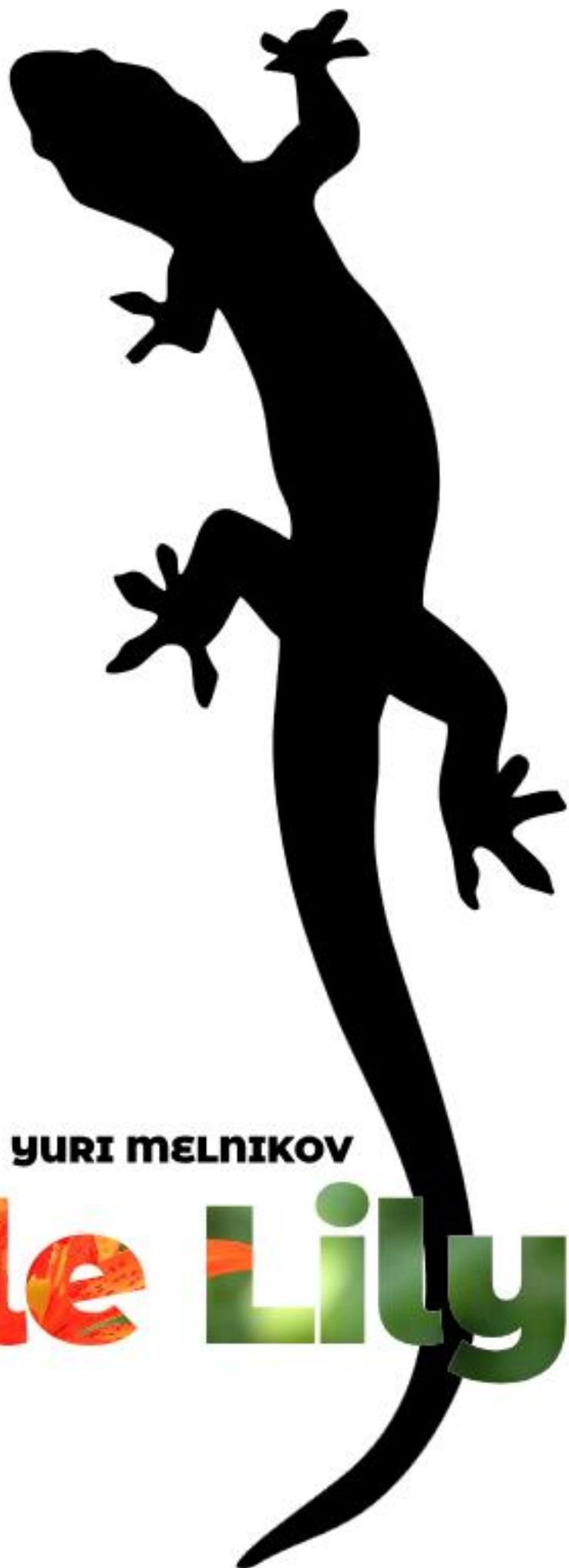


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YURI MELNIKOV

Little Lily

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*I repeat your name
At night in the silent dark,
and it sounds so far away,
as it has never sounded before.
This name is further than the stars,
and sadder than the weary rain.
– Federico García Lorca*

Prologue

She sat on a warm stone. The stone remembered the morning – remembered how the first ray of light had touched its rough surface, how the dew had lazily trickled down its sides, vanishing into the dry earth, how it had begun slowly, drop by drop, to absorb the blinding zenith light. And now, by noon, it harbored so much dense, heavy heat that one could boil an egg on it, if anyone in this world had an egg, and if anyone wanted to boil it, and if there existed anyone at all besides herself.

But there was no one. There was only the stone. There was the sun, resting on her shoulders like a heavy gold coin. There was a scent – dry, slightly bitter, like the exhalation of an earth that had long ceased praying for rain and had forgotten the names of its gods. The grass didn't smell like grass; it smelled like the memory of grass: whatever remained of the stems after months of drought and sweltering heat – dust, in which the barely perceptible, ghostly spirit of wild mint and wormwood still lingered. Somewhere far away, perhaps beyond the hill, perhaps beyond the sea – she did not yet know what a sea was, but she felt its subtle, corrosive seed of salt in the air – somewhere far away, something massive was burning. The smoke was not visible, the sky remained ringing and transparent, but her nose caught it: a faint, ancient bitterness, as if someone had placed a glowing coal, oozing an anthracite gleam, on the very edge of the horizon.

She did not remember how she had ended up here. It felt as though she had always sat here, her arms wrapped around her sharp, dry knees.

The boulder she had settled upon was not alone. All around, as if halted halfway between becoming a mountain or crumbling into dust, lay others – gray, rusty, threaded with white quartz that looked like lightning frozen in time. They were all warm, each in its own way: one like a mother's palm smelling of rice flour and soap, another like the hot breath of a dog, a third like cheeks after a long, frenzied fit of weeping, when the tears are gone but the fever remains. Dry little bushes grew between the stones – hyssop, perhaps, or some thorny scrub – whose stems were thin and springy as rusted wire, their tiny leaves carrying a scent so pungent it made one want to sneeze and cry at the same time.

Then she saw the lizard. It lay on a flat stone – slightly to the left and just above her hand – drinking the sun. It looked like a miniature dragon, cast from old malachite dust and liquid, darkened bronze. Its emerald scales caught the rays, turning them into blinding, microscopic sparks. It lay so motionlessly that for a split second, the girl mistook it for an primordial carving etched into the rock: the same grayish-brown underside, the same dark speckles, the same tiny, almost inhuman pattern. But then the lizard blinked – a single, instantaneous, translucent contraction of a leathery membrane – and the girl understood: it was alive. Time pulsated inside this tiny body.

The girl did not move. She knew – not from anyone else, not from words in a book, but from the very fact of her own presence here, in this merciless light – she knew she had to be quiet. Quieter than silence itself. Quieter than a shadow creeping over grains of sand.

The lizard was basking. Its body lay sprawled across the stone with that absolute, eerie trust accessible only to creatures with cold blood. It let the noon enter it – through its scales, through the bony plates of its skull, through every delicate little joint in its tail – and transformed this heat into movement, into pure life, into an underlying capacity to vanish into a crevice in the blink of an eye if the world suddenly became unsafe. But for now, the world was not unsafe. The world consisted of warmth, stone, and the scent of wormwood. The world was beautiful.

The girl looked at the lizard and saw everything with a frightening, almost agonizing clarity: The five toes of each tiny paw, pressed against the rough quartz – with barely visible suction cups at the tips, like poppy seeds; The flanks, which moved – ever so slightly, yet continuously – sending fine ripples across the scales like a mirror of water into which an invisible strand of hair has been dropped, only in reverse: not from the top down, but from the inside out; The tail. Long, elegant, trailing away from the body like a sentence someone hadn't had the time or the energy to finish – it lay on the stone in a perfect arc, each scale casting its own separate, miniature shadow; And the eyes. Two round, bulging, yellow eyes with vertical slits for pupils, holding neither thought nor fear – nothing but a readiness to leave. To flash and vanish.

The girl thought about the proper way to be a lizard. How wonderful it must be – to bask on a scorching boulder and know that you are an extension of this boulder, and a part of the sun, and a part of the dry wormwood wind, and that there is no difference between your body and this world, because you are simply one of the places where the world has decided to become thick and tangible for a fleeting moment.

She reached out her hand – slowly, the way a figure moves on a mountain trail far in the distance – not to touch, but to feel, simply to get closer – and her fingers, smeared with gray limestone dust, hovered in the air.

And then came the Sound. It came neither from the right nor the left; it came from everywhere – from above, from the faded blue, and from below, from the granite depths. It was not thunder – she would have recognized thunder; she remembered thunder with her entire body, remembered how the air suddenly turns into an iron wall and strikes your chest, your ears, knocking out teeth and thoughts. This was something else. A collapse. A strained, visceral cracking of the tearing fabric of the world, splitting along some invisible, ancient seam – as if a massive, unseen hand had gripped the mountain itself and snapped its spine in two.

The stones around her began to hum with a dull, terrifying rumble. The earth sent a dry, fine vibration into her tailbone, her thighs, the very base of her skull – not loud, but so deep that the sound was perceived not by the eardrums, but by the spine itself. Somewhere – close, behind her or deep within the cliff – a massive stratum shifted, tore loose, and crumbled into dust, and from this invisible destruction, the air was instantly filled with stone powder. It had no taste, but it possessed a heavy density: it settled on her dry lips, on her eyelashes, on her open, frozen palms.

The birds. They rose all at once – not a flock, not two – but every single feathered creature that had been hiding until that moment in crevices, in thorny bushes, on ledges. Their cry was neither song nor chirp – it was pure, dry, inarticulate terror, transformed into an ultrasonic wave. They shrieked the way creatures shriek in the face of utter annihilation, creatures that have no words and therefore no ability to lie or comfort themselves. Their cry was true – hopelessly, absolutely true – and from this dense truth the air thickened, grew matte, and for a moment, the sun overhead dimmed.

The shadow. It fell upon the stone swiftly and ravenously – not like a ordinary cloud, but like the plummeting of something heavy and unseen. It was not simply a darkening; it was a collision of cold and heat. The shadow was thick, almost anthracite, devoid of gradients or halftones – an absolute, impenetrable impossibility of light. A sudden, sclerotic chill of a crypt swept over the rock.

The lizard vanished. No, it wasn't a disappearance. An unforgotten, immutable law triggered in its primal brain: to stay alive, you must be able to sever a part of yourself. You must leave the world the very thing it is trying to use to hold you. There was a barely audible, wet, brief snap – the sound of living fibers tearing. An emerald-bronze lightning bolt darted into a dark, saving crevice between the stones. But the tail remained on the boulder.

It was not dead. It writhed, bounded, violently and rhythmically thrashing against the gray stone, dancing its own mad, death-throe dance. In this tiny stump of flesh, in this scaled ribbon, there was so much desperate, thrashing, blind energy, as if it were trying to deceive the fallen shadow, to take the entire blow upon itself while the lizard quieted deep in the fissure. This was pure physiology elevated to the absolute of beauty: the rhythm of nerves that had not yet realized they no longer belonged to anyone. The tail arched like a plucked string that still trembles, remembering its final, highest note.

The girl gasped. Shock pinned her in place, but then she slowly reached out her hand, as if obeying another's will. Her fingers carefully closed around the thrashing piece.

It rested in her palm. Warm. Weightless. Convulsively restless – its tip still quivering like a thread in the wind. She felt it with every cell of her skin, every receptor on her fingertips, how smooth and hard-cold the scales were on the curves, and how the living, tender, pinkish skin showed between them – wet, like the tip of a tongue.

And then the smell caught up with her. It wasn't blood – lizards do not smell of iron and human slaughter. It was a different scent – delicate, dry, like a snapped green branch, like the sap that oozes at the site of a violent rupture. The scent of parting. The scent of how the living leaves a part of itself behind to keep breathing.

She looked at the tail. It had no eyes, but it lay in her palm so trustingly and heavily, as if it were the most precious offering. Finally, the tip stopped twitching. The last spasm subsided, leaving only warmth.

The girl looked up. The crevice where the little emerald dragon had taken refuge was bottomless and silent. Not a sound came from it.

The stone dust slowly settled, swirling in invisible air currents. The birds fell silent, retreating into their rocky burrows. The sun returned – exactly the same as it had been before the sound, before the terrible shadow and the birds' cry. The boulder beneath her once again

swelled with golden heat, the wormwood smelled just as bitter, and on the very edge of the earth, the invisible coal smoldered just as smokelessly.

