters. But did you know they managed to rescue over 600 people from the outside? Sadly a lot of the outsiders never made it up here, but all of them are considered heroes up here at the ‘unit’.”

“Wow... I knew that grandpa was a hero, he was the kindest person ever and always wanted to help anyone he met.” Yuuri replied smiling as she kept hugging Chito. “But why didn’t he ever tell us about this place?”

“Yuuri, I was confused about that as well. Do you remember if he ever told you in the past about us or the unit?” Reo replied as he kept looking at her “I know that he went through an emotional trauma after everything that happened to him, but I think there must have been some reasons as to why he never told you.”

“My memory is not that good from our past and he mostly worked at the factory every day. But he used to tell us stories about the world outside so many times and that he helped people look for food or supplies... he never mentioned this place...” Yuuri replied. “But it’s nice that he has a family too... out there me and Chii-chan were his only family.”

Smiling she turned to Mieko who was sitting close and listening to the conversation. “And Mieko, you are Reo’s daughter?”

“Yes... I am his only daughter and since a month ago a certified nurse and the girl that beat the ‘unit’ champion in chess!” Mieko giggled, she must have bragged to anyone she met about finally beating Reo in chess. Turning to Reo who looked like his pride was hurt she continued speaking “And I beat him at his own game, I kept asking him to explain from memory how a ‘Splenectomy’ is performed, while I recited a passage from ‘Franz Kafka’s - The Trial’ out-loud.”

“Pfff... ‘Kafka’... and she calls me a cliché science fiction character... I lost to her reading ‘Kafka’...” he mumbled annoyingly under his breath as Mieko playfully punched him on the shoulder still giggling.

“Ummm... Kafka? Splenectomy?” Yuuri asked them back, they barely heard her as Reo had Mieko locked under her arm and messed up her hair while she was struggling. “I will show you ‘Kafka’ and who’s a cliché science fiction character! I will obliterate you in chess next time you coward, just you wait and see!”

Yuuri chuckled as she turned back to Chito, who was still underneath her snuggled against her arm. The commotion between Reo and Mieko was still going on in their room as she started speaking to Chito “Chii-chan, they are kinda a crazy family?”

“Mhm... and it seems like they are our family now, and you share something similar with Mieko’s mother. She also lost her leg in an accident many years ago on the outside.” Chito replied as she was almost in a trance snuggling Yuuri’s numb arm. She was beyond happy that she finally awakened after her coma.

“Mom would love to meet you as well Yuuri. She will be home in 2 days, they are down with her group scavenging for parts.” Mieko spoke from underneath Reo’s arm as she pulled away from his grasp, punching his arm again a little forcefully. “But... if she is missing a leg - how is she able to go outside?”

“Yuuri - my colleague specializes in ‘Neuroprosthetics’ and he can create and synthesize neuroprosthetics for children and adults that suffered a loss of limb from accidents,” Reo replied as he kept looking at her. “With just a few surgical implants and lots of practice. it’s like you’ve never even lost your leg. My wife lost hers on a scavenging mission, she was salvaging components and something fell on her leg breaking it into several pieces. Sadly she had to share the same fate as you. But don’t worry Yuuri, he will be able to build your prosthetic as soon as you are ready. It will take time but you will be able to walk again.”

“Oooh wow... hey Chii-chan... I will be a robot and a god at the same time.” she smiled at Chito who kept snuggling her arm. “Oh, and how many people live here?” Yuuri asked him again, her sense of wonder seemed to be back as well.

“There is above two hundred thousand now. The number used to be much higher, but there was a lot of inner turmoil between the residents for so many decades before.” he answered “Our unit was made to house over two million

residents and in the early days was an experiment in self-sufficiency from the outside world. They made about 40 of these units around the world, but after the wars, we lost contact with every single one around the world many years ago. While this unit was built to provide atmosphere and clean water for the layers below us, it was also used for research, preservation, and data for humanity to colonize the planet Mars. The first spaceships they built, sent millions of people to that planet. The whole world ran a lottery, and about four billion people signed up to leave this planet. Only a few million were selected for the first flights. The planet back then was overpopulated by humans and humanity felt that they eventually had to move to a different planet. Just as the spaceships launched, a few years later, one of the mass extinction wars started, which almost wiped humanity off from its planet. After that we never had contact with the crew that went to Mars, we will never know if their mission was a success or if they managed to colonize the planet - or if they are still alive up there among the stars.”

“Oh... “ Chito and Yuuri were both left speechless as they listened to Reo carefully. It felt like too much information to suddenly process about their new home and even the history of the world. “But... how did the last layer survive for this long?” Yuuri asked him back. “If you saw the weapons outside, they protected the layer for many years from air raids. It’s controlled by a very advanced AI that controls the ‘unit’. No one has been able to turn it off for hundreds of years or even breach the room where the ‘AI’ works from. Even to this day it still works, but I am glad that it never killed any outsiders in recent years that made the hike up the stairways. The weapons shoot concentrated light beams that almost instantly fry anything up in the sky with 99.9% accuracy, that is how the ‘unit’ was able to protect itself for so many years. The blast walls were an advanced ‘Starlite Compound’ that has been researched to withstand an EMP attack and even thermonuclear bombs 20 times bigger than the one that was dropped on Europe at the end of World War Three. When Chito placed the bomb on the wall outside, the shock-wave was absorbed by the wall triggering an alarm just like when the unit used to be under attack many years ago.” Reo replied. “The sensor systems didn’t work that day and if you never set off the explosive, we would never have found you.”

“But why was it built as an unbreachable fortress? What did they want to protect inside, if they pretty much destroyed every living thing outside?” Chito asked him as well joining into the conversation, still snuggled with Yuuri who was also listening carefully.

“Chito, you both have to talk to the ‘traveler’, one of the reasons why the world has turned this way it’s their information, even though it never meant to and humanity’s fault was mostly behind it all.” Reo replied and sighed looking at Yuuri “Yuuri... I’m afraid if it wasn’t for the ‘traveler’ and the information - you never would have been able to wake up from your coma. As much as it has done damage, some of the information was extremely helpful to humanity. I never wanted to tell you both, but Yuuri was showing no brain activity -after we rescued her outside. She had extensive brain damage, and she was never going to wake up. It was only after we put a nano synthesized machine inside her brain that it was able to repair her cells to perfection. That is why she recovered so quickly.” he stopped for a second to look at the worried looks on the girl’s faces, both of them with grief in their eyes. “I am so glad that I found the information and was able to synthesize it. I haven’t slept for a week researching the archive and finally was able to find it, buried deep under mountains of information, schematics and research. I don’t have a record if it was ever performed on a human in hundreds of years, but I am so glad that I did. I couldn’t live with myself seeing another spark disappear. You might have been the first human in recent times that ever recovered from this condition, Yuuri. You both are the luckiest and strongest girls - and when I look at you both I see my grandfather’s determination in your eyes.”

Chito listened to him carefully as couldn’t help but start crying again looking up at Yuuri, she couldn’t express with words how glad she was that Yuuri was alive and lying next to her. She couldn’t stop the tears for many weeks now as it always flooded her eyes. Chito never knew what she would do if the circumstances were different and she lost her lover out there on the wall, or if she never woke up from her coma.

“Robotic brain... robotic leg... Chii-chan I might be a robotic god!” she laughed again, as Chito brushed the tears of her eyes and smiled back at her “Yuu... You really are care-free and strong, even after everything that happened...” she replied before turning to face Reo with her teary eyes. “Reo, I am eternally grateful to you and Mieko for helping her, I don’t know what I would have done without her by my side... I really don’t... just the thought of losing her -”

“Chito... all these years I felt like I’ve never done anything more for my parents. Giving you both a chance at life is the last thing I could do, and I am so happy that you both are here with us. You are our family and dad would never forgive me if I never helped you.” Reo and Mieko both got up from their chairs

and went to hug them both on the bed. “I am so glad you woke up Yuuri... I am so glad.”

The rest of the evening all of them spent it laughing and reminiscing about their journey up to the last layer and talking about Itsuki and Yasuo. Yuuri even helped herself to another portion of chicken curry with rice and those familiar ‘Gramineae bar’ rations with chocolate flavor until she couldn’t eat anymore.

She never felt so full of food before in her life.

• • •

“Chii-chan, I forgot to ask... do you remember anything after we were rescued that day?” Yuuri asked her after the night had set in and they were getting ready for bed in their hospital room. Yuuri no longer needed the transfusions, and she had a hearty meal for the whole day. All she needed now was to get the strength in her body back and to start learning to walk with a cane until she got her prosthetic.

“Oh... I don’t remember much but... it’s so odd... I remember seeing Miko and Reo for a brief moment and then... it occurred to me that I had another that dream where we are living in that ‘other’ reality. We were walking at some weird ‘park’ thing and there were some animals called a ‘deer’, there were some odd buildings and scary statues too. That is what I remembered from the dream... After I remember that we went to have a bath and we talked about life and where we would go travel next and... after that, I woke up in that bed.” Chito replied as she turned the lights off in the room and snuggled close to Yuuri on the bed.

“Oh... I don’t really remember much when I was in a coma, Chii-chan. Just I think I could hear your voice sometimes and that was it. Most of the time... it was like the world was dark and I couldn’t feel anything. Just like when I was sleeping the other times.” Yuuri replied as she faced Chito underneath the covers and looked her in the eyes “When I think about it - it’s really scary. Do you think that’s what we see when we die Chii-chan? Just darkness?”

Closing her eyes, Chito snuggled on Yuuri’s chest and softly replied “Mmm... I don’t know Yuu, but I really don’t want to find out - soon. What

happened to us on the outside, made me realize - just how much life is valuable and - I don't want that darkness..."

Keeping quiet for some time, both of them exhausted from the excitement of the day quickly started to fall asleep.

"mm... Chii... when we are together that darkness is not... so scary... it's just like when we go to sleep together..."

That night was the first in a long time that Chito and Yuuri slept peacefully together on that hospital bed, without fearing for their lives.

• • •

"Hey Mieko, where are you taking us?" Yuuri turned around facing Mieko and Chito who were pushing her in a wheelchair in one of the parks inside the 'unit'. A few days have passed since Yuuri woke up from her coma, and she was gradually getting her strength back and was finally able to stand and sit on her own. Chito walking next to them, for the first time in her life wore the usual comfortable 'summer' clothes that people inside the 'unit' wore when the temperature felt warm. It was their first time that they've gone out for fresh air and some 'simulated' sunbeams since Yuuri woke up from her coma.

The 'unit' is divided into several sections and grids. The residential areas and additional facilities and factories were closer to the walls. The rest of the sections deeper inside the 'unit' were called the 'protected' area and stood surrounded by large forests and lakes. This section had all kinds of different species of flora and fauna that lived and thrived for numerous years. The ceiling of the unit was far above them and it consisted of holographic panels and grids that were used to simulate the sun, stars and even clouds depending on how the AI determined the weather should be inside. The projection felt almost real and it could artificially simulate the sun with immaculate accuracy. Close to every panel, tiny sprinkles and fans were used to simulate wind, temperature, and droplets of rain inside the 'unit'. This strange place had its own ecosystem that was protected from the outside and managed to thrive for hundreds of years.

"Yuuri, the 'traveler' wanted to meet you and speak to you both for a long time now. It resides close by in the park." Mieko replied as they walked through

the park which was occupied with families and children that greeted them as they passed by. After they arrived at the ‘unit’ they felt like some kind of celebrities. Almost everyone wanted to speak to them, from survivors of the outside to the original citizens of the ‘unit’ and talk to them about their travels and the world outside. They made so many friends in such a short time, but most of all Chito and Yuuri were beyond happy that they were accepted within this small world. After a short walk, they went to a secluded area of the park, where Chito and Yuuri noticed the familiar statues among the trees.

Outside, these statues were almost everywhere, and now they found them here inside the unit. “Chii-chan, aren’t these the same statues we saw on the layers beneath us?” Yuuri asked her, still sitting in her wheelchair as she pointed at the biggest statue in the middle. “You are right Yuu!” Chito replied looking up at them, there were 5 of these statues standing still looking to the left.

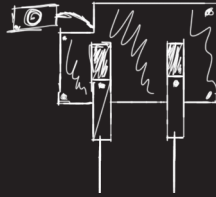
“Hey... Traveler!” Mieko called out to something that was standing behind one of the statues. “You can stop complaining now! Finally, here they are, Chito and Yuuri!”

With a few machine-like sounds, a robot similar to the one they met at the fish factory emerged and slowly walked towards them on its tiny legs.

“Konichiwa - Chito - Yuuri - I’ve waited to talk to you for about six thousand eight hundred and fifty hours - thirteen minutes - fifty-eight seconds since our ‘first’ encounter.”

Chapter 8

Traveler



“Chii-chan, is that the same robot from the fish factory?” Yuuri asked as she stared at the robot after it emerged from behind one of the stone statues. “Oh wow, we never thought we’d meet you again. But how did you get up here?” Chito asked with equal excitement.

This robot had comparable features and even the same vocal modulator as the one they met on their journey back at the fish factory, but there was something much distinctive about it. Gradually it moved closer to the girls, stopping just a few meters close them before it started speaking again.

“Chito - Yuuri - I am not the same robot you met at the fish factory - I am just an insignificant ‘traveler’ who simply had its collective consciousness of its species fused with the unit’s ‘AI’ many years ago - However I can remotely control over 1642 thoroughly functioning robots around the city grid through the connection nodes that we continuously fix every day - The robot at the fish factory was malfunctioning and I wasn’t able to take control of it - It’s core programming was corrupted and it had a single goal of serving the needs of something ‘insignificant’ that was bred for human consumption - However, I had control over the construction robot that you both destroyed with an explosive device. “

“Ummmmm...” both Chito and Yuuri looked at each other with guilty expressions on their faces. Mieko standing close to them was equally perplexed as she listened in on the conversation. Turning back to the robot both of them apologized bowing their heads down “...we are sorry...”

“What on earth were you girls doing out there blowing things up?” Mieko asked them as she scratched her head. “You do realize without those construction robots the city’s foundation could collapse?”

“Well... we never knew at the time... we are sorry...” Chito responded “The robot was deconstructing the facility where the fish lived, and... I guess we thought it was going to hurt the fish, we wanted to save its life...”

“...Yeah... I jumped on top of the construction robot, planted the bomb and it went boom!” Yuuri blurted reminiscing on how they destroyed the construction robot back at the fish facility. “But... as Chii-chan said we never knew at the time that -”

“It’s ok - Chito - Yuuri - I already commissioned another robot that day to fix the one you destroyed and to continue its work at that section of the city - It should be ready for operation within four hundred twenty-three hours thirty-two minutes and twelve seconds” the traveler spoke back “However - Chito - Yuuri - I regret to tell you when the repair robot arrived, the fish was already deceased - The malfunctioning robot had already ceased to work as well, it’s core programming shut down frying its electrical components - there was no point in repairing it but its purpose would be used for scrap further on.”

“Ohh...” they both gasped sadly as they looked back at him. “Yuu, maybe we should have eaten the fish... I guess...” Chito replied with a sad look in her eyes back at Yuuri. “Maybe, we should have eaten it Chii-chan, but I hope both of them had a happy life until the very end! I guess back then we would have been satisfied with a fishy, but I am happy that they lived for a short bit.”

“Yeah... I guess...” Chito replied as she turned to face the robot. She still had a lot of questions on her mind. “But how did you know our names?”

“I gathered the information from the robot at the fish factory and that is how I learned both of your names - I also registered you the moment you entered the factory in your vehicle, your presence was of little insignificant to my task at hand - The construction robots possess no vocal modulators, and at the time I miscalculated that your presence at the factory would be temporary without any interruptions - I tend not to disclose any information about the ‘unit’ to any outsiders or robots that have malfunctioned due to problems in the past - even if the construction robot was to possess vocal modulators we wouldn’t have had any contact - The task at the factory was to decommission rooms near the water tank, as the resources are of importance to the layer underneath with no harm done to any living being in the vicinity as the construction robot possesses core programming that forbids it from harming any living being.”

“The probability and cause of danger that the structural stability of that sector would collapse was minimal, but even with that kind of uncertainties repairs have to be carried out - By blowing up the construction robot, I realized that your actions were selfless and you risked your life to save a living being that was widely considered ‘insignificant’ as it’s sole purpose of existence was for consumption - Your act reminded me of something my species have done lots of times, to save the lives of beings that have no choice regarding their existence - After our encounter, I wanted to speak to you both but I wasn’t able to find you again - For that I apologize as I think your circumstances to reach the

unit unharmed would have improved - I have failed you the same way I have failed Itsuki and Yasuo.” The robot spoke without moving an inch from the spot where it stood.

“We are sorry for destroying the construction robot... At the time we didn’t know there were still any living beings existing in this world, and we had no idea the construction robot served some kind of a purpose.” Chito replied. “But what is your species ‘traveler’, can you tell us more about yourself?” Mieko and Yuuri carefully listened in as well.

“Chito - Yuuri - My species serve no insignificant to this universe - Just as you, this planet and even this conversation have zero point billion to one percent insignificance in the grand scale of the universe. We are simply ‘travelers’ from many worlds that share a common goal - Looking for a home, information and some kind of meaning to existence in the grand scale - We arrived on a ‘spaceship’ at this planet when ‘humans’ were at the ‘stone age’ as your species call that period - For all that time the ‘humans’ were unaware of our existence - We lived in hidden commensalism symbiosis and our sole purpose was to live peacefully and observe the natural development of this planet - We fed on information and the natural resources this planet provided and our co-species even fed on the ‘spaceship’ that gave us a safe passage here - Our species possess a hivemind and we can communicate through advanced ‘radio waves’.” The ‘traveler’ answered in its same monotonic voice looking back at the girls.

Chito and Yuuri remember that they met its species before outside at the unusual submarine. The unusual creatures that resembled mushrooms must have been the same species as this ‘traveler’.

“Chii-chan, those species outside... Didn’t they communicate through that thing called ‘radio waves’?” Yuuri asked as she looked back at Chito “Yes, and they are also able to devour metal and unstable elements! We met your species outside ‘traveler’!”

“Chito - Yuuri - That is impossible - My family was the last of our species - Our species has been long extinct on this planet - The co-species you met were given a name by the humans of ‘Eringi’ due to their similarities with the fungi of the same name - Our species were given the name of another fungi family called ‘Shimeji’. We arrived on the same ‘spaceship’ together - We lived hidden from the world and while our species fed on photosynthesis and the carcasses of animals and plants, the ‘Eringi’ fed on natural elements and minerals found be-

neath the ground - When this food source was scarce, the 'Eringi' found out that they could eat man-made materials and even dangerous substances - While our species stuck outside the 'unit's after the wars struggled to find food and slowly began their way towards extinction, the 'Eringi' managed to thrive on the unlimited supply of food that humans left them with - Just like every living organism when our time has passed we symbiotically return to the ground and in a way, we complete our circle and give back our resource to the planet - When the time of an 'Eringi' has passed, they slowly wither away and turn to dust which feeds the ground for plants and food to grow - When the time of a 'Shimeji' has passed, they slowly turn into a stone compound which could be used to shape way for society or even as food for the 'Eringi' - What you see behind me is the last 5 'Shimeji' that lived a long time ago inside the 'unit' before they passed from an unknown disease - Just before the transfer of one's consciousness fusing with the Unit's AI."

Behind the robot, there were 5 stone 'sculptures' that Chito and Yuuri noticed so many times outside in all kinds of different sizes and shapes that they thought were sculpted by humans. At first, they couldn't understand the meaning behind these 'sculptures' and thought they were some kind of deities worshiped by humans. "We saw so many of those stones outside," Chito said as she looked back at the traveler. "We even hit one of them with our 'Kettenkrad'..."

"Chii-chan... it was you who drove into it!" Yuuri replied chuckling softly, as Chito looked at her with an annoyed expression.

Mieko only placed her hand to her face as it was completely unbelievable to her that these two girls were complete delinquents. "You planted a bomb at the wall outside and detonated it, you destroyed a construction robot, you drove over a 'Shimeji' statue... Gee, I wonder if it even was you two that fired that missile from the 'MK982 - War Mecha' last year. We felt that up here and it set up every imaginable alarm."

"Actually-mmpmhpp" Yuuri tried to speak, but Chito with a guilty grin on her face placed her hand to her mouth to shut her up "Nooo... that wasn't us..."

"That's ok - The 'statue' you hit with your vehicle - The 'Shimeji' passed away a long time ago - As I said my species 'bodies' after they pass away are just there to serve as some kind of a resource for the future generation - The 'Shimeji' you see behind me was the last of it's kind - The one in the middle was

the last living ‘Shimeji’ - Our hive mind works on a different wavelength from the ‘Eringi’ however the only way my species was able to communicate with the ‘Eringi’ was on a maximum radius of 1 Kilometer - While we share similar functions in the universe our species lived its secluded lives just like different species of primates did a long time ago - Our species possessed a greater intellect than the ‘Eringi’ and we strived for communication - We passed information among ourselves all our lives and that is how we were able to preserve our history, through our nodes and our need for information was always present” Pausing for a second the robot kept looking blankly at both Chito and Yuuri before it continued speaking.

“We were able to pass our information to humans using the same wavelengths through their devices - That is how we even managed to transfer our consciousness to the archive’s AI on this layer before the last ‘Shimeji’ passed away - We are not positively sure if the same thing happened with the other ‘Shimeji’ in the unit’s across the world - or if anyone out there is alive in the wide known universe.”

“The ‘Eringi’ we met, they told us that we were the last living people in the whole world, but they told me they never have seen what’s on the last layers. How didn’t they know about the ‘unit’ on the last layer? Didn’t they ever meet anyone on the outside if there are still people living out there?” Chito asked him, she remembered clearly that day when they met Nuko’s family on the outside.

“Chito - the ‘Eringi’ you met are generations that have survived on the outside and just like the people and the robots that I control that go on supply and maintenance runs, they probably have never seen each other before - Unlike the ‘Shimeji, the ‘Eringi’ cannot carry information throughout decades of existence, during their short life span they might not have memories of the ‘Unit’ or ever meeting any other living being - The city is so vast that running into another human being or an ‘Eringi’ would be considered like finding a needle in a haystack.”

“However, one way that we can understand the ‘outside’ world is through uncertain connections with the city and the ‘nodes’ scattered around it which helps us formulate a map of the city and what was destroyed or still functional - So far the connection is still minuscule to have a stable link with other beings and AI is a trivial task - While Itsuki was on the outside, he managed to send messages but could never receive any messages from us, and was strictly instructed to never share this information with the outsiders and by the informa-

tion we gathered he did run into dangerous individuals on the outside - However the nodes he managed to connect the 'unit' had access to a lot of new information, history, schematics, and even entertainment - We were gradually acquiring connection with the world again, but the communication node that connected countries and even continents outside is positioned beneath the city and the current estimate that the robots would reach that section which was devastated by conflict is about eight years and one hundred and thirty-two days."

The girls listened to the traveler carefully and eventually, Chito remembered something that Reo mentioned a few days ago when Yuuri woke up from her coma. "Traveler... Reo mentioned something that your species were partially responsible for what happened to our planet, but why did he say that?"

"Chito - Yuuri - You have to understand sadly that we only prolonged the death of this planet and its species - Your planet was already on the brink of extinction even in the twenty-first century but humans never listened and saw the clear signs as they went on their path to self-destruction - What transpired on your planet happened to our previous home as well - Our species have traveled the galaxy for milenia and our previous home was located at the galaxy what you humans call 'Messier Eighty-Three' - We were technologically advanced and 'Shimeji' and 'Eringi' lived in peace for a long time after the great wars in the past - Just like 'humans' are the dominant 'primates' of this planet, 'Shimeji' and 'Eringi' were the dominant 'fungi' on our homeworld - The 'Shimeji' believed that the universe was a simple simulation run by a computer smaller than a handheld device - The 'Shimeji' believed that the simulation was corrupted and that there was no way to fix it, hence the universe would never cease to exist in an endless loop even after its final demise - The simulation could create so many different realities that might exist simultaneously at any given moment." The traveler spoke carefully about it's past.

"The 'Eringi' believed that they were the alternative reincarnation of their former selves and that the end of the endless loop of reincarnation was the 'being' that lit up the world after death - The 'Shimeji' and 'Eringi' observed that the star on our previous home would go 'supernova' shortly - That is when we built 'spaceships' to go the stars to look for our new home for salvation of our species - Our species once again were scattered around the galaxy - Many years later the star of our previous home went 'supernova' devouring its species and decades of technological information - The 'Eringi's prediction of the being that lit up the world after death became a reality - The 'Eringi' on this planet is waiting for the star in this solar system to go supernova so the endless cycle

would cease - This belief was deeply encoded into their genetics and this is not something that they would easily forget even through cycles of generations that would predominately subsist on the planetoid”

“Being that lights up the world after death...” Chito repeated the words to herself, she remembered that she has seen these words in one of the structures on the layers beneath that looked like a temple. “Yuu, do you remember back at that Temple after we left ‘Kanazawa’, I saw those words etched on the stone there.”

“Oh yeah, it’s the place where you ‘disappeared’ in the dark and I got scared.” Yuuri pouted as Chito held out her hand and gently patted her on the head “Awww... you were cute though... and you somehow broke those stone flowers and posed with them for a picture.” Chito replied and smiled.

Mieko was already beyond fuming “Great... add demolishing sacred sites to the list... I just hope you two didn’t launch a nuclear strike or something!”

“Well... there was this button that said ‘Launch Nuclear Strike’ that I kinda pressed without Chii-chan knowing at the nuclear submarine... did I do something bad?” Yuuri replied before she burst into laughter, Mieko almost had a horrified look on her face before Chito stepped in and giggled.

“What she meant is ‘I am a total nincompoop, don’t mind me!’” Chito stepped in before she turned to face Yuuri with a grin. “Chii-chaaan... you know I would have pressed it if there was one... you would have just scolded me not to press it at all and probably thrown a wrench at me...” she answered as she held Chito’s hand gently.

Chito turned back to the traveler, she had even more questions to ask it. “Traveler, why did the humans have the temples with your statue and teachings?”

“Chito - That ‘Scared Site’ was what you humans would call our graves - The humans at one point worshiped us as the ‘gods’ - Even though we were just mere ‘travelers’ and served no significance to this universe, the humans accepted most of our information as it helped them develop exceeding what they knew was probable - Consequently the humans saw us as ‘gods’ - The ‘Shimeji’ were the gods of information and the ‘Eringi’ were the gods of substance - However at first there was no peace between the humans and the ‘Shimeji’ and ‘Eringi’”

- After the Third World War ended when the country identified as Russia detonated a Nuclear Bomb in the heart of Europe, the humans started digging up our sacred lands for material and construction.”

“In this country of ‘Japan’ one of our sacred lands is what you humans would have called ‘Towada-Hachimantai National Park’ - The ‘Shimeji’ and ‘Eringi’ were an endemic kind in ‘Japan’ - We hid from humans for many years and our last home on this island was at the ‘National Park’ - When they started digging the land one of our ‘Eringi’ elders that were the leader of our pack appeared and started devouring their machinery - Soon many ‘Eringi’ followed around the world on this war against the humans - The ‘Shimeji’ were not able to devour metal and weapons back then so sadly we weren’t able to fight back and that was when our species slowly started decaying - For years the humans used their weapons against us and slowly our species were disappearing around the world - The elders feared extinction because our virtually endless knowledge was going to be extinct as well - That was when the ‘Shimeji’ elders finally spoke the forbidden language to the humans - The rule of the ‘Shimeji’ before we left our home world milenias ago was that we collect information but we were never supposed to share our information with another sentient species - The elder realized that the only way the humans would stop killing us is if we share the information of our species.” Pausing for a second, the traveler kept speaking.

“This was information of new medicine, technology, endless electricity, space travel, successful cloning, and what you ‘humans’ would call ‘alchemy’ or the ability to synthesize any kind of organic compound or technological device through the process of reclamation and recycle - The humans could take our whole information but only if they would agree to our demands - The demands were manageable that the humans would protect our most precious territories and the last remaining organic species in fortresses just like the ‘unit’, and we were to have every kind of information created by the humans stored on incorruptible drives around the world to analyze for our own needs - Despite our warnings of the excessive use of our information and that on our previous home we were unfair to the more inferior species by toying with the course of nature, the humans agreed to our demands”

“The humans suddenly were able to progress way beyond what was possible - Endless electricity was the first thing they invited, then the humans cured every imaginable disease and even cheat mortality and time itself, the oldest human recorded in recent history lived up to be 236 years way beyond their

termination day - Due to overpopulation the humans needed to build the layers in the sky or deep underground to house more humans - more facilities - more homes - more schools - more workplaces - more factories - Despite warnings the humans forgot to account for one important thing - To live you needed nature and those 'inessential' species they chose to nullify from the face of existence to bring order to the chaos - The layers were a self-sustainable 'Shimeji' design where the top of the layers were the lungs and heart of every city - That is what the humans built in 'Japan' but yet they used it for their indulgence - The higher class lived in the 'unit' among nature, endless supply of entertainment, food, water, and luxury - The middle and lower classes lived in the layers underneath and where the workforces were able to work the factories and military to protect the city - It was something that would look like a social pyramid from old literature and social studies - Once food became uncommon that was when the riots and wars inaugurated - Humans could now develop even more powerful innovative weapons and the higher class abruptly could do a population sweep to get rid of excessive individuals that could cause difficulties - This was after humanity made space travel possible to Mars - Suddenly the poor and the middle class living on the bottom layers found themselves under a powerful laser sweep from what you would call an 'MK982 - War Mecha'"

"The population swipe was going on for years until the machines stop working - The humans that endured, killed each other with the weapons from their ancestors as abruptly every electrical machine that wasn't 'EMP Resistant' was useless in the world outside - They felt that every individual was an enemy and fired their weaponry at them - The higher class were safe in their 'unit's around the world - However even in the security, convenience and gratification of their homes up in the 'unit' the humans still managed to eliminate each other - 35% of the species that lived in the 'unit's were extinct and that was when the 'Shimeji' that remained inside the 'units' had to take a final stance - The 'Shimeji' came up with the rules that humans could only ever use 15% of the resources and land in the 'unit' - Unless it was absolutely necessary no Human was allowed to kill an animal in the 'sacred' ground or cut down a tree, the food the trees grew were rationed subsequently with every species - Humans had to learn to live alongside the species it once destroyed and appreciate their lives - After this 'unit' lost communication with the world outside and the last of the 'Shimeji' died off, we were transferred to the archive so the rules changed over the years - Suddenly as humans were becoming endemic species they were allowed to use 20-25% of the 'unit' for their continuation - People of this 'unit' were unhappy and that is when the faction wars started between the residents of the 'unit' - About one million three hundred thousand fifty-five humans were

exiled to live on the outside - Quickly there were even more rules that had to be enforced during the years - Unfortunately one of those rules had Itsuki and Yasuo exiled”

“Chito - Yuuri - What you see is in this ‘unit’ is what is left of humanity, animals, insects, plants, flowers, information currently residing in ‘Japan’ - At the moment we are unable to establish a connection with the rest of the layers below us and besides you two the robots were unable to locate any other individuals for months - We are unable to establish a connection with the other ‘unit’s around the world so our numbers may be faulty - We are unsure if even the Mars mission was a success - The living organisms in this ‘unit’ is safeguarded on a layer that might structurally collapse in two hundred and sixty-three years, eleven months, twelve days, eight hours, two minutes and three seconds - The humans that live here know this information and help the layer in any way they can to protect what is left of their country - We have calculated and made a plan that will take approximately 1248 years to gradually move nature back into the world as it once was to the bottom and deconstruct the top layers into its original resource - Our plan is for nature and life to overtake the world again.”

Chito, Yuuri, and Mieko all listened carefully to the traveler as it spoke of its plans, demise, and life. Both Chito and Yuuri were left flabbergasted and speechless by this information from the traveler as it was way too confusing and convoluted to take in an hour. They would never imagine that what happened to their homeworld could keep repeating to so many species around the galaxy in an endless loop, the circumstances were beyond null that it would eventually make no sense to any human understanding. “Chito - Yuuri - Our species may be dead but we will never allow another life form to stop existing as part of it was our fault due to the state of this planet - That is why when our species died we transfer our consciousness in the ‘archive’ as we want to help bring nature back to its original state - The ‘Shimeji’ should have never interfered with the natural growth of the humans but this was our home as much as it was theirs - We assumed that the humans would not go the same path as we did but it eventually resulted in the demise - Sorrowfully life on this planet outside the ‘unit’s of the world ceased to exist as we know it - But we can help bring the spark of life on this planet in due time.”

Chito and Yuuri kept looking at each other with a confused expression. Yuuri suddenly got up from her wheelchair and took the walking cane that Chito was carrying for her. She slowly walked towards the robot and placed her hand to its head.

“Traveler.” She spoke “What happened to our planet is really sad - but I know something. Maybe your information was bad but if it wasn’t for your information to save my brain, Chii-chan would have lost me forever.” Yuuri smiled as she turned to Chito, she once again had tears in her eyes smiling as she looked at Yuuri taking her first steps by herself since she woke up. “Chii-chan’s smile is what got me through the journey on the outside, and nothing in this world makes me happy than seeing Chii-chan smile!” she replied and closed her eyes, a single tear went through her cheek. Chito moved closer to her and carefully hugged her from behind as they both stood near the traveler.

“Traveler... we saw how the world is outside, and this place... this place looks beautiful and we will do anything that we can to help. I know that we have done damage on the layers underneath us but, you, Reo and Mieko gave Yuuri back to me. For that I am grateful, thank you... traveler...”

“Chito - Yuuri - You are welcome to stay here with us - We hope that one day we can help the unfortunate outsiders that still live among the ruins - Our purpose for a long time was to maintain stability and safety for the species that live in this ‘unit’ - One day I hope that we can live in harmony and life will get back to how once it was. The planet and its species deserve it.”

So many things are left unsaid about the history of the ‘unit’. Once deemed a utopia, to some it was a painful memory. Humans that were given the luxury of food, information and entertainment still found a way to kill each other and still kept destroying everything in their path. The ‘unit’ was just a set of instructions that ‘Shimeji’ and ‘Eringi’ brought from their homes many light-years away, and they were happy that it worked. Every planet has its ways of evolution and every sentient being alive or dead was responsible to bring its footprint on the world. We are insignificant in the grand scale of life, just like our own lives, the lives of our predecessors, the lives of our successors, our planet and even galaxy is insignificant in a rudimentary way. To make sense of our lives we bring love and creation in the mix, we are a lost speck of stardust in our mother universe. Sadly we can’t answer the question of what lies beyond and what is ‘significance’ in the long run but humans can try...

“Hey Chii-chan, why did Mieko throw us out of the hospital?” Yuuri asked her as she carried a backpack of her clothes with her walking cane. She carefully walked hand in hand with Chito as she was still getting used to walking with a cane. “She was like ‘Get outta here you delinquents! Go back to your homes! Run be freeeee’.”

Chito chuckled before she replied “She was joking Yuu, and besides we can’t live in the hospital anymore. They were kind to give us our own house If I can find it somehow...” Chito kept looking through the lines of houses to find theirs. It was supposed to be the house with the number ‘26’, just close to where Mieko and her fiance lived in that sector. The houses at this part were all similar Japanese style prefab’s that could be built at any time and then easily fixed, rebuilt or even demolished by robots in a matter of hours. They were all simple rectangle-shaped blocks with windows, sliding doors, and even a small garden.

“There...” Chito pointed to one of the houses that had the number 26 written on top of it. As they moved closer, Yuuri noticed some words written on the door. “Hey Chii-chan, what is that written on the door?” She asked as Chito carefully read it... “Oh, it’s just our names ‘Chito and Yuuri’s House’.” Chito smiled as they moved closer to the entrance “I am sooo excited Yuu.”

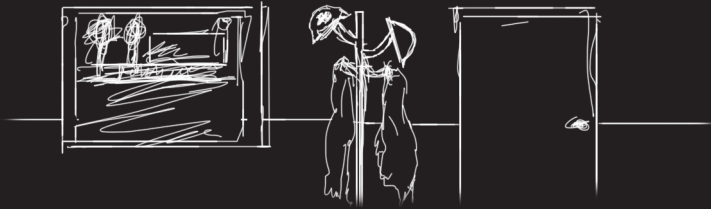
“Umm.. how does the door open Chii-chan?” Yuuri carefully walked towards the door and pressed one of the buttons on the side that had arrows pointing in each direction. With a single swoosh, the door opened sliding on both sides startling her. “EEEEPP...” she blurted falling backward and if it wasn’t for Chito she would have found herself down on the grass. “Yuuu!... be careful, you are still getting used to... the walking...cane... you are heavy...hhhhnnn”

“Mmm Chii-chan... I can’t wait to have my robotic leg... you will finally worship me for a ‘Robotic God’ that I will be” Yuuri smirked as Chito struggled to hold her from falling. Finally, she helped her back up on her foot with her cane as Chito got beside her.

“So, Yuu... do you want to see our new home?” Chito asked her smiling as she grabbed her by her arm. “Yay! New Home with Chii-chan!” Yuuri exclaimed as both of them walked inside, the door with another swoosh closed behind them.

Chapter 9

Home



“We need to take off our shoes before we go inside, Yuu.” Chito sat down on the porch of the entrance, as she started pulling off her shoes and placed them on a small raft to the side of the door.

“Oh, but why Chii-chan?” Yuuri asked her as she stood above resting on her walking cane.

“Mieko and Reo told me that at the ‘unit’ they never wanted for old traditions to go to waste, usually in the old world, when you go into a home you have to take off your shoes to keep it clean!” Chito replied as she moved her hands to Yuuri’s leg and helped her take off her shoes

“Should be easy with me Chii-chan, I only have one shoe!” Yuuri replied smiling as she moved her foot slowly off from her shoe. “There..” Chito placed her shoe on the raft next to hers as she stood up and gently took Yuuri by her arm. “You can wear the other shoe when you finally get your leg.”

Their new home was a small rectangular-shaped Japanese style house. It was big enough for a small family with all the necessary facilities, and it was already furnished because of their condition. At the ‘unit’ these types of houses or even large apartment complexes and facilities could be built or demolished within days with just a simple task sent to construction robots. This is how families at the ‘unit’ and refugees from the outside according to size were housed. Families could choose where to live, Chito and Yuuri chose to live close to where Mieko and her fiance lived close to a beautiful forest and park. The hospital where they were residing was just 15 minutes walk. With the use of the salvage printers, furniture and even working appliances could be created from all kinds of recycled materials within minutes.

“Chii-chan, WOW! Are you sure this is our house?” Yuuri asked her as she kept looking around in awe. This was a completely different home from where they lived with Itsuki on the bottom layer. Most of the housing units on the bottom layers were built from metal and concrete and looked almost lifeless, but this was done in a completely different process that involved recycling plants, and even materials they could salvage from the bottom layers.

“Yes, they told me we could live here close to Mieko. They even furnished it for us!” Chito replied as she helped Yuuri move to their living room. “I think that is how they also built factories and apartments outside too, Yuu. Maybe they also looked beautiful like this back in the days but they never could help

maintain them after the wars.” Chito replied as she looked around their living room. The living room was in an old Japanese style with tatami mats, couch, flowers planted in pots and a huge screen that you could use to access the ‘archive’. In the middle of the room, there was a table that had some kind of a blanket underneath, and just close by was a dining table with chairs.

“Did people used to sit on the ground Chii-chan?” Yuuri asked her as she kept looking around the room, the table on the ground was an interesting sight as she never has seen anything like this before. “Mieko told me that they used to do, and even sleep on the floor. But I think we have our own beds as well so we can be comfortable. Let’s check out the rest of the house.” Chito answered as they continued walking around the house together. The house contained 2 bedrooms, a kitchen, pantry, bathroom, and all kinds of appliances and facilities. Even if it was a small house, for Chito and Yuuri it felt huge and they were more than happy that they now have a new comfortable home that the residents of the ‘unit’ kindly furnished for them.

“Chii-chan, it’s so beautiful!” Yuuri replied with the widest smile as they walked around their new home, Chito walked next to her and held her tight. Even though Yuuri could move around almost with ease, Chito was always close by ready to help her out. “Also we can use the garden to grow our own food. Mieko said she does the same, she grows tomatoes, potatoes, and peppers.” Chito replied.

“Mmmmm... if only we could grow fishies too Chii-chan!” Yuuri grinned softly drooling from her mouth.

“What do you want to do first in our new home Yuu?” Chito asked her as they moved back into the living room. “Well... I want to sit underneath that blanket thing at the table.” Yuuri answered. The evening was almost over as the ‘artificial’ sun outside was setting in, the last of the sun-rays were dissipating as the evening passed on. The people in the ‘unit’ usually used this time of the day to catch up with their families after their work was done and prepare all kinds of food that the ‘unit’ could spare for the month.

“I heard that blanket is called a ‘kotatsu’ and supposed to be really comfortable.” Chito said as she helped Yuuri sit down underneath the table, placing her walking cane next to her. “Mmm... Chii-chan its sooo comfy... and warm! Quick, Get in!” Yuuri exclaimed as she laid underneath the blanket.

“Wait, I have to get the rest of our stuff from the entrance!” Chito moved back to the entrance and with her good hand, she grabbed some of their boxes and Yuuri’s backpack and carried it with her back into the living room. “Geeze... even with one leg, she is so strong...” she thought to herself as she kept struggling to carry her backpack. “But then of course, on the outside she could lift all kinds of heavy things with ease.”

“Chii-chaaan, quick get in the kotatsu!” Yuuri called out to her again after Chito finished moving all of their stuff to the living room. “Alright alright...” Chito answered back as she got underneath the blanket as well. “Ahhh.. sooo comfyyy!” closing her eyes as she lay her head on the table.

“What did I say Chii-chan, they know how to be comfortable up here.” Yuuri giggled and also laid her head on the table just like Chito.

After some time passed in comfortable silence, Yuuri remembered something. “Oh hey Chii-chan, I almost forgot. Can you bring me my backpack?” she asked as Chito turned around and lazily grabbed the side of the backpack slowly pulling it towards Yuuri. Yuuri lazily, from the power of kotatsu turned around and grabbed the backpack pulling it towards her. “Lets seeee.... mmm.... where did I put it...” opening her backpack she moved scoured through their clothes and felt the rectangular shape object that she hid for Chito “aaahhh... here” she pulled a black device out of the backpack and handed it to her.

“What’s that?” Chito asked as she took the device in her hands. “It’s just a gift to say I am sorry for something I did a long time ago.” Yuuri replied with a smile looking at back at her. “Huh... what did you do?” Chito answered back confused as she inspected the black device. There were few tiny buttons on the side of the device.

“Chii-chan you have to press the button, you’ll see!” Yuuri answered back, as Chito slowly trailed her finger along with the device and pressed the button on top of the device. The device came to life and brought out a crudely drawn picture on the screen of Yuuri with the letters... “Goft fr Choto?” Chito asked still puzzled as she kept looking at the screen. “Well.... It’s supposed to be ‘Gift for Chito!’” Yuuri blushed as she looked at her checking out the device “Oh you have to turn it with your finger like this.” she gestured with her finger in the air moving it in a slight motion from right to left “ Mieko-chan showed it to me some time ago and though it was a perfect gift for you.” Yuuri answered with a smile.

“Haha, you still can’t spell right Yuu...” Chito giggled as she gently swiped her finger on the device. The next image had the words “Kappa?” written on it.

“Well, Mieko told me that it’s this thing called a holographic device that lets you read books. She said it has a lot of books in it and I figured we had to replace the ones we burned to keep us warm. You can also use it to write in your diary again if you want. I remembered the name of the book that you loved so much and asked Mieko to put it somehow on the device. I know it’s not on paper, but this device is supposed to be fireproof if I decide to burn it again. She told me that you can find a lot of books that are on paper in the library too...” Yuuri answered back smiling at Chito who suddenly started jumping from joy “Yuu! Eeeeeeee.... thank you! thank you!” she squealed from joy hugging the device tightly as Yuuri gently patted Chito’s head and blushed “It’s nothing Chii-chan, I hope you enjoy reading all of the books here at our home, or I can always try and burn the device”. Yuuri smiled as Chito jumped again into Yuuri and started kissing her cheeks. She was beyond happy with her new gift.

Softly blushing she said “Hey hey... Chii-chan... it’s nothing really... they have so much stuff up here, Mieko told me you can even build a whole tank if you want...” Yuuri was now considering if she should get a whole tank for herself, she would be the complete ‘Robotic God’ that she said to be.

“No Yuu... I know what you are thinking but they won’t let you have a whole tank.” Chito replied, still giggling and hugging her close. “But what else is in your backpack?”

“Mmm... just some new clothes and even our old clothes, and look they even kept our helmets!” Yuuri kept scouring through the large backpack as she took everything out from it. Chito stared at her old clothes, they were cleaned and gently folded. It was the same clothes that they used to survive on the outside, along with their warm winter jackets. Some of those clothes belonged to their grandpa and Chito’s father when they were younger.

“Hey Yuu - it almost feels like a whole eternity since we arrived here.” Chito replied as she held her jacket “I can’t believe some of our stuff survived from outside. I felt those are the only clothes that we would have had in our life - It felt like we would have died in those clothes and the helmets on the outside.”

“But we didn’t die Chii-chan! We are here... We made it in our new home thanks to grandpa and his family.” Yuuri responded and smiled as she gently

held out her hand to Chito's arm gently squeezing her. Chito sighted and placed her clothes on the side of the mat.

“Hey, Chii-chan... I am hungry...”

“Yuu - we just ate at the cafeteria earlier... but yes I think we have food in the pantry and there is a thing called a refrigerator in the kitchen.”

“Mmmmm... we should prepare something nice for ourselves.” Yuuri answered back before she lazily scuttled inside the blanket. “But I am just going to stay under the kotatsu thingy for now.”

“You are now going to be lazy all day under the ‘kotatsu’...” Chito giggled and smiled before she moved away all of their clothes on the side of the room. Again she gently held her's and Yuuri's jacket in her hands and inspected them. Up at the ‘unit’, the weather inside was quite nice and warm so they didn't need the jackets for some time now until the dynamic weather would change to cold in a few months.

“Oh... I know what I will do with our helmets and jackets.” gently she took them and walked towards the entrance. There was a coat hanger just close by and she placed their helmets on top of the hanger and the coats just underneath. “I hope we never need them again Yuu... but just in case.” she smiled and moved back to the living room, Yuuri was still lying underneath the kotatsu without a single care in the world.

“Oh, by the way, Yuu... I kinda have a gift for you too.” Chito moved to one of the boxes, and opening it she took a round-shaped thing that looked like a pot and placed it in the middle of the table.

“Oooh... what's that?” Yuuri asked looking at the device that Chito just placed on the table. “Remember what I promised I would do to you once when we reached our new home?” Chito asked her as Yuuri mentally placed her thinking hat on and spoke “Hmmm... as if I remember correctly, back at that weird block you mentioned something about drowning me into a hotpot?”

“Haha, yes! I wonder how you even remembered since you forget everything Yuu.” Chito giggled looking back at her as Yuuri suddenly filled with joy, she had been waiting for this moment for what felt like forever.

“Chii-chan I never forget promises you make about food... besides now I have a ‘robot’ braaaaaaiinnn...” drooling as she kept looking at the white electrical pot in front of them. “But how does it work?”

“Well.. you put fresh water in it and turn the dial on the side. It’s supposed to work with those batteries that never expire, just like the camera Kanazawa gave us.” Chito explained as she kept inspecting the pot. “And then when the water boils you put all kinds of food in it and wait until it all turns into a soup. That’s how grandpa also made it if you remember with those soup bars, but here we have meat, eggs and fresh vegetables - should be really delicious.” Chito replied as she continued inspecting the device.

“So Chii-chan, should we make a hotpot for dinner?” Yuuri asked smiling from underneath the kotatsu as she gazed back at Chito still drooling.

“Sure, but you have to help me prepare the ingredients.”

At the mention of food, Yuuri seemed to have beat her laziness as she jumped from underneath the kotatsu and stood up with her walking cane “Let’s do that Chii-chan!” only the mention of food could move her from underneath that powerful table.

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“What’s that Chii-chan?” Yuuri asked as she pointed towards another white device standing on the kitchen sink, it looked like the hotpot but it was taller with a lid on top of it. “I think it’s a rice cooker?” Chito answered inspecting it and opening the lid to check out what’s inside. They had just walked into their kitchen which was separated from their living room with an open wall. “Mmmm... riice... Chii-chan did you notice they eat rice with everything here? We had to ration it in the village, but here they have a lot of it.” Yuuri said as she kept inspecting the device with Chito. “Yeah, I guess it’s another traditional thing, back in the old world rice was popular to eat and they even made a drink from it called ‘sake’. Mieko told me how to use this, should be really easy. Yuu, go see in the pantry if we have rice.”

“On iiiit!” Yuuri replied as she strutted into the pantry with her walking cane and opened the door. Inside there were all kinds of foods from canned

goods, vegetables and even non-expiring edible ration bars made from plants. There was a large bag of rice as well that would probably last them for months.

“Fiiiish...” Yuuri grabbed one of the cans with the image of a fish on it. At the ‘unit’ they were able to produce canned products along with ration bars as well, they had a small facility that was able to produce all kinds of food that never expired with time. “Chii-chaan... FIIIIISH!” she shouted from the pantry with joy, flashing the cans.

“You can take only one, or we will run out of fish cans. Even up here we need to ration food for up to a month, we can’t be glutenous Yuu.” Chito replied as she was setting up the rice cooker device. “Hey, you need to bring me a cup of rice for the cooker.”

“You mean this bag?” Yuuri carried a 20kg bag filled with rice and a can of fish with ease as she strutted towards Chito looking at her amazed “How??? Even with one leg - she can carry all that???” she thought to herself as Yuuri placed the bag on the counter “Here Chii-chan, let’s open the bag.”

Carefully they opened the bag, as it was filled with rice up to the top. At the ‘unit’ they could produce enough food for every family and sometimes they packaged left-over food and scattered them on the layers underneath in case survivors and outsiders needed them. The ‘unit’ could house over 2 million residents but there was only a small number of humans left up here, so they always had spare food to share, however, they still had to ration food like meat and fish.

Chito took out a cup and scooped up the right amount for the rice cooker as she placed it inside along with water. Turning on the machine it started with a single beep and a flashing light.

“Is it done?” Yuuri asked as she looked at the device coming to life before Chito replied “Well.. it usually takes 45 minutes. In the meantime you can cut the vegetables and the meat from the fridge, can you go take - “

“On iiii!” Yuuri replied again in the same tone as before as she opened the fridge which was also filled with all kinds of vegetables, meats, fruits, drinks, and food. “oooooooooohh...” Yuuri with a wide grin pulled a bottle filled with a yellow liquid... “Chii-chan!” she said holding the bottle proudly in front of her face.

“Ummm...” Chito leaned closer to read the words ‘beer’ on the bottle’s label before she moved back.

“Oh no... no... I’m gonna feel weird from drinking that again!” Chito replied looking at Yuuri with a worried face as she nodded and said “Oh yes... we are so going to drink it! They even have this here too Chii-chaan! We are gonna drink it all later!” gently she placed the bottle on the kitchen sink before she moved back to the fridge to take an assortment of food and placed them on the counter.

“Yuu, you can’t put that in a hotpot.” Chito inspecting the pile of food that Yuuri took out, pointed towards an apple.

“But why not?”

“It’s called an apple. It’s a fruit, not a vegetable.” Chito explained before she took an onion from the pile that Yuuri put out from the fridge and started cutting it with the knife she pulled from the drawer. Chito knew how to prepare vegetables as Itsuki taught her while they were living in the bottom. But she also had Mieko show her several instructional videos to teach her to prepare basic recipes after Yuuri woke up from her coma. Mieko and her fiance were helping her to get ready for life up at the ‘unit’ with helpful instructional videos in the ‘archive’.

“Umm... what’s an apple?” Yuuri asked as she looked into the weird fruit she just pulled out from the fridge. “Just bite into it with your strong teeth Yuu.” Chito replied as she continued cutting the onions, but the strong smell made her shed tears.

Yuuri holding the apple in her hand took a single bite with a satisfied look on her face “Mmm... this is so sweet and tasty... almost sweet like the ration bars, but so much tastier!” smiling she looked at Chito who was still struggling to cut an onion with tears on her face.

“Chii-chan, why are you crying?” Yuuri asked as she moved closer and gently held her.

“It’s these onions... they make me cry...” Chito replied as she struggled to cut onions with Yuuri around her arms.

“Awww... are you sad because you have to kill the little onions?” Yuuri asked her as she placed her head next to her before she also started crying from the strong smell of the onion.

“No’ it’s because when you cut onions it hurts your eyes and you start crying. I am not sad...” she replied and sniffled. “...Go cut the rest of the onions and vegetables Yuuuuu! I bet you remember how to do that from grandpa.” she said as Yuuri moved to the side and took out a knife.

“But we are eating the fish first!” Yuuri exclaimed before she grabbed a carrot from the food pile she took out and started chopping it into pieces.

• • •

Sitting down underneath the kotatsu, they already set the table earlier with two plates, two soup bowls, two rice bowls, and a fish can that Chito opened earlier. A set of forks and chopsticks were close to the plates and in the middle, the vegetable hotpot was still simmering as they helped prepare it earlier.

“Mmmm Chii... this smells so tasty” Yuuri kept drooling sitting on the opposite side from Chito who opened the fish can and separated the contents into two parts and placed it on both their plates. “Here, we can try the canned fish it smells so tasty too... even better than the ones we found on the bottom layers.”

Yuuri kept on drooling as she grabbed the fork and gently prodded the fish before taking a huge chunk to her mouth. “Mmmmm... Chii-chaaaa! Its FISHY!!! I almost forgot how tasty fishy was!”

Chito grinned looking at her before she took a small bite of the canned fish and some rice with chopsticks. Chito was so fascinated with the old cultures at the ‘unit’ that she was also trying to use the chopsticks but kept struggling to learn the technique. It seemed like such a difficult task at first but she didn’t want to give up. “Mmm.. it is tasty indeed Yuu.”

Next on the menu was the contents of the hotpot. Chito carefully placed a spoon-full into a bowl and handed it to Yuuri who softly blew on it as it was still hot. She gently sipped carefully as to not burn her mouth... “Mmm.... Chiiii-chan its soooo tasty mmmmm... the soup is sooo warm and soooo mushy!”

she exclaimed and giggled so loudly she couldn't help herself. "Chii-chan you are a wonderful cook..." she continued devouring the contents of the bowl even if they were hot. "I want to learn to cook food like you as well."

"Sure Yuu, we can prepare food every day if you want." Chito replied with a smile before she started eating her portion. They both giggled from satisfaction as they kept eating the contents of the hotpot.

"Chii-chan thank you for drowning me into a hotpot!" Yuuri smiled still giggling after she finished her bowl. They both helped themselves to another serving before the hotpot was empty. It was the first proper meal they cooked together in what felt like a really long time. Even if the food in the cafeterias and community restaurants around the 'unit' was also delicious, homemade food was the tastiest.

Of course, next on the menu was the beer. Chito opened it up and poured a small content for herself and a large glass for Yuuri. She couldn't really drink it that much as it made her feel funny. Yuuri could drink much more of it. "Cheers!" both of them exclaimed as they hit the glasses softly and drank the contents, they could vividly remember the first time they drank beer, and now when it was cold from the fridge it felt even more wonderful.

• • •

"Chii-chan, this was the most wonderful day of my life!" Yuuri said after she got a bit tipsy from the beer and snuggled into Chito who was also felt a bit tipsy even though she didn't drink much. Outside was already night and the 'sprinkles' that simulated rainfall was already turned on. The gentle sound of rain washed over the ambiance of their lit up room as they both laid on the couch in each other's arms. The 'unit' outside was lit up with the street lights and the gentle light of other houses around their neighborhood. Usually, after night has fallen, the citizens of the 'unit' either spent their time with family and friends or went out to enjoy entertainment in the community areas.

Even though it was such a small community, people still played instruments, games, read books, watched movies, drew pictures and paintings and knew how to have fun after their tasks were done for the day. They had no abundance of alcohol, sweet drinks, entertainment, and food.

“We can have hotpot another time as well, Yuu.” Chito replied as she snuggled into Yuuri. “Mmm... let’s drown into hotpot every day for the rest of our lives, Chii-chan.” Yuuri kept smiling as she took another sip of beer from her glass...

“Ohhh, Chii-chan you said something about the ‘archive’ and that black screen... We haven’t check it out yet, what is it?”

“It’s something the people can access up in the unit. It has those kinds of moving pictures as we saw in that ‘cinema’ thing many months ago. It was when... you know... I had that cute dream with you and me...” Chito blushed as she looked at Yuuri’s eyes and both smiled. “And they have many other things like books, music, instructional videos and you can even learn the old language. But I haven’t used it yet, I only looked at instructional videos that Mieko and her fiance showed me.”

“But how do we turn it on?” Yuuri asked her as Chito slowly got up from the couch and walked to the screen “Ummm... I think it was similar to the device you gave me... you have to press a button...” She gently pressed the button on the side of the device, and the holographic screen came to life displaying all kinds of text, images, and instructions on how to use it.

Chito still didn’t learn how to use this device and it was one of the most important devices in the whole ‘unit’ as it connected the citizens to their history. There was a section that had music written on it. “Yuu, do you remember how many of those disc-shaped records grandpa had?”

“Yes, Chii-chan... but he could never make those strange discs work.” Yuuri replied as Chito kept touching the strange device looking through the music sections. “I remember grandpa told us that each disc had a different kind of music on it but we could never hear and besides that strange song we heard on the radio from the ‘eringi’, we never heard any other kinds of music in the world. I remember grandpa told us how he listened to music and it must have been up here...” As she kept pressing the strange buttons on the screen, suddenly the whole room came to life with a type of music they have never heard before or ever imagined it exists. It was so noisy but sounded so happy and full of hope. One could just stand up and dance until they are completely exhausted. The voice coming from the screen was from a girl that lived in another century and she sang in their language.

“Chii-chan, this is sooo wonderful...” Yuuri hopped around still sitting on the couch smiling as Chito got near her and handed her hand. “Lets dance Yuu... just like we danced that time under the moonlight.” she asked smiling as Yuuri gave her hand and softly got up from the couch with the help of her walking cane. They kept turning around in each other’s embrace as if the world was spinning like crazy, Chito gently held her tight as they both hopped around jumping and laughing, Yuuri carefully hopped as well, as to not fall. “WOOOOOO” Yuuri yelled as she closed her eyes and turned around in her embrace....

They kept jumping on and on, they were the happiest girls on this whole planet. Their shine was the brightest pulsar in the universe. They kept on jumping and dancing to the craziest music they’ve ever heard in their life, made in a century that long away has passed. From all that dancing, Yuuri suddenly tripped and pulled Chito along with her down on the soft floor.

Laying on the floor both of them exhausted from the dancing, they knew every time they looked in the eyes of each other just how much they were in love.

“Chii... we made it... we are finally home...” Yuuri replied looking deeply into Chito’s eyes full of happiness, reaching her hand towards Chito’s cheek and gently caressing her. Slowly she leaned to her lips, and kissed Chito’s lips deeply closing her eyes. The song went on and on as the girls kept kissing in pleasant tranquil, laying on the ground in an embrace, never wanting to let go. They were the happiest lonely souls in the world. Even after the difficulties of their journey and the losses they endured, here they were dancing to this odd music from the old world and eating hotpot in the comfort of their new home.

The rest of the night they spent cuddled into each other with a blanket on the couch, drinking what was left of the beer and listening to music from all around the world. Some songs were sad, some were happy, some were heart-breaking, some were just random rhythmical noises that Chito thought it could make you dance every single time.

The next song that played felt mystical and almost out of this world, the person in the song sang in a language that seemed to have been forgotten a really long time ago. “Chii-chan...” Yuuri spoke from underneath the kotatsu as they both were cuddled underneath it, “What is this music called?” Chito looked up at the screen the words written that she could understand were “ummm... it’s just a song called ‘Odugen Taiga?’” Chito responded. She was puzzled as

to what those words meant and she couldn't understand what they were singing about.

“Chii-chan... what does that mean?” Yuuri asked as she was equally puzzled... “I have no idea it's probably words written from a foreign language, the song just came up all of a sudden.” Chito answered before she looked at Yuuri who had tears in her eyes.

“Chii-chan... this is so - beautiful...” Yuuri wiped the tears off her eyes and continued listening to the song “It's not like the music we danced to, but it just sounds mystical - like that song we heard the ‘eringi’ play. Like a song of our ancestors or - like a song of the world... I can't understand why something so beautiful - would cease to exist.” she sniffled as tears ran down her face. “I mean... why did people instead of wars - made beautiful music like this?” she asked and cuddled Chito even tighter. Yuuri was usually strong-willed and seldom cried, but a fascinating and mystical song like this made her cry her eyes out. “Why Chii-chan was humanity so cruel to each other? Why didn't they - make beautiful music - like this - instead of killing each other? It's really sad.”

Chito turned and hugged her back. She never expected that music would move Yuuri so much, she has never seen her cry like this before in her life. “It puzzles me as well, Yuu, I will never understand it as well. People took solace in music back in the old days, even when they were feeling down and even when they were happy. Grandpa told me that music made the world a beautiful place and it showed us that humanity was able to do much more, but... hatred and weapons won Yuu... not beautiful music like this. Granpa, he loved music so much and reading books. But out there he could never listen to music again and I think that made him - really sad.” she replied as she rested her head on her chest. Yuuri continued softly crying as the song finished, she had never heard something so mystically beautiful in her life.