She closed her palm – slowly, carefully, the way one closes an old, sacred book – and pressed her fist to her chest, right against her beating heart. She did not cry. She did not smile. She simply sat on the scorching stone in the middle of an endless 'now,' holding what was lost, knowing that this loss was the most real and honest thing she had left.

Then sleep fell upon her. Thick and warm, like a woolen blanket.

And when she woke up, her palm was empty. The tail had vanished – carried off by the wind, by ants, or by the earth itself. But on her skin remained two thin, semicircular imprints of scales, pressed so deeply into the flesh it was as if they were a seal. Or a brand.

She stared at these marks for a long time, until the sun dipped below the peak of the cliff and a long, cool shadow fell across her lap. Then she stood up, brushed the dust from her hem, and started walking.

Where to? She did not yet know.

Chapter 1. Awakening

The blade curved like the beak of a bird of prey, and for a fleeting second, it caught the blinding, white sun – caught it so sharply, flared so brightly, that the eye inside the dream began to ache.

She stood in the yielding, cool shade of a stone archway, seeing everything around her with that terrifying, crystalline clarity that only comes a second before you wake up. The man – tall, with a face weathered by desert winds to the color of old, darkened bronze – stepped toward the man in light robes. His movement was flawless in its lazy grace, almost tender, almost loving: his hand slipped easily, effortlessly into the folds of rough wool on the other man's chest, and the metal entered the flesh with a strange, soft, rustling sound, as if a knife were slicing through an overripe melon. It was a triumph of pure geometry, an ideal, self-contained act of the merging of steel and human warmth. Instantly, petal by petal, a wet scarlet chrysanthemum began to bloom on the faded, unbleached cloth. It grew, pulsating with the very life that was leaving the body right at that moment to become a simply unbelievably beautiful, symmetrical stain on the fabric. And it smelled of hot iron, bitter copper, and scorching dust that scratched the throat.

The man with the bronze face turned around. His eyes, black and dry as sun-cured olives, met her gaze, piercing right through her, through the thickness of centuries and someone else's memory.

“Run!” his cry tore through the ringing midday silence of the square, like tearing thick silk. “Tamar! Run!”

And she ran. The narrow streets, squeezed by white limestone, rushed to meet her. The air burned her throat, smelling of fermented honey and overripe figs that burst beneath her bare feet. Her feet pounded against the scorching, uneven stone; her soles burned, but stopping was impossible, because behind her – she felt it not with her ears, but with the skin between her shoulder blades – something massive, heavy was moving, making the walls of the houses terrifying tremors. She dashed forward, her shoulders knocking aside woven

baskets, and dark purple fruit oozing sweet juice spilled under the wheels of unseen chariots. She ducked into a blind alley, and bright, damp, freshly dyed fabrics hung from wall to wall struck her in the face: carmine-red, rich saffron, piercingly blue cloths entangled her, stuck to her lips, blinded her, suffocated her, stripped her of her name...

“Nakayama. Wake up. Do you hear me? Wake up.”

The blue fabric of the dream instantly turned rigid, gray, and cold. It no longer smelled of figs or oriental spices. It smelled of sour, days-old sweat, rotten straw, and an underlying, sticky fear.

Yuriko opened her eyes and inhaled convulsively, with a rasp, as if surfacing from the bottom of a deep, abandoned well. Miko’s thin, icy fingers still gripped her shoulder in a deathly hold, biting straight to the bone through the filthy fabric.

“Get up,” Miko said. Her voice was flat, dry, and empty, like an overturned terracotta bowl from which every last drop has been drunk. “Get up, Yuriko. They are here.”

All around was not a sun-drenched ancient square, but Ihamigama – a cave that had become the Third Surgical Hospital of the Okinawa Prefecture. The gloom here was not merely the absence of light; it was a dense, porous, tangible entity that pressed against the eardrums and smelled so foul that a heavy, sour nausea constantly rose in the throat. This sickening, sweetish stench of gangrene and decaying living flesh mingled here with the sharp, nostril-burning reek of chloride of lime, stagnant urine, carbolic acid, and raw earth churned by explosions. Water dripped from the invisible, moisture-oozing stone vault with the monotony of a broken chronometer. *Drip. Drip. Drip.* The sound ate into the subconscious, ticking away the seconds of other people's lives.

The girls – students of the First Women’s School – sat huddled together in the damp darkness, clustered in heaps like freezing, terrified nestlings. Their school uniforms, once immaculately neat with sailor collars and starched blouses, were now stiff with ingrained dirt, clay, and dry, brown, alien blood. They were children – ordinary fifteen- or seventeen-year-old girls from the village of Mawashiasato, with sharp knees protruding from hunger, thin necks, and cracked lips bitten to the flesh. They were shaking – not from the cold, though a tomb-like, bone-chilling dampness filled the cave – but because the fear inside them had outgrown the stage of tears and hardened into a dull, numb stupor.

In the center of the cave, illuminated by the trembling, dying beam of a kerosene lamp, stood their teacher. His face, once round and kind, had sharpened over these weeks, turning into a skull stretched with yellowish parchment skin. His round-rimmed glasses were askew, the lenses covered in a web of tiny scratches and limestone dust, but he didn't notice. Here, beneath these low vaults, he seemed too large and too straight – a man who had already made a decision and was now carrying it like a tombstone.

“Girls,” the teacher said. His voice creaked and stumbled like an un-oiled door hinge, but in the silenced cave it echoed up to the ceiling, bouncing off the wet walls. “Listen to me carefully. Our duty... The Himeyuri unit is disbanded. Orders from headquarters. The Army can no longer hold this line and protect you.”

A quiet, collective, convulsive sigh swept through the cave – like the rustle of dry leaves caught in an autumn wind. Those who had been sleeping woke up. Those who had

been quietly moaning on rotting mats in the depths fell silent. Duty was over? To them, who had considered their work in the hospital as something eternal and unbreakable, this "over" sounded as if they had been told the sun simply wouldn't rise over Okinawa tomorrow.

"You know who is coming here," the teacher continued, and for a moment a mad, feverish fire flashed in his eyes, drowned in their dark sockets. "The Americans. Long-nosed demons. They will spare no one. If they take you alive... what they will do to you will be a thousand times worse than death. They will dishonor you, tear your bodies to pieces, and throw you to the dogs. You are daughters of the Emperor, students of the First School. You must not surrender."

He turned and lowered a heavy canvas backpack to the stone floor. From the bag came a strange sound – dull, dry, purely ceramic. Like ceramic pots clinking against each other at a bazaar.

The head nurse, her face as white as chalk, began passing these round, rough objects through the rows. When Yuriko's turn came, her hand reached into the sack, and her fingers bumped against something cold and weighty.

"This is a grenade," the sensei said quietly, almost soundlessly. "Type 4. You know how to use it. A weapon of despair."

It was not made of iron. It was a round orb of coarse, baked, dark-brown clay, covered in a thin layer of rough glaze, about the size of a large Okinawan orange. They weren't made in military factories, but in pottery workshops, by hand, when the Empire ran out of metal.

"And one more thing," the teacher pulled small paper packets from his pocket, rustling in his trembling fingers. "This is cyanide. In case the grenade misfires. Over there, by the exit, in the kitchen, there are two milk cans with condensed milk left. You can... add this in. Stir it. And drink it. It will be easier that way."

No one cried. The word "milk" – the only peaceful, sweet word from a past life – sounded here like a terrible, absurd joke.

"Teacher..." the voice of a girl from the corner of the cave, where the most severely wounded, the amputees, lay, trembled so violently that her words broke. "What about the wounded? Are we leaving them? What will happen to them?"

Minato Kobayashi froze for a second. His hands, holding a ceramic orb, shook harder, but he did not turn his head toward the gloom, toward the pus-oozing mats where people with torn-open bellies were wheezing.

"They," he replied dryly and abruptly, "will have their own choice too."

Yuriko looked down at her uniform. Her fingers automatically, with a sort of domestic neatness, began to smooth out the crumpled sailor collar, to button the surviving buttons of her blouse. It was unbearably absurd: the world was collapsing, the walls of the cave were shuddering from the distant strikes of naval artillery, and they were straightening their clothes as if preparing for a calligraphy lesson. Beside her, without uttering a word, Miko hid her ceramic grenade in the deep pocket of her dark hakama. The white ribbon in her hair was gray with dust, but tied in a perfect, precise bow.

"Let's go," the sensei ordered.

And they ran.

The exit from the Ihamigama cave didn't just let them out – it literally spat them outside, right into the gaping, boiling maw of hell. The sky over Okinawa wasn't blue; it was the color of clotted, baked blood, ripped open by black pillars of greasy smoke. The entire island shook, shuddering beneath their bare soles like a giant wounded whale that had just taken a thousand harpoons in the back all at once.

The jungle absorbed them instantly, swallowing them whole as muddy water swallows a thrown stone. The air outside proved stifling, hot as tropical broth; it was so humid that Yuriko's blouse was soaked in seconds, turning into a thin, sticky film glued to her body. This air smelled of ash, cordite, shredded pandanus wood, and the sweet, suffocating, nauseating stench of rot – the stench of hundreds of bodies that had been lying in these thickets for days. The sounds of explosions merged into one continuous, droning metallic chord that vibrated their teeth and bones.

They dashed through the chaos of greenery. Enormous fern leaves, resembling the bony ribs of prehistoric fish, violently whipped their faces, leaving sticky green streaks. Time here lost its linearity: it would stretch, turning every step into an endless, viscous torture, then race at a gallop, confusing yesterday, when the birds still sang, with today, where there was nothing but death.

The girls scattered through the brush like pearls from a snapped thread. Yuriko saw it happen ahead, some twenty meters away: right on the path, a blindingly white, silent sphere of an artillery shell flared up. Two fleeing figures in school skirts simply dissolved into that flash, ascending to the zenith along with a pillar of red Okinawan clay, turning into dust, into nothing, in a split-second of pure destruction of life. Yuriko didn't even have time to feel afraid. She merely registered it with her eyes and kept running, feeling the two grenades in the pockets of her hakama battering her thighs – heavy, rhythmic, like a second and third heart.

They stopped only when their lungs began burning from the inside with live fire, and the air in their chests felt like crushed glass. The roar of the artillery here, on the slope of the hill, had become slightly muffled, bogged down in the dense thickets of banyan trees.

They were left alone. Only Yuriko and Miko. The other silhouettes had melted away into the green hell.

Breathing heavily, with a rasp, Miko leaned against the trunk of a tree through a fissure in its trunk, white sap resembling milk slowly oozed. Her face was completely covered in black soot and grime, making the whites of her eyes look unnaturally enormous, almost bottomless. She thrust her hand into her hakama pocket and slowly, as if disbelieving her own fingers, withdrew the ceramic orb of the grenade.

Yuriko froze, pressing her back against a wet stone. Her heart pounded right in her ears.

"Miko," she whispered, barely audible. She knew what was supposed to happen next.

They taught us. They taught us at school, taught us on the parade ground. Press it to your stomach. Pull the pin. Strike the primer hard against a rock. Do it for the Emperor. Do it so the devils don't touch your clean blouses.

Miko looked at the brown, baked clay in her hand for a long, endlessly long time. In her huge eyes, there was neither the teacher's fanaticism, nor patriotic ecstasy, nor even fear. There was a strange, frightening, adult transparency. Devastation. Suddenly, she swung her arm – not at all the way soldiers are taught, but simply, childishly – and threw the grenade. Not at her own feet. Not at a rock. She hurled it far away, into the dense, squelching pandanus thickets, right into the mud.