People all around the world sang and made music and it made them happy, but all that happiness could never cure the world out of hatred and wars. One day the people used to sing and make music, then the next day they made weapons so they can kill each other. The wars never stopped and the music was powerless to ever stop the machine of hatred.

• • •

It was almost midnight as Chito and Yuuri moved to the bathroom to have a nice bath before bed. Chito leaned over Yuuri and started carefully taking her clothes off as she sat down on a stool next to the shower. She had to help Yuuri take a shower before they took a bath.

“Chii-chan... it’s been ages since we’ve taken a bath together.” Yuuri grinned as she sat down naked on a stool in front of her. “The last time was after we turned the Kettenkrad into a bathtub.”

“Oh yeah, your memory is getting so much better Yuu.” Chito smiled at her as she also started taking her clothes off in front of her. However, it suddenly occurred to her this was the first time they were naked together after they shared their feelings for each other. This seemed to be an unavoidable predicament as Chito promised to help Yuuri take a bath until she got her prosthetic leg. “Err...” Chito blushed heavily as she covered herself with her hands. “Ummm..... errrr...” she continued as Yuuri stared at her puzzled.

“Chii-chan - you shouldn’t be ashamed. It’s not like the first time we’ve taken a bath together.” Yuuri turned to look at her and smiled. “And hey... you’ve grown so much since last time!” Chito blushed even more as she sat on a stool close to her covering herself “Well... it’s all that food... and medication and vitamins up here... I think... we’ve grown much more and... errr... cmon! Don’t look its.... kinda embarrassing...”

Yuuri blushed softly as she took the shower handle and handed it to Chito. “I think that is why the people up here are so tall and nice-looking, they have so much food and those vitamin thingies to help them grow.” Chito kept on blushing as she turned the water on and helped Yuuri wash her hair, using some shampoo as she ran her hand through her silky blond hair. “Mmm... this smells so nice. What is it Chii-chan?”

“It’s called shampoo, we didn’t really have any outside beside some bar of soap we even had to ration that...” she helped wash it off on Yuuri as she pointed the shower handle to herself. The nice warm water flowed through her whole body, scrubbing her hair with the same shampoo after washing it off. “Mmm... I wonder how much we must have stunk when they found us outside... we haven’t bathed in such a long time.” Yuuri replied softly chuckling.

“I didn’t mind your smell, Yuu... you always smelled... so nice!” Chito blushed again after she helped Yuuri get off from the stool and gently lowered her in the wide bath.

“Ahhhh.... so warm” both of them exhaled laying comfortably in the bath. Being so close to each other naked always felt kinda warm and comfortable for their hearts, but since they confessed... Chito felt overwhelmed with a different kind of feeling looking at Yuuri’s nude body. It evoked some strange emotions in her that she never felt before, but remember reading about it in a book and even that strange moving picture they saw on the outside.

“Was she... always this beautiful?” Chito thought to herself as Yuuri sat opposite her with her eyes closed and a wide satisfied smile. “She has... always been such a beautiful girl and... I never thought about that before...” She kept blushing as her heart kept pounding even faster, too afraid to even move as she sat close to this beautiful girl. Yuuri kept glancing back at her and kept blushing too before she turned around and laid close to Chito.

“Chii-chan, we’ve bathed together since forever you shouldn’t be so jumpy!” Yuuri giggled as she got close to her in the bath, her nude body was now close to hers. “Ahhh... sooo warm...” she smiled closing her eyes again. Chito still red-faced sat stiffly like a rock beside her. Indeed they haven’t bathed together since she turned the broken kettenkrad into a bathtub. But it always felt relaxing and safe when they were together in a bath.

“Mmm... Chii-chan we should take a bath together almost every day now, it feels so nice.” Yuuri said as she dipped her head down in the water and playfully blew bubbles. Chito was still flooded with these strange emotions, her heart could have completely burst out of her chest. Trying not to think about it, she took a sponge from the side of the bathtub and turned back to Yuuri. “Yuu, can you turn around so I can scrub your back?”

“Mmm... sure...” Yuuri smiled and turned around with her back facing Chito.

Blushing even more, Chito placed the sponge on her back and gently started scrubbing her. “Even her back... she is so beautiful and gentle... I... just... love her so much.” She thought to herself both of them feeling content in the warm bath. Sharing these moments even on the outside always felt special to her.

“Chii-chan... I’m gonna fall asleep like this...” Yuuri smiled as she laid her back comfortably on Chito. It seemed impossible, but Chito turned redder than before, she knew that she had to help her with a bath every day but somehow it felt so strange for her at this moment. “What do I do?” Chito thought to herself as she stood still. “It will pass... it’s nothing much... we are just taking a bath as we’ve always done.”

Laying inside the bathtub both Chito and Yuuri enjoyed the warm water in complete silence until Yuuri had a request “Chii-chan... mmm...can you rub my - “

Chito completely flustered and red-faced jumped out of the bath... “I--- think that’s enough bath for today... lets dry up...”

“ - shoulders????” Yuuri was even more puzzled after she looked at the girl that stormed out of the bath in the nude. “Geeze what’s with that girl today? Maybe it’s the beer again!” she thought to herself as Chito placed a towel on Yuuri’s head and helped her stand up from the bath.

“Heee.... I need to... scrub your hair and.... I need to dress you for bed as well...” Chito was still completely flustered as she kept struggling to speak. She already covered herself in a bathrobe too before she scrubbed Yuuri’s wet body sitting down on the chair.

“Chii-chan, did you drink too much of that beer drink tonight?” Yuuri asked her with a puzzled expression, sitting down on the stool just next to the bath.

“NO! You had too much beer! Not me no!” she answered and continued wiping her body with the towel. “Here you can put some new underwear...” Chito muttered underneath her breath, and even after reading all about it she was still unsure what these feelings were and maybe seeing Yuuri like that brought out some crazy emotions that she couldn’t control. Her heart continued pounding faster than an automobile engine, as Yuuri continued dressing up her underwear and pajamas waiting for Chito to help her up again.

Smiling Yuuri started talking “Chii-chan... Chii-chan...” she gently held out her hands and placed them around her to try to calm her down. “Don’t worry Chii-chan. I know what you felt.” she replied smiling and suddenly her face turned red as well “ I - kinda felt that same thing when we were bathing and...

errr.... I guess when we are ready one day - we will know what to do in this situation..." Yuuri answered her back looking deeply in her eyes and smiled, she was flustered as well as she must have had these feelings back for her as well the moment they were together in the bathtub.

"I am sorry Yuu, I hope you don't think bad of me... but just seeing you like that... I thought you were the most beautiful girl in the world." Chito answered still flustered. Yuuri blushed even more as she looked into her eyes "Chii-chan, I can say the same about you... you were always the most beautiful girl to me..."

Chito still couldn't help but blush as she held Yuuri's hand "But I want us to take baths together I don't mind... I guess the beer was at fault tonight." she giggled.

"But Chii-chan, you barely drank a full gla ---"

"Shhhhhh... Yuuri..." Chito gently placed her hand on Yuuri's mouth "It was the beer."

• • •

After they dried their hairs with the hairdryer and already dressed up for bed, they moved together to one of the larger bedrooms. The room had a large double bed, dresser, another black screen device on the wall and just on the side of the wall another window with shutter blinds that looked into their garden. The whole atmosphere of the room felt so comfortable and nice. "You can sleep in this room if you want, Yuu. I know we don't have bunk beds like we planned, but just look how big the bed is." Chito said as she helped Yuuri lay down on the bed, Yuuri playfully took a pillow from underneath her head and snugged it.

"Chii-chan... the bed is even comfier than the one at the hospital." Yuuri giggled as she lay back down on the bed and sniffed the pillow "and the pillow smells sooo nice... and my hair is sooo silky and smells nice too." she kept giggling as Chito wanted to help tuck her in.

"Stay still Yuu! I have to tuc - " abruptly she got smashed by a pillow that Yuuri swung at her and fell on the bed from the force. "It's war Chii-chan!" she threw the other pillow to Chito who now had an annoyed look on her face

as she found herself on top of the bed. Chito took the pillow and smashed her back. “Yuu! You are still a crazy girl!” she exclaimed giggling as both of them smashed the pillows from each other, before they both laid down on the bed exhausted.

“Yuu... I remembered those exact words you said to me... when you pointed the rifle at me. I still don’t understand why did you do that!” Chito asked her as she laid still on the bed exhaling fast. “You scared me so much.”

“Chii-chan... I felt so horrible after that but... I wanted you to realize that I was worried you never wanted to carry a gun with you and, grandpa always told us how dangerous it was outside and people killed each other for food. I never even had the finger on the trigger... and it hurts every time you punched me, or throw a wrench. I am sorry that I am not that smart Chii-chan.” Yuuri replied laying still on the comfortable pillows.

“Yuu... we both have done things that we feel horrible about and it’s just that’s how that world outside made us.” She held out her hand and gently squeezed Yuuri’s. “I felt at the time that slapping or punching you was the right thing to do because you also made mistakes and seeing that side of you pointing your rifle at me and when you fired the rocket from the war machine scared me so much... but I made mistakes too and I realize that... I was wrong to do that and... I am sorry... Yuu...”

“Chii-chan, that is all in the past, and now we can just enjoy the rest of our lives up here... we don’t need weapons anymore.” Yuuri replied as she squeezed back Chito’s hand laying still on that bed.

“Well... it’s way past bedtime. I will go sleep in the other room.” Chito said as she got up, right before Yuuri held her hand tight. “Chii-chan... please sleep next to me!” Yuuri asked as she blushed softly holding her gently. “But... my nightmares will just wake you up Yuu. And I keep swaying my arms around in my dreams...” Chito replied before Yuuri spoke again. “I don’t mind Chii-chan. I know we are finally safe but - I am still afraid of being alone in the dark and when you sleep next to me I feel so much safer.” she replied still holding her hand.

Chito smiled softly and she scuffled in the bed snuggling close to her. “I guess - I can’t sleep without you as well Yuu. Even back at the hospital, I couldn’t...” she replied laying in each other’s arms.

“Chii-chan, maybe you should take that pill that Reo gave to you, so you don’t have nightmares.” Yuuri replied still snuggling her close.

“They just make me feel really weird. I think he said it’s something called medical ‘cannabis’ and supposed to help me with my condition.”

“Oh Chii-chan, what’s a ‘cannabis’?” Yuuri asked her back.

“I think it’s just a plant, they seem to like it up here at the ‘unit’. I don’t know what else they use it for beside medication and building material.”

“Mmm... maybe we can eat it as well?”

“I don’t know if you can eat it Yuu, we have to ask Reo and Mieko if we can.” she replied.

“Oh, I wanted to show you these earlier.“ Next to the bed was another box that Chito carried with her from the hospital and opened it scouring through the contents. “It’s the letters from Itsuki and Yasuo. I haven’t gone through them all.”

“Oooh... I remember you told me about those letters.”

“Mhmm... Reo gave them all to me so I can read them while you were in a coma but I haven’t gone through them all. There were so many things that they wanted to tell up to their friends and family up here.” Chito answered as she kept scouring through the whole pile of letters.

“Chii-chan I hope I can learn to read them all one day, I want to read by myself what grandpa was writing all those years to his family.” Yuuri replied when something from one of the letters fell on the bed. Chito looked down on the bed and gently took whatever that was in her hand. It was a printed photograph of a man and a woman holding a baby, and behind them looked like their village at the bottom layer. “Chii-chan, who is that?” Yuuri asked her back as Chito kept intently gazing at the photograph. “Oooh... the girl in the picture looks a lot like you! She looks so beautiful - just like you!”

Chito kept looking into the photograph transfixed into those eyes frozen in time. It was a picture of her father and her mother holding her while she was still just a tiny baby. They both were beautiful and when she gazed at those eyes

of her mother, it felt like she was looking into a mirror. Her mother looked a lot like her, with the same black hair but she wore it with a single pin. On the picture they were smiling and full of life, holding their newborn daughter in their hands. Even if life was difficult for them on the outside, they were so happy and brimming of life holding their beautiful daughter whom they decided to name Chito a long time ago. Sadly they never expected that 3 years later they would depart from this world leaving Chito behind.

Looking down on the photograph, droplets of tears started falling from Chito's eyes, as Yuuri kept looking at her. "Chii-chan?" Yuuri asked her as she snuggled her closer "What's wrong?"

"It's - mom and dad - It's the - first time I see them -" she wailed loudly as she raised her arm and cried into it. "Why - did they die? Yuu -" she continued sobbing as she snuggled into Yuuri's chest. She has never seen them before in her life and their picture somehow survived the journey up to the last layer. Even though they were dead a long time ago, their picture made the journey up to the last layer through the countless refugees and families they had saved from the cruelty of death.

Even if Chito and Yuuri survived and went through hell to find their home and both of them were turning into young adults, she still wanted her mother and father beside her even though she didn't remember them much. She also wanted Itsuki to come on the journey with them as well, but they were dead a long time ago, their souls were one with the universe leaving Chito and Yuuri alone to survive this harsh world.

"Chii-chan..." Yuuri without words snuggled her closer as they laid on their new comfortable bed. "Your mom and dad - they lived and were happy as well. Even grandpa lived and was happy all his life as well out there with us. They gave the most beautiful girl in the world to me, and she saved my life and she makes me so happy every day that I am awake."

"Yuu... I am so... terrified!" Chito couldn't stop crying again, no matter how much she tried to stay strong she always felt like crying was the easiest thing she could do to express her inner turmoil. Even since they lost the only vehicle that saved their lives in the world she couldn't stop crying. "What if this is all a dream - I don't want to wake up out there again - I really don't want to be ever out there again - I don't want to live in a world where you are not by my side - Yuu! What would I have done if you never woke up and - you are

still sleeping forever on that bed. I - I --” she wept loudly in her lover’s arms. They both paid a huge price to be here together, and that time while Yuuri was in a coma, it shattered her spirit and her heart in millions of pieces as her inner turmoil kept living on.

“Chii-chan... please don’t cry. I am here, right next to you and you are wide awake - my love.” Yuuri snugged her so close that she just wanted to stay with her like this forever “If you want we can go outside one day where they found us and you can see that we are not out there in the snow anymore. Chii-chan... we are here - we are home. Please, my love - don’t cry - please” Yuuri couldn’t stop the tears in her eyes as well and softly started crying. She couldn’t bear to see Chito like this anymore and no matter how much she wanted, she just really wanted them to be happy from now on. The raiders, nor the snow or hunger couldn’t hurt them anymore.

“Yuu... I am so sorry.” Chito replied as she was slowly composed herself in her arms “I - I love you so much. I don’t know what I would have done without you. Please don’t ever leave me again - ”

“I love you too, Chii-chan.” Yuuri replied as she brushed her tears off. “I feel the same way, I would never leave you alone... Chii-chan - we have a future up here and I want to grow old together with you. We have a family as well that cares deeply about us and I really like them as well. Chii-chan, please don’t cry... Chii-chan, I am here - next to you - I will never leave you...”

After some time, they both felt composed in each other’s arms as they fell asleep on their new comfortable bed. The gentle comfortable silence and the sound of droplets from the rain gently lulling them to sleep.

• • •

“Chito... Chito... You have to wake up.” Itsuki was in the driver seat of the Kettenkrad as they both have drifted away in sleep. Chito was in the back slowly opening her eyes as she gazed upon the cold derelict world outside. It was 3 days since they left their village after a group of raiders attacked them. Both Itsuki and Chito managed to escape with everything they could carry, just before the fighting started. As they drove away, they could hear weapons firing in every direction.

Itsuki feared for Chito's life and he had to help her escape. He felt that once again he was exiled from another home on the bottom layer.

“Uhh... Grandpa... what's wrong?” Chito brushed her eyes and gently got up from underneath her blanket. She was sleeping in the back of the Kettenkrad and had the most peculiar dream where she was with a girl she never has seen before in her life called 'Yuuri', and they lived at some odd place at top of the world.

In her dream, the place was just as Itsuki described it to her, populated with humans, animals and all kinds of food and plants.

“We have to drive as fast as we can, I think I heard motorcycles in the back, I fear that maybe we have been followed!” Itsuki started the engine as fast as he could and started driving straight down the derelict and road filled with snow. Rows of houses and snow-filled up the dead horizon as the clouds above covered up the whole sky, the large layered city was out there in the distance.

“Just in case, do you remember how to use your pistol Chito?” Itsuki asked her back, as Chito took out a 'Nambu Pistol Model 14' from underneath her blanket and inspected it. She never wanted to use a gun in her life and was disturbed by them, but Itsuki instructed her to use it and never think twice in case there is a danger. “Just point and shoot Chito... if they want to hurt me or they want to hurt you. Just squeeze the trigger and... don't think... don't look at them afterward.”

Driving off into the distance, after some time the sound of the motorcycles seemed even closer to them. With a panicked expression, Itsuki parked the vehicle near an abandoned house and turned off the engine. Itsuki knew that the motorcycles were faster than the Kettenkrad and could easily overtake them, especially when they were overcapacity with supplies. He felt it was time to make a stand, to protect both their lives if they were going to make the long journey up to the 'unit'. “Chito, take your pistol and hide in the house! I will wait for them here with my rifle.” Itsuki exclaimed as Chito got out from the vehicle and looked at him “But grandpa - “.

“I didn't ask for a reply Chito - Go hide in the house! NOW! And don't come out unless I call you! And remember to squeeze the trigger and don't think...” Itsuki was ready with his rifle and hid behind the Kettenkrad, as Chito ran inside the house and frantically looked for a place to hide. She saw the

flipped over table closeby and hid right behind it. Holding her breath she kept waiting and listening to see what will happen.

“It’s going to be alright...” she kept repeating to herself shaking from fear and held her pistol tight in her hand. ‘It’s going to be alright...’

The sound of the motorcycles grew louder and Chito could hear the first shot. The first shot was the familiar sound of the rifle that Itsuki used. That was just before a full-blown firefight went outside and after a few shots were fired, Chito could hear a man that sounded like Itsuki suddenly cry out from the pain.

“Where is the girl? You sack of shit!”

“She died - you shot her at the village - how can you be so cruel to do this to innocent kids?”

“LIAR!” a loud thump and the man yelped from pain again as someone must have hit him forcefully. “WHERE IS SHE? IF SHE IS DEAD WHY DO YOU HAVE SO MANY CLOTHES WITH YOU???”

“F... fuck... you... you shot my brother! Go fucking die in a hole you piece of s-” another loud gunshot - and then a deafening silence.

“You - girl - grab his rifle and search the house. If she has a weapon don’t hesitate to shoot her!”

Chito kept hiding and holding her breath trying not to cry. She kept shaking from fear, as she could hear footsteps through the house. After some time, someone forcefully pushed the table just where she was hiding. Closing her eyes she pointed her pistol to the person right in front of her.

Chito yelped from pain as the person kicked off her pistol right from her hand. With tears in her eyes, she looked up at the person standing above her. The person was a tall girl about her age, with blond hair and blue eyes. She pointed her grandfather’s rifle directly at her head. Chito scuffled back crying from fear and kept looking up at the girl. The girl with a dead stare looked at Chito with no expression on her face. It occurred to Chito that this was the girl from her dreams, the one she shared so many special moments in her life and even a whole journey up to the last layer.

“Yu - Yuuri?” Chito asked as the girl kept pointing the rifle at her.

“Who?” the girl replied still with no expression on her face with an absolute dead look in her eyes. She felt so assertive pointing the rifle at the defenseless girl in front of her. “Yuuri - It’s me... Chito...”

“My name is not Yuuri. I’ve never met you in my life. We were sent to kill your grandfather because he caused all kinds of trouble for many years... And we are supposed to take you with us...” she sighed before she continued speaking “But for some reason, I really just want to kill you, watch you die slowly and bleed out like everyone else we killed at the village.” The girl replied with a grin starving from this cold-blooded hunger to take someone’s life away. All this time she had the rifle pointed at Chito. She was not the Yuuri from her dreams, but a cold-blooded murderer.

“No Yuuri... you are not like that... I love you - you are the nicest girl I’ve -” Chito yelped again from pain as the girl kicked her head forcefully.

“Shut up... you little shit!” the girl exclaimed and pushed her up against the wall. “Please... Yuuri... please don’t kill me... please...” Chito continued weeping and begged for her life, as the girl looked at her with cold eyes and started talking.

“Little girl, this is war. Not even pretty girls like us are spared,” she exclaimed before she reloaded Itsuki’s rifle and pointed it dead center at her eyes. “Believe me I am doing you a favor, you will be with your grandfather soon and I get to watch you die! It’s a winning situation on both fronts don’t you think?”

The girl squeezed the trigger of the rifle. A sudden loud bang split the dead silence in two. With an evil grin, the girl threw Itsuki’s smoking rifle on the ground just beside where Chito was laying. Just close to her was where she kicked Chito’s pistol off and she leaned down to take it into her hands inspecting it carefully.

“You are lucky that piece of a shit rifle is so crooked that I missed. I guess dying from hunger is even worse. I hope you enjoy that, you little shit!” the girl chuckled and walked off from the room outside where the others from her group were waiting.

“What happened?” the voice of a man outside asked, just as she walked out. “Hey, calm down... the girl had a gun pointed at me, I had to shoot her.”

“Where is the rifle then?”

“Well, it jammed and blew up in her face. Her head is all over the place, I wouldn’t go inside if I were you!” she replied chuckling.

“Shit.. well we can take his vehicle and all of the supplies with us. Leave them here to rot.”

After a few minutes, the Kettenkrad and the rest of the motorcycles came to life as the group seemed to have driven away. It was dead silence once again.

Chito covered herself with her arms and wept loudly inside the house just after the group drove off. She kept waiting in vain for Itsuki to call her out, but it felt like there was not a living soul outside. She got up with her bloodied face and started walking with difficulty, still crying when she saw Itsuki laying down on the ground covered in blood.

“Grandpa!” Chito screeched as she fell over his body and wept even louder “Grandpa! Wake up! Please! Don’t leave me...” she kept nudging him and kept trying to wake him up, but he laid peacefully down on the ground, covered in a pool of blood. “Why?” Chito kept weeping, laying her head down on his body unsure what was going to happen to her next.

She had no supplies, no means of transportation up to the last layer and the only person that ever cared about her in the world, lay dead on the cold ground. Her head hurt like hell and she felt like the whole world spun around her. She couldn’t understand why the beautiful girl from her dreams would hit her head forcefully and even tried to kill her. Chito kept weeping until she couldn’t keep conscious anymore and fell asleep on top of Itsuki’s body.

Some time must have passed because when she regained consciousness, she found herself in a different kind of place. Her head didn’t hurt anymore and Itsuki was nowhere to be seen. She kept looking around to see where she was but all there was a flat horizon, a stairwell, and a square stone monument just close by. The only source of light seemed to be the stars above her. In the dead distance there seemed to be no one else, all she could hear was the sound of a loud electrical buzz coming from the square block.

Carefully she got up from the cold ground and started walking towards the block. The sound of electricity grew even louder and louder as she approached it until it was almost ear piercing. The square block seemed to be calling out to her to come closer and closer. She reached out and gently touched the block. In a matter of nanoseconds, she was transported to a different kind of place and the sound of electricity stopped.

The only thing she could see was the evening sun and lots of yellow plants spread across her. She found herself in a large field of wheat, the stone block stood just behind her. This odd new place seemed to have been somewhere else in the world and she had never seen anything like it before.

Walking calmly through the field she finally reached the edge of the wheat field and walked right out of it. Looking around again, the sea in front of her stretched through the far horizon and there was a motorcycle close by with a bench where someone slept on.

Discreetly Chito moved closer to see who the person was on the bench. The girl on the bench had dark hair similar to hers and laid down on her back-pack, snoring softly. She had something in her ears and in her hand, she held a book with the words 'Catch 22' written in Japanese.

Chito was even more puzzled looking at the girl. The girl looked exactly like herself except she was tanned and wore some kind of weird clothes that people in the 21st century probably wore, with flipflops on her feet.

The girl on the bench stopped snoring and woke up mumbling. Brushing her eyes she sat up on the bench and looked at Chito who was wearing the usual army clothes that she had on her journey on the outside layer. They both looked at each other with equal confusion, before the other girl smiled and said.

“Oh, Hey! I haven't seen you in my dreams in like - a really long time.”

Chapter 10

Dream



“Ummm... Who are you?” Chito asked the girl as she stood up from the bench and stretched her arms. She was wearing a summer dress with a swimsuit underneath and sunglasses on her head. Chito had only seen girls wear these types of clothes in the 21st Century, in some of her books.

“I could ask you the same?” the girl replied as she sat back on the bench. The weather at this strange place was quite warm and the gentle fresh sea breeze brushed through their hair as they kept looking at each other with equal uncertainty in their eyes. In the near distance, they could hear the sea waves and the gentle wind rustling through the field. They both felt like they were looking in a mirror and were still unable to comprehend what was going on, was this real or just another one of those strange dreams.

“I’ve seen you so many times in my dreams. I always felt like I was dreaming a whole story and that post-apocalypse world was something that I had envisioned, but after some time I still can’t discern who you are and why we have this strange connection?.”

“What do you mean by connection?” Chito asked her back, she was still perplexed as to how she found herself in this place, and who this person that looked exactly like herself was. Chito had also seen this girl a few times in her dreams and the last time was when she was in a coma. Chito also thought that it was only a recurring dream, but here she stood talking to her and it felt surreal.

“I can’t explain it, but I think we are somehow - connected. It’s strange because I also read online that a small number of people had similar dreams that their counterparts lived in a different kind of reality. They explained in great detail these worlds. Sometime in the future they almost met themselves, in similar circumstances and never again afterward.” the girl replied as she gazed at the far horizon. “I thought I was going insane when I read these stories and the whole thing was just some viral hoax, but - here we are... and what do we do? What do we even talk about?”

“Oh...” Chito sighted in confusion as she looked back at the girl, she was left speechless. The girl moved her belongings away from the bench and gestured to Chito to sit next to her. “Cmon... don’t be a stranger.” The girl smiled as Chito moved closer and sat on the bench next to her. The gentle waves rushed towards the beach as the sun illuminated the sea into thousands of shimmering lights. In the far distance, several fishing boats were scattered gently floating on the blue sea.

“But... why are we here? What is this place?” Chito finally questioned the girl.

“Well... I came here to enjoy the sunset and must have fallen asleep reading my book and listening to music.” She responded yawning softly. “I don’t know why you are here though... Oh, by the way, this place is just close to a town called ‘Enoria’ in Greece, and that is the ‘Aegean’ sea right in front of you.”

“Greece?”

“Mhm...” The girl replied as she looked back at the sea. “Well we have been planning a trip to Europe for years now and we just took a long vacation. I just finished my master’s degree. Yuuri and her sister opened an Udon restaurant in ‘Kichijoji’. It’s quite successful and I am so happy that she is now a wonderful cook. But yeah - we went on a 2-month journey around Europe on our motorcycle.” she pointed towards the vehicle parked close to the bench where they were sitting on. “That is what we have been driving for the past 2 months.”

“What is that?” Chito asked as she looked at the strange motorcycle in front of her. On the back it was tied up with storage containers, the motorcycle looked like it was outfitted for extended journeys.

“It’s been our ride for the journey. It’s called a ‘Suzuki DR 650’ that we rented in ‘The Netherlands’ and it has been our home for about 2 months now.” The girl smiled as she explained “But I am really sad that we have to leave it behind. Next week we have to catch a flight to ‘Tokyo’ from ‘Athens’. It’s pretty much the end of our journey in Europe. But hey it’s not as cool as your ‘Kettenkrad’!”

“Wait.. how do you know about our ‘Kettenkrad’?” Chito asked as the girl smiled again.

“Well, as I said, I’ve seen your journey in my dreams. I’ve seen you drive it so many times and the most interesting thing is that before these dreams I’ve never heard that this strange vehicle ever existed. Yuuri and I saw it on display in a war museum in ‘Berlin’, and I told Yuuri we should just ride it out of here. She sat down on the back and I sat on the front just like in the ‘dreams’, but then they threw us out.” she replied and smiled, but then her expression changed. “Oh... I am sorry - I just realized it was inconsiderate of me. I never discerned before that you were real and, I know that vehicle probably saved your lives -

but - ummm... it's just that - we are out here having fun and everything seems so easy at the moment..." she replied as Chito kept listening to her speak. "...I could see some events from your life in that desolate and - ugly place, I just don't know what happened to your world and I hope you both are safe."

"You are right - that vehicle did save our lives," Chito replied as she kept looking back at the girl. "I know that a lot of bad things happened to our world but we found the most amazing place with Yuuri. However I miss the 'Kettenrad', it broke down on us and no matter how much I tried I could never repair it. It's probably still down there among the ruins." Chito with saddened expression reminisced about her grandfather's vehicle that went through quite a journey in its really long life.

"But what happened to you both?" The girl asked "I haven't seen you in my dreams in 4 years. The last time I saw you both in a blizzard walking towards this unusual wall and that was it - that's all I remember."

"Well..." Chito sighted before as she continued speaking "We made a really dangerous choice to see what's on the last layer of the world, and it almost cost us our lives. But some wonderful people that live up here saved our lives from the blizzard. Sadly, I broke my hand because I was so frustrated when we didn't find anything there again and I kept punching the wall with all my force. But Yuuri - she lost her leg due to frostbite and she was in a coma for 1 month, I almost lost her as well. All of this happened some time ago - on the outside - we almost died..." Chito replied as the girl held her hand to her mouth, she was almost going to cry. "I sat beside her for 1 month waiting for her to wake up, I was so scared that she wouldn't wake up, but she is a strong girl... she woke up in the end."

"Yuuri lost her leg and she almost died? What?" The girl with a sad tone asked Chito back.

"Yeah - But she is going to get a new leg soon. Something called a 'neuroprosthetic'. She doesn't seem phased about it, not even a little bit, and is so happy that she is going to have a new leg. She is a strange girl but that is why I love her so much" Chito replied with a smile, the girl sitting next to her was almost ready to cry. "But don't worry we are safe, she is just probably sleeping right next to me, she didn't want me to sleep in the other room. I've been having a lot of nightmares and I usually wake her up with my shouting - I'll probably I find my hand inside her mouth again..."

“Aww...” the girl exclaimed almost wanting to hug her, but she learned in one of her science fiction books that if you come in contact with yourself the world might implode, she didn’t want to risk this even if it was a dream. “And, just earlier - Yuuri and I were fighting for a ridiculous reason.” The girl replied as she brushed a tear from her face.

“Oh - what happened? I was wondering why you were alone and not with Yuuri. In my dreams, I almost always saw you being inseparable with Yuuri and - I kinda saw you when you both kiss as well...” Chito replied and blushed, the girl smiled and then started speaking.