The shell traced an absurd arc, plopped softly into the muck, and vanished. No explosion. No honor. No flash of a chrysanthemum. Just a piece of scorched earth returning back to the earth. And following the first, Miko pulled out and threw the second.

Yuriko stared at the spot where the mud had closed over, feeling as if some invisible string that had held her up all her life was snapping inside her with a deafening, glassy ringing. Miko turned to her, held out her empty, soot-stained hands, and looked silently into her eyes. And in that gaze was everything: *we are just children, I refuse, this is not our war, we are not going to do this.*

Slowly, as if someone else's hand were controlling her body, Yuriko lowered her fingers into her own pocket. Her palm closed around the rough body of the Type 4 ceramic grenade.

And in that moment, the world around her seemed to fall silent. Yuriko felt it with her entire being, with every microscopic receptor of her skin. The clay was heavy, dense, and surprisingly, absurdly warm. But it wasn't the warmth of the midday sun from her dream, nor the warmth of a mother's hand – the grenade had heated up from her own body, absorbing the fever of her frantically beating blood, her sweat, and her life. To the touch, the surface was porous, uneven, bearing the fingerprints of an unknown master potter who had fired it in an oven. On the side of the sphere, Yuriko distinctly felt a thin, sharp seam from the mold – it dug into the tender skin of her palm, leaving a deep mark. If you rubbed it just a little, the dry, poorly fired clay began to crumble, leaving a fine, brown powder smelling of the kiln on her fingertips. A thin crack ran near the very base of the fuse – like a life line on a hand that abruptly ends. There was no steel majesty in this object, no military pride. It was simply dead, cold earth packed into a mold, stuffed with explosives, and forced to make human warmth work for destruction. This clay weight weighed too much – it was pulling her down, down to the graves of the cave, to the teacher's order, to someone else's forced death.

Yuriko pulled her hand from her pocket. She brought the grenade right up to her face, peering one last time into its wretched, brown simplicity, feeling her fingers cramp from its weight. And then – she simply opened her fingers. Without a swing. Without effort.

The ceramic orb hit a thick banyan root with a dull, dry thud, rolled over the wet, slimy moss, smearing itself in the white tree sap, and came to a stop in the grass at her feet. The second grenade followed the first.

Yuriko felt a strange, deafening emptiness. The palm that had just gripped death remained open, damp with sweat. On her skin, right across the lines of fate – from the base of her thumb to her pinky – two crimson, indented stripes burned from the ceramic seams. They looked like scars. Or like new, clean roads she had yet to walk. Her hand still remembered the weight, her muscles still remembered the shape of the sphere, but there was nothing left in it. It was empty.

Miko stepped closer and took that empty, trembling palm. Silently. Tightly. The way one grasps at life. Miko's fingers were thin, dry, and hot, and when their palms joined, Yuriko went perfectly still.

And so they stood – two girls in filthy school uniforms, with clean, empty hands on their island, in the middle of someone else's war. And neither of them knew what to do next.

While the jungle around them went on living its massive, indifferent life: water dripped, unseen lizards rustled in the foliage, and somewhere in the background, the earth hummed from the explosions.

Chapter 2. The Forest

Morning arrived in the jungle with the immediate weight of summer heat. Slowly, like a thick greenish syrup, it seeped through the multi-layered canopies of banyans and cryptomerias, bringing not cool relief, but a suffocating, humid vapor from the scorched earth. The air here did not move – it hung dense, smelling of fermented leaves, crushed snails, decaying bark, and that sweetly anxious rot of a forest overfed on death. The light was chlorophyll-tinted and cold, unlike sunlight; it seemed the foliage did not let the rays through, but rather replaced them with its own dim, stifling glow. Dew condensed on everything – on ferns, on wet moss, on pale skin and eyelashes – rendering the world glossy and unreal, like sugar frosting on a poisoned pastry.

Miko woke up because a large black ant was crawling across her cheek.

She opened her eyes, twitched to brush the insect away, and the first thing she realized – not with her mind, but rather with her numb body – was that her left shoulder, which had felt another world all night, now rested on bare, still-cold ground. This sense of sudden loneliness was so wrong that Miko sat up immediately, with a sharp jerk, without any transition from sleep to waking. Her heart was pounding with an ancient, animal fear, the kind that comes when you wake in an unfamiliar place and cannot remember your own name.

In the spot where Yuriko had slept, only an imprint of her presence remained: flattened grass that still retained a faint warmth, and two or three dark hairs clinging to a wet fern stem. Yuriko was gone.

Every muscle in Miko's body remembered yesterday's flight, and every bone ached from falls, but she stood up and walked toward a sound – a quiet, monotonous splashing of water. Pushing aside the heavy, prickly-haired branches of a shrub, after twenty steps she saw her.

Yuriko was crouching beside a small crater left by a shell, perhaps a week ago. The crater had filled with clear water, though stained reddish by the soil, reflecting the pale, scorched sky. A stream trickled down from somewhere above, beneath the stones; it was so thin – no wider than a child's palm – that there seemed to be no water, only its rhythm and transparent movement.

Yuriko was washing her hands. Or rather, her hand. One hand. The left one.

Miko stopped behind her back, watching these movements. Yuriko was washing it meticulously, intently, with the obsession of someone trying to erase something far greater than dirt – the very memory of a touch. She rubbed the pad of her thumb against the pad of

her index finger in small circular motions, bringing the skin to a glossy shine. The skin had already reddened from the friction; tiny flakes of washed-away epidermis were carried off by minuscule, silent whirlpools of water.

A twig snapped under Miko's foot. Yuriko shuddered all over, as if struck, and spun around sharply, hiding her left hand in the folds of her dirty *hakama* skirt. Quickly, reflexively – the way one hides something that betrays a secret.

In that brief instant, Yuriko looked up at her from below. And in that gaze – through dilated, frightened pupils and flaring nostrils – there was so much defenseless, superstitious greed that the air between them seemed to thicken. Yuriko looked at the tonal line of Miko's neck, at how a lock of short, tangled hair stuck to her soot-stained cheek, at the sharp, fragile collarbone visible in the neckline of her sailor uniform. For Yuriko, in this morning's decaying forest, there was nothing more tangible or important than this girl. The mere thought that yesterday everything could have ended – in a flash of white phosphorus or beside the jug of poisoned milk – made her heart contract to the point of physical pain. This closeness needed no names or confessions; words would have destroyed it, turning it into a vulnerable structure in the middle of a war. They locked this feeling inside their chests like birds that must remain silent so as not to be found.

"Good morning," Miko said. Her voice was steady. Steadier than it should have been.

"Good morning," Yuriko replied, attempting a smile. It came out brief and crooked, like a note scribbled in haste on a scrap of paper.

Miko sat down beside her on a flat, wet stone, cupped water in her palm, and took a sip. The water smelled of iron and rotted roots, its chill making her teeth ache, but this ordinary, physical pain restored reality. Then Miko reached out, caught Yuriko's left wrist, and gently yet firmly unclasped her fist.

Across her palm, directly above the lines of life and heart, two strange marks showed dark. They were neither cuts nor inflamed burns. Two thin, perfect, brownish crescents were pressed into the skin so precisely, as if someone had applied a tiny, meaningful brand. They faced each other like two eyes, or like the imprints of two scales from an unknown creature. Between them, the skin remained clean, and the ordinary lines of the palm ran their usual course, as though oblivious to these signs.

"What's this?" Miko frowned, tracing the pad of her finger over the marks. At this touch, a shiver ran up Yuriko's forearm, which she hastily passed off as a chill.

Yuriko swallowed thick saliva. In her memory, the dry, scorching sun from her dream flashed instantly: the blinding curve of a blade, a crack in ancient stone, and for some reason, the emerald, living tail of a lizard thrashing in her palm.

"I don't know," her voice quavered, and she insistently freed her hand, hiding it back in the empty pocket where her grenade used to be. "Maybe... a burn. From the grenade. Yesterday, when the teacher handed them out, the ceramic was still hot."

Miko said nothing. She accepted this lie as one accepts a prolonged tropical rain – as a fact, as a part of a changed world. Yuriko needed the lie as a shield, so Miko simply set the question aside for later, until the time when the truth would come out on its own, like a splinter emerging from a healing wound.

“Shall we go?” Miko asked softly, wiping her wet hands on her hem.

“Let’s go.”

They stood up. Their legs felt like cotton wool, scratched by thorny underbrush into tiny, dried lines of blood. Time for them had turned into “botanical time” – it had no clock face, it grew and stretched like vines, forcing them to wander without purpose or direction, turning them into ghosts on their own island.

Moving north, toward their own troops, was fatally dangerous. The Imperial Japanese Army, retreating in agony, was ruthless. Anyone who left the hospital without a written order, anyone who stripped off medical bandages, was declared a deserter and a spy by officers with hollow eyes and three-day stubble. “Are you from Himeyuri? Why are your hands empty?” – this unspoken question stood before them like a firing squad wall. To their own people, they had become traitors who chose not to die beautifully for the Emperor.

Yet heading south, toward the Americans, was equally unbearable. The stories told about the “long-nosed demons” in the caves made their blood run cold: giant, white-eyed creatures devoid of pity, who skinned captives and fed them to dogs. Fear needed no facts – it fed on the unknown, just as mold feeds on darkness. The girls were caught between two pitiless millstones: the blind, suicide-demanding honor of their own, and the mythical horror of the enemy.

Yesterday they had stumbled upon a dirt road torn up by tank tracks. Hiding in the bushes, they had watched for hours as gray, identical silhouettes marched along it. The ground rumbled beneath their steps; tiny pebbles hopped like fleas. Yuriko and Miko did not breathe, huddled into a tight ball until the column disappeared into the haze, and only then did they rush in the opposite direction – not because they knew the path, but to keep the road from catching up with them.

At night, they had found a hollow between the roots of a giant tree. The roots were as thick as a human torso, forming a kind of den. They lay there close together, warming each other with their thin bodies that shivered from the cold and the horror they had endured. Yuriko had not closed her eyes all night, breathing in the scent of Miko’s hair – a smell of soot, damp earth, and slipping childhood. This proximity was the only thing holding her sanity back from falling into the abyss. If the world had ended at that second, if the jungle had closed over them forever, Yuriko knew: the warmth of this hand resting on her wrist would have been enough.

But morning came. And now they walked on.

Yuriko walked first, Miko exactly two steps behind her. This two-step gap between them lived a life of its own: narrowing on tight trails and widening when the bamboo parted. In that space pulsed everything they kept silent about.

They emerged into a strange, circular clearing. The grass grew unnaturally smooth and short, like a trampled pasture, and in the very center lay a flat gray stone. It was of such an ideal round shape that it could not have appeared here on its own; it looked as if placed deliberately for someone to find.

Yuriko stopped, gazing at the gray surface. The stone reminded her of something – no, not reminded, but imparted – some unfamiliar sensation of warmth and the smell of

wormwood under a desert sun. But there was no wormwood here, only moss, grass, and drops of dew.

“Why did you stop?” Miko asked softly from behind.

“Nothing,” Yuriko shook her head and walked on.

She did not look back and did not see that as soon as they left the clearing and the green thicket closed behind them, a small, brownish-gray lizard with a long, perfect tail crawled onto the center of the round stone. A solitary ray of sun that had broken through the dense jungle canopy fell precisely upon it. The stone began slowly absorbing that warmth, and the lizard drank the light – alive and indifferent to the war, to the grenades, and to the departing girls.