“Well... we kinda fought, back at our hotel. I guess, in a relationship as long as ours even huge fights might be inescapable. Usually, when we get angry at each other we don’t speak for 2 hours and afterward, we act as if nothing happened, but this time I guess we were just yelling insults at each other.” the girl replied as she searched through her backpack and took out a small leather bag showing it Chito. “And the whole fight was for this - it’s her wallet. We were getting ready to go to the beach just before sunset and then she couldn’t find her wallet and her passport is inside it too. And I guess I kinda snapped at her cause she can be so clumsy sometimes and now she lost her wallet and her passport at the same time.” she sighed replacing Yuuri’s wallet into her backpack. “I called her an asinine d-cupped airhead and she called me a dull bookworm geek and then I stormed out of the room. I drove off to look for her wallet and found it back at the restaurant where we had lunch with her passport inside. I was so angry that I just wanted to cool off on the motorcycle and then I drove here... I read my book listened to some music and fell asleep. I mean we were here yesterday sitting on this same bench while we looked at the sea and ate this thing called a ‘gyro pita’, which is just a typical tasty Greek dish from this thing that looks like a meat tornado.” the girl smiled, she was still sad about her fight with the Yuuri from her world and felt it was for completely ludicrous reasons.

“I am so sorry!” Chito replied as she looked back at the girl, who had a worried expression on her face. “I sometimes got angry at Yuuri as well, because - well we both did stupid things too. She almost burned a book that I like - but in the end, it was all for pointless reasons, we had to burn all our books and even my journal so we can survive the cold on the outside. I realized that material things don’t have much value when the person you cherish almost died - Everything else in life even books can be replaced, but nothing could ever replace her...”

Chito said as the girl sitting next to her sniffed and brushed her nose with her hand. “I guess I stopped getting angry at her even for the most insignificant things, I am just glad that she is happy and alive. I love her more than anything in the world... and if i’ve ever hurt her well... that just makes me feel like such a horrible person...”

The girl, scoured through her backpack again and pulled out a small black box and handed it to Chito. She wanted to show Chito something that she has been carrying with her throughout her entire journey in Europe.

“What is that?” Chito replied as she carefully examined the small black box. “Well - you can open it, don’t worry it won’t break.” Chito with ease opened the box and looked inside. It contained a ring with three beautiful blue rubies on top of it, it looked old and worn as it has been passed through many generations.

“It’s my father’s ring that he gave to my mom when he proposed to her. I guess in my family the eldest son or daughter got this ring as an heirloom and after they found someone they loved they passed the ring on.” the girl replied still staring in the far distance, the gentle sun rays felt warm on their skin as they sat on the bench. “Before my father passed away, he wanted me to have the ring for whenever I found the one I love, but my mom held on to it for many years. Sadly my mother wasn’t always welcome to my relationship with Yuuri because - in this stupid world a girl must marry a guy or a guy must marry a girl... she always wanted me to have a husband or boyfriend for some reason. But just before my trip with Yuuri she wanted to see me and asked me ‘Do you truly love Yuuri that you would marry her?’. I replied to her that if it wasn’t for her I wouldn’t know what to do in my life and that I loved her more than life itself. Then she gave me the ring and told me ‘You should propose to her then.’ and she had the widest smile I’ve ever seen.” the girl smiled and held the box tightly in her hands after Chito gave it back to her. “I hugged her so hard and I was so happy that she finally accepted - for who I am and that, the only person that matters to me in my life just happens to be a girl. I planned to propose to Yuuri tonight - I know she enjoys ‘Greek’ food a lot and I planned to surprise her at this wonderful restaurant that I read about on the internet. But now - I don’t think she ever wants to see me again.” the girl looked down on the bench as few drops of tears fell from her face.

“I know that’s not true, she loves you as well,” Chito said as she stared back at the girl. “I’ve seen you both so many times in my dreams and I know

that she loves you more than anything in the world. It was you both that inspired me to share my feelings for Yuuri when we were out there in the last layer fearing for our lives. I thought that we were going to die out there, but I am so happy I could tell her that I loved her all my life and even if we died in a short while, I was going to be happy that she knew that I loved her.” Chito said and blushed softly looking at the girl. “And then she gave me a ring and said she wanted to get married when we found our home - and the ring was just a grenade pin that she found somewhere on the bottom. But I think I lost it while we were out there in the snow. I wasn’t able to find it since then and I didn’t have the heart to tell Yuuri. I don’t want her to be mad at me.”

The girl smiled and replied, “Both our Yuuri’s are such gorgeous sweethearts. If I never met her in my life I don’t know what I would have done. When I was in high school, I was the shy and depressed introverted girl that sometimes people made fun of for no reason - just because I really enjoyed reading books and listening to music some people might find ‘weird’. I guess that even got worse when some of my classmates found out that I wasn’t interested in boys like them - but then I saw Yuuri one day. She was the popular girl that every boy presumably wanted to pursue in high school, but I presume she also had a secret like me. I guess I had a significant crush on her the first time I saw her, I knew I had to get out of my comfort zone and somehow speak to her one day. Then one day we met at a high school party just after we graduated and we started speaking, I was shy at first but... beer REALLY helps in these situations.” The girl chuckled and blushed before she kept talking about how she met Yuuri from this world.

“She was so fascinated with my knowledge of literature and music, and even my tendency to converse about all kinds of insignificant philosophical concepts. That summer break we started hanging out as friends almost every day. We went to shopping malls, to coffee shops, to the arcade, I even managed to make her come to a music festival with me, and one day after we went to the cinema, I blurted out of nowhere that I loved her - I was sooo flushed... and I felt that she will hate me forever and never speak to me after that - but she just took my hands and looked me in the eyes and said the same thing. She confessed to me that she had seen me back in high school and always wanted to talk to me but never had the chance and besides being the popular and pretty girl, she always felt shy. I don’t know what brought us together that night at the party, but could it have been destiny? We had our first kiss, sitting in the park after all the ‘Asahi’ beer we could drink.” The girl smiled still reminiscing to Chito about how she met Yuuri from her ‘world’. “I guess our love is so strong that -

somehow we relive it again in all kinds of alternate realities. I can't explain it at all - I just really hope you are still alive and that you both found happiness in that world in the future."

Chito carefully listened to the girl with a wide smile on her face, it felt impossible how destiny brought them together with Yuuri in this reality she shared with her. Maybe through some kind of special bond, she shared an extraordinary connection with her ancestor. Or maybe for Chito, this was all just a dream and she somehow imagined this girl, as some kind of happy coincidence and comfort that she would one day be able to find happiness and home with Yuuri while they were out there on the outside looking for a home. I guess when she found her home, she had to tell her all about it. "Do you think that It was destiny that I am with Yuuri in our reality?" Chito asked the girl looking at her. "Maybe our souls share a special bond and we live in this reality where the world was sadly destroyed by wars, machines and human greed. And we were both left to survive for so long and finally found our home."

The girl kept looking far in the distant horizon, holding the black box with the ring tightly in her hands. "I don't - know..." she replied. "I can't conceptualize time as one constant, but maybe we exist in all kinds of timelines, realities and possibly everything is on a loop since the existence of our universe. Maybe after my death, my soul would travel through all kinds of forms, different lives, and yet in your reality - somehow we share the same name, same appearance and even the same 'Yuuri'. It's unexplainable, but it makes me so happy - that we have been given another opportunity of life together, no matter how challenging it appears in your reality. I guess it shows - our connection is strong that we would exist even in the most difficult of circumstances, and our destinies would cross paths repeatedly." the girl smiled and placed the box back in her backpack. "I know that in my reality with her, I just - have to propose to her. I want her to accept it - and that she will be my side as long as I am alive. I love her."

"I am sure that she will gladly accept. I've wanted to give her a ring I found earlier but we were having so much fun listening to music and drinking beer I kinda forgot. It was the ring from the canned fish that we opened for lunch. For now, I think fish is her favorite food, but she has been eating so many different kinds of food I think she just loves all the food in the world..." Chito replied and kept looking at the sea "I pulled the ring out of the can and thought 'well this will be perfect for Yuuri'."

The girl turned back to Chito and smiled as well. “Well, its nothing different, Yuuri has been obsessed with Udon for sooo many years now.”

“What is Udon?” Chito asked, she almost felt like Yuuri asking all of these questions to the girl that lived in a completely different era.

“Well - udon is a sort of food that is made from wheat flour, you can put it into a soup and add all kinds of ingredients to make it delicious.” The girl replied. “Her family’s recipes are actually quite amazing. Yuuri was having trouble with her university studies back then and then she decided to drop out, after that she started working really long shifts at a supermarket and even part-time at a ‘Taiyaki’ stand until she finally got fed up with it. One day after her shift she just came home and all of a sudden blurted ‘I WILL OPEN A RESTAURANT!’. I just looked at her from my book and said ‘ok’, I was so lost into my book that I didn’t notice that her sister suddenly came over and they made plans about the restaurant almost all night and drank 2 liters of beer. They decided to open it in this stylish suburb in ‘Tokyo’ called ‘Kichijoji’ and their business went - HUGE! suddenly Yuuri was all kinds of cute wearing a chef uniform and making Udon with her sister, appearing on all kinds of social media, newsletters and even national television. I am so proud of her.”

“Well - of course! Yuuri makes food in your reality.” Chito laughed softly “I guess I have to look that recipe back home. You will probably see us struggle to prepare it again in your dreams.”

“Oh - “ the girl sighed and looked back at Chito with a sad expression. “The thing is - I read that after this dream that we might never see each other again. We never have been able to talk before but - I guess this is some kind of an ‘epilogue’ to our dreams. Maybe I guess - we both found what we wanted in our lives. You found a home and a happy life with Yuuri, and I went on an unforgettable journey with the one I decided that I want to spend the rest of my life with. I don’t know what life will bring next when we get home. I know that I will have to look for a job, and I am afraid of what I will do with my philosophy degree. I always wanted to teach or maybe I might start writing a novel, or a travel diary or write for music magazines - But I know that it will all be for nothing - everything in the future will be forgotten and meaningless...”

“Hey.” Chito replied “You know at our home up at the last layer, we have this thing called the ‘archive’. They told me it contains almost 72% of the information that was created back in the old centuries, and by connecting with

the rest of the city, even more, information is shared with us. So I don't think it's all for nothing. When we left the village from the bottom, I recorded our journey in a book, but then we had to burn it to keep warm. I plan to rewrite it again from memory and have it stored in the 'archive' so people in the future will know of my journey with Yuuri. I guess people in the old world created all this information for the future as well for the present, but they never knew that the world might be like that. However, most of what people created was stored and kept safe."

The girl listened with fascination and smiled widely. "I always imagined what would happen to the things we create in the future, to our music, art, literature, movies and almost everything people used to create. Will they ever be able to live on afterward? I couldn't imagine that the 'internet' would exist for a long time and would be able to store all our pieces of information on drives - eventually, everything crashes in life. There is so much wonderful music, movies, books, art in this world that I always thought that one day it would all be forgotten. It's almost unfair..."

"Well... I remembered that name you said... 'Asobi Seksu' from my dream." Chito replied "We looked it up with Yuuri and suddenly this wonderful girl's voice started singing something so beautiful, I never heard something like that in my entire life. It was so full of hope and happiness and the words were so beautiful. Their music survived and we heard so many other songs and kinds of music from the world. We were so touched by what the people in the old world created..."

"What? How do you know about 'Asobi Seksu' how?" with a surprised reaction she looked at Yuuri, suddenly tears started flooding her eyes again "What... How do you know them?" She was suddenly overwhelmed with an emotion of happiness and sadness that she started sobbing. Chito with confusion looked at her and was unsure what to say

"Why? What's wrong?"

"They... they are my favorite band ever... It just... hurts so much - I - I listened to them when I was feeling so down - I listened to them when everyone hated me and - felt the whole world wanted me to die - I listened to them when I almost overdosed on 'Prozac' and wanted to just disappear from this life - and then we listened to 'New Years' when Yuuri kissed me the first time - and then we listened to them whenever we were together and made love - they helped

me get through a lot and every time I listen to them - it reminds me of those beautiful eyes.” the girl sobbed even louder laying down on the bench. “I am so happy - that you were able to listen to them - I am so happy that their music lives on and everyone else’s in those realities - but.... how is all this possible? - I am just - so afraid that we will be forgotten and - I am so afraid that she will say ‘no’ - I can’t be alone anymore without her - I just can’t live without her by my side - I love her...”

Chito stared at the girl that just broke down and cried next to her, she was just so unsure what to say or do anymore. She felt the same way so many times in her life, suicidal thoughts seemed to be so frequent in every kind of reality. It only took her a split decision to use the explosive on the wall instead of themselves. Thinking about it, Chito never felt so ready to kill herself along with Yuuri and end their sufferings back then. She didn’t want her to suffer anymore because this reality was too cruel for such a pure soul like hers... But if she did, they wouldn’t have been alive now, their souls probably would have been lost again in the universe. Yet they found each other again beyond the wall at their new home and it felt just like heaven.

“Yuuri will never say no - not in your reality not in every other reality. Our destinies crossed paths in so many different realities, she loves you more than anything. I know that just like the ‘archive’ our love will live on as long as it can and even in every kind of future iterations of our world we will be together again.” the girl brushed her tears off and slowly composed herself as she looked back at Chito with a smile on her face. “When you give her your ring she will be the happiest girl in the world.”

“Thank you so much - I know what I will do tonight - and I will propose to her - and I will do all I can to make her the happiest girl in the whole wide world,” she replied with a wide smile sniffing softly... “But I am glad you both found joy in music - Music is one of our journeys in life. We always travel somewhere in life through hardships and difficulties, but we always keep our eyes back home and to everything that we created through life. I just have a feeling that next week - when we go home to Tokyo, we will be engaged and one day we will get married... and I just hope that we get to spend our lives together.” The girl replied smiling.

Just like Chito, she was also so full of life and happiness and she suffered through a lot of difficulties in life. She was determined to spend the rest of her life with the one she loved so much no matter what.

The rest of the ‘dream’ they spent laughing and reminiscing about their journeys. They each had a journey in life to go in their realities, and it never felt like the end no matter what it was. “Hey... did you notice that the sun never moved?”

“Oh yeah... I think time doesn’t move that fast when you are dreaming. I think I might be still sleeping on that bench - Ughhhh... I hope no one robs me in the meantime and steals my motorcycle. Then Yuuri’s wallet and passport will be gone again! ughhh...” The girl stood up from the bench and looked back at Chito scratching her head “Oh... so... umm... yeah - I guess this is goodbye... Oh! Wait! I always wanted to try one thing!” She raised her arm and jumped a few times in the air, cursing after a few tries.

“What are you doing?” Chito again looked at her with confusion as the girl jumped up and down cursing.

“Well...crap... ughhh... I read about in lucid dreams you can fly and I always wanted to try it again... but ughhh so much for flying in this one.” the girl pouted as she took her backpack and placed it on her back. “I only ever managed to do it once and it was for 3 seconds until Yuuri woke me up with her mumbling!”

Chito grinned as she kept looking at her, both of their eyes met and it still felt like she was looking at a mirror. The girl standing next to her was just a few years older than her but still looked the same as her. “I guess it’s - goodbye,” Chito replied with a smile. “I hope you both find happiness in life as well. After all that happened, I want to spend the rest of my life with Yuuri up at our ‘unit’ and I want to help as much as I can to rebuild our old world. Maybe in a different reality If I meet with Yuuri again, we will live in a much better world. I know that we have to fix the future that our ancestors ruined so much.”

“Thank you so much for everything...” the girl replied as she placed her helmet on her head and sat down on the motorbike. “I will never forget you.” she smiled and started the motorbike and drove away...

“But wait... isn’t she still dreaming?” Chito replied in confusion as she looked at the girl riding off on her motorcycle, she wasn’t going to get anywhere like this...

“Wait!!! what about that stone block behind me ...“

“Uhhh... Huh?” the girl abruptly woke up still laying down the bench. The day was almost over and the sea grew calmer. Looking down on her wrist to check the time, she suddenly panicked “Oh... crap! I fell asleep again! Hey other Chito, I gotta ru-” she looked around but the girl from her dream was nowhere to be found. “Huh - guess it was just another book fueled dream....” she looked back at the book and shoved it back in her backpack, still yawning and brushing her eyes.

“Shit! Hope no one robbed me!” Checking her backpack she carefully opened it, Yuuri’s wallet, passport and the black box with her father’s ring were neatly tucked in. “Phew.... crap! Our reservation! The restaurant! Yuuri will be so worried! ughhh...” she placed on her backpack and her helmet and started the motorbike driving a little bit in the distance before she stopped and turned around.

The bench and the wheat field were just behind her, it felt like she had another vivid dream where she talked to her friend from that other reality at this odd place. Maybe this was an epiphany that she didn’t have to take everything for granted in her life and enjoy it for what it is, she had to live in the present and enjoy these moments. For now, she had a huge decision to make, and that was to propose to the only person in the world that meant so much to her.

The girl never noticed that odd weird-shaped stone structure that stood just in the field behind the bench before. It was covered in all kinds of weird graffiti and some odd circular symbols, it even had some words written in an odd language that she couldn’t understand. She could swear at one point she heard the stone make some mysterious electrical noises but decided not to pay attention to it.

“Huh... I guess it’s just an odd-looking electrical substation.” she shrugged as she drove off in the distance.

• • •

“MmlmlmlmlmLMLmMlmlmmmpmpmlMLmlmlmlmlml”

“Uhhh... Huh?” Chito woke up in her bed to a weird but familiar sound underneath the blanket and her hand was wet again. “Ughhh... cmon Yuu... not again!”

Her hand was deep in Yuuri’s mouth again, she drooled all over it. Yuuri must have tried to eat her again in her dream. Pulling her hand out of her mouth she looked at it as it was drenched in Yuuri’s drool “eughh..” she exclaimed in disgust, wiping her hand from the side of the bed. With a sigh and a smile, she turned back to Yuuri who was sleeping next to her on their new comfortable bed. She kept mumbling again in her dream...

“Chii-chaaan, you are so wonderful and tastyyyyy I wanna eat you all oveerrr...mmmmmlmlmlmlmlmlml” she kept drooling with a wide smile on her face, as Chito blushed again and leaned gently kissing her cheek.

“I love you so much.” she gently whispered before she turned to her side of the bed.

She couldn’t sleep most of the night contemplating her dream. Was that girl in her dream real? She couldn’t have imagined all of the things the girl spoke of, and most of it she couldn’t understand everything the girl was saying. She was from a completely different reality or even century... no matter the similarities she was different than her. Of course, the girl grew up in a different ‘reality’ that wasn’t such a desolate place as this one.

“Oh wait...”

Chito thought to herself as she took the device that Yuuri gave to her as a gift from the side of the bed and turned it on. Just on the corner, there was a ‘search’ box that she pressed and typed the words “Greece” on it. Suddenly beautiful pictures of this country from the past showed up, showing beautiful picturesque beaches, old villages and all kinds of different foods, and people living their lives. She kept scrolling and reading all about this wonderful place, and other beautiful countries in Europe and the Balkans too. However, reading on she got to the part of the information that included the aftermath and the history after the World War.

The devastation was on a massive scale and all that was left behind was just rubble and destruction. Suddenly these beautiful beaches, the flora, and the fauna and even all the beautiful cities humans created and their history, art, and music were wiped clean from existence. All that was left was just like the city outside on a grander scale of destruction. Just - nothingness and an empty shell of a life that once was. Humans left their boot prints covered in repugnant filth all over the continent, leaving it uninhabitable for thousands of years.

Looking at the screen, Chito couldn't help but start crying again. No matter how much she looked at these digital pictures of how beautiful life was before, it would never be the same ever again. So much life that the planet has created in billions of years from its existence, ruined by its own creation called 'mankind'. Humans knew they had only one planet, yet they destroyed almost every part of the world they could, leaving only their useless creations behind.

With tears in her eyes, she turned to Yuuri who was sleeping tightly next to her and snuggled her gently. "I love you - so much - Yuu. I am sorry that we are - in this reality." she whispered and leaned down Yuuri's chest, listening to her gentle heartbeat until she fell asleep.

Chapter 11

Moon



“Arrrrghhhhhhhhh... I don’t think I can fix this Yuu!!!”

“Sorry.”

“How did you manage to drive the cart into a small rock?”

“Sorry.”

“Geeze... I shouldn’t have let you drive, Yuu!” Chito bent down in the front of their cart inspecting out the damage that Yuuri caused a few minutes ago. Carelessly Yuuri drove their cart into a small boulder that was on the side of the gravel road deep inside the forest. The chassis of the white cart was slightly bent inwards with some scratches from the collision. Nearby Yuuri laid down on the grass with her eyes closed mumbling a song she heard from Chito’s device. “Mmhhh Mmhhh Mmhhmmm...”

“We barely had the vehicle for one day and you managed to write ‘Just Marrod’ with industrial paint on the side, and drive the cart into a rock!” Chito pouted with an audible grumble, as Yuuri kept laying on the grass. “Well, you didn’t complain about my spelling. I am getting much better at writing and reading Chii-chan.” Yuuri responded and continued mumbling on.

“You wrote ‘Just Marrod’ instead of ‘Just Married’ you dummy!” Chito still mildly annoyed kept looking at Yuuri with her arms crossed. On the other hand, Yuuri appeared to be without a care in the world laying down on the grass. “But I have to admit, I am really proud that you finally started learning to read and write.”

Some time passed since they settled into their new house. Both of them were slowly getting used to living in the ‘unit’. Chito’s health was getting much better and with regular exercise, her hand improved as well. After they return from their honeymoon, Chito and Yuuri planned to start working and help out within the ‘unit’. Chito wanted to put grandfather’s engineering lessons to good use and help out working as a mechanic, and Yuuri had plans to learn to be a chef at one of the cafeterias.

When Yuuri discovered that she could prepare food all day, she almost immediately decided that she would learn to be the best chef ever together with Mieko’s husband, Kazuo. Both of them knew that they had to spend time apart from each other at their tasks, but at the end of their work they could always be

together and even spend their evenings with their friends and family. Chito and Yuuri still had a lot to learn, but they both wanted to help out the people and the home that saved their lives.

“Hey, Chii-chan, I really loved our party last night.” Yuuri smiled holding her hand up in the sky. The artificial sun rays illuminated the shape of the wedding ring that Chito placed on her ring finger, just the day before during their ceremony. Finally, after some time passed since their rescue, they officiated their marriage with a big party, and earlier in the day their new family sent them out on their honeymoon. Both Chito and Yuuri had similar wedding rings that they ‘synthesized’ from recycled materials, with a small synthetic diamond held in place in the middle.

“The ring looks sooo beautiful!” Yuuri grinned as she kept checking it out.

“I know, I love mine as well!” Chito smiled as well looking at her ring, she was careful not to lose this one as well. Sadly she never was able to find the grenade pin that Yuuri gave to her the first day after they reached the last layer, and the one they would always remember. Sadly the next day was the most traumatic day of their lives. “But I hope you get to keep my ‘engagement’ ring Yuu. I know it’s not as beautiful as the ones we got for our wedding.” Chito replied as she still kept trying to fix the bend on their new vehicle with no luck.

“Chii-chan, don’t say that. To me, it’s the most beautiful ring ever! Look, I made a necklace just a few days ago, to keep it near my heart.” Yuuri got up from the grass and walked over to Chito showing her the necklace with the ‘ring’ that she gave to her many months ago. The ‘ring’ was a small can opener that Chito pulled out from the first time they had fish in their new home, she thought it was a cute ‘ring’ that she wanted to give to her. Ever since the day from the outside, Chito wanted to give Yuuri a ring when they found their home and knowing that Yuuri loved to eat fish she felt it was the perfect gift for her.

“Ahh... that’s so cute!” Chito replied looking at her necklace, she still had her fingers around the chassis of the vehicle trying to shape it into place with no success... “I feel so sad that I lost the grenade pin Yuu. I could have worn it on a necklace as well. I’m so sorry - “

“Don’t worry about it Chii-chan! Better to lose the grenade pin instead of you. I am sure it will turn up somewhere, or I can always go down, find a grenade and pull another one from it - “

“NOOO!” Chito shouted and ran over to Yuuri “It’s fine... it’s fine... I won’t let you go out there ever again!” Chito hugged her tight and leaned her head down on Yuuri’s arm.

“Chii-chan, I was kidding! Are you still afraid to go out there? I know I said we should go out to the wall to see where they found us, but you never wanted to go out again. You said you were terrified of that idea.” Yuuri replied as Chito held on her tightly. “I know I know - I guess I am still scared of that idea - but we can go out again someday. I don’t mind.”

“Sooo... Chii-chan. Are we gonna go to the lake or stand here in the middle of the forest hugging each other?” Yuuri asked her and chuckled, as Chito broke from the hug and gently blushed

“Sure. But I am never letting you drive again Yuu!”

Walking back to the vehicle, Chito sat in the driver seat as Yuuri sat next to her. With a push of a button, she turned the electric motor on. The vehicle looked something like an oversized old century ‘golf’ cart that could operate on electricity. The citizens of the ‘unit’ used these carts frequently inside to get from one point to another, and they were able to transport almost anything of use with them. Any vehicle from the old era that used gas or any kind of pollutants weren’t allowed inside and could only be used for exploration on the outer layers, they were more durable than the electric vehicles and even if oil was scarce on the outside, they could still find some on the bottom layers and salvage all they could, with the right materials they could even synthesize it. The back of the cart included a storage container that Chito and Yuuri filled up with clothes, camping equipment, and food. They decided to spend their honeymoon camping out at the artificial lake and explore the forest for a few days.

“Chii-chan!” Yuuri settled her prosthetic leg right in front of Chito’s view on the dashboard of the cart as Chito drove on. “I never showed you, but look!” she smiled showing to her how she could wiggle her toes on the prosthetic leg, as Chito kept concentrated on driving towards the lake. “Reo said it would take a long time but look! It’s soo easy... I can finally wiggle my toes!” she kept wiggling her toes right in front of her with a wide smile on her face. Her new leg was made from synthetic skin and was connected with electronic nodes surgically implanted in her stump. The leg was fully functional, waterproof, and looked precisely like the one she lost from frostbite. If it wasn’t for the slight mechanical noises it made when she moved her foot and toes, one would think

her leg was genuine. In a short time after her surgery, she made a fast recovery and could walk without her cane or support from Chito.

“Yuu, that’s so amazing. But do you want me to crash into another boulder looking at your cute toes?” Chito replied concentrated on the gravel road that led to the lake. It was a short one-hour drive from the community, but it almost took them the whole day as they stopped to check out the sights in the forest. Besides a few different kinds of insects and birds, they still haven’t seen any wild forest animals cross their path yet. They lived deeper in the forests away from the humans.

“Chii-chan, does this vehicle kinda remind you of our ‘Kettenkrad’?” Yuuri asked as she moved her leg away from the dashboard.

“Yeah... It kinda does, but the ‘Kettenkrad’ was an old military vehicle and built to withstand harsh terrain. This one is civilian and we managed to damage already!” Chito pouted again driving onwards. She wasn’t used to driving a wheel before, but it felt easier than the motorbike handles. There wasn’t much philosophy to driving these types of electric carts, just press a button to turn on the electric engine, press the forward pedal with your right leg and use the breaks with your left leg. They were significantly slower than the vehicles on the outside. “So, do we need fuel to drive this thing Chii-chan?”

“No. It drives completely on electricity. Toshi told me that you can drive it for 5 months on a single charge. Unlike small devices, this one has to be charged as it uses more electricity I think.” Chito replied, still she kept focused on the road ahead. Yuuri kept looking around the tree lines as they spread across the whole range. “I wish we had a vehicle like this one outside, Chii-chan. It would have saved us the trouble of looking for fuel.”

“Yeah, I know.” Chito replied “But we couldn’t find any. They probably scrapped most of them, because these electric devices were easily fried out there, by something called EMP bombs. Still, the ‘Kettenkrad’ was so much fun to drive and much more reliable.” Driving onwards the ‘artificial’ weather was quite warm with a gentle wind whooshing through the trees. They never knew how forests looked like in the old centuries, but this felt like the closest thing that remained in the world. If the traveler’s plan succeeded than maybe in a thousand years he would be able to repopulate the planet with trees and animals. It hoped for a better future for what’s left of humanity and it’s living beings.

As they drove on, Yuuri had her hands on Chito's black device and kept trying to read one of the books from Chito's library. Besides reading books, they found out that the device could play music, so they kept listening to all kinds of genres and even whole discographies by musicians and bands from the old centuries any chance they could. Both Chito and Yuuri found something they had in common, which was listening to all kinds of distinctive music the world previously had to offer.

"Chii-chan." Yuuri kept flipping through the pages of a book on the device "I've been practicing my reading with this book. It's fascinating that those girls in that story resemble our journey. I've never even heard about the place called Germany, Spain or Poland before this book, and yet the girls went on really interesting journies and described how it was to live back then."

"Oh - I picked that up after that strange dream I had because I wanted to read how life was back then. I wonder if that girl is still alive in that reality. I wish I could dream about her again, but I never did again." Chito responded with a sad sigh. "I talked with the 'traveler' about this encounter and it was perplexed as well. It told me that the stone we saw the day we arrived up here, was used to power their telepathic and mind hive ability, they built them in secret for thousands of years to keep in contact with the other 'Shimeji' around the planet and the nearest one was the one we saw when we arrived up here. It told me that some people in history could absorb its power and that the girl I saw in my dream could just have been some kind of 'metempsychosis' of our descendants." Chito replied as she kept her leg on the pedal, driving carefully through the forest.

"That's really fascinating Chii-chan." Yuuri replied, and looking around she was still absorbed by the beauty of the forest. "I never had a dream like that, but then, usually my dreams are all about food and about you sometimes..." she blushed trailing her hand through her hair.

"Well, the traveler told me that in the records, not many people in history were able to have this kind of dream. But in a way, it makes me happy that maybe we live in another reality, it's really crazy when you think about it. The dream was such a strange experience, but we've seen so much in this world that nothing seems unusual to me anymore. The traveler told me that such a coincidence to occur was so uncommon or as he called it 'the glitch in the simulation'." Chito replied as she kept driving the cart carefully through the gravel road.

“Chii-chan, the ‘traveler’ it’s such a strange artificial intelligence, unlike the one at the elevator below. I wonder why it never told us about the ‘unit’ or the ‘AI’ residing here.” Yuuri wondered as she kept looking around the forest. “The ‘AI’ on the ground below lost contact for hundreds of years and I guess the other outsiders or citizens of the unit never had contact with it in recent times. The city is so big that I guess you can find so many different entrances and access points to reach the top of the world. I wish we knew about it before so we could have found an elevator that reached the top of the world. I still wonder why ‘grandpa’ never told us from the start about it. I guess I share the same quirks as him and I can be reserved with others at times, I too was so afraid what you would have thought about losing your leg back then.” Chito replied back as Yuuri listened in.

“Chii-chan, I would never hate you and it happened there is no going back in time. If we waited for a day we would have died out there and Mieko-chan told me that the blizzard raged on for days after.” Yuuri spoke back and turned to look at her “But I am happy that after all that we’ve been through, we are also able to live happily again together. Oh, and should I learn to make that thing you told me... ummm what was it called?” Yuuri asked as Chito turned to look at her and said “I think you mean udon noodles. We can probably make them ourselves with instructional videos. It should be easy and tasty I think.”

Driving on carefully through the road, the ‘artificial’ sun was still high up above in the sky. It was such a beautiful day to drive and hike around in the forest, yet they were alone on this path. It was a workday and the rest of the citizens had other tasks to do. Besides a few ‘forest’ robots they haven’t seen anyone else on the road. The ‘forest’ robot tasks were there to keep maintaining the trees, plants and the needs of the animals in the forest and they varied in sizes. From small robots to large ones just like the one they destroyed back at the fish factory. They operated within the ‘unit’ constantly without pause.

“Hey, Chii-chan!” Yuuri exclaimed as she turned to face her. “Mieko’s belly was soooo big! Remember?”

“Well, of course, her belly was big because she was pregnant Yuu.” Chito replied with a smile, she felt happy that life was able to flourish in this world and that people were able to have a family even up here too. She felt their lives were so much happier up here than on the bottom layers, and yet people still had families down there too. If only most of them knew about the ‘unit’ maybe they could have made the journey up there too.

“Yesss, her baby is sooo cute!” Yuuri replied still smiling. “We should be pregnant one day too, Chii-chan.”

Chito’s face quickly turned red at Yuuri’s idea. “Errr... Well... you know... it doesn’t really... work... with two girls... to get pregnant... you know... without going the artificial way...” she replied with an embarrassed tone as she almost hit another boulder by mistake but quickly avoided it. “But we can always adopt an orphan... if you want... further in our life. Many children out there live without a family, that’s what Mieko told me.”

“What’s to adopt Chii-chan?” Yuuri asked her back, as Chito kept driving forward. “Well... it’s when you take care of a child who has no home or family. In a way, grandpa adopted us on the bottom after we both lost our parents. We were both orphans Yuu, and Toshi told me that his relative ‘Daishi’ adopted grandpa and my father when they found them on the outside. He was a mechanic and a teacher as well, but he passed away a long time ago.”

“Chii-chan... Do you think we will be good mothers?”

“The best Yuu!” Chito replied proudly and smiled, however, Yuuri had even more troublesome questions to ask her.

“But Chii-chan, why can’t two girls get pregnant with each other?”

Chito unexpectedly hit the brakes, both of them almost flew away from the cart together with their stuff. “Errrrrrr.....” Chito tried to answer something but she was still dumbstruck and embarrassed by Yuuri’s question. “I mean errr.....” she mumbled and turned completely red again.

Chito read in an embarrassing informational book about biology how it all worked and even saw a romantical movie with two girls when Yuuri was sleeping. But for girl couples, it was completely different than for a man and a woman. “I mean... errr... maybe when you learn to read properly and I’ll show you this book I read a month ago why it doesn’t work Yuu...”

They were married but Chito was still too embarrassed to talk about that stuff with her. Eventually, Chito had to talk to Yuuri one day how the creation of life was carried out, it was still a difficult and mysterious topic for her. “But Chii-chan! How did Mieko get pregnant? Should I ask her if she can tell me?”

“WHAAA????” Chito with an inaudible scream and a shocked expression looked at her simple-minded wife. “NO! NEVER! NEVER ASK HER THAT! NEVER!” she was completely red-faced and from embarrassment, she lay down in front of the wheel. Where did these questions about pregnancy, and the creation of life suddenly come from she absolutely had no idea?

“Chii-chan... Chii-chan... fine I won’t ask her. I was just curious... but you can show me that book one day so I can read how it all works.” Yuuri responded but Chito could almost melt from embarrassment and frustration as she just remembered something that they once talked about honeymoons.

“Oh my goodness... I just remembered! I told you something on the outside about married couples ‘consummating’ their marriage on their honeymoon... I hope you didn’t say something like that to anyone... Yuu?” she turned to face Yuuri with an even more frightening expression as she seemed to be recalling something.

“Oh - Chii-chan...” Yuuri recalled an interesting discussion she had just a few days ago with Mieko while they were hanging out in the park. “I just recalled, I was talking about our wedding and our honeymoon to Mieko while you were feeding the ducks a few days. I couldn’t understand why she got so speechless and flustered. I told her that we planned to ‘consummate’ our marriage with lots of fish, food and - “

“YOU DID WHAAAAAAAAAAAAAT?” Chito screamed so loudly that several birds from the trees nearby flew away in panic. Completely embarrassed and frustrated she kept groaning as she lay down on the wheel in the middle of nowhere. “WHY?” she kept groaning and groaning, Yuuri was completely confused and kept looking at her.

“Just this morning she looked at me completely flustered and gave me her thumbs up. I had no idea why she did that, but now - AARRGHHHHHHH-HHHhhhhhh WHY DID YOU SAY THAT TO HER? - DUMMY!!! FOOL!!! IDIOT!!!”

“But you said that couples eat a lot of food when they get married on their honeymoon Chii-chan...” Yuuri replied as she looked at her groaning wife, Chito was almost ready to hang herself from embarrassment. “I knoooww... but to ‘consummate’... it doesn’t mean that... it’s completely different... it has to do with ‘that’ feeling you also get when we take a bath together but... they also call

it making love... on that movie that two girls did it...kinda..." she was just too embarrassed to even continue speaking anymore. Yuuri was still confused as she kept looking at her, and had even more questions.

"But Chii-chan, how do girls make love?"

Chito groaned even louder from frustration as she got off the vehicle and ran away to the nearest tree and hid behind it. She was completely embarrassed and flustered. Yuuri felt like this was just another *déjà vu* since that time they took a bath together the first time, and many afterward in their home until Chito got more comfortable being close to her naked in the bath. She kept looking at Chito still confused as her audible groans became even louder behind the tree.

"Chii-chan! What do girls do when they get 'that' feeling when they are in a bath together?" Yuuri asked her loudly completely oblivious.

The rest of the trip to the lake both of the girls kept quiet and were completely red-faced as Chito finally got the courage to explain to Yuuri the questions that she kept asking her.

"But Chii-cha-"

"Shhhh..."

"Chii-c -"

"SHUSHH!!! YUU - !!!"

• • •

After some time passed, they finally reached the lake as Chito parked the vehicle close to the lake. The artificial lake was quite large and picturesque with a beautiful waterfall falling from one of the cliffs, it was even larger than they had imagined at first. About 20 minutes hike from the lake, there was another pillar that was used as structural support and an access point to get to the top level of the giant structure. Robots and even humans use these pillars to get to any part of the 'unit' in case of emergencies or maintenance. Just close to the lake the whole area was crowded with beautiful blooming sakura trees,

sprouting beautiful rose petals that filled up the whole field with all varieties of expressive colors.

“CHII-CHAN! WOW!” Yuuri exclaimed with a wide smile on her face as she kept looking around. This was unlike she had seen anything in her entire life. It was one of the most beautiful sights they both had seen in the world. “What are those trees called?”

“It’s called a sakura tree Yuu.” Chito replied as she got off the vehicle to check out the horizon. “They used to bloom in springtime, but these were genetically altered many years ago to bloom most of the time, to help with pollination as well too. Reo told me that he used to come here with grandpa and his mother a lot of times and have a picnic. It’s beautiful isn’t it?” Chito replied as Yuuri kept laughing and skipping around in the field before she fell on the grass giggling loudly.

“It’s so beautiful - it’s just like the lake from my dream! We finally reached it Chii-chan!”

Chito was filled with joy every time she saw Yuuri so happy, as she looked at her skipping around the field. “Yes! We did Yuu.” she responded before she moved to the back of the vehicle. “Hey, come help me set up the camp!” Chito called her over to the back of the cart as she opened the storage container. Yuuri ran over to her still giggling and helped her take everything out and place it down on the ground.

“Right... we need to set up the tent first, and then the rest of the camp.” Chito stated as Yuuri took the tent in her hands. “Umm... how do you set the tent up?” She looked at the large peculiar circular-shaped object in her hand, wondering how it works.

“I think you have to throw it and it will open but first -”

“On it!” Yuuri exclaimed as she tossed it with all her might like a frisbee across the horizon, it drifted over into the tree line at the edge of the forest, almost out of sight.

“ - First you have to open it - arrrghhhh.” Chito groaned again as she held her hand to her face unable to understand why Yuuri just did that “That was our only tent!”

“Sorry, Chii-chan... I’ll go get it!” Yuuri replied still with a smile on her face as she skipped over to the tree line just where she tossed the tent.

“Hmm... where did I throw it?” Yuuri kept wondering where she threw the tent at and kept looking around until she found it laying down on the ground just close to the edge of the forest. After she bent down to grab the tent, looking up she saw several pairs of curious eyes looking back at her.

“Umm..... hello?” Carefully stepping back, suddenly she felt afraid of the strange creatures just at the beginning of the forest. Turning around she yelled back at Chito “Errr... Chii-chan!!!”

“What’s wrong Yuu?”

“Come here! QUICK!!!”

Chito dropped most of the stuff she was carrying for their camp and ran over to Yuuri fearing if she was in danger again. Coming closer to her she saw her staring at something in the woods. “What? What’s wrong?” Chito asked her alarmed.

“What are those?” Yuuri pointed towards the odd creatures in the forest, she hasn’t seen anything like that before in her life. The creatures were standing just close by curiously staring at the girls.

“Where?” Chito asked as she looked where Yuuri pointed. “Oh... don’t worry Yuu - these are called deer.” she smiled trying to calm Yuuri down. “They are not dangerous don’t worry.”

“Wow! Are they alive?” Yuuri asked as she kept looking at the curious herd of deers that came over to investigate them. “Yes Yuu, they are wild animals. I told you I’ve seen them once in my dreams with that girl as well. They live in the forest in large numbers and are quite calm.”

The herd kept looking at them with curious eyes. The deer were in all different sizes, and a group of ten came to inspect the girls carefully from inside the forest. “Are the little one’s children?” Yuuri asked as she walked back cautiously, she was still a bit scared of them. “Yes, they are a large family. Mieko told me that some of the animals in the ‘unit’ move in herds as a large family. I think we can pet them as well, they are supposed to be friendly.” she smiled.

One of the deer broke from the herd and curiously approached the girls. “Don’t be scared just reach out your hand and you can pet it.” Chito smiled as she gently took Yuuri’s arm and moved it towards the deer.

The deer smelled her hand and leaned its head down as Yuuri placed it to its soft head. “Eeee... It’s so cute and soft... almost like Nuko.” Yuuri grinned as she gently stroked the deer’s head. Chito giggled softly and also reached out her hand and gently placed it on the deer’s body. The deer seemed to enjoy being caressed by humans.

Over the years the animals that remained alive and safe from extinction have learned to get closer to humans without fear, they could almost be domesticated but they were determined to live in the forest without a care in the world. Robots or other humans tended to their care, but usually, they just let this ‘artificial’ nature take its own path. Even the food chain was still active among the animal kingdom in the ‘unit’. “Wow! Chii-chan! It’s so cute!” Yuuri exclaimed chuckling softly with her eyes closed, still gently caressing the animal. “But can we eat it?”

Cautiously the deer stepped back as it had enough of being caressed for the day. Turning around it returned back to the herd. “Pff... your constant hunger scared it Yuu.” Chito replied as she looked at the herd move away from their vision deep in the forest. “I don’t think we are allowed to hunt deer yet, but only when their numbers get too high. Their meat is called venison and I heard it’s quite tasty.”

“Oh, why is that Yuu?”

Yuuri asked before Chito replied “Well... it’s something called population control. Once their population grows it could be damaging to the ecosystem of the ‘unit’ and people or even robots can hunt them for food. It’s only when the artificial intelligence gives the green light to hunt wild animals that they are allowed to do, else you would be hunted back by the robots and tranquilized with a dart. I heard that you could even be jailed or exiled from the unit for hunting forbidden animals. We should be careful Yuu, I don’t want us to be exiled like grandpa.”

“Chii-chan, ‘population control’. Is that what humans did to the world outside? Did the humans damage the ecosystem and then they started killing each other off to help stabilize it?” Yuuri asked her back. “Aren’t animals also alive

and share emotions just like us? Why do they hunt them? They are so cute.”

“I guess it’s just the way of life Yuu. Sometimes the stronger kill the weak for food and their population grows to the point that the weak go extinct. It’s the same case with humans. Once there were too many humans to sustain the world, and suddenly the ecosystem of this planet collapsed. The resources on this planet weren’t able to sustain every single human that was alive, so I guess they took to drastic measures, afterward it takes years and years for the resources to grow stable. It’s the same in the animal kingdom, once the population grows in size then the ecosystem isn’t able to sustain and the resources for the other animals could be scarce.” Chito replied still looking in the direction where the herd moved on. “That’s just the mysterious way of life Yuu. Maybe the unit’s ecosystem might collapse one day from overpopulation so that is why we have to be careful and protect this world from the outside.”

“Chii-chan, is that why we are allowed to only take two fishies from this lake?” Yuuri asked as she turned to look at her. “I guess so. Two fish per day at this lake, else their numbers might go extinct in the lake if everyone in the unit started eating the fish here instead of the farms.”

“So.. let’s go catch some lake fishies Chii-chan, I am hungry!” Yuuri smiled as she ran back to the lake. “Wait... Yuu! we have to set up the camp first.”

• • •

After the girls set up their camp, Yuuri took off her sandals and went in the water to try to catch a fish with her bare hands, but she didn’t know this was really a difficult way to catch fish.

“Here fishy, fishy!” Yuuri kept splashing in the water looking at the few fishes that swam along in the deep. Suddenly she jumped in the water trying to catch one without luck and splashed in the water. Her clothes were completely soaked as she got out of the water. Chito couldn’t help herself but laugh as she kept looking at her futile attempt to catch a fish.

“You will never catch a fish like that, we have to use a fishing rod!” Chito took a fishing rod out from her backpack and with a press of a button, the rod extended to about 2 meters. “Oooh...” Yuuri got out of the water completely

soaked looking at the device that Chito just pulled out of her backpack. “What is that?”

“It’s called a fishing rod, it’s how people in the old century and even now catch fish, but I heard that it’s adjusted with some kind of technology so it’s easier to catch fish. I guess you throw the lure into the water and then wait for a fish to bite it.” Chito replied as she inspected the rod.

“Oooh... can I try?” Yuuri asked as Chito nodded and handed the fishing rod over to her. Yuuri positioned it like a javelin and was ready to throw it in the lake.

“WAAIT!” Chito yelled at her just as she almost threw the rod in the lake. “That’s not how you throw it Yuu. Here - “ she gently took her by the hands and with a swift motion threw the lure in the water. “See? Just the lure has to be in the water, not the whole thing. You won’t be able to catch a fish otherwise.”

“OOOO...” Yuuri exclaimed again as she held the fishing rod tightly in her hands with Chito. “ - What do we do now?”

“Well... I think you press this button to turn the lure on and then you wait until the fish bites it.” Chito replied as she pressed the button. The lure started emitting an odd sound and vibration in the water.

“And then?” Yuuri asked again. “And then you have to pull out the fish from the water when it bites on the lure. Stand here I’ll go prepare for dinner.”

After a few minutes of patiently waiting and mumbling, one unfortunate fish bit the lure and started pulling on the rod. “Chii-chan Look!” Yuuri exclaimed Chito who was closeby sitting on a rug and preparing their dinner. “It’s pulling on the rod. What do I do?”

“Just press and hold one of the buttons to reel it in and pull upwards!” Chito answered as she placed a hot plate she brought along on their journey on the picnic table, along with several ingredients.

“What this one?” Yuuri pressed another button just close to where she held the rod with both her hands. But with the combination of pulling and reeling, the fish hopped right out of the water and as it unhooked, it flew right into Chito slapping her in the face.

“EEEEEEEEEEH???....” Chito let out a shriek of surprise as she didn’t expect a fish to come flying right into her. Yuuri standing close with the rod in her hands and still soaked looked at Chito who was struggling with the fish and then burst into laughter.

“AHAHAHA CHII-CHAAAN! You said there were no flying fish! AHA-HAHHAHA!”

Chito kept struggling to place the fish in the fridge and turned to face Yuuri with an angry expression on her face. “HOW ABOUT I SHOW YOU A FLYING DUMMY!” she jumped from the camping chair and started chasing Yuuri. “I’LL THROW YOU IN THE LAKE YUURI!”

Yuuri unable to compose herself from laughing so hard, tried galloping away from her. “Chii - wait! Another one might fly over so you can catch it! HAHAHA!” but from all that laughter she didn’t notice that Chito was actually gaining speed on her like an angry small cheetah. Grabbing her with a swift motion she swung Yuuri around back in the lake.

With a big splash, Yuuri found herself soaked again sitting in the lake. Chito just stood above her looking down on her and unable to control herself she burst from laughter. She completely forgot what she was angry about. “I told you I will show you a flying dummy! HAHAHAHA!” She didn’t notice that Yuuri with a smirk on her face got out of the lake exclaiming “I AM A LAKE MONSTER!” and pulled Chito in as well. With another big splash, both of them found themselves completely soaked in the lake, laughing and splashing each other with water.

After they changed into their swimsuits and hanged up their clothes to dry, Chito took the fishing rod where Yuuri dropped it to catch another fish for their dinner. Yuuri seemed to have still been a recipe for disaster with everything she touched.

• • •

“Chii-chan! This smells so tasty!” Yuuri impatiently kept waiting and drooling as she watched Chito prepare their dinner on the hot plate she brought on their journey. Filled with an assortment of vegetables and the two fish they

managed to catch from the lake, dinner was almost ready. “Mmm... smells better than the canned fish.” Yuuri closed her eyes and with a delighted look on her face kept drooling on the table.

“But why can’t we cook them on fire?”

“As I remember fire is not allowed in the forest and if we start a fire the sprinklers will just turn on soaking the campground. You don’t want the rest of our things soaked Yuu?” Chito replied as she kept prodding the fish with her chopsticks to see if it’s ready. The wonderful smell of grilled fish and vegetables fills up the air as it sizzled on the hot plate.

“Mmmpphhh... I really wanna eat the fishy!” Yuuri continued giggling and drooling on as Chito turned to scour her bag for a plate and chopsticks. “Hold on, let me get a plate. I think it’s ready.” Carefully she placed Yuuri’s portion on a plate and handed it over to her, and scooped some rice that she prepared at home from one of the food containers.

“What did you bring for drinking? We can’t drink the lake I think.” Yuuri asked as she kept drooling over the steaming plate.

“Ohh... let me see. I have water, beer, and this thing...” Chito opened the small refrigerator and pulled out a dark bottle that they got as a gift the night before. “Its called red wine, I don’t understand what ‘Merlot’ means, it is written on the bottle.”

“What’s red wine?” Yuuri asked as Chito opened the bottle and took two peculiar shaped glasses that they got as a gift as well.

“Huh... I guess after all this time here we never tried this drink too... I was told that it’s an alcoholic drink made from fermented grapes. The couple that gifted it to us told me they produce it from their own vineyard and told us to drink from these glasses as it enriches the taste. Do you wanna try?”

“Of course Chii-chan.” Chito poured the wine in the glasses and handed a glass to Yuuri. Looking at the red liquid through the glass, they were curious to try and see how it tastes like.

“Oooh... it’s strong. It’s nothing like beer, its so much fruity.” Yuuri sipped on the glass and smiled as it made her ticklish and warm all over. “Mmm...

yes...” Chito tried a sip as well “It’s so tasty, but we have to be careful. It’s stronger than beer.”

“But yes FISHY TIME!” Yuuri exclaimed with her hands up in the air bursting from happiness.

• • •

“Chii-chaan! Lake fish is the tastiest thing ever!” Yuuri replied laying down on the rug, her belly satisfied with the tasty meal she just had. “Of course it’s tasty, it’s fresh fish Yuu-chan.” Chito cleaned out their empty plates from the water in the lake and poured another glass of wine for both of them. Chito was careful as to not get drunk again but it seemed like Yuuri could absorb much more alcohol than her without a problem. The warm sun was still high up in the sky ready for the evening.

“Chii-chan do you want to go swimming?” Yuuri asked as she got up from the rug and stretched “I’ve wanted to go swimming since we arrived here.”

“Sure, I brought out this thing called a floater that I can inflate so I don’t drown again.” Chito scoured through her backpack and pulled the floater out. “I need to inflate it though.” She turned to look at Yuuri but again found herself red-faced as she pulled out her swimsuit and stood naked at the edge of the lake. She had nothing else but just her necklace and her ring on.

“Errr.... you do realize its called a swimsuit for a reason Yuu! But you just want any kind of excuse to get naked!”

“Chii-chan there is no one here just us two. Cmon let’s go swimming!” Yuuri replied as she ran into the lake and jumped “NYUUUU!” she yelled and with a big splash found herself in the water “Eeeee... it’s kinda cold, it’s just like swimming in that water tank but it’s much different. This is so much more fun!”

“One second.” Chito finished inflating the floater and placed it around herself. It was a yellow floater she found somewhere in the program of the ‘synthesizer’ that said it could help with floating and she wanted to try it out. Slowly she moved into the lake accumulating to the cold water.

“Chii-chan, you should get naked too!” Yuuri giggled as she stared at her blushing softly, still swimming around in the lake.

“Nooo! Someone might come and see us!” she responded carefully floating along the surface of the water closer to Yuuri. “Brrrr... so cold.” Chito slightly shivered as Yuuri swam close to her and gently grabbed the floater. “You look so cute with that thing around you Chii-chan.” she smiled bumping her nose with hers.

Chito blushed again as Yuuri got closer to her in the water. “You really can’t resist being naked you silly girl!” she chuckled softly looking at her eyes. Yuuri gently reached her head closer to her and placed a peck on Chito’s lips still holding on the floater. “Let’s go check out the waterfall... I’ll pull you along.” Yuuri smiled as she held on the floater and swam to the waterfall.

“Oooh... it’s like taking a cold shower!” Yuuri replied as the water gently splashed over their heads. Chito with a smile kept floating next to her enjoying herself “But still, its kinda cold.” she replied softly shivering.

“It’s not so bad, it’s warmer than the water on the outside.” Yuuri responded as she peeked to see what was just behind the waterfall, “Oooh Chii-chan, look a cave.” just behind the waterfall there was a cave that Yuuri discovered and pulled Chito along with her inside. The gentle splashing sound of the waterfall felt so comfortable and calm inside the cave.

“I wonder, how did they build this cave Chii-chan?”

“I think through a process called ‘algorithmic terraforming’, they told me that the whole process was an experiment to create landscapes like this on other planets as well. But yeah, it does look so wonderful.” Chito replied looking around inside the cave, she could feel her feet touching the rocks just below her. Yuuri got out of the water and sat down in the rocky interior checking out the small cave. “Do you want to live here the rest of our lives Chii-chan? We don’t have to wear any clothes and we can eat fishies almost every day!”

Chito kept blushing as she looked at Yuuri being so carefree with her nudity. “Well... I prefer our house its so much more comfortable Yuu, and I know you can’t get out of the kotatsu!” she replied as she got out of the water to check out the cave. “Besides we can’t grow any food inside the cave.”

“I know but still it’s so cozy and cute.” Yuuri chuckled as she kept looking around the interior of the cave. “Chii-chan, cmon take off your swimsuit. I don’t think anyone can see us here!” Chito kept blushing and sat down beside Yuuri

looking around the cave. “And if someone comes, I’ll protect Chii-chan from the eyes of the other people!!!”

“Pff... fine... you win.” she finally gave in and carefully took out her swimsuit placing it on the rocks beside her. She found herself nude again sitting close to Yuuri “Happy?” she replied and blushed as they looked at each other.

“Hihi... it’s just like taking a bath at home Chii-chan. You shouldn’t be so embarrassed.” Yuuri replied as she jumped again in the cold water inside the cave swimming around.

“But we have to wear swimsuit around other people Yuu, and when we go to the pool as well... it’s just... kinda embarrassing you know...” Chito replied still sitting on the cold ground of the cave, covering herself with her legs in the water.

“Chii-chan, cmon I’ll show you how to swim!” Yuuri exclaimed as she grabbed her by the leg and gently pulled Chito back in the water. “Wait wait... I’ll drown again.”

“No! You won’t I’ll hold you tight!” Yuuri replied as she gently brought her along to the deeper side of the cave. “Ok, I’ll hold you and you start gently swaying your legs. That is how you keep afloat.” Chito was still afraid but she did exactly as Yuuri told her and could feel she was staying afloat. “This is wonderful!” Chito replied as she swayed her legs around.

“You have to sway your arms like this too!” Yuuri replied gesturing a swaying motion to her as Chito repeated after her. “I will teach you how to swim but, please remember this if you ever find yourself alone in deep water.” Yuuri replied, but she seemed to have been worried about something that happened in the past as she looked at Chito who kept practicing staying afloat. “Yuu, I wish I knew this back at the water tank. I wouldn’t have sunk in the deep.”

“Chii-chan I kept telling you how to do it but you almost drowned, you really scared me back then because it was my fault too!” Yuuri replied swimming close to her and gently she clutched her closer looking deeply in her eyes. “What if I lost you back then down in that pool?”

“Well, you came to my rescue, Yuu!” Chito replied and chuckled but Yuuri still had a serious look in her eyes. “I know, but we’ve been close to death so

many times now... I was really afraid each time Chii-chan. I was really afraid of losing you..." Yuuri replied and snuggled close to her.

Chito's heart started pounding even faster and kept blushing as her bare body was so close to Yuuri's in the water. Every time they took a bath, they both shared these feelings for each other but it still felt embarrassing to do anything about it. Now that they were older, she felt that she didn't want anything more in the world but to show her just how much she loved her. "We are safe here, but if we ever go out again promise me we will stay safe and be more careful. After all that we've been through, I don't want to ever lose you Chii-chan."

"Well, that's easy I am never going out there ever again!" Chito replied still in her embrace. She was never so close naked to her before and suddenly it felt so peaceful and pleasant, but she didn't care about being embarrassed anymore. She felt like her soul connected with Yuuri's. "Chii-chan, that's ok but we will stay safe if we ever go out again. Please promise me?" Yuuri replied and smiled looking back at her, both of them gently floated back to the shallow area inside the cave still embraced.

"I - promise - Yuu - "

Chito closed her eyes and gently placed her lips to Yuuri's, kissing her deeply she felt her body connected with hers on a more heartfelt spiritual level. She wanted to eternally stay in Yuuri's embrace like this. They kept kissing calmly with their eyes closed, the sound of the waterfall gently continued splashing filled by the warm ambiance of the cave.

"I promise you - my love - we will stay safe... I will never leave your side - "

• • •

"Chii-chan, I felt so warm and so peaceful - inside the cave with you by my side." Yuuri with a flushed face lay down on the rug near their tent gently holding Chito's hand close to her heart. Both of them already dressed up were looking up at the sky as the day was almost over, the evening sun lit up the beautiful forest in all varieties of contrasting colors. Chito with a flushed face smiled, laying in Yuuri's embrace. "I wouldn't have wanted it any other way Yuu-chan. I love you, Yuuri."

“I love you too, Chii-chan.” Yuuri replied, still holding her close. The minutes passed away in sweet silence in each other’s embrace.

“Yuu... I could almost forget the sky is not real.” Chito said as she kept looking up in the sky, the virtual clouds gently drifted across the evening sky up in the thousands of the holographic screens on the ceiling. Sadly to observe the genuine sun and sky one had to go out of the ‘unit’, but the citizens mostly preferred to stay inside and only ever went out of the unit on supply runs. “But I guess at times we forget we live inside a ‘fantasy’ Yuu. If the last of humanity that’s left here are not careful this will also be gone too, one day - It will just be a distant memory left in the ‘archive’.”

“Chii-chan, I guess it’s a wonderful fantasy and I am glad that we get to share it together.” Yuuri smiled as she kept gazing up in the sky and the vast horizon.

“Oh Chii-Chan, I wonder what is that pilar we saw way over there?” Yuuri asked pointing towards the nearest pillar in the distance that extended up to the ceiling.

“I think it’s just for structural support and there is a staircase that leads up to the ceiling of the ‘unit’. I think you can see the sky from up there.” Chito responded looking at the pillar in the distance.

“Chii-chan, do you want to go climb it up? I would like to see the real sky and stars once again with you. Besides, it looks like we haven’t made the final climb yet, and grandpa told us to climb to the top of the world.” Yuuri asked as she kept looking up at the ceiling just where the pilar ended.

“But grandpa meant to come up to the unit, and beside it’s still really cold outside!” Chito answered as Yuuri rolled around and grabbed her backpack. “And it’s going to be dark soon.”

“Chii-chan, look what I took with us.” Yuuri took out their uniforms that they wore on the outside and kept them warm from the cold. “We can wear our old uniform up there and it won’t be that cold, besides I can always share my warmth with you. And we can bring the rug and the wine up there as well. I think they will keep us warm as we look at the sky.” Yuuri smiled as she got up and stood close to Chito showing her the jackets. She was already determined to go on their last climb together.

Chito also got up from the rug to check out her jacket “But you know that I am afraid to go out there again, Yuu.” Chito replied as she scratched her head with worry in her eyes. Yuuri looking back at her smiled and gently held Chito’s hands. “Chii-chan, I was afraid of the darkness and you were there close to me every time so the dark didn’t feel so scary anymore. I know that together we can do anything and I will be there right beside you on the top! I really want to see the stars with you again, and they are out there waiting for us. I’ll keep you safe and if it’s dangerous we can immediately go back inside.”

Chito couldn’t do anything else to convince her to stay. “Ok Yuu, you convinced me to do yet another crazy thing like earlier.” She blushed and bent down to take her rug and another bottle of wine with the glasses from the fridge.

“Ok then, let’s go on our last climb.”

• • •

It was already dark in the forest as both Chito and Yuuri kept on hiking towards the entrance of the pillar with their flashlights on. The dark forest already came to life with the sounds of all kinds of nocturnal animals. “Chii - I was wrong! I am still scared of the dark!” Yuuri held out her hand as Chito gently squeezed her hand. “It was your idea, you silly girl!” Chito replied as they kept walking on the path towards the pillar. She kept pointing the flashlight around careful not to trip over the branches of the tree. “It seemed so close and yet we’ve been walking for a long time.”

“There!” Yuuri exclaimed pointing towards small directional lights on the ground that leads up to the entrance of the pillar. “I think we have to follow the lights on the ground Chii-chan.”

“Hmmm.... sure” they both changed their directions and found themselves at the entrance of the pillar. The huge cylindrical structure extended up to the sky and it felt like another long climb to the top of the world. “Ummm... this reminds me just like when we reached the pillar on the bottom... Yuu.”

“So... are you ready to climb it Chii-chan?” Yuuri asked her as she took their jackets out from their backpack. “I guess so.” Chito reached her hands to take her jacket and wore it on, Yuuri did the same with hers.

“Well, it looks like we are going out there again, Chii-chan!” Yuuri replied as Chito pressed a button near the entrance. A door slid to each sides opening to the staircase that felt like it went on forever to the top. The pillar inside looked like it was lit up from the top to the bottom with lights going off in every direction.