“We need food,” Miko said hollowly. “I can’t anymore. The emptiness makes me feel sick.”

Hunger had passed the stage of a simple craving for food. It was a deep, animal spasm of bones and muscles; Yuriko’s body was literally dismantling itself from within, burning its last resources for scraps of warmth. Her head spun constantly, the world tilted slightly, and the ground felt unstable, like thawing ice.

“Over the hill, there should be villages,” Yuriko pointed the direction with her left hand, without pulling it from her pocket. “Maehira or Arakaki. There might be abandoned vegetable gardens left. We’ll find sweet potatoes... anything at all.”

The word “sweet potato” acted like a spell – thick, viscous saliva gathered in her mouth, and her stomach responded with a painful cramp. They walked along the low ground, trying to stay within the dense bamboo thickets to avoid being spotted from strategic heights.

Soon the trail led them to a rough, cut-over clearing. The stumps around had managed to overgrow with white, poisonous fungus; some trunks were charred from old fires. But far ahead, at the very edge of the green expanse, Yuriko distinguished the outlines of a thatched roof and a lopsided fence. Most importantly, the air brought a scent.

It was not the gunpowder or sour smoke of war, but the homely, dry smoke of a hearth. The smoke of burning firewood, carrying a promise of food and heat. The smell made Yuriko’s stomach tighten so sharply that she froze.

Yet it was not the smoke that made her stop.

The feel of the forest behind them had changed. Ever since dawn, an itchy, clammy sense of a stranger’s gaze had lingered between Yuriko’s shoulder blades, but now it became dense, almost tangible. In the motionless, humid air, something shifted. It was not the snap of a fallen twig. It was a soft, careful, yet heavy sound – the way a creature shifts its body weight onto damp, yielding soil.

A single leaf on the lower branch of a breadfruit tree swayed.

From right to left. Slowly, smoothly. And then stopped. There was no wind in the jungle.

The hairs on Yuriko’s arms stood on end. The thread of tension pulled to its limit. The forest no longer felt indifferent – someone was following them step for step, breathing in time

with their stumbling paces, stopping whenever they stopped. Someone was hiding in that impenetrable wall of ferns, watching the two exhausted girls from behind.

Yuriko slowly reached back and grabbed Miko's shoulder in a vise-like grip, forcing her to stop. The fingers of her left hand inside the empty pocket clenched into a fist, digging her nails into the two mysterious crescents.

"Stop," Yuriko whispered. The sound was barely louder than the pounding of her own heart in her ears.

Miko did not turn around. Instinctively, she leaned her back against Yuriko's, pressing against her shoulder, seeking protection. Her lips trembled. She read everything from her friend's tense back – Miko knew how to read Yuriko better than Yuriko knew herself.

"What is it?" Miko exhaled, barely audible.

Yuriko turned her head slowly, fraction of an inch by fraction of an inch, peering into the greenish gloom of the vines from where they had just emerged. The shadows there intertwined too neatly, forming a foreign, motionless silhouette.

"I think..." Yuriko swallowed the dry lump in her parched throat, without taking her eyes off the flickering shadow. "I think I saw someone."

Chapter 3. The Sunflower

The shadow moved.

It moved with a jerk, a single, short, wet thrust – the way something that breathes and finally decides to show itself moves. It was completely unlike the way shadows usually move. It moved differently – not like the smooth and gradual crawl of a cloud's reflection drifting across the sun. This was something else. The fern – broad, scaly, with edges fringed in almost black – swayed, opening up like green fingers that want to look but are afraid of being seen. And in the resulting gap, against the backdrop of the chlorophyll gloom, a silhouette emerged.

Yuriko did not breathe. She didn't close her eyes – she was ready to meet death face-to-face. She didn't even blink. The fingers of her left hand inside her empty pocket dug into the two mystical crescents so hard that blood was about to burst from under her nails. She waited for the strike: with her whole body, every nerve, every hair on her forearms. Waited for a rifle barrel – black, round, indifferent. A long bayonet, if it was a Japanese soldier, or the broad, bread-knife-like snout of a Thompson, if it was an American. She waited for a stranger's voice, a stranger's order in either of the two languages that now meant the exact same thing – the end.

But the barrel did not appear. Out of the green twilight, a tiny, bare foot stepped onto the soggy soil of the path. Then a second. A creature stepped onto the path. Without a bayonet.

Small. Outside of time.

It was so caked in filth, so implausibly dirty, as if this very ancient, rotting forest had birthed it from the dusk, the moss, and the damp vapors. In height – barely above her waist. Wearing a torn cotton shirt with three buttons that had once been white, but had now become the color of reddish ash, the color of everything this creature had crawled through

over the past few days. Below the waist, he was naked. His thin legs, covered in scratches, with cracked soles, resembled the fragile stems of a stubbornly living plant.

The dirt on his face was like a mask, a crust, a second face grown over the first: layer upon layer – first soot, then clay, then dried tears. And through this armor, only his eyes peeked out. Dark, round, wet eyes looked up from below. There was no fear in them, no tears – none of what should be in the eyes of a six-year-old boy in the middle of a war. In them was that pure, absolute, non-human attention with which only a child or a forest spirit looks: without judgment, just a gaze, just “I see you.”

Yuriko exhaled. The air left her lungs slowly, and with it went the tension of the last few days – the anticipation of the bullet, the bayonet, the end. In their place flooded an unbearable, overflowing relief: they wouldn't be killed.

Miko reacted first. Forgetting her weakness, she simply dropped to her knees right into the liquid mud before the boy. She lowered herself so quietly, as if afraid that at a loud sound this forest child would crumble into fern spores.

“Hello,” Miko said. Her voice had changed. Warm, soft – the way one speaks to a wounded bird or a thing that might shatter into pieces if you breathe too hard. “Hello, little one. We aren't scary. Our names are Yuriko and Miko. We are from the school... we are coming from there.”

The boy didn't blink. He examined their smeared blouses, scratched legs, wet hair. It wasn't childish curiosity, but rather a test: are they real? Are they alive? Is it safe to approach?

Miko held out her hand. After a second of hesitation, a small palm, rough with dirt, settled into hers. He didn't grip it tightly, but he didn't pull back either. He just decided to stand – nearby.

Yuriko watched them, and something inside her clenched and unfurled at the same time. Miko, who bowed to no one, had dropped down before this dirty child. And there was tenderness in her voice. But Yuriko knew: Miko's tenderness didn't belong to anyone in particular. It was her property, just as bark is the property of a tree, or moss of a stone. This tenderness poured out onto the boy simply because Miko couldn't do otherwise...

...The three of them walked, guided by the only unerring compass – the smell of smoke. It came unexpectedly: dry, domestic, smelling of firewood, and underneath it – something sweetish that scorched the nostrils. The smell of real food.

A hundred steps later, the jungle parted, exposing a scorched wound in the earth. The village was empty. Four or five peasant yards. All that remained of the houses were black, charred skeletons of beams sticking up into the sky like the ribs of a beached fish. The ground between them was covered in gray, damp ash. The war had passed through here like a blind giant, trampling everything, but leaving behind a glassy, absolute silence.

But in one of the yards, under a collapsed awning beam, a stone hearth had miraculously survived – a regular Okinawan *kamado* with three stones. The fire in it had died, but under a thick layer of whitish ash, like a fairy-tale creature burrowed into the earth, a thick, crimson heat still throbbed.

Yuriko dropped to her knees. She found a dry stick and began raking away the ash. The stick hit something hard. Out from under the gray flakes rolled rounded, flattened, black lumps.

Sweet potatoes. A whole dozen. Someone had put them in the ashes to bake but never had the time to eat them.

An intoxicating smell of caramelized sugar, honey, and hot earth wafted from them. Yuriko's head spun from a pure, animal desire to eat. Forgetting caution, she snatched a hot tuber from the embers with her bare fingers. The skin on her fingertips burned instantly, but she felt no pain, tossing the black lump from palm to palm and blowing her breath on it.

They sat right on the ground around the hearth, forming their own secret circle. Yuriko pressed her thumbs into the charred crust. The potato split in half with a dry, brittle crunch. Thick steam billowed up.

Beneath the dead, burnt crust hid a blinding, moist, golden flesh. It was so bright it seemed all the sun their island had now lost was hidden inside this root. This was not food. This was communion.

They didn't fall upon the potatoes with greed, even though their stomachs were cramping. Yuriko broke off a tiny piece – no bigger than a fingernail, so as not to harm the starving child – and brought it to the boy's lips. He opened his mouth like a baby bird. He placed the piece on his tongue and froze. His eyes widened, his jaws began to move uncertainly, remembering how it was done. And his lips were smeared with gold.

And the boy smiled.

It was a true blossoming. The mask-like face suddenly came to life, his eyes narrowed, and between his dirtied lips milk teeth appeared – so implausibly white and clean amidst the ash, as if they glowed from within.

Yuriko broke open a second sweet potato and handed half to Miko. Their fingers touched for half a moment, and in that there was more than in all unspoken words: “take,” “eat,” “we are together.”

Miko took a bite. The hot, honeyed juice ran down her chin. Yuriko watched her chew with her eyes closed. On Miko's chapped lips, the black ash mixed with the amber juice of the sweet potato. These two spots – gold and ash, sweetness and death, life and war – made Yuriko's heart ache. In that moment, Miko's face turned toward the warmth, as if she found herself in a place where there were no more caves and grenades.

Yuriko watched and couldn't eat. Her throat caught from the impossible, silent contemplation: she was sitting in the middle of a ruined world, watching the one she loved eat. And this moment was the most honest in her entire life.

“Eat, Yuriko,” Miko said quietly, opening her eyes.

And Yuriko ate. The sweet potato burned her mouth, stuck to the roof of her palate, smelled of earth and smoke. It was the sweetness of what had survived when everything around had burned. The golden flesh fell into her empty stomach, her body shuddered, accepting the warmth, and from this painful, unbearable joy, Yuriko's head spun.

When the potatoes were finished, the boy licked his fingers, looked at Miko, and suddenly spoke. His voice was thin, but flat, like paper from which pencil drawings had been erased.

"I am Hinata," he said simply.

"What a good name," Miko gently reached out and wiped a golden crumb from his chin. It left a clean spot, like a moon breaking through clouds. "A place in the sun. Like a flower. Like a sunflower... Tell us, Hinata, where is your mother?"

The boy frowned, piecing together the scattered pictures of his memory.

"We were walking on the road. It was dark. Mom was holding my hand tight-tight," he clenched his little fist to show it. "And then it got very loud. Bang! And fire. The ground started jumping. Mom fell and let go of my hand. And everybody ran into the grass. I ran too. I ran, I ran... I lost my sandal in the mud. I looked for it, and then Mom was already gone."

He spoke about it without tears, like a fact of the weather. His mind hadn't yet found the words for the childish pain.

"And your dad?" Yuriko asked softly.

"Dad is far away. In the north. Mom said – in the north. I slept in the jungle under a big leaf. It was cold. And yesterday I saw you. You were walking ahead, and I was behind you. But I was afraid to come close. You were big. And I thought... you would scold me. I thought you would chase me away. I'm dirty. I lost my pants."

Yuriko's nose stung, and she turned away to the hearth. This child, who had lost everything in the fiery meat grinder, was most afraid that the older girls would scold him for being untidy.

At that moment, a drop fell on Yuriko's cheek. Then a second. The air grew thicker, the sky descended, and a tropical downpour poured from everywhere at once. It fell in a solid sheer wall, washing away the scorch, pinning the foul smoke of burned villages to the ground, and cooling the red-hot island.