“Ok, let’s climb it up. But you have to hold me Yuu, I forgot I was afraid of heights.”

• • •

After some time passed climbing up the staircase, they finally reached the top of the pillar. Covered in sweat and exhausted Chito sat down on the floor, she felt completely out of shape since the time they were on the outside.

“Ahh... uhhhh... I forgot how hard it is - to go upstairs...” Chito complained with Yuuri standing close by and breathing heavily as well. “I am surprised - you managed to climb the stairs - with your leg - Yuuri - you really are - exceptional.”

“I know... I am a - god... - after all ahh...” Yuuri couldn’t stand anymore and also sat down on the floor to catch her breath. Chito pulled out her flask and took a huge gulp of water and handed it to Yuuri who managed to drink the whole thing. “So... how do we go out on the roof?” Yuuri asked as Chito slowly getting her composure back, got up and inspected the room.

Beside the staircase and a blast door on the ceiling, there was nothing else in the room, not even a window. The huge blast door could be opened by a press of a button on the screen located near it. “I think you have to press the button on the screen and we can go out on the roof!” Chito replied as she trailed her finger on the screen. The blast door was the only thing that stood between the girls and the world outside. With just the press of a button, they would find themselves on the outside... yet again.

“Chii-chan, Are you ready?” Yuuri asked and smiled as Chito stepped back, she was too frightened to press the button. “I - I - am really not sure...” Chito replied as Yuuri got up and gently hugged her from behind. “What if I press the button and we wake up out there once again, Yuu? Today has been

another beautiful day with you and being so close to you - I just - never want this dream to be over.”

“Chii-chan, even if everything up to this point since they rescued us was a dream and we wake up out there again, I know that we will be together. If this was all a dream, then I am sure we would find somewhere else we can be happy. Chii-chan - you have to understand that I will never leave you.” Yuuri placed her head down on her and smiled “I will never let anything happen to you.”

“Ok... I guess I have we have to find out once and for all. Yuu.” Yuuri gently took her hand close to hers and after they looked at each other with a smile on their faces, they closed their eyes just as Chito pressed the button on the screen.

An alarm and a flashing red light started blaring loudly as the blast door started opening slowly on the ceiling and the stairs kept making a form to the exit. The cold and dead air rushed through them from the outside. Keeping their eyes closed and their hands locked together, they stood still waiting and waiting, until the alarm stopped blaring and the blast door widely opened.

The familiar dead silence of the world outside that they have comprehended for a really long time, terrified Chito to the essence of her heart. She tightly squeezed Yuuri’s hand as her heart started pounding so fast. This was the same familiar feeling she had when they reached the top of the world and thought they found nothing and no one up here. Walking upwards and through the blast doors hand in hand with Yuuri, she still kept her eyes tightly shut.

Once again, it felt so cold and dead outside. “CHII-CHAN.” Yuuri exclaimed standing close to her “Open your eyes!”

Chito thought to herself, it was time to wake up on the outside once again. Once she opened her eyes, she would find herself on the bottom layers surviving and starving together with Yuuri. But she had to do it, she had to open her eyes. She had to finally know that it was all a dream, and if all up to this point it was all a dream. Their wedding, their home, their family, the unit, being so close to Yuuri... it was all a dream, but only when she opened her eyes. She had to open them now, and finally know the answer. “I am so scared but... I know that... Yuuri is so close and she holds my hand.”

“Chii-chan! OPEN YOUR EYES! LOOK!” Yuuri exclaimed pointing up towards the sky. “CHII-CHAN! ITS THE MOON!” Chito slowly opened her eyes and looked at Yuuri who jumped around from happiness. The blast door opened wide still stood behind them, the 12 blue lights shimmered far in the distance along with many other lights scattered across the whole unit. And then she looked up. The whole sky was covered in a carpet of glittering stars and only the light of the full moon lit up the whole world above them. The moon felt so close that Chito felt they could jump and catch it.

“We reached the moon CHII-CHAN! WE DID IT!” Yuuri kept laughing and shouting “WOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO! IT’S SO HUUUGE!”

Chito couldn’t help but start laughing like months and months of pain and doubt that accumulated inside her finally washed away.

It was real!
The ‘unit’ was real!
Up to this point, everything was real!
She wasn’t dreaming anymore.

She finally found the closure she was looking for with her own two eyes. Up to this point, grandpa told them to go to the top of the world, but in some way, he meant for them to come up here. To the highest point in the city, to know that they are safe and that they had a home, family and a future just underneath that they can share together.

“Maybe what we are seeing is not there, but far into the distance. Or inside the layer...” Chito spoke to herself repeating the words she spoke the first day they reached the top of the world. Smiling and feeling a bit cold Chito reached her hands inside the pocket of the jacket to warm them up, but she could feel a familiar object inside.

“WE DID IT!” Yuuri kept exclaiming as she jumped into Chito hurling her towards the snow on the ground in a warm embrace. “Chii-chan... I am so happy. I want to say today was the happiest day of our lives, but with you, every day is the happiest of my life!”

“Yuu! guess what... I found it!” Chito started laughing again underneath her to the confused look of Yuuri. “I FOUND IT! THE GRENADE PIN! It’s been inside my jacket the whole time!” She pulled it out showing it to her as

she kept laughing and laughing. Both of them laid on top of each other and kept laughing. “I don’t know how I forgot that it was inside my jacket all the time! But here it is! It’s the grenade pin!”

“Chii-chan, give it to me I don’t trust you with it anymore!” Yuuri jokingly replied as she took the pin and placed it around her necklace.

“There... they will stay together just like the two of us. I will keep it safe near my heart until you get a necklace too. Just like I will keep you safe... my love.” smiling and embraced once again, they both stared into each other’s eyes as they kissed again.

• • •

“So, what do you want to do?”

Chito asked her as Yuuri still laid on top of her.

“Well, let’s look at the stars and the moon, and we can drink that wine you took with us.”

“Yes! We need to celebrate our last climb.” Chito replied as she got out from underneath her. Reaching in her backpack she took out the rug and neatly placed it down on the snow as she sat together with Yuuri looking up at the moon. She took out the two glasses and the wine and poured a large glass for both of them.

After a while, they kept laughing and drinking as they looked up at the moon with the widest and happiest smiles in the world.

“Chii-chan...” Yuuri spoke cuddled close. “I kept reading about the girl in the story, that when her lover passed away she did something. I’ve been meaning to ask you, what does ‘assisted suicide’ mean?”

“Oh, I read somewhere that it means when you get help to end your life. Usually, it’s with an injection or something similar to that. I remember in that story that after her accident, she was unable to move and was heartbroken that her husband passed away from the accident.” Chito responded with a sad tone. “She blamed herself for what happened to him and couldn’t live with it, and

made a decision after she finished writing her memoirs from their last travel before the accident, she would go with the decision to join him in the afterlife. She was deeply afraid that they would be forgotten, but I am happy that they keep living in her books, even though I was unable to find the rest of the story in the archive.”

“Chii - please promise me if anything happens to me you won't do something like that. Please.” Yuuri replied holding her close in her arms. “I know there is a family here that loves us and if we have children one day they will also love us. And if something were to happen to both of us, they would be devastated. But... if I go one day before you, I promise that I will wait for you on the other side. It will be lonely and dark but... I will be brave and wait for you to come. We are also lonely in this world, but I'm so glad that I get to share that loneliness with you.”

Chito looked back at Yuuri and closed her eyes gently resting her head to her chest. “Yuu, I want to imagine that one day when we are like a thousand years old that one night when we are ready, we will have a nice meal together, a warm bath and then go to sleep in each other's arms and drift away together towards that darkness. Because just imagining it makes me so afraid and... I don't know what I will do without you, Yuu... I wouldn't want to imagine a world without you or if anything bad happens to us... I hope that we have a long life ahead of us and one day we will have a family of our own. I know that grandpa wanted a good life for us because he was so far away from his family and struggled to help us.” Chito replied and smiled. “I just want to respect his wish that we will be happy and together for a long time, he gave his life away so we can have one, Yuu.”

Yuuri hugged her even tighter “I don't know what I would do without you as well, Chii-chan. I am happy that we are safe and we have food and a home, and one day we would have beautiful children. But after all, what happened, I am happy. I've never been so happier in my life with you, Chii-chan.”

“Me too - Yuu.”

They kept snuggling at the top of the world looking up at the moon that guided them towards their new home until they got cold and sleepy. It was time to go back to the camp, back inside their home.

• • •

“Chiiii--chaaa....” Yuuri kept stumbling and tried to keep close to Chito as both of them walked towards their camp. “Did I *hick* mention that *hick* you looked soooooooooooooo blutful *hick* under the moonlight...”

“Yuuri! You drank so much wine! C’mon just a little while and we can go to sleep.” Chito kept struggling to walk forward with Yuuri as she stumbled around, she managed to drink the whole bottle of wine at the roof. “But Chiiii... I mean *hick* to say you are butifeeeeeeeel....” she kept giggling and held on on Chito for support.

“I know, you tell that to me every day now. C’mon! Stay concentrated!” Chito replied, but reasoning with her drunk wife was just pointless. “Chitoooh... did you notice... I have 10 fingers *hick* WHOOOOA!”

“And one nose, I know Yuu! Geeze!” Chito mildly annoyed still walked together with Yuuri towards their camp. It was close, but it felt like they walked forever, and the climb down from the pillar was even more difficult holding onto Yuuri who was completely drunk.

“Chiiii--- can we do that... cave thing again inside *hick* the tent?”

Chito got flustered once again at the mention of what happened inside the cave. “Errr... maybe another day - Yuu - we have all the time in the world to do that... thing” she replied and still flustered kept carrying her around “But we need to go to sleep. I am so tired and you are just... drunk again!”

Once they reached the tent Chito opened it slowly, but she let go of Yuuri for just a second as she fell inside it. “Oh no!” Chito exclaimed as Yuuri laid face down on their sleeping bag, drooling all over and giggling. “Chii-chaan I didn’t know you were so *hick* so eager to go to bed *hick*!”

Chito sitting close to her drunk wife helped her take her clothes off and put on her nightgown, Chito somehow managed to tuck her in their shared sleeping bag. Yuuri immediately drifted off to sleep snoring loudly. Sitting above the sleeping bag, Chito smiled as she looked down on her and leaned to place a gentle peck on her cheek.

“Today was such a wonderful day Yuu. I want every day to be just like today, with you by my side.” taking her clothes off and putting on her nightgown, she got inside the sleeping bag and snuggled close to Yuuri turning off the lantern. She looked deep into her closed eyes and smiled once again. “Goodnight, my Yuuri.”

Closing her eyes she drifted off to sleep, deep in her lover’s embrace.

Chapter 12

September



“Are we going to visit Itsuki at the temple again?”

“Of course Kouki, today is a special day. It’s the 9th of September our ‘outsider’ birthdays, and it was his birthday as well.”

“Oh... I forgot what were those black things there called mommy?”

“They are called memorials sweetie. It’s where people remember those that passed away a long time ago so they are never forgotten, their names are engraved in each memorial and something of their personal value is sealed inside.”

Walking hand in hand towards the memorial graves inside the temple grounds, Yuuri and Kouki were looking up the names on each ‘memorial’ to find their family row. It was a sunny day inside the ‘unit’ as the citizens were getting ready for the festivities of this special day. During the afternoon the citizens usually visited their friends and families that passed away at the temple’s memorials, and during the day they had a big festival to celebrate the event.

“Oh, here he is!” Yuuri smiled pointing to one of the nameplates on the stone, the name written on the memorial was ‘Itsuki’.

“Hi again, Itsuki! Happy birthday!” The little boy said as they both got closer to the memorial. Yuuri placed her hand near the nameplate and smiled. “Hey, grandpa, Happy birthday! Look who came to visit you! Look how big he has grown since the last time we’ve come!” She smiled as Kouki waved and also placed his little hand on the grave. “I hope you are doing fine wherever you are grandpa,” she continued speaking still holding her hand on his grave. “I keep telling you every time and you are probably bored from listening to us - but thank you for everything. We are doing well, and just like you said in your letter, work sometimes can be hard. There are a lot of hungry mouths to feed at the cafeteria up here. After some time I finally perfected my udon recipe as well and now everyone up here wants to eat my food. I think it’s equally popular as your curry recipe. Chii-chan is just finishing with her job at the garage, she said she has some kind of surprise later for me, I hope it’s new food to eat. I’ve already tried every kind of food up here and I think I gained a little weight. I exercise my legs regularly with Chii-chan and Kouki and my prosthetic leg is still really sturdy. I try to take good care of it every day so it serves me as long as it can. Chii-chan still has those nightmares from the outside and wakes me up at night but I don’t mind it, I am happy that they are occasional and she is also

a strong girl and I am always there to help her. We sometimes argue, but I know it's just what married couples sometimes do but we can't stay mad at each other. Don't worry about us grandpa, I love her and Kouki the most in the world. I hope you are happy somewhere in another life with Yuriko. Reo and the rest are fine as well, I hope they came here earlier to visit you as well. Later we are going to the festival and Kouki really wants to catch goldfish and eat takoyaki. We spent all day preparing all kinds of food, it's really going to be fun and we will watch the holographic fireworks tonight! I wish you were here with us watching the fireworks grandpa. I love you - wherever you are, grandpa."

"Mom, how did Itsuki look like?" Kouki asked her still holding his little hand on the memorial grave. "Well, as my memory serves, he looked a bit like Reo. I remember him with white hair, glasses and he was a bit skinnier than him. He was a kind selfless person and always was buried deep in his books and music, just like your mom. He and Chii-chan's father helped so many people on the outside. He saved our lives and we could never thank him enough." Yuuri answered and smiled as she looked back at him.

"But what happened to him?"

"We will never know Kouki. When Chii-chan and I left the village many years ago, he stayed behind to protect us. The last I remember that he was waving at us, and that was the last time we saw him in our lives. He made plans for years to come here with us, but we didn't have enough supplies in the end for the three of us and he was old. After years of waiting for him, Reo and Mieko decided to finally have a memorial made for him and they sealed something of his value inside. There was a large ceremony to celebrate his life and about a thousand people came, most of who he helped from the outside and their families. He was their hero and our hero to me and Chii-chan as well. His memorial is right next to his wife, Yuriko." she pointed to the left of his grave where the nameplate of 'Yuriko' stood. "She also passed away a really long time ago. We never met her, but from what I've heard she was also an outsider that grandpa saved. She used to be a great painter and she loved grandpa very much. However, her heart broke when he had to leave her."

"But why did he have to leave the 'unit' mommy?"

"He and Chii-chan's father helped a large group of refugees up here when it was not allowed and they were exiled. But that rule changed after many years and they couldn't find him again on the outside to bring him home. The 'travel-

er' came up with a way to help outsiders from to find their way to the 'unit' by having his robots place signs, food, and even some new security robots that he repaired outside to prevent people with bad intentions to hurt us. When Chii-chan and I were outside, we thought that we were the only people left in the world. But the world is really big, it turns out there are still people left outside struggling to survive. You and many other children and families arrived here 5 years ago when you were just a baby, and of course, you were such a cute baby that we instantly fell in love with you and we wanted to give you a home and family." Yuuri replied and smiled as she kept holding his hand looking at Yuriko's grave.

"Mommy, but who are those right next to Itsuki?"

"They are Chii-chan's father and mother." the nameplates right next to Itsuki were the names of 'Yasuo' and 'Haruhi'. "Their memorials were made a long time ago. Reo knew that they passed away a long time ago from grandpa's letters and he had their names engraved on the memorial stone. They were also born on the outside and it's their 'outsider' birthdays as well."

"Oh... Happy Birthday everyone!" Kouki shyly exclaimed with a smile as he looked up to their nameplates of their descendants.

"Yasuo was grandpa's brother and best friend, they lived outside for a long time as well. We never knew if he was his blood relative and we thought that grandpa wasn't related to Chii-chan. Chii-chan was too young to remember them when they passed away, and we both don't remember much from our childhood... but the only thing surviving from them is a picture."

"Its that picture in your bedroom the one with the baby?"

"Yes, that's the one sweetie, that cute baby is your mommy!" Yuuri smiled again still holding onto Kouki's hand. "It's the only picture we have of them and sadly we don't have one of grandpa. But we keep him alive deep in our memories."

"Oh... I am sad I never got to see him..."

"He still watches over us Kouki, he will never leave us!" Yuuri replied and smiled. "He is still our family even if he passed away a long time ago."

“Mommy... who is that next to Yuriko?” the boy curiously pointed towards the memorial storage right next to Yuriko. Unlike the other graves, this one had an exact date of birth and death and seemed to belong to someone in their family who was regarded as a hero as well.

“That’s Chiya,” Yuuri replied back to him. “You don’t remember her but she used to take care of you when you were a baby. She is Mieko’s mother. Sadly she passed away 3 years ago from an accident on a supply run outside. She was also really nice and we had something in common too, she had a prosthetic leg just like mine.”

“OOOOH... was she a robot just like you?”

Yuuri chuckled softly and replied “No, Kouki. We are just ordinary humans, like everyone else here in the ‘unit’. I am not the only one to have a prosthetic leg, there are a lot of adults and even kids who have one. You see the outside world can still be really scary and that is why Chii-chan and I never wanted to go out again and we protect you inside her. She almost went on the supply run with Chiya when she passed away. But after her accident, she decided to stay at the task of being a mechanic in the ‘unit’ and we never went out again, and she loves staying at the library too. We used to go up to the roof of the unit to watch the sky, and we can take you up there when we go camping again.”

“Mom, how is the world outside? Will we ever go out?” Kouki asked her brimming with curiosity once again. “Kouki - It’s a really cold and dark place - its full of machines that still work and there are a lot of discarded weapons and garbage. There are countless empty buildings and there are no animals, trees, food, and plants like in here. But the sky is beautiful and the moon, the billions of stars in the galaxy you can see with your own eyes. Even if the snow hurt me, it’s beautiful too. With the snow, you can build a snowman, have snowball fights and even eat it and boil it into a snow-tea. We lived out there for a long time with your mom, but we found our way to the ‘unit’. You were just a baby when you arrived up here and I am really happy that you came into our lives.” Yuuri smiled and leaned down to hug him. “But if you want to go out one day, we will let you when you are an adult. Is that a deal?”

“It’s ok mommy. I will be patient... I really like it up here with you and mom, but I want to see the world outside too and when I grow up I want to be strong like my mothers!” Kouki smiled and hugged her back.

As they hugged a familiar voice behind them spoke.

“Hey guys, did I miss something?”

“MOMMY!” Kouki exclaimed as he turned over and ran over to Chito hugging her tightly. She was still in her work uniform and was slightly covered in grease from working on the machines. “Hey Kouki!” she replied hugging him back. Yuuri looked over to them and smiled as she stood near the memorial stone. “What did you guys do all day? I missed you.”

“Oooh! We were at school - and I played with the other kids - and look.” Kouki pulled a crude drawing out of his pocket of Chito, Yuuri and himself in the middle. In the back was their house with flowers all around. “I drew that earlier...” he proudly displayed the drawing to Chito.

“That’s so cute!” Chito replied as she took the drawing in her hand, Yuuri came close to look at it as well. “You are going to be the best painter in the world!”

“I KNOOOOW...” he exclaimed jumping around from happiness. “I WILL BE A GOD OF PAINTING!”

“I see where he gets his excitable personality from!” Chito chuckled as she looked at Yuuri and smiled leaning towards her and kissed her softly on the cheeks. “So how was your day sweetie?”

“Well, the mothers and fathers at school prepared a party for the kids and we had to join in and play with the kids. It was really fun and after that, we came here to visit grandpa.” Yuuri replied, “Before I went to school, we were in the cafeteria preparing batches of food for the festival later. What about you?”

Chito chuckled and held out her hand to her and Kouki’s. “Well, I’ve been working as usual. We had to go to the garage because the group came from the long supply run. They told me that some of them are trying to fix another communication node and maybe we could connect with the rest of the world again. I really hope that we do, imagine if there are other survivors and units out there. And some of them brought a lot of books for the library. I always tell them to bring books if they find them down there. They are as equally important even though we have the archive.” Chito replied as she held hands with both Yuuri and Kouki.

“Oh and guess what... you remember the thing I was telling you about?”

“Is it the surprise you keep telling me about for days now?” Yuuri asked her back curiously. “Well - You’ll see what it is at home!” Chito chuckled again.

“Anyway I think we should go home I have to change out of my uniform and take a shower, we have to prepare for the festival too. Also before we reach the house you both have to close your eyes. Do you promise both of you?”

“We promise!” both Yuuri and Kouki replied as they kept walking through the temple with a wide smile.

• • •

“Can I open my eyes now?”

“Nope... not yet.”

“But I wanna open my eeeyess...”

“Be patient Kouki, just a few steps!”

“What about now?”

“Right abouuuut..... now.”

Both Kouki and Yuuri opened their eyes, they found themselves back in their garden just outside the house, but there was something else there.

“Umm... what’s that?” Kouki asked puzzled as he looked at the large mysterious crude object that founds its way in their garden. Yuuri’s eyes suddenly filled up with joy and screamed “AAAAAAAAAAH!!! NO WAY!!!! WHERE DID YOU FIND IT???” and turned to Chito full of excitement. “It was where we left it, all those years ago Yuu!” Chito replied and chuckled, as Yuuri hugged her back. “No way! It can’t be! Are you sure it’s ours?”

“Well... how many of these things exist in the world?” Chito replied still smiling as she looked at Yuuri who was full of joy once again.

“Mommy, what is it?” Kouki asked still puzzled looking at the strange object in front of his eyes.

“Kouki, it’s called a ‘kettenkrad’ “ Yuuri replied and smiled.

“A ‘kettenkrad’?”

“It’s the vehicle that saved our lives many years ago, Kouki.” Chito answered as both of them got closer to see their old ‘friend’ up close. The ‘kettenkrad’ seemed to have been in even worse shape since they left it on the bottom.

“It arrived 2 weeks ago with one of the excavation crews and they almost scrapped it for parts, but I took it right under their nose. I tried to fix it but it’s completely ruined and its scrap now. So I wanted to take it home with us for sentimental value. I think we can use it for something. What do you think Yuu?”

“Ummm... maybe we can use it to plant something in the back?” Yuuri replied as she kept looking at the old worn-out vehicle. “I don’t think it’s a good idea to take a bath in it though. It’s completely rusted.”

“Ooooh I know... if I catch any of those goldfishes can we turn it into a pond?” Kouki asked her as he climbed in the back of the vehicle and sat down.

“Sure sweetie, I think we can turn it into a koi pond or anything you guys want!” Chito replied back as she looked at both Yuuri and Kouki sitting in the back of the kettenkrad. “Mommy, how did you drive this thing?”

“It was really fun and easy, you just sit in the front and turn on the vehicle with this key.” Chito sat in the front and pulled out the key with the fish key-chain from her pocket and put it in the ignition. “And you just turn the key and you start driving it.”

“NO WAY! IT STILL HAD THE KEY?” Yuuri exclaimed again from excitement as she looked at Chito place the key in the ignition “Haha yes, I was surprised as well. It was still in the ignition when they found it - but I tried turning it on it doesn’t work.”

“So this is how we used to drive it around Kouki. I sat in the front and your mother in the back... and most of the time it was just the two of us, but we had each other and it was never lonely. We learned so much on our journey and we

survived through too much. Sometimes we laughed, sometimes we cried, sometimes we argued and in the end, we realized just how much we mean to each other. I knew all my life that even if we find a home and we find other people that it was always going to be the two of us. We discovered so much and most of all, we are happy that we found a home and that you came to us Kouki.” Chito replied with a smile sitting in the driver seat of the kettenkrad, Yuuri and Kouki sat in the back listening to her as she spoke.

“On the outside, we met two wonderful people Kanazawa and Ishii and even a strange creature we called ‘Nuko’. And we met ‘Nuko’s family and these strange creatures were called the ‘Eringi’ that came to this planet a really long time ago. We saw and experienced so many confusing things while we were out there, but somehow, in the end, it was fate that brought us all up here and I guess - just pure luck. If it wasn’t for a bomb that we found on the outside, we wouldn’t have been alive Kouki.”

Chito reached her hands and gently held Yuuri’s and Kouki’s hands looking at them with a wide smile on her face. “Kouki, we sometimes argue, and then we sometimes scold you if you do something bad. But I hope you know that we both love you the most in the whole wide world. Yuuri is the one that helped me so much in my life, she is my wife and I also cherish her the most in the world just as much as you. It’s the three of us for now, and maybe one day you will have a sister and a brother and we will be five. And then one day you will meet someone you will love and our family will be even bigger. But in the end, we only have each other and we are one big family even though all the hardships in life might stand in our way.” she reached and hugged them both still sitting on the ‘kettenkrad’, their old vehicle that got them through so much in their lives.

“Know that I will love you both as long as I live...”

Before they moved into their house, Chito turned around to look at their old ‘friend’. After the longest journey in its life, even the ‘kettenkrad’ managed to find it’s way back home again. Smiling she placed her hand on the old worn out headlight of the kettenkrad “Thank you, old friend! If it wasn’t for you, we would never have made it up here. Thank you, for saving our lives - thank you for everything.” she quietly spoke before she turned and walked inside their house, where Yuuri and Kouki were already sitting comfortably underneath the kotatsu.

After a long shower, Chito went to her room to dress with Yuuri in their kimonos. They both smiled as they looked at each other and Chito gently held out her hand to hers looking deeply in her eyes. “You look so beautiful in that thing!” Chito said as she kept looking at Yuuri.

“You do as well, Chii-chan. I really enjoy wearing a kimono, and last time we wore one for ‘Children’s Day’. It was such a fun day, and we had Mieko’s kids over for a sleepover. Kouki had so much fun!” Yuuri replied still holding Chito’s hands.

“Oh yeah, I remember that night! It was so fun!” Chito replied and giggled as she hugged her closer. “So hey, we can watch that strange movie that grandpa liked, I’ve been meaning to watch that one because I just finished the books too. Want to watch it with me?”

“Sure! And we can eat pancakes again with hot chocolate!” Smiling they both kissed before they walked out of their room. Kouki was waiting in his room for Chito and Yuuri to help him put on his kimono as well.

All three of them dressed up in their kimonos and hand in hand walked out of their house. The whole ‘unit’ came alive with festivities and the happy laughter and commotion of its residents. Waiting patiently outside their house was Reo, Mieko, Kazuo, and their three kids. “What took you guys so long?” Mieko asked them just as they got out of the house.

“Well, you know these kimonos take ages to put on, Mieko,” Yuuri replied and smiled as she looked back at her family. “And look at all of you six with your kimonos, we should take a group picture.”

“Do you have a camera? I think I forgot mine at the hospital?” Reo asked her as she was checking her kimono for the camera. “Oh there it is, I’ll put it on time on our porch, you all have to move in our garden. Me, Kouki and Chii-chan can sit on the ‘Kettenkrad’.”

Reo’s memory shuffled as he remembered that he has seen that vehicle before, the last time with Itsuki just as the elevator doors closed. “Waaiit... isn’t that my dad’s kettenkrad?” he turned to the girls as they both smiled. “Yes, they found it on the outside and I decided to keep it!” Chito replied to him back.

“They almost scrapped it for parts, but I took it right under their nose! They will never scrap our old friend.”

“But where was it?”

“I will tell you the story later I think we have to pose for the picture!” Chito replied as they all posed in front of the camera.

“SAY CHEESE!!!”

“CHEESE!!!” all of them shouted as the camera snapped the photograph.

The photograph contained the smiling and happy faces of a family that once was torn apart by the outside world, but through all kinds of challenges, they found each other and their home under the safety of this mysterious world that their ancestors built to protect what little was left of the world outside.

Chito, Yuuri, and Kouki were sitting on the ‘kettenkrad’ as the rest of their family stood close around them, and for a long time, they were brimming with joy.

• • •

One of the rooms they seldom used in the ‘unit’ contained a communication device that operated constantly. In hundreds of years, there was not even a crackle coming out of it as they lost the connection with every other ‘unit’ in the world. But suddenly that same day on the 9th of September, it came alive with the crackling voices of many different languages.

“igeos-eun jadong---- doen mesi-----da. nuguegenai ju-----sulo ban-e----
----ida.”

“הז רדת לע ----- מש דחא לכל-----מוטוא הע-----יהוז.”

“ha---h risalat tal-----atu. alj-----ak yasta---ha a---aduda.”

The last message was in a language that was far known in the whole wide world, many years ago.

“This is an automated message from our home the planet ‘Mars’. Please respond to this frequency. Every day we are looking at our beautiful blue planet wondering how is it back home - is anyone still alive there?” ...

Epilogue



“I wonder how we haven’t crashed yet with your flying!”

“Oh, gee... I wonder what kind of cartographer gets you lost over Russia!”

“I told you! The map I found is outdated and besides the snow outside, I can’t see anything else. It was your idea to fly to Russia!”

“Hey Kanazawa, did you know these planes were used by kamikaze pilots in World War 2?”

“What’s a ‘kamikaze’ pilot Ishii?”

“I can show you if you don’t shut up and get our headings right!”

Flying an old ‘Yokosuka D4Y3’ plane they found in an old museum block in the city, Ishii managed to fix it along with Kanazawa’s help and took off just hours ago. They were flying over Russia as her dream to finally escape the city was a success. However, for many miles, since they arrived over Russian airspace, they weren’t able to find anything down there, just a barren wasteland full of snow.

Back at the huge city by some blind luck, Kanazawa and Ishii found each other on their journey and roamed the layers of the city together looking for food and supplies. Hungry and exhausted they managed to find an old museum of airplanes and just barely any supplies to help them through. Looking at the old airplane designs, Ishii thought that they could both fix one of the sturdier planes and in theory, it should be able to fly again. Her design managed to snap into several pieces and crashed just after takeoff, but these planes looked more conventional and in the past were able to fly. After several months of hard work, Ishii finally managed to fix and even start one of the planes, soon after both of them decided to fly out of the city.

Ishii was finally able to fulfill her dream.

“Hey, I think we are somewhere over ‘Komsomolsk’, I can see the river and nothing else,” Kanazawa replied over his communication helmet as he looked through the map and anything outside to pinpoint their correct positions.

“I really have no idea where we are flying though, but I haven’t been this excited for years.” Ishii with a wide smile kept her hands on the controls, flying

the plane steadily. “However, I think we have to land soon, we don’t have much fuel left.”

“Oh hey... Ishii! There! Look at your right - do you see that?” Kanazawa spoke to her as he kept looking through the window scanning the horizon. “Yes... I think we should land there before we really ‘kamikaze’ to the ground!”

“Again... what’s a kamikaze?” Kanazawa asked her but to no reply. She had her mind focused on carefully landing the plane down on the snow.

Just as they landed, she could clearly see what those objects covered in the snow were. About 20 different kinds of plane designs that she had seen before in an aviation book, parked close to each other. These planes belonged to designs coming from the 21st century. It seems like they were also in blind luck and found an old abandoned airfield, hopefully, there will still be leftover fuel to start the plane again.