"Over there!" Yuriko jumped up, scooping Hinata into her arms. The boy turned out to be unexpectedly light, like a bird made of thin bones and feathers.

At the edge of the yard stood a half-ruined shed – a former goat pen. One of its walls had collapsed, but the sloping thatched roof was still holding. They flew under the overhang the second the downpour turned into a roaring waterfall. Inside, it smelled of musty straw, wool, and a rescuing, enveloping dryness. In the corner lay a pile of old mats. The girls pushed them together, building a warm semblance of a nest.

It went dark instantly, as if someone simply turned off the light in the world. But they weren't afraid. The noise of the water on the roof cut them off from the rest of the earth, muffled the artillery cannonade from the coast, and locked them in an impenetrable, cozy cocoon.

Hinata fell asleep almost immediately. He curled up into a ball, tucking his knees to his chin – the way children accustomed to sleeping alone in the dark curl up. Even in his sleep, traces remained on his lips: gold and ash.

Yuriko lay on her back, listening to the water. The jungle around them was changing the mathematics of their existence.

When you are running ahead of fear, and there is no one behind you, the world is a tunnel, and you dash through it, expecting a bullet. But now a child was sleeping behind them, and Miko was beside her. Their world ceased to be a tunnel. Three points formed a triangle. Three legs make a stool that won't fall. And in its center, a circle was formed. And in a circle, one can finally breathe.

In the dark, Yuriko carefully, blindly, reached out and found Miko's fingers. Miko was not asleep. She squeezed her hand in return – tightly, interlacing their fingers.

Under the roof of the old shed, in the middle of a bleeding island, it was dark and damp. But for Yuriko, this place was now the brightest on earth. Her stomach no longer howled with hunger, filled with the warm sweetness of the sweet potato. There were three of them. They were full. And they were alive.

She looked at Hinata – sleeping, curled in a ball, with the golden spot on his lower lip – and thought that if the world were to end right now, right this second – if the rain flooded everything, and the jungle closed in, and the earth opened up – the last thing she would feel would be Miko's hand and the boy's breathing in the dark. And that would be enough.

Chapter 4. The Anatomy of Pain

The first thing she felt was a hand.

Not a familiar one. Not the palm she knew better than anything in the world – thin, dry, hot – not Miko's hand. This hand was different: large, heavy, in a thick cotton glove. It moved methodically, professionally, without hesitation and without pity: along her ribs, over her hips, across the folds of her dirty school skirt. The movements were functional. The hand was checking. The hand was searching for a hidden threat – ceramic death, a steel sphere. It didn't care what the body beneath it felt. It had a task.

Yuriko threw her eyes open, preparing to scream, but the air stuck in her throat.

Above her, a couple of handspans away, a face loomed. And it was black. Not just swarthy or tanned – it was a deep, impenetrable black, gleaming with a violet bronze tint. The face was crowned with a netted steel helmet, from under which stiff curls escaped. The whites of his eyes against this skin seemed unbearably, frighteningly white. They looked at Yuriko with a calm, military attention.

Yuriko froze like a butterfly on a pin. The black man stopped searching the pockets of her *hakama*. With his teeth, he pulled the glove off by the fingertips, raised a bare dark index finger, and pressed it to his lips.

Quiet.

This gesture, ancient and universal, understood before the invention of the Tower of Babel, crossed the ocean between them. A finger to the lips meant “be quiet,” and “be quiet” right now meant “you are still alive.”

The soldier turned his head toward the exit of the shed and said hollowly in a guttural, barking language: “She's clean too.”

Yuriko sat up slowly. Her hands went up on their own – palms open, fingers spread and trembling finely.

In the far corner of the shed, huddled against each other, sat Miko and Hinata. Miko was hugging the boy, hiding his face against her chest, her eyes empty from extreme tension. Around them stood three more men in green helmets. Their rifles pointed at the ground, but their figures alone filled the shed with a suffocating weight. Yuriko looked at their faces – young, pale, with beads of sweat on the bridges of their noses. And through her shock, she saw the main thing: the devils were afraid. Their shoulders were tense; they peered into the darkness of the corners as hunted as the girls themselves.

One of the soldiers, chewing something invisible, stepped toward the cold hearth. There, on a piece of roofing tile, lay the two sweet potatoes hidden away since the evening – their morning talisman. The soldier carelessly lowered his rifle and poked the potatoes with the blade of his bayonet. The charred crust burst with a crack; the soft, golden flesh spilled out into the gray dirt and cold embers. It was a quick, mundane destruction of their small shrine.

Hinata, seeing the death of his only breakfast, couldn't hold it in. He didn't scream, but from his huge eyes large, hot tears rolled down instantly, all at once. Two clean tracks broke through the crust of dust on his cheeks. He looked at the crushed sweet potato with a silent, absolute loss.

The soldier with the bayonet froze. He shifted his gaze from the ruined root vegetable to the crying boy. The American's face – freckled, with soft fuzz above his lip – suddenly trembled and stretched into an incredibly wide, ridiculous, white-toothed smile. It was the embarrassed smile of a man who doesn't know how to handle other people's crying children.

He slung his rifle over his shoulder, dropped to one knee, and flipped open the flap of a heavy canvas duffel bag. Yuriko watched his hands, clenching her teeth. The soldier pulled out a small, oblong, khaki-colored tin with white letters. *C-Ration, M-Unit*. He inserted a tiny key into the slot on the lid and, with a metallic crunch, rolled back the strip of tin.

Instantly, the thick, aggressively hearty smell of stewed meat and vegetables in a dense sauce filled the shed. It smelled of an alien, well-fed, unattainable planet. Yuriko's mouth immediately filled with thick, hot saliva.

The soldier held out the open tin to Hinata. "Here, kid. Eat. Don't be afraid."

Familiar English phonemes broke through the veil of terror – this language had been taught in school before it was declared the language of the enemy. "He says... you can eat. Don't be afraid," Yuriko rasped. Her voice was dry and foreign.

Miko gave a short nod. Hinata took the can with his dirty little fingers, breathed in the smell, and began to eat. He dipped his fingers into the sauce, licked them, the jelly-like broth smearing his chin, and in the shed all that could be heard was his quiet, greedy, childish smacking. The freckled soldier squatted and smiled – warmly and calmly now.

They were taken away. Not roughly, but confidently, ordering them with gestures to walk along the muddy path. Yuriko walked and felt like a character in someone else's dream.

Soon the jungle parted, and they found themselves in a company encampment. It was a small, noisy anthill of olive tents looking like compressed clouds, a couple of jeeps, a roaring radio station, and the sharp smells of gasoline, wet canvas, and burnt coffee. Between the tents, wounded men lay on stretchers – they smelled of blood and the sour sweat of pain. Soldiers passing by stopped and simply stared at the two short figures in the dirty uniform of the First Girls' School and the boy standing with them. Not hostile. Not pitying. Just looking, the way one looks at things that don't fit into any category: not soldiers, not prisoners, not refugees, not children – something that has no name, no place in the manual, no instructions.

They were seated on wooden ammo crates. A young sergeant without a rifle approached them. He had high, chiseled cheekbones and dark, slightly slanted eyes.

“Relax, everything is alright,” he said in pure, soft Japanese, with a slight bookish accent. “My name is Ren Kimura. I am a translator for the United States Army. There is nothing to fear. My father is from Hawaii, Japanese... well, and my mother is Navajo. It's an Indian tribe. Anyway, long story.”

Ren looked at Hinata, who was still clutching the empty tin. The translator took a flat rectangle in a purple wrapper from his breast pocket, unwrapped the foil, and handed it to the boy. Chocolate. Hinata grabbed it and sank his teeth in with the greed of a little animal, smearing his cheeks.

But then Ren Kimura reached out and gently but firmly took the bar back from the child's mouth. Hinata froze with his mouth open. Yuriko tensed, ready to jump up.

The translator paid no attention to this. He neatly, with a snap, broke the chocolate along the perforated lines into equal pieces. And he handed one piece to Yuriko, and the second to Miko.

“Don't forget about yourselves,” he said quietly. “You eat too.”

Yuriko placed the piece on her tongue. The air filled richly with cocoa – the smell of the “before” world, the smell of normalcy. The chocolate melted, filling her mouth with a slightly bitter, enveloping sweetness, and from this warmth, it seemed to Yuriko for a moment that the world had ceased to be divided into demons and humans. The sweetness was shared.

Ren pulled out a small, worn notepad. “Who are you? Where are you from?”

Yuriko swallowed the chocolate. A lie right now would be a house of cards. “We are... students of the First School. We were assigned to the hospital in the Ihamigama cave. As nurses. When the order came to die, we ran away. And we found the boy in the forest. He lost his mom in the shelling.”

Ren Kimura wrote down her words. Yuriko saw his dark hand tracing angular, foreign signs on the paper. Because of this, her story ceased being a nightmare, turning into a document. A testimony.

The translator closed the notepad, turned to a tall officer with a cigar who had walked up, and spoke rapidly in English. The officer frowned, looking at the exhausted girls, then pointed at Hinata: “What about the kid?”

Yuriko lunged forward, almost shouting in the translator's face: "He stays with us! We won't give him up. We'll look after him!"

Ren Kimura chuckled with just the corners of his eyes and translated. The tall officer shrugged, making a simple logistical decision: "Fine. Tell them to get on the truck with our wounded. They were nurses, right? They can keep an eye on them on the way to the sorting camp. I need my medic here."

Ren turned to the girls: "The officer decided you will be sent to the sorting camp on a truck. You were nurses, so the lieutenant said, 'They know what to do with the wounded.' You will ride with ours. And you can keep an eye on them on the way."

The medical truck was covered with a thick green tarpaulin; light poured through the ventilation slits in uneven stripes, resembling streams of rain. Inside smelled of iodine, carbolic acid, clotted blood, and heavy, sour human sweat.

Yuriko climbed in first. Hinata followed Miko, holding tightly to the fabric of her *hakama*.

The canvas flap closed behind them, finally cutting off the wet tropical world.

The truck bed swayed rhythmically on the rutted tracks. Along the sides, four men lay on stretchers in two rows. Four men in green uniforms. When Yuriko's eyes adjusted to the dim light, the figures of the demons vanished. On the stretchers lay large, very young, frightened boys.

One of them had a bandage on his head covering his right eye, and a thick, rusty-red stain seeped through the gauze – exactly the same kind of stain that blossomed on the shirts of the Japanese soldiers in the caves. Another wounded man, with an arm in a cast resting at an awkward angle, breathed hoarsely, with a whistle, clutching the edge of the tarpaulin with whitened fingers. The third stared motionless at the ceiling of the truck, and in his pupils reflected that same ultimate, bottomless exhaustion that has no nationality, language, or shape of face.

The wounded man with the eye bandage turned his head. He looked for a long time, uncomprehendingly, at the three figures in the dirty school uniforms. The truck bounced hard over a pothole; the American winced from a flash of pain, caught Yuriko's gaze, and... smiled at her. Crookedly, weakly. As if apologizing for lying there and scaring them.

His neighbor, the boy with the cast, slowly raised his good arm and gave a small wave with his hand.

Yuriko looked at this apologetic smile through the hum of the engine. In her ears, the screams from the cave and the teacher's orders still echoed, but before her eyes there was only a stranger's dirtied cheek and trembling lips. She didn't smile back – nothing inside had come back to life enough for that yet. But she stepped forward, leaned over the stretcher, and carefully straightened the gray wool blanket that had slipped from the wounded American's shoulder. He exhaled quietly and closed his eyes.

The truck bed swayed, the tires thumped through the mud, and this rhythm became like the rocking of a cradle, carrying them away into complete uncertainty.

Yuriko sat on the floor; Hinata was asleep on her lap, his nose buried in the fabric. Miko settled next to her – shoulder to shoulder – and her warmth returned Yuriko's sense of reality. They were riding.

The three of them.

Chapter 5. The String

Sleep came in broad daylight, in the middle of the suffocating midday stupor of the camp anthill, through the buzzing of flies, the creaking of wheelbarrows, and the clanking of tin buckets. It was not a falling asleep, but a falling: one moment the white canvas of an American tent billowed overhead, and the next – Yuriko was blinded by an entirely different sun. An ancient, angry, scorching sun that remembered the world when it was young.

In this space, she was split in two. Schoolgirl Yuriko lay on a mat in the Shimabuku camp, feeling the crescent-moon scars on her palms throb in time with her heart. But simultaneously she was *her* – a grown-up girl from an alien world, whose body had become heavier, stronger, more angular. Yuriko felt the hot, dry wind scorch her skin, and the rough leather straps of her sandals rub her feet until they bled.

They stood on a flat roof towering over a massive city of blindingly white stone. The city was rejoicing. The air was thick with the smells of roasting meat, incense, and fresh blood that hadn't yet had time to cool. The streets, squeezed between stone walls, were seething. Thousands of people shouted, wept, and embraced in some terrifying, frenzied ecstasy.

Below, on a round square by a dried-up stone pool, lay the dead. There were not many of them – five or seven bodies. Yuriko didn't know who they were. They wore strange clothes of thick leather with iron plates, and on their heads – round helmets with scarlet crests on top. They resembled the warriors from the antique, darkened pictures Yuriko had seen in school: like samurai, but different. Foreign. Their armor was crumpled, their swords broken, and blood flowed lazily across the white slabs.

Her father turned to her. His face, dried by desert winds, shone with a terrifying, triumphant joy. His hands, remembering the weight of weapons, he raised to the sky.

“We are cleansed!” he shouted, and the roar of the crowd picked up his voice. “The defilement is washed from the stones. We are clean again! And now the Promised One will come. The Messiah will come soon!”

He stepped toward her and opened his hand. Flat silver coins lay on the calloused skin. Stamped into the metal was a chalice and the prickly, angular signs of an alien, incomprehensible alphabet, carved with fury and pride.

“Look,” her father shook from the words overwhelming him. “It is stamped here: ‘Herut Zion.’ We are free!”

Yuriko looked at his shining face, and in her chest – foreign and yet her own – stirred a quiet, deep, inexplicable anxiety that had no words, but had a weight: heavy, pressing, like a stone. And in this jubilant cry of her father, in the roar of the crowd, she heard another, quiet voice. The very one from the limestone cave of Ihamigama, when the teacher had handed out the grenades and spoken of the daughters of the Emperor.

And she thought – she, not Yuriko, but that other one, the one whose name was Tamar – she thought: were those I saw dead cleansed? They too were clean when they came here. They too believed their god was right. They too were loved by their fathers.

Those on the square, in the iron armor of beetles – did they not believe their god was right? Were they not loved by their fathers?

But she stayed silent. Her father jerked, a silver coin slipped from his fingers and rolled with a ring across the stone step.

Plink.

Yuriko opened her eyes.

The ringing continued, resonating in the hot air of the camp.

“Hold it tighter, Hinata,” Miko said quietly. “If the neck wobbles, the copper wire will just fray against the edge.”

The white stone city vanished. In its place, stretching to the very horizon, was the canvas sea of Shimabuku – a civilian camp where American trucks brought survivors from all over the south of the island every day. The camp lived by the laws of a ragged rhythm. It smelled of salted fish, bleaching powder, powdered milk, and dirt. Time had gotten stuck somewhere at the end of June 1945.

Plink.

Miko struck the taut string again with her thumb. The string was a piece of copper wire pulled from a broken field telephone; the neck was a fragment of board from an ammo crate, and the resonator was an empty olive-drab tin of American stew with neat white letters.

It was a *kankara-sanshin*. A musical instrument – an instrument of despair, an Okinawan lute born from trash, tin, and war. Its sound was rattling, thin, a bit nasal, but it was a living sound. And it was music. Real music.

Because this sound – the sound of an empty tin can with three pieces of copper wire – was the sound of peace. Of a world that existed before the cave, before the grenades, before the war – a world in which there was a festival, and the sanshin, and the night, and crickets, and stars – and this world had not ended. It was hiding. In the can. In the wire. In the fingers of a six-year-old boy.

By evening, six sanshins had been made.

Miko made them faster and more precisely than Yuriko: her hands were more accustomed to the work – to bandages, to scissors, to doing something small and exact in the midst of chaos – and the cans under her fingers turned into instruments with some kind of domestic, familiar dexterity, the way things transform in the hands of someone who knows how to create order out of disorder.

The children came to the sound.

In the evening, around Miko, right in the camp dust, sat about twenty children. Dirty, thin, in ragged clothes, some with gray army bandages on their heads, they looked at the tin cans as if the sun were hiding inside them. Six-year-old Hinata sat closest of all, jealously clutching the folds of Miko’s *hakama* with his free hand.

And in the camp, people said different things. News flowed from tent to tent faster than the American patrols moved. Yesterday, jeeps had brought Colonel Yahara – the only surviving officer from the high command. Generals Ushijima and Cho themselves had committed ritual seppuku in the caves of Mabuni. The Japanese garrison had surrendered. Officially, there was no more war on the island, although somewhere in the mountains and jungles shots still rang out – those who refused to believe in the death of the Empire were hiding there.

The old world had collapsed, but at ten in the morning the Americans still handed out rice rations, and the wounded on the stretchers continued to moan. Life was adapting to the emptiness.

A woman with a Red Cross on her sleeve came to them a few days later.

She was neither old nor young: maybe forty, forty-five years old, with a face dried to a parchment transparency by the sun and tears – and her eyes were dark, deep, with little wrinkles at the outer corners, and these wrinkles were not from laughing, but from squinting too often while looking at the sun, or at the fire, or into the emptiness.

She stood before Yuri and Miko and looked – appraisingly, calmly, the way one looks at a thing one wants to use.

“Are you from Himeyuri?” she asked in a tired voice.

“Yes,” Miko answered.

“Were you nurses?”

“Yes.”

“Do you have experience dealing with children?”

They stayed silent.

“The Americans have decided to keep you busy,” she continued. “Organize the children. Make something like a school so they don’t get under the wheels of the trucks.”

Miko looked at Yuri. Yuri looked at Miko. In this look was – everything: both “we don’t know,” and “we are children ourselves,” and “but something must be done,” and “Hinata is alive,” and “we will manage” – and all of this was said without words, because between them words were unnecessary.

“We...” Miko started. And stopped. Because Hinata, who stood nearby holding onto the edge of her *hakama*, raised his head and looked at the strange woman – with huge, round, black eyes, and in that look there was no fear – it was protection: he was protecting Miko. Small, silent – he was protecting his Miko from the strange woman asking too many questions.

“We will try,” Yuri said.

And they did. The first open-air school on a dusty patch between the tents.

First, they ate.

Not the camp porridge, not rice, not canned fish, but what Yuri and Miko gathered in the evenings: roasted peanuts traded at the camp kitchen, dried bananas, pieces of

sugarcane – and they handed it out to the children, and the children ate, and from the food their eyes changed: they didn't become joyful, they didn't become happy, but they settled. They stopped jumping, darting, looking for danger. They settled and looked at what was in front of them.

Then the *kankara-sanshin*.

Yuriko showed them: how to stretch the string, how to press it, how to pluck. And the children – one by one, hesitantly, quietly plucked. And smiled. Not the way Hinata smiled: broadly, showing teeth, but differently: with the corners of their mouths, just the corners, the way those who have forgotten how to do it smile, and are now remembering.

Then English.

One word. Every day – one word. Yuriko wrote it on a can (the letters were crooked, sticking out like sticks in a fire), and the children repeated – in a chorus, quietly, hesitantly.

“Repeat after me,” she would say. “Hello.”

“Ha-ro-o...” the children responded unevenly, like frightened sparrows.

“Thank you.”

“San-kyu...”

“I am hungry.”

“I am han-gu-ri,” the camp class repeated in a chorus.

And there was something absurd and terrifying in this scene. The children of Okinawa, whose homes had burned down, sat in the dust under the scorching sun and chanted in chorus, like a prayer, the phrase “I am hungry” in the language of the people who just yesterday were devils to them. But in this spell lay the great magic of survival: a child who could say “I am hungry” to a soldier by a truck would get a cracker or a piece of chocolate. The girls were teaching them to live in a new world, where there was no longer an Emperor, but there were jeeps, canned goods, and bread.

After English came the turn of the letters. Miko drew them with a piece of charcoal on the back of the ammo crates. A, I, U, E, O... The children repeated the sounds, and from this simple “A” the world around them seemed to become slightly more solid. After all, the world is when a child learns the alphabet, and nothing explodes because of it.

Then came arithmetic. Two fingers and three fingers is five fingers. Five tin cans lined up in a row. Five bananas. Five steps to the teacher. Five is a number, and a number is safe, because a number doesn't shoot.

And at the end, Yuriko would take out a piece of gray packaging cardboard. With a stub of a pencil, she would draw a long, curved line on it, resembling a bamboo stalk or a crawling worm.

“This is our island,” she would say quietly, and the children fell silent. “Right here, in the very south – that's us. This is Shimabuku. And right here...” her finger hovered over the empty gray surface of the cardboard.

There, beyond the hills, just a few hours' walk away, lay their home villages. Mawashiasato. Naha. Shuri.

Neither Yuriko nor Miko had once spoken the words “mom,” “dad,” or “home” aloud since leaving the cave. These words were too dangerous. As long as they remained unnamed, their loved ones existed in the vulnerable state of camp hope – they were neither dead nor alive. They were simply waiting for someone to return to the ashes and check. What was left of their homes? Charred beams? Black ash?

The children looked at the gray cardboard and were silent. In this silence there was no lack of understanding – in it was a shared, adult, unbearable longing for the places that had now turned into pencil outlines.

And in that moment, to drown out this silence, Miko struck the copper strings of the *kankara-sanshin* again, setting a fast, syncopated island rhythm. The children picked it up, began to stomp their dirty little feet, and the rattling sound of the empty cans filled the tent, returning to them the right to play. The right to be children.

In the evening, when the inflamed red sun sank behind the barbed wire, the camp fell quiet. The rare lights of patrols flickered on.

Yuriko sat on the edge of the mat. Hinata was already asleep in her lap, breathing heavily in his sleep and tightly gripping her finger with his small hands. Miko sat nearby, darning the torn hem of her school *hakama* with a thread pulled from the suspension line of an American parachute.

“You know,” Miko said quietly, not lifting her eyes from her work. “The string on the *sanshin* is going to snap tomorrow. It has frayed completely against the edge of the tin. We’ll need to ask Mr. Kimura for a new wire tomorrow.”

Yuriko rose from the mat and went over to her. Miko raised her eyes to her and smiled – faintly, tiredly, and a little sadly. Yuriko felt a sweet and painful tug in her chest. She wanted unbearably to sit beside her, to touch Miko’s shoulder, to take her away from these children, to leave together for somewhere they wouldn’t be found. But Hinata was everywhere.