Parking close by she turned off the motor and opened the hatch to the cold outside. Covering herself with her jacket she walked out of the plane as she turned to Kanazawa who followed right behind her. “It’s so much colder than in the city.”

“So... what do we do now? We look for fuel or - ?” Kanazawa asked her as she turned around to scan out their surroundings. Besides the planes, there was nothing else visible in the distance, not even a hangar or any kind of structure. It was all covered in snow as far as the eyes could see.

“These planes really look well preserved, Kanazawa. And they are of more modern design than the old World War 2 machines we found. I’d say these were from the 21st century.” Ishii replied as she moved closer to one of the planes.

The airplane was a large war machine that could fly thousands of miles before it needed to refuel. It could also have been an early electric machine model but she had no way of knowing unless she boarded the plane and checked it out. She felt that they could switch to this airplane if they found no fuel. It looked a lot sturdier, even for longer journeys.

“Maybe we could check the interior if I know how to open it!” Ishii replied trailing her hand through the hull of the plane.

Once they figured out how to open the door of the plane, behind them about 8 masked individuals in white winter clothes appeared out of nowhere and had them surrounded with old-style weapons in their hands.

“STOY!” one of the men who seemed to be their leader from the group shouted at them.

Both Kanazawa and Ishii put up their hands up startled by the 8 masked figures pointing guns at them. “Kto ty?” the men appeared to be speaking a language they couldn’t understand.

“Huh what? What did you say?” Ishii asked him, still with her hands up in her air.

“Chto eto za yazyk?”

“Chto u nikh s glazami?”

“Bozhe moy, kak vy dumayete, oni iz drugoy strany?”

“We don’t understand you? Who are you?” Kanazawa asked them as he still had his hands up in the air.

“Of course we don’t understand them and they won’t understand us, you idiot! If it wasn’t for you we wouldn’t have been in this mess!”

“Hey I might have saved us or we would have crashed, you are the idiot, moron!”

“Stupid, shithead!”

“Dumb foureyed bi- “

“ZATKNIS’!” one of the men shouted at both of them as they abruptly stopped arguing. “My dolzhny vzyat’ ikh s robotom-interpretatorom.” the man spoke again as he turned to the person standing close to him “Misha, prover’ ikh na oruzhiye.”

The other person was a girl in her mid 20’s who moved towards them checking both of them for weapons. She pulled a pistol from Kanazawa and

turned to him saying “Izvinite, ya dam eto vam pozzhe.” Ishii had no weapons on her.

“Idi za mnoy!” one of the men from the group motioned to them to follow him, but still they were cautious of the two strange people that just landed in an ancient machine, and kept aiming their weapons at them.

Walking through the barren wasteland just close to where the planes were one of the men waved at something closeby and suddenly the ground came alive. A huge blast door opened revealing a metallic hallway inside. The group and their prisoners walked inside as the door closed behind them.

• • •

“Well, what do you think they will do with us now?” Kanazawa asked as both of them were sitting down in a room. A guard outside stood by and watched them carefully as he kept quiet.

“Well, so far they didn’t kill us and they brought us this really tasty warm tea.” Ishii calmly replied as she sipped on the tea, sitting close to them.

“Oh and did you see their eyes, they look really different than us! I think they are Russians, Ishii.”

“Gee, thanks I wouldn’t have figured that out!” she replied, still sipping on the tea but she kept checking out the guard. “I think that guard is a welcome sight, I had to look at your sad face for months now!”

“Pffff...” Kanazawa replied with a mild annoyance. “As if they would like a four-eyed nuisance like you!”

“I really wish I ‘kamikazed’ us to the ground now!” Ishii replied as she rolled her eyes, still sipping on her warm tea. “Oh cmon, tell me what the hell is a kamikaze?”

Opening the door of their room, one of the women from earlier walked inside and spoke to someone outside. “Oni zdes’, vy dumayete, chto mozhete ikh ponyat’?”

“YA zaprogrammirovan na 7111 yazykakh - ya uveren, chto ponimayu ikh, Misha - spasibo.” they heard another voice in Russian but it seemed to have spoken in a monotonic, almost robotic voice.

With a few mechanical sounds, a robot just like some they have seen back in their country walked inside the room. Both Ishii and Kanazawa looked at him with a puzzled look. The robot seemed to have stopped for a second to look and scan them and suddenly it spoke.

“Konichiwa - from my DNA scans you seem to have traveled from a country known as Japan.”

With a puzzled look, Ishii got up from the chair and looked at the robot. “Wait... you speak Japanese?”

“That is correct - I also can speak and understand 7111 different languages - Could you tell us your names?”

“I am Ishii and that over there is Kanazawa.”

“Ishii - Kanazawa - Don’t worry you are safe here - We didn’t know that there are other survivors out there anymore - There are about three million five hundred sixty-five citizens in this unit and the main language spoken here is Russian - This is the first time we see someone from a different country in hundreds of years.”

“It wasn’t just us, back in Japan there were two unfortunate girls that were left in the city. I don’t know what happened to them but I hope they are safe.” Ishii replied as Kanazawa still with a confused face kept looking at the robot.

“Wait! How many people are living here?!” he asked.

“That is correct - Our ‘unit’ was a successful experimental however we lost connection with the other ‘unit’s’ around the world many years ago - after the great wars people moved in the ‘unit’ for safety - but one day we plan to move to the ground and rebuild our cities.”

“That is amazing!” Kanazawa replied as he stared at the robot. “But what is this place?”

“We can show you and if you ever decide to live here with us, you are welcome to stay.”

Both Ishii and Kanazawa together with the guards and the robot moved towards an elevator. One of the guards pressed a button and with a slight mechanical sound, it started moving downwards.

They could see what the robot meant about ‘living’ here.

The world underneath suddenly lit up with an ‘artificial’ sun. The underground world looked almost unbelievable with huge pillars, structures, houses and even skyscrapers that went up to the ‘sky’. It seemed like there was another world underneath the one that was ravaged above.

“Wow!” Ishii exclaimed with her eyes wide open as she held Kanazawa’s hand closer. “So... you still want to fly away from here because I kinda want to stay... Ishii...”

“Ishii - Kanazawa - Welcome to ‘Lenski Stolbovi Experimental Unit’”

Bonus Chapter + Extras

“Chii-chan... Chii-chan...”

“Mmm... what is it Yuu...”

“I can’t sleep... I’ve been turning over all night...”

“Mmmh... well, I told you not to drink all that coffee last night.”

“I know... but I wanted to try it. It’s the first time we get a fresh batch since we arrived here, and I felt kinda nervous about tomorrow.” Yuuri replied as she lay next to Chito on their bed and kept trying to sleep. It was already quite late at night and after a long day of hanging out with their family and strolling through the park inside the ‘unit’, Chito was exhausted as she kept trying to sleep close to a restless Yuuri.

“Mmm... Yuu... you should try to sleep, you know it’s an important day tomorrow.”

“I know... Chii-chan, but I am... kinda worried!” Yuuri replied as she kept looking up at the dark ceiling. Chito softly mumbled and brushed her eyes looking at her worried lover. “Oh... you shouldn’t be worried Yuu. Reo said it’s just a simple procedure that they have done countless times, and you will be asleep during the whole thing. After that you will have a new leg, didn’t you say you want to be a ‘robotic-god’ Yuu?” Chito replied and softly embraced Yuuri under the covers.

“I know but, I am still worried it will be dark again... I don’t want you to wait for me again to wake up for a really long time like last time. What if something happens?” Yuuri asked as she gently held Chito’s hand under the cover.

“Chiya had the same procedure done to her and look she is always working and going on expeditions on the outside, you shouldn’t be worried Yuu. I will be right outside the room waiting for you. After that, you will be able to walk properly again with training.” Chito replied back and smiled as she held her hand close. “After the procedure, we can go eat gyoza at the park again if you want Yuu.”

“Mmm... Gyoza... and I want fresh fish again Chii-chan!” Yuuri replied back and smiled with a drooling mouth.

“I think we can get fresh fish too. We still have enough ration points for the month.” Chito replied back as she held her hand close to hers. “But you know that you need to train the leg almost every day. It doesn’t work right away so it will take you time to get used to it. That’s what Reo and Mieko said.”

“I know Chii-chan, but I will be so happy to see you smiling when I can finally walk on my own without the walking stick!” Yuuri replied and embraced her closer. “I will be brave for you tomorrow.”

“Oh hey, I just thought of something Yuu, I hope it will help you sleep. Maybe I can return the favor and the warmth you shared for me that time outside in the snow fort. I slept so peacefully at that time in your embrace.” Chito softly blushed as she looked at Yuuri.

“But we don’t have snow to build another fort Chii-chan!”

“Oh! We don’t need snow. I read in a book that children in the old world used to build these things called pillow forts from blankets and pillows and... let me show” Chito leaned next to the bedside where she kept the black device that Yuuri gifted to her the first day they moved into their house where she could read a lot of books and write in her diary. Turning it on she found the book where it showed pictures from the old world and how children used to build forts.

“Oh, they look so cute!” Yuuri replied as she scrolled through the device. “I wish we had this many pillows on the outside Chii-chan, we would have been so comfortable.”

“Well... I think we have a lot of pillows and blankets in the other room too. I can go get them and we can build the fort in the living room. It will be just like the snow fort but, even comfier.” Chito replied as she got out of the bed grabbing her pillow.

“Oooo... I wanna help too Chii-chan!” Yuuri said as she got up from the bed and grabbed her walking stick. With her free hand, she grabbed the pillow from underneath her.

“Go wait for me in the living room, I’ll grab the rest of the pillows and blankets!” Chito spoke as Yuuri walked out of the bedroom and turned on the lights in their living room.

“Chii-chan... that’s a lot of pillows.”

“I know... I didn’t know we had them in the other room. I think they are for guests if they want to sleep over here.” Chito walked close where Yuuri was sitting with her pillow and dropped all of the pillows and blankets on the ground that she could carry from the bedrooms. She kept looking into her device for ideas on how to build the fort.

“Hmmm...” she mumbled thinking to herself before she grabbed the chair from the dining room placing it on one side and two other chairs she placed opposite each other to give enough room for both of them inside the fort. Yuuri kept looking at her as she was still sitting down on the ground snuggling her pillow.

“Here Yuuri, you can place these blankets on the ground between the chairs and I’ll cover the fort with the one I am holding.”

“On it!” Yuuri replied with a smile as she moved closer to the chairs, spreading the blankets just underneath while Chito was covering the fort with one of the blanket using the chairs for support.

“And then... we just put a lot of pillows inside!” Chito said as she kept looking in her device as Yuuri carefully listened to her. “Huh... that was easier than the snow fort Chii-chan!”

“Well.. the snow fort was more difficult to build Yuu, I still wonder how we even managed to build that. When we work together we can really do amazing stuff, if only you weren’t so lazy laying underneath the kotatsu all day.” Chito replied humorously as she looked at Yuuri who was carefully placing all of the pillows inside the fort, covering the chairs and every bit of space inside.

“Chii-chan, that kotatsu is a miracle invention. You can eat on it and sleep underneath it... what else a girl could want?” Yuuri replied and softly giggled from underneath the fort. “Oh and this says we can use a flashlight, lantern or anything to light it up inside. I think I have that holographic star projector that Mieko gave me for when I have nightmares but I haven’t used it still.” Chito replied as she kept scrolling through her device. “I think I left it in the other room!” she walked out of the living room to look where she placed the small holographic projector and a flashlight.

“Chii-chan, I placed all the pillows inside. I think we already finished it.” Yuuri replied from underneath just as she was settling in, Chito was already back standing close to the fort. “So what do you think Yuu, will you be able to sleep here for the night?”

Yuuri glanced at the crude pillow fort they just built together with Chito. “Chii-chan, this is so cute. We built another fort, and this one is in our house made of comfy and warm stuff.”

“It’s so cute but hey... I found the flashlight and the holographic projector... here!” She handed them over to Yuuri as she moved to the side of the room to turn off the lights in the living room. “Don’t forget to turn on the flashlight first so I don’t trip over.”

“Sure!” Yuuri replied as she turned on the flashlight just as Chito turned the lights in the room off. Moving inside the fort Chito sat close to Yuuri. “This is so comfy and cute Chii-chan!” Yuuri with a wide smile moved the flashlight around the fort lighting it up. It felt so comfortable inside with all the pillows and the blankets, like another small house inside their house. “I don’t think we have to leave the fort ever Chii-chan, we can just live inside here with all the pillows.”

“Well, we have to leave it to go prepare food and work Yuu. And Reo and Mieko will be worried about us if we stay inside here forever.” Chito giggled as she took the holographic projector in her hands inspecting it. It was a small device that Mieko gave to her that could emulate the night sky within a room with a holographic projection on all kinds of surfaces, but she never tried it out yet. “Oh we don’t have to take it down if you don’t want to, we can sleep inside here tomorrow too after your procedure.”

“Oh hey, Chii-chan is that the ‘holographic’ thingy you kept talking about?” Yuuri asked as she looked at her holding the device in her hands. “Yes I think that is it, let’s try it out.” Placing it on the side of the fort she pressed the button on top of the device, however, nothing was yet happening. They both kept waiting for something to happen, as they looked at the device.

“Do you think it’s broken Chii-chan?” Yuuri asked her with a puzzled look, glaring at the device. “Hmmm... Oh! I think we have to turn the flashlight off.” Chito replied as Yuuri reached around for the button on the flashlight and turned it off.

Suddenly, the whole fort came alive with shining and glittering lights, showing the billions of stars, planets, nebulas in the whole wide universe.

“Chii-chan, WOW! This is amazing!” Yuuri exclaimed as she laid down on the pillows looking up at the blanket above as the stars it emulated felt almost real and alive. Chito laid next to her also glaring up at the ‘night sky’ with wonder in her eyes. “Oh... so this is why she said it might help me with my nightmares, it feels so calming to look at it. I think it might work in our bedroom as well.”

“Chii-chan, it’s like when we were sleeping outside looking at the beautiful distant stars, but in the safety of our home and inside a pillow fort... eeee” she squealed with a wide smile and snuggled her pillow. Chito gently blushed as she looked at her happy smile, it seemed like she had forgotten all about her worries of the neuroprosthetic surgery the next day. Chito knew the risks were minimal and that it would have improved her life and given her full mobility back but she was still worried about Yuuri. She loved her more than anything in this entire world and she would never let anything bad happen to her again.

“Hey... Yuu.” Chito grabbed her blanket close and leaned up at the pillows with her arms opened wide. “I promised to return all the warmth back to you that you gave me at the snow fort. Come close to me.” she smiled, as Yuuri moved closer and laid on her chest looking up at her.

“Chii-chan... you are comfier than all the pillows in the world!” Yuuri replied and smiled closing her eyes under the safety and warmth of the pillow fort and Chito’s chest.

“This is how I felt outside that time in the snow fort and I knew it might help you fall asleep. I felt so safe and warm in your arms and I knew one day if we found a home it’s how I would love to sleep close to you.” Chito replied and smiled as she covered herself and Yuuri with a blanket and looked up at the ‘night sky’ projected on the blanket above. “Every time you snuggle me close to you I just fall asleep almost immediately Yuu.”

“So hey Chii-chan, we should invite Reo, Mieko, and Kazuo for a sleepover in our fort!” Yuuri replied with her eyes still closed laying into Chito’s chest. “You said that that the pillows and the blankets in the other room were for guests to sleep sometimes in our house.”

“I think the pillow fort is too small for all 5 of us, they can always sleep in the other room if they want. Mieko and Kazuo live nearby and they never had to stay over.” Chito replied, the warmth of Yuuri’s body always felt so comfortable and pleasant for her.

“Maybe Reo can stay here sometimes... I know he is alone and sleeps at the hospital all the time...” Yuuri responded back still huddled into Chito, slowly her speech was getting mumbled as she was starting to fall asleep.

“I know, but he told me he likes to sleep in the hospital, he doesn’t feel so lonely there. Besides he and Chiya don’t really live together anymore, and he feels alone at his apartment.” Chito replied still looking at the ‘night sky’ with sleepy eyes. “He can stay here anytime he wants, it will be just like living with grandpa.”

“Oh... why don’t they... live together... I am worried about him... Chii-chan...”

“I don’t think they love each other like they used to do Yuu. Reo is always busy with his work at the hospital and Chiya is always out on supply runs is seldom home, so they don’t see each other often and they grew apart... Mieko lives with her husband and they are waiting for a baby, so Reo lives alone.” Chito replied as she held Yuuri tight in her embrace. “So hey... Yuu what kind of ‘gyoza’ do you want to eat tomorrow? We can also go get fresh mackerel from the market too.”

“Yuu?” she asked again but to no reply. Yuuri must have already fallen asleep in her arms as she started to softly snore on her chest. Chito smiled again and laid her head on hers. “I know Yuu... this is how you helped me stay alive all this time outside... I love you my precious flower.” Closing her eyes Chito also fell asleep, inside the warm pillow fort they built together. The holographic stars kept glimmering above keeping them safe and softly lulling them both to sleep.

As long as they lived, they never slept apart. Not even once. They were always there for one another, in sickness and in health, even in their old age, safe from harm of the cruel and cold world outside. It’s all Chito and Yuuri wished for themselves, happy humble life and somewhere warm to stay the night together. All the warm, tasty food they can eat and most of all, their growing family by their side.

Foreword

From the bottom of my heart, thank you for following the girls on their “next” adventure exploring the last layer that their world had to offer. I hope you enjoyed reading the story and your thoughts, feedback, and reviews are always welcome. Knowing that you reached so far to read this Foreword brings me a lot of happiness!

Girls’ Last Tour is one of those stories that left a huge impact on me. Even bigger than most stories I’ve read in my life, and it was mostly because of my love for the girls. I think the empty void the manga ending left in my heart is what inspired me to write this story. As much as the ‘ending’ had an impact, I felt that Tsukumizu left us with so much more to the story to go on with. Deep in my heart, I knew I couldn’t leave the girls to freeze out there. and I am happy that in my story they found a home and family.

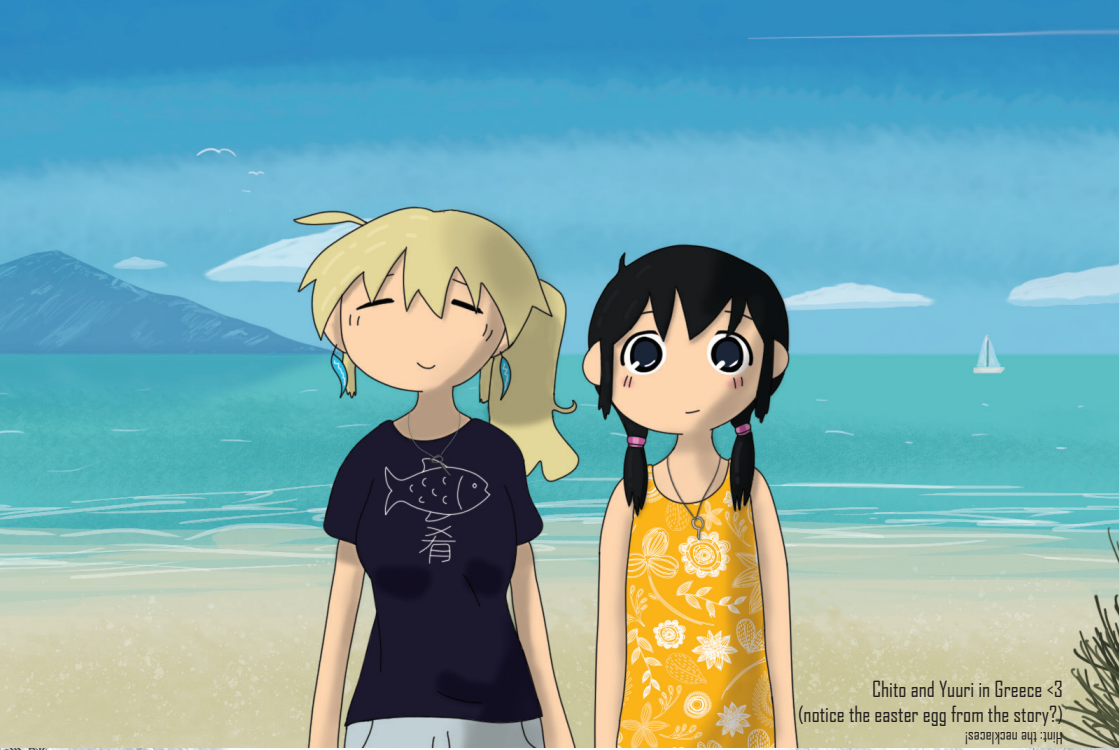
I had this story in my head for 5 months now and It kept bugging me until one night in May 2019 the day after I lost my job, I couldn’t sleep and sat down to write Chapter 1. It was originally going to play out really differently, but as I kept writing and writing, it came up with something completely crazy, cheesy, sad, dark and really emotional. I kept writing it through tears, through laughter, through sleepless nights and even now in 2020 I keep coming back for the 3rd or it could have been the 4th rewrite because I felt there is so much you can change and add to it and almost never run out of ideas. I want this to be a perfect story for the girls, even if I am unexperienced in writing stories and this was the first and probably the only novel I will ever write.

Sadly I know that it’s not an official story and some of the Girls’ Last Tour fans prefer the manga ending for the message it brings, but I felt that with my story I had an extra message to convey, because if after everything seems hopeless, it’s immeasurable to look for the positive outcomes. Even after everything life throws at you, you have to keep fighting for yourself and even the one you cherish the most in your life. I hope this story conveyed a message of hopefulness and one of perservation because we only have one planet for now and we have to preserve our flora and fauna, and even our music, art, history and technology.

Deep in my heart, I consider this story as canon, and I hope even in your hearts it brought you happiness and warmth. For me, this is how I see the story played after they reached the top of the world.

I hope you feel the same!

CorrectGrapefruit (Nuko Nui)



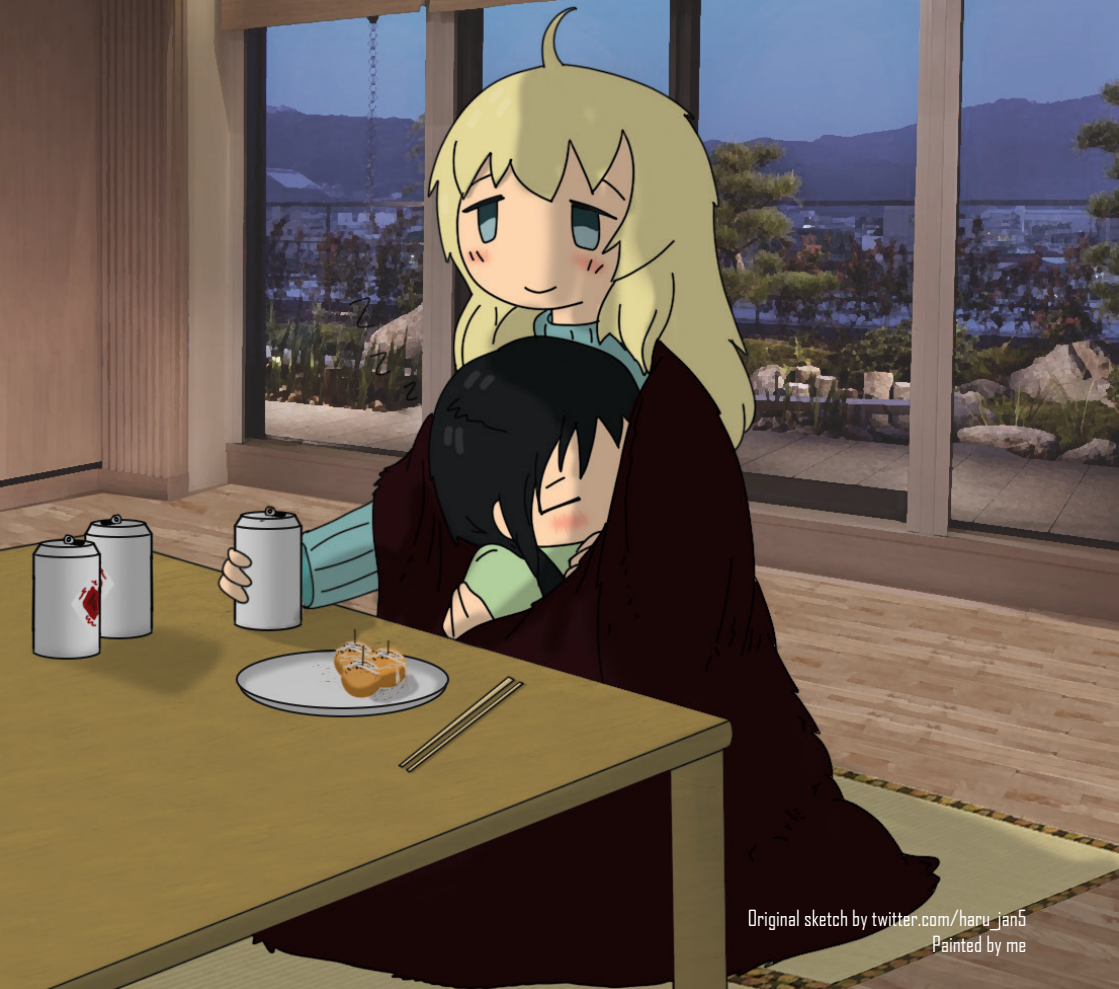
Chito and Yuuri in Greece <3
(notice the easter egg from the story?)
hint: the necklaces



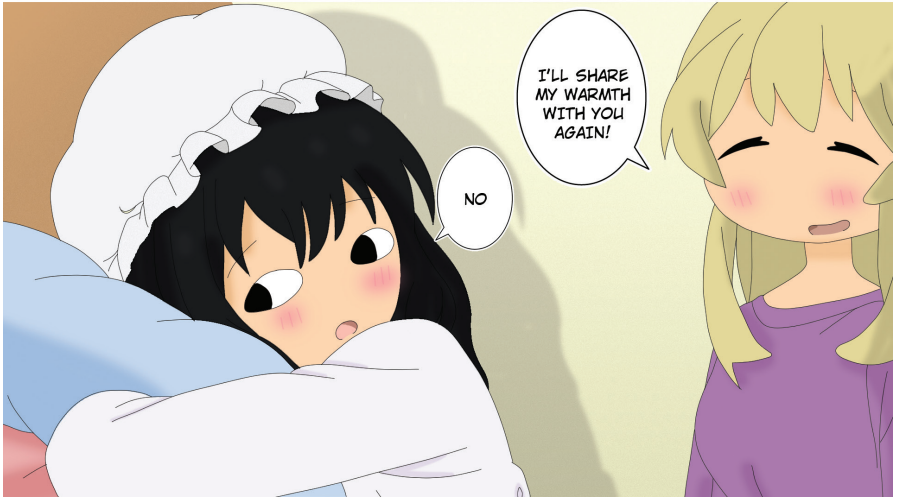
Using some scenes from the anime as references I drew this
(This was my first BLT fan-art :)



The Pillow Fort scene from the story drawn by me!



Original sketch by twitter.com/haru_jan5
Painted by me



Have **YOU** or anyone **YOU** know
been struggling through
the great potato depression?



**IF YOU OR YOUR FAMILY AND CLOSE FRIENDS
HAVE BEEN AFFECTED, YOU ARE ELIGIBLE
FOR A DOSE OF "GIRLS' NEXT TOUR"**

WHAT will happen to the girls after the ending of the manga?

WHO were the flying mushrooms the girls met on their journey?

WHAT is the secret behind the last layer?

All of these questions and many more secrets unveiled
in the sensational new (fan)sequel "Girls' Next Tour"
available for a **FREE** download at the nearest link!