The boy had become their shared shadow. He slept between them, burying his nose in Miko’s side, ate from their mess tin, followed them step by step. At night, Yuriko clenched her fists until they hurt in the darkness of the tent, listening to his gentle, peaceful breathing. He had taken Miko from her. Taken the chance to talk, to cuddle close, just to be alone after all the horror of the jungle. Dividing their silence three ways. But it was impossible to be angry at him. He was protecting them the only way he knew how – by not letting go for a second.

And yet, when she spoke of the wire, Yuriko heard something else: tomorrow there will be a day. We will wake up, we will need a string, and we will play.

This was her promise of life...

Yuriko did not answer. She simply lowered her free left palm onto the warm earth between them. Miko, without stopping her sewing, fleetingly, barely perceptibly, covered Yuriko’s fingers with her hand. The touch lasted only a second, but in this second of closeness, in the middle of a canvas city and a foreign land, there was more warmth than in the entire Empire.

Later, when Miko lay down and covered Hinata with the edge of the blanket, Yuriko stared for a long time into the darkness of the ceiling.

The little crescent-moon scars on her palm ached softly, barely perceptibly. She knew that tonight Tamar would come again. She would see the ancient girl standing on the stone wall, looking at the campfires of foreign armies in the valley. Yuriko didn't understand why their fates had intertwined across thousands of years, but she felt it: that other girl on her wall, just like she herself, was looking into the darkness and waiting for the dawn.

Chapter 6. The Wall of Paper Birds

By the end of the second week, the Shimabuku camp had acquired its steady, frightening geography. In the center, where rain-washed brown Okinawan clay had once been, the distribution square now gleamed white – it always smelled of bleaching powder, rusty iron, and sweet powdered milk. From it, “streets” radiated in regular spokes, formed by endless rows of green canvas tents.

Each sector had its own ritual, its own hierarchy, and its own sound. Near the medical tent, it smelled of iodine, gangrene, and death; there, lying on stretchers, were those whose survival the American doctors measured in hours. In the northern part of the camp, where fishermen and old people from the destroyed village of Itoman had settled, Buddhist memorial prayers hummed monotonously in the evenings, like the surf. And here, on the southern outskirts, between the field kitchen and the engineer supply depot, Miko's *kankara-sanshin* chimed, and forty orphaned voices shouted alien, angular words in unison.

The camp's morning began at six with a sluggish line at the water standpipe. The water ran brackish and warm, but women and children stood for it for hours, carefully holding aluminum buckets. At seven – the distribution of gray, sticky porridge. At eight – inspection, when American patrols made the rounds, counting heads and checking lists as if tallying surviving livestock. And at nine, school began.

This fragile little world, built from tin cans and English phrases, was interrupted by a new sound.

Tap. Tap-tap. Tap.

Not the sound the ears of Shimabuku were used to – not the flapping of storm canvas, nor the clanking of water drums – but a frequent, dry, wooden tapping. A hammer. A real iron hammer with a wooden handle. The sound was so domestic, so peaceful, and therefore so impossible in the middle of the camp, that the children on the mats fell silent all at once and turned their heads – like a flock of birds – toward the square.

There, four American soldiers in green shirts with rolled-up sleeves were digging heavy wooden posts into the ground. To the posts, methodically and with cheerful banter, they nailed wide, smooth, freshly sawn boards. Bulletins. Ten. Twenty. Thirty... White wooden walls smelling of fresh timber and damp forest. They lined up in a long, even row along the entire square, and their clean, untouched whiteness exuded something frighteningly new. In the camp air, possibility appeared.

Kimura sat on an overturned wooden ammo crate, a notebook resting on his knee, and watched. Not the soldiers. Not the boards. Them.

For Ren, this war had long turned into a surreal immersion into the hell of an alien, fractured consciousness. He was a Nisei – a *hafu*, half-blood, from Sacramento – a man

stuck in between. In America, boys had called him a “Jap,” while in the POW camp, Japanese officers spat at his feet, viewing him as a traitor to his blood. At home, his mother always spoke a language his father was ashamed of, and prayed into her pillow. Out of this eternal loneliness, Ren had learned the main thing – to look and notice what others missed.

Every day, thousands of tragedies passed through his translations, but these two girls from the Himeyuri corps made his heart squeeze differently.

Miko frightened him. In her was steel – the very absolute, unyielding bearing that the Imperial newspapers trumpeted, but directed not toward a glorious death, but toward fierce, stubborn survival. She moved steadily, her back a bastion protecting her small school from the entire world. She was a fortress without a single visible crack.

And Yuriko... Yuriko was different. Ren caught himself following her with his eyes as soon as the staff jeep drove into the southern sector. In Yuriko there was no such efficient armor. She moved hesitantly, nervously, as if afraid to take up space, as if constantly trying to make herself invisible, to shield some inner, ringing brittleness. Dark, tangled hair, thin wrists, a pale collarbone protruding from under a bunch of washed-out school uniform... She seemed to Ren like a glass *furin* wind chime that had miraculously survived at the epicenter of a typhoon. In her defenselessness lay the beauty of an open palm – honest, wounded, unable to hide pain – and strong. And he felt a desire – painfully, to the point of clenching his teeth – to walk up to her. Not because she was beautiful – he had seen beautiful women in Sacramento, in San Francisco, in hospitals. And not as an employee, a junior officer of the US Army, but simply – to walk up, push back a strand of hair fallen over her face, and do something that would make her thin lips quiver into a smile.

Ren pulled a long, dry blade of grass from his pocket and mechanically began tying a complex Native American knot his mother had taught him in childhood. It helped calm the trembling in his fingers.

He stood up, walked over to the girls, and handed Miko a spool from a field cable, around which several meters of fine copper wire were wound: “Here. For your instruments.”

Then Ren turned to Yuriko. He unbuttoned his shirt's breast pocket, took out his notebook, carefully tore out a few clean, dazzlingly white sheets, and handed them to her along with a pencil.

“What is this, Mr. Kimura?” Yuriko asked quietly, looking at the paper with inexplicable fear.

“Those are bulletin boards,” Ren pointed to the wooden panels where soldiers were already finishing nailing supports. “Command gave permission to put them up in all sectors. You can write your names. And the names of those you are looking for. If any of your loved ones survived in other camps – they will see it. It... it’s like paper boats, Yuriko-san. Or like birds. You release them into the ocean and you don’t know if they will reach the other side. But you can’t not release them.”

Write a name. For Yuriko, this was the scariest moment since the day she had thrown the grenade under the roots of the banyan tree.

As long as the names of her mother, her brother Soma, and her father remained unspoken, they existed in a state of tangled, blissful uncertainty. They lived in her memory

whole and unharmed. Writing them on the board meant setting off the ruthless mechanism of reality. It meant admitting: they were lost, the world was destroyed, and perhaps there would be no one left to check the ashes. To write was to give the world the chance to shatter you completely.

Miko was pale as camp lime. Her hand trembled, but she took the pencil and quickly, in a clear, almost teacher-like handwriting, rendering every stroke, wrote on the scrap of paper: "Nishida Miko. First Girls' School. Alive. Looking for family."

Yuriko swallowed a dry lump in her throat. The pencil felt heavy as a gun breech. Her fingers wouldn't obey; the dirt on her wrist mixed with fresh sweat. She pressed the paper against the smooth pine board of the bulletin and wrote: "Nakayama Yuriko. First Girls' School. Alive. Looking for mother and brother Soma. Father – don't know."

"Father – don't know." Two words beneath which lay an abyss. Not "died," not "missing," but precisely this "don't know" hanging between heaven and earth, which was worse than any certainty.

They were far from the first. The white boards were already dotted with scraps of paper, torn pieces of American cardboard, rags from undershirts. Written on them in charcoal, pencil, or squeezed berry juice were names and descriptions. "Tall woman with a mole on her cheek," "Five-year-old boy, without left arm," "Look for us in Sector B." This entire huge wall rustled in the warm wind like a giant living creature woven from hope and horror. Dozens, hundreds of paper birds, pinned with nails to a wooden raft in the middle of an indifferent ocean. And every description was a portrait: small, uneven, written with love on a piece of wood – and every portrait screamed: Are you alive? Are you here? Answer me.

Miko stepped back slightly. Yuriko stood unable to tear her gaze away from her note, and suddenly felt hot tears flowing silently down her cheeks. She didn't sob – just trails of clear water cutting through the camp dust on her face. She felt unbearably ashamed of her weakness in front of Ren, in front of Miko, in front of the sleeping camp.

Ren Kimura stepped toward her. His voice sounded steady, professional – like the voice of an interpreter – but deep within it vibrated something entirely different: "Don't worry, Yuriko-san. The war will end soon. The checkpoints will be removed, and you'll be able to go home."

He faltered, looking into her wet eyes, at the pulsing vein on her temple, and added quietly, humanly: "If there is still a home."

And fell silent.

"There is no home," Yuriko finally wiped her cheek with the back of her hand. "Our village, Mawashiasato... it burned down. Nothing is left."

"I know," Ren answered softly, looking away so as not to give himself away. "You will find them. Or they will find you. And if not... Let it be another home. One that you build yourselves."

He turned sharply and walked toward the staff jeep – tall, in a foreign uniform, but no longer frightening.

Miko walked up to Hinata. The boy stood nearby, barefoot, in his constant three-button shirt, staring spellbound at the rustling notes. He couldn't really read yet, but his sensitive, childish heart understood everything.

"Hinata," Miko squatted softly in front of him. "Would you like us to write your name too? Your mom's name?"

The boy looked at the swaying paper wall for a long time. His lips quivered; he bit his lower lip hard, and then slowly shook his head.

"No," he said very quietly.

"Why, Hinata?"

"Because... if we write it, and Mom doesn't come..." he swallowed, hiding his eyes, "then it will be like I lost her completely. For good. But as long as it isn't written here – I haven't lost her. She's just far away. In the jungle. She will come."

Miko fell silent. Yuriko pressed her palm to her lips. The paper birds on the wall kept rustling under gusts of wind as if breathing.

Yuriko turned to call Hinata back to the mats, but her gaze met something heavy.

About ten meters away, by the large camp water cauldrons, stood a group of women from the northern sectors. They did not move. Their faces, dried by the sun and grief, were gray, and their gazes were motionless and cold. The women whispered, covering their mouths with their palms, and in those gazes there was neither pity nor gratitude for the girls teaching the orphans.

There was something else there. A sharp, sticky contempt.

Yuriko physically felt that glare against her back – exactly the way she had felt the stalk of an alien beast in the jungles of Ihamigama. She could almost hear their snakelike whisper: "Himeyuri... The pure daughters of the Emperor should have stayed in the caves. All respectable schoolgirls blew themselves up with grenades or threw themselves off cliffs. But these ones survived. Ran away. And now they smile at the long-nosed demons, take their clean paper, eat their chocolate. Traitors."

Yuriko shifted her shoulders as if from a sudden draft. Hinata, instantly catching her movement, dropped his ration biscuit, ran over, and wrapped his thin little arms tightly around her legs with all his strength. He glared angrily from under his brow at the women whispering by the cauldrons, shielding his Yuriko with his body.

Yuriko placed her palm on his stiff cowlick. Miko had seen those looks too, but her face remained a flawless, impassive mask. She straightened her back even more and walked toward the tent with a steady stride.

In the evening, the inflamed, crimson sun sank behind the rows of barbed wire. The camp submerged into precarious twilight.

Yuriko sat on the edge of the mat. Hinata was already asleep, as usual burying his nose in her *hakama* and tightly, to the point of white knuckles, clutching her index finger with his small palm. Miko sat beside her, shoulder to shoulder. In the dark, her silhouette seemed

carved from ebony. As always, she was darning the torn hem of her skirt with a thread pulled from the strap of an American parachute.