9 out of 10 Nuko's
Recommend "Girls' Next Tour"



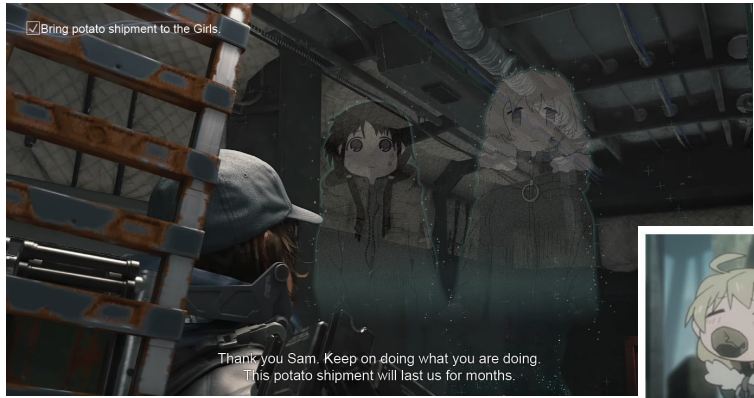
WARNING MAY CAUSE SIDE EFFECTS LIKE DISJOINTED REALITY, ADVERSE CRYING, MILD LAUGHTER AND IN SOME CASES SEVERE HEAD-CANON TRAUMA



Ojii-Chan's tips to surviving the Post-Apocalypse

Has all life on planet Earth ceased to exist? Have your ancestor left this planet completely devoid of life and happiness in your hands? So you are left here to fend off raiders and fight for food? Fear not... with just these easy tips you will be able to live a long and prosperous life even if everything seems hopeless. It seems like mankind constantly makes the same mistake

and remember... the hydroponics bay only work when you ration the seeds as well. That is one way to be able to use the leftovers from the planets and process it into something edible like ration bars. And with just a touch of chemical it will taste exactly like chocolate or fruit of your own choice. Remember! Rationing and clear mind is your friend in surviv-



Random GLT Memes I made over the months <3

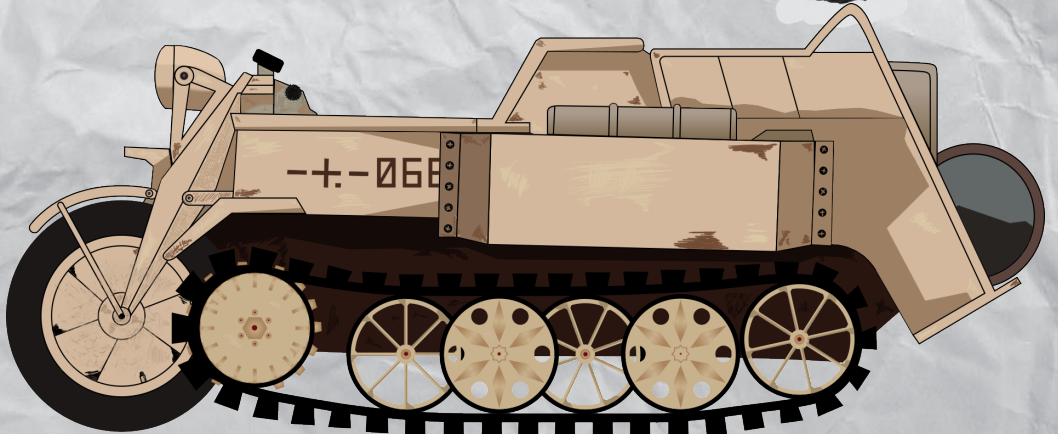




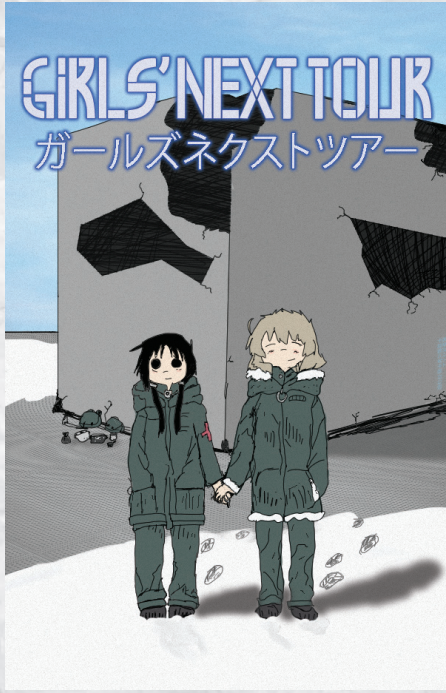


Chito's premonition dream in Chapter 2





Characters and Item designs (Never finished with the other characters :)



First Cover



Second Cover



Third Cover

GIRLS LAST STRANDING

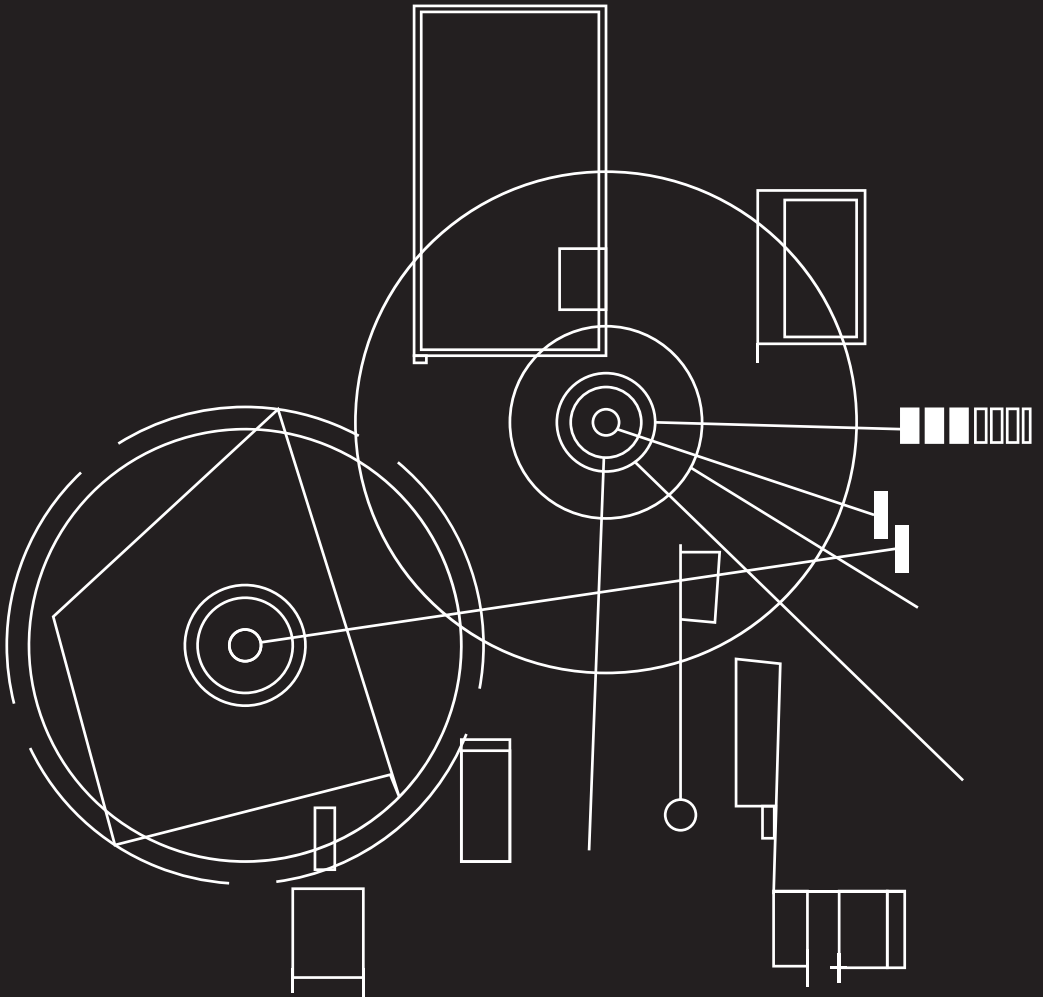


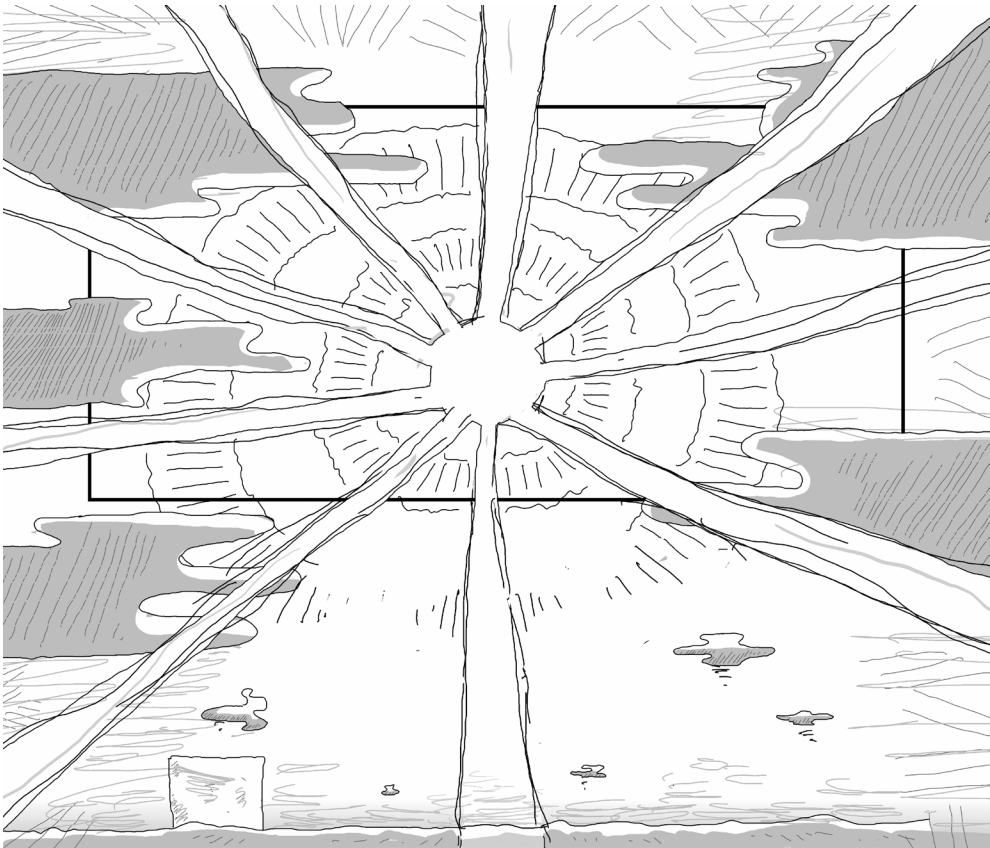
Crossover art I made with Death Stranding
(was retweeted by Kojima himself <3)

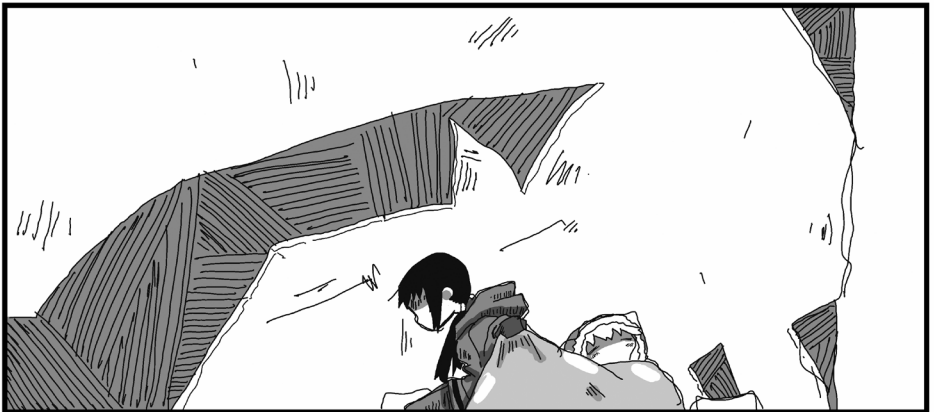
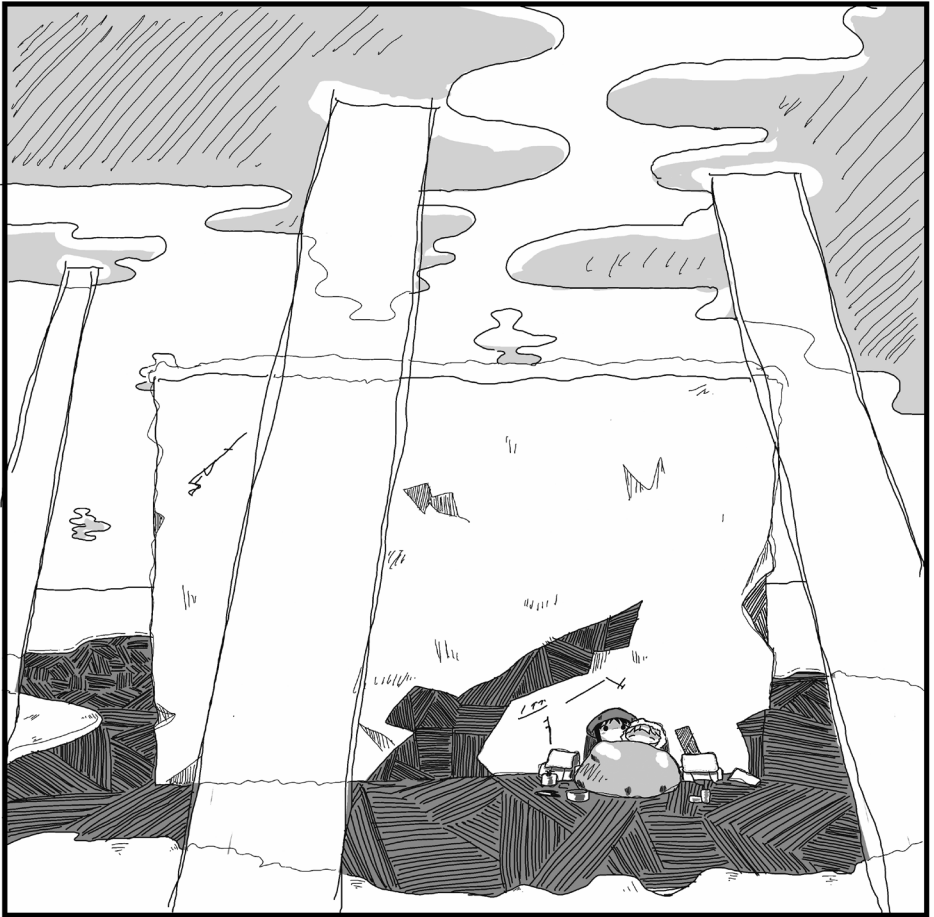
Manga Concept

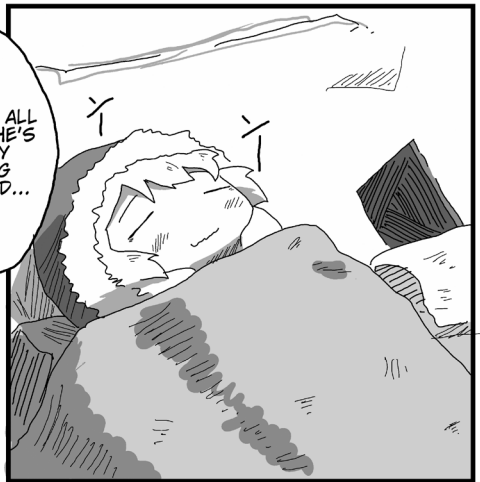
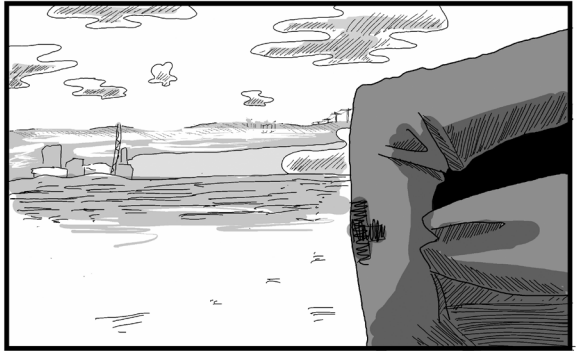
by: Charse North Espinosa

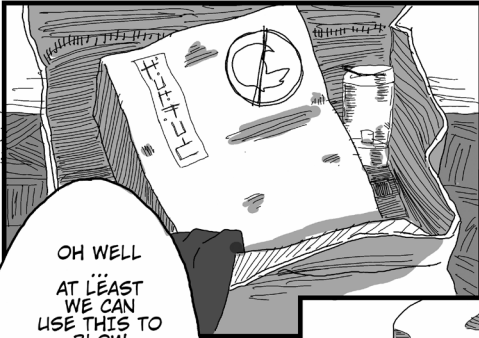
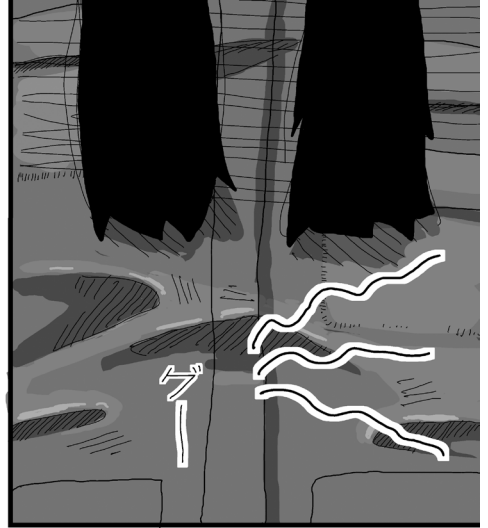
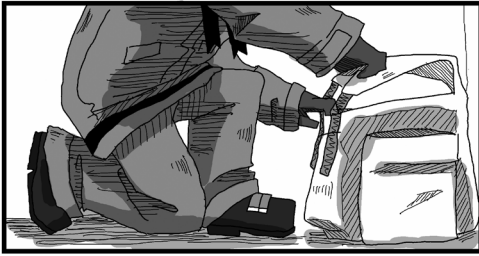
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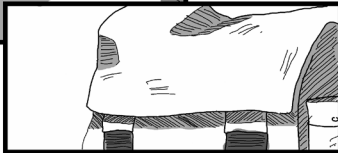




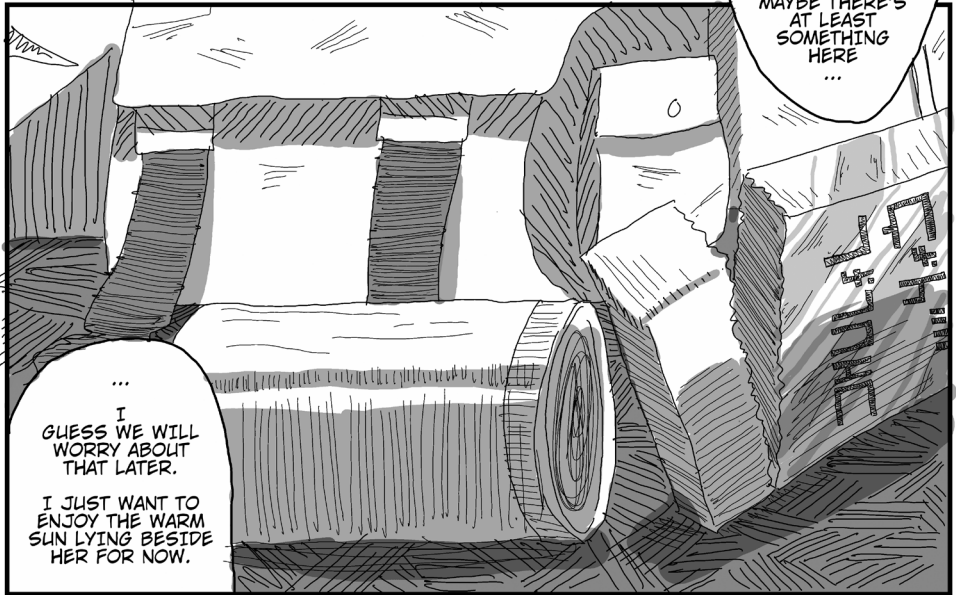




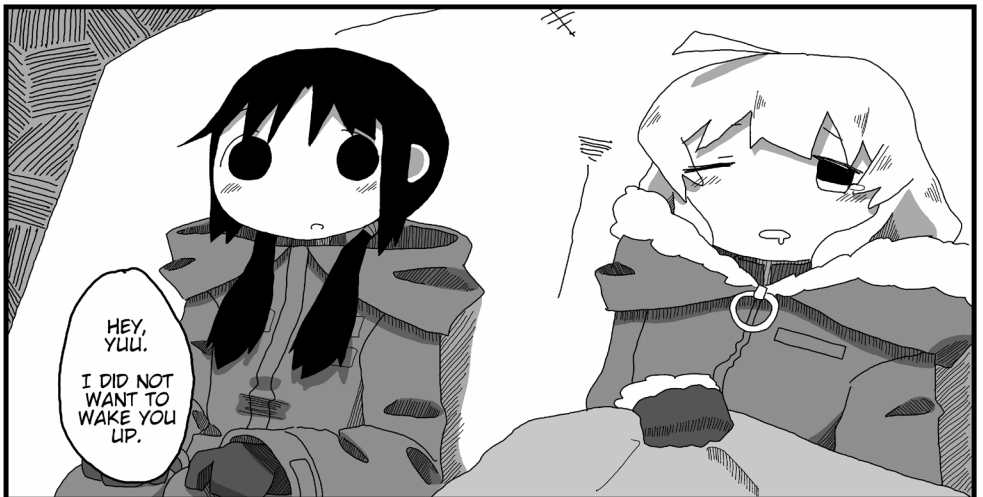
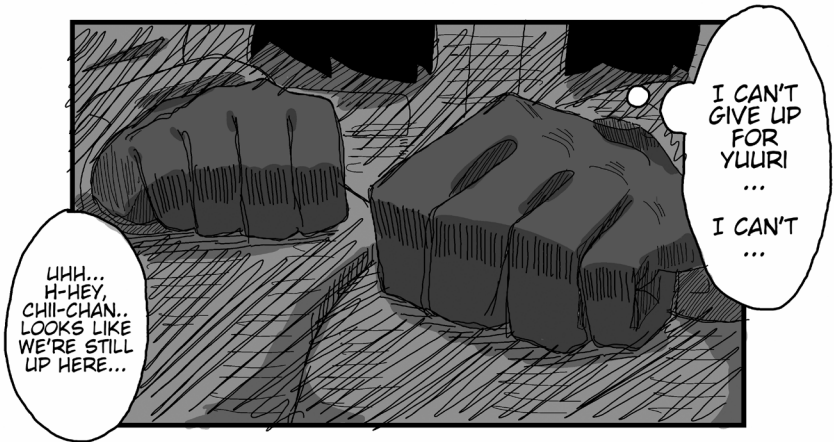
OH WELL
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OUR FIRST
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THAT LATER.
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I JUST WANT TO
ENJOY THE WARM
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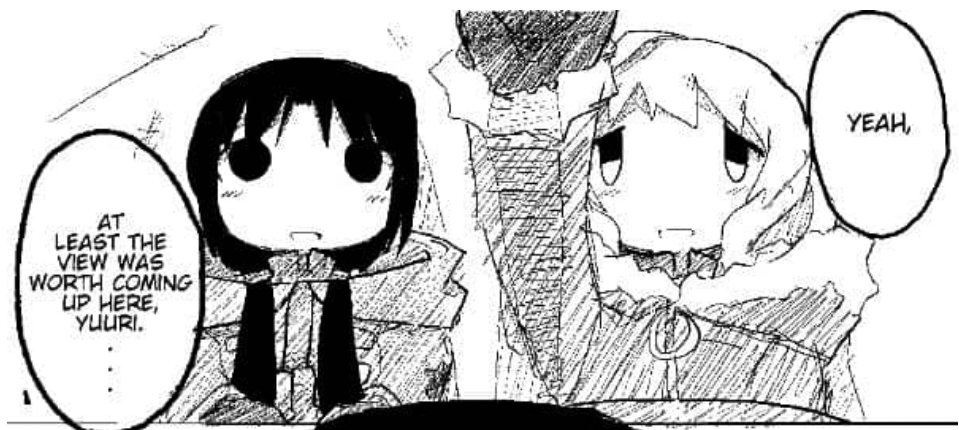
JUST
YOU AND ME
EATING ALL
THE FISH WE
CAUGHT
FROM A
LAKE,



I
REALLY
WANT TO
HAVE FISH
AGAIN
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SO
TASTY
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AT
LEAST THE
VIEW WAS
WORTH COMING
UP HERE,
YUURI.
...

YEAH,



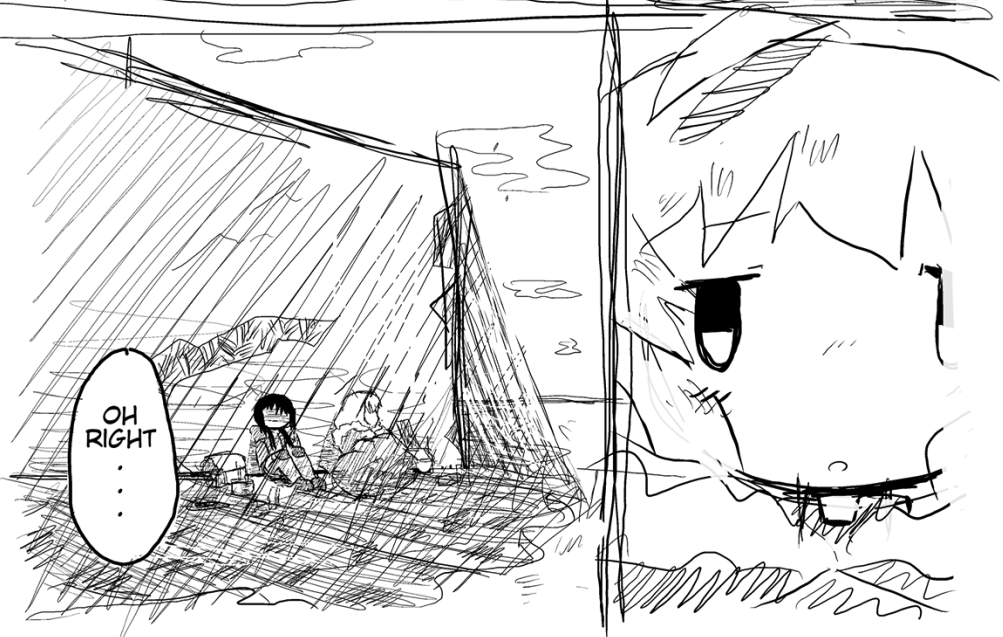
WHAT
SHOULD WE
ACTUALLY DO
NEXT, YUURI?

WE FOUND NO ONE AND NOTHING.

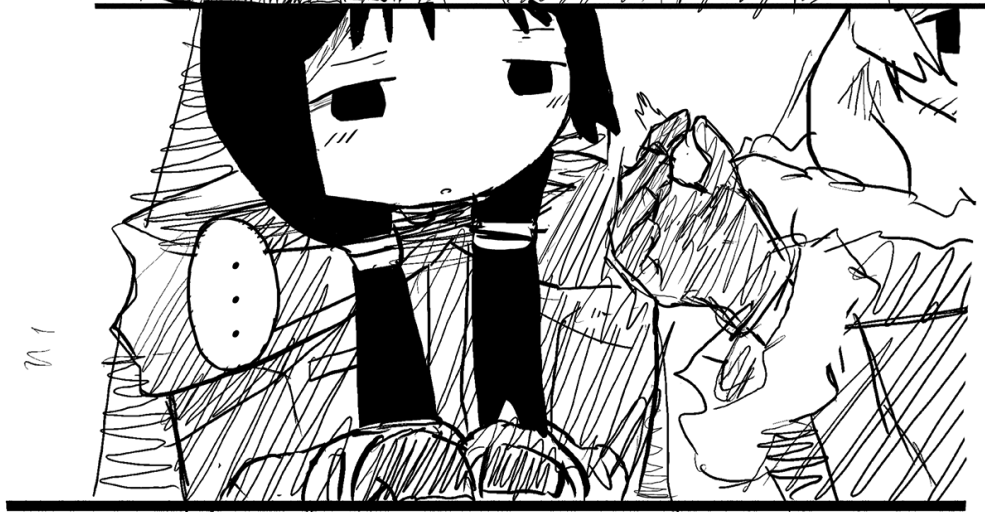
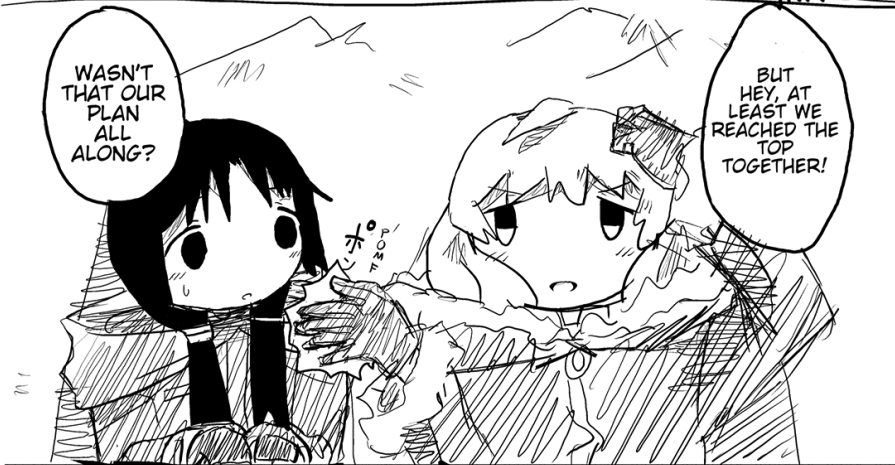
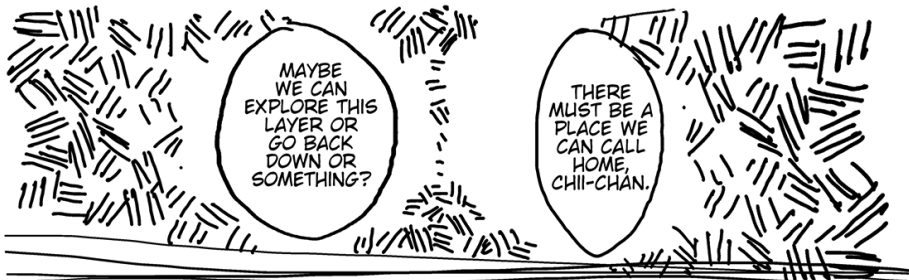
SO FAR WE ONLY FOUND THIS SQUARE MONUMENT.

WE HAVE NO FOOD AND OUR RIDE BROKE.

I MEAN, WE GOT UP HERE BUT...



OH RIGHT
...



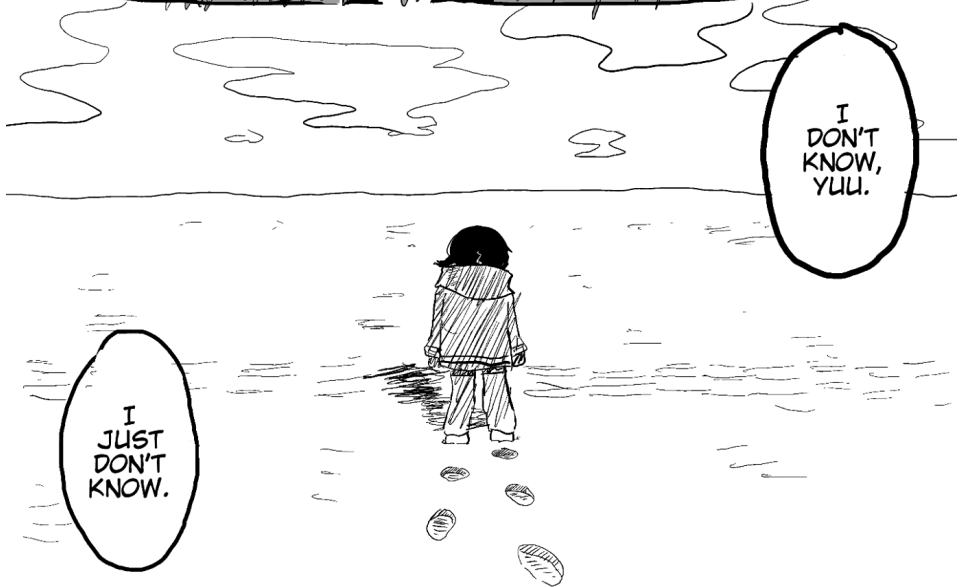


...

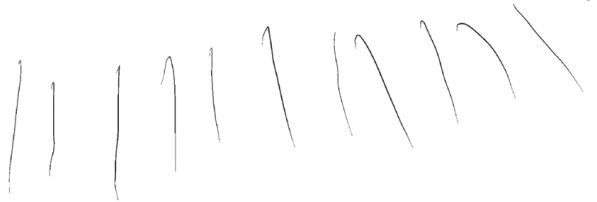
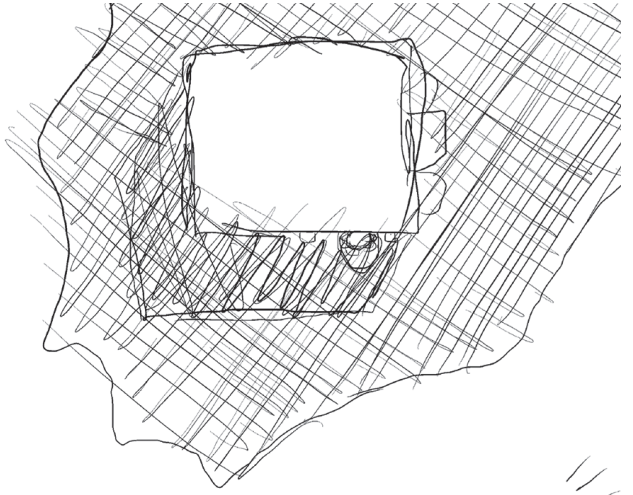
DO YOU
THINK IT WAS
A MISTAKE
CLIMBING
UP HERE?



I
DON'T
KNOW,
YUU.



I
JUST
DON'T
KNOW.



Thank You !!!