“I wrote a note,” Miko whispered without turning her head. “And I’m... I’m terrified, Yuriko.”

Yuriko remained silent. Against such fear, no words existed. It was their shared fear – one for two, of the exact same temperature and depth.

Instead of an answer, she placed her free left hand on the warm, dust-scented earth in front of them. Miko did not look up, her fingers continuing to move the needle rhythmically, but a moment later her palm – warm, with hard calluses from washing clothes – faintly, weightlessly covered Yuriko’s fingers.

Just for a second. And her hand stopped trembling.

Far away on the square, the wind fluttered thousands of pinned sheets. The white boards stood in the dark like the sails of ships stranded in a harbor at the edge of the world. The paper birds rustled, whispering to each other about all who had died and all who had survived, and from that rustling, the camp night became, for one brief moment, a little quieter.

Chapter 7. New Skin

By the end of July, the Shimabuku camp had learned to breathe.

But he breathed differently – not like healthy people breathe: evenly, deeply, without noticing his own breathing – he breathed like a seriously wounded but surviving creature breathes: with wheezing, long pauses, twitching of the canvas roofs, but alive.

July was past its midpoint, and the camp had ceased to be a temporary shelter, turning into a vast, dusty city living by its own harsh laws. The heat was so dense that the air above the tents shimmered, distorting the outlines of the water towers.

Yet through this suffocating dust, a routine began to emerge. Rice was handed out on time. Water flowed from the standpipes – brackish, with a taste of rust and lime, but flowing nonetheless. American engineers had repaired the latrine trenches. The children were no longer just shouting foreign words – they had turned into an obedient little unit that obeyed the two girls. And when they raised their hands, calling out English phrases, it felt as though the school's canvas tent grew somehow cleaner.

The children shouted “Gud mornig! Ai em hangri” – no longer in a chorus, but individually, raising their hands like in an arithmetic lesson – and from this shouting, from this funny, ridiculous, childish “I am hungry” in a foreign language, the tent felt warmer. Not from the temperature. From the rhythm. From the fact that the world had found an order, and that order was not military, not camp-like, but school-like: the bell (a stick striking the bottom of a tin can), a lesson (letters, numbers, sanshin), recess (peanuts and banana peels), another lesson.

Thus the world found a new rhythm: life adapted to the emptiness, the way water adapts to the shape of its vessel.

Their own clothes by this time had turned into a translucent concept of the past. Miko's dark maroon *hakama* had become rags, held together only by her stubbornness and parachute thread. Yuriko's white sailor suit was so deeply soaked in insidious brown Okinawan dust that it seemed sewn from gray burlap. This school uniform no longer protected – it had thinned out, turning into a monument to a world that no longer existed.

Lessons had just ended. The sun hung so low that the shadows of the tents covered the entire southern edge of the camp. Hinata sat on the mat, intently sorting through empty shell casings that served as an abacus for the children, when an army Willys jeep rolled up to their patch, kicking up a white cloud of dust. The engine sputtered and died.

A woman stepped out of the vehicle.

Yuriko recognized her immediately – it was the very same woman with the Red Cross armband who had come to them at the very beginning with cold, appraising questions. But now there was no cross on her. She was dressed in an austere, dark-blue dress of heavy cotton fabric with a high collar. There was nothing feminine about it – no darts, no folds, no ruffles; it resembled workwear or a buttonless closed tunic, cut so as not to hinder movement. On the fabric there were no patches, no insignia, no stars. And in this absence of symbols, in this stern cleanliness of the cloth, there was more weight than in any military uniform.

Two American soldiers quickly unloaded four huge canvas bales tightly bound with twine from the back of the jeep, dropped them straight into the dust, and stepped aside.

The woman walked over to Miko. She stood straight, hands clasped behind her back.

"Hello," her voice was low, businesslike, with a strange lilt to her accent. "We've met before. I am Mrs. Sanchez. Umi Sanchez. I represent the civil affairs section of the island's military administration."

She paused, peering into the girls' faces, and then added in pure, soft Okinawan dialect – quietly, as if sharing a secret:

"My parents are from the island. From Urasoe."

Urasoe. At the sound of that name, something inside Yuriko gave a brief, blind tug. It was right next to her home village of Mawashiasato. It was her former world – shattered, turned upside down, having once crossed the ocean and now returned in an American jeep.

Miko straightened up. Her back turned completely rigid, her shoulders squared – a habitual reflex when facing any unknown. There was no defiance in this movement, only absolute readiness to take a blow.

"Can we help you with something, Mrs. Sanchez?" Miko asked. Her voice sounded steady. Slightly steadier than it should have been.

"There is clothing here," Umi Sanchez pointed at the bales. "Relief supplies from reserve stocks. There are work coveralls, blouses, a few civilian dresses. You must distribute this among the women in your sector. Choose those who need it most. But first..." she inspected Miko's tattered hem closely from top to bottom, "first, pick out something for yourselves."

Yuriko opened her mouth to say that the school uniform of the First Girls' School was all they had left, that they couldn't take it off, but the words stuck in her throat.

At that very moment, her left palm began to itch intolerably. The itch was deep, coming from somewhere within, straight from the bone – in the exact spots where two tiny crescent-shaped scars darkened on the pad of her thumb and at the base of her pinky. It was not an itch from sweat or dust. It was almost mystical, frightening. Yuriko feverishly clenched her palm into a fist and hid her hand behind her back, as if these markings of the Ihamigama cave were warning her: the old skin must shed. Like scales shedding from a snake.

Miko noticed her abrupt movement, cast a brief glance at her, but said nothing.

"You are no longer schoolgirls here," Mrs. Sanchez said quietly, but with insistent firmness, looking Miko straight in the eye. "There are no more schools. You are teachers. You are responsible for these children. Your clothing must match what you are doing. There are no children's clothes in these bales, but we are expecting a transport from Hawaii; there will be clothes and shoes for the orphans. I will bring them as soon as they arrive."

Miko lowered her eyes to her chalk-stained palms.

"Very well, Mrs. Sanchez," she replied. "We will do everything as you say."

She took a short breath, and a sharp, adult directness appeared in her gaze.

Sanchez looked at Miko, at Yuriko, at Hinata sitting off to the side on the mat – and in her gaze appeared something Yuriko had not expected: not pity, not sympathy, but caution. As if she were about to say something on which everything depended. And was afraid. Not for herself – for them.

"You were..." she began. Paused. Corrected herself: "You were in the Ihamigama cave, weren't you? With Minato Kobayashi?"

Miko tensed up. Yuriko felt it – not with her eyes, but with her body: Miko's shoulder next to hers became harder, colder, the way stone becomes hard and cold when a shadow falls upon it.

"Yes," Miko answered. "We were with Sensei Kobayashi. He disbanded our unit. Handed us..." she paused for a moment, "things. And told us to run."

Umi Sanchez nodded. Slowly. Thoughtfully.

"Minato Kobayashi is alive," she said.

Silence.

Not the silence that happens when words stop. A different kind. The kind that happens when the air changes temperature, and everyone breathing that air feels the change at once: Yuriko and Miko froze.

"He didn't commit suicide," Umi Sanchez continued. Her voice was surprisingly calm, professional – the voice in which facts are delivered without emotion. "When you left, he joined the remnants of the Thirty-Second Army. They tried to break through south to the Kiyan cliffs, but were caught in artillery fire. He was gravely wounded by shrapnel in the chest and left shoulder. American medics picked him up in the field a few days ago. Right now he is in the 76th Field Hospital. His condition is stable; he will live."

Yuriko heard Miko slowly, raggedly exhale. It was an exhalation she had been holding back, it seemed, for an entire month – from the very second the teacher had stood in the entrance of the cave. It was not joy or relief. It was the final, crushing collapse of illusions. The teacher who had sent dozens of girls who trusted him to their deaths in the name of honor had not pulled the pin himself. He had chosen life – wounded, shameful, in captivity of the very “long-nosed devils” he had terrified them with to the point of convulsions.

Miko nodded slowly. Her face turned into a mask of white stone. In this nod there was no anger. Only release from the last ghost of the Ihamigama cave. The last wall of the Empire in her head collapsed and crumbled into dust.

“Can you...” Miko stumbled, not knowing what to say. “Tell him...”

And stopped. Because she didn't know what exactly they “could” do. Visit? Write? Thank? Ask for forgiveness? For what? For surviving? For throwing away the grenades? For not dying as he asked?

“Can you tell him...” Miko started again. And stopped once more.

“I will tell him you are alive,” Sanchez cut in quietly, sparing her the need to search for words. She pulled a small notepad from her pocket, tore out a clean sheet, and handed it to Miko. “This is my address at the administration office. If anything happens, or if the children urgently need medicine – send me a note through the translator, Sergeant Kimura. He knows where to find me.”

Miko took the paper, neatly folded it in half, and put it into the deep pocket of her *hakama* – right where a grenade had once rested.

“Thank you,” she said. This time – for real.

Mrs. Sanchez nodded, turned, and climbed into the jeep. The vehicle started moving, and thick white dust obscured her silhouette. When the dust settled, the jeep was gone.

The bales were untied only by evening, when the sun had set completely, leaving a crimson, slowly cooling streak in the sky.

Inside the canvas sacks were items from some old military reserve. It smelled of mothballs, soap, and dry factory cleanliness. Miko carefully sorted through the dresses. One of them – light yellow, made of thin cotton with small white daisies – she pulled out and held up against herself. Yuriko looked at her and froze. Against the backdrop of this peaceful, foolish, serene pattern, Miko's soot-stained face, sunken eyes, and sharp cheekbones looked almost frightening. The yellow daisies were a detail from some other, forever-erased life.

Miko looked at the fabric, then into Yuriko's eyes. Silently, she folded the dress and set it aside.

“No,” she said quietly. “We'll take the coveralls.”

She pulled out two identical stacks of dark olive, almost black work coveralls made of heavy twill, with iron zippers and deep pockets. Stenciled on the back of each in small letters was: “USACE.”

“For us?” Yuriko asked.

“For us,” Miko replied. And in her voice there was no question. There was a decision.

Yuriko did not argue. She knew: when Miko says “for us” – it is not a suggestion. It is an order. Miko had chosen. And Miko’s choice was right: not dresses, not gray blouses, not cotton skirts, but coveralls. Dark. Identical. Inconspicuous. Because a dress is like an address. A dress says: “I am a woman, look at me.” Coveralls say: “I am nobody, move along.”

And that was what they needed. Not beauty. Not dignity. Invisibility. The right to go unnoticed. The right to pass by a condemning glare without taking a blow.

They changed behind a screen made of an old army blanket. When Yuriko pulled on the heavy fabric and stepped out into the light of the kerosene lamp, Hinata, who had been gnawing on a piece of dried sugarcane, suddenly froze, choked, and burst into a ringing, infectious laugh.

The coveralls were tailored for adult, tall American mechanics. On the thin, emaciated teenage girls, they hung like sails on broken masts. The shoulder seams slumped all the way down to their elbows, the trouser legs dragged on the ground, the collar jutted out awkwardly, exposing thin white collarbones, and another Hinata could easily fit inside the waist.

Yuriko looked at herself, then at Miko, who was standing in the exact same shapeless black sack with sleeves reaching her knees, while maintaining her unperturbed, straight samurai posture. Miko looked so absurd, serious, and tender all at once that Yuriko felt, for the first time in many months, a warm, tickling wave rising within her. She snorted. Then smiled. And then burst out laughing – quietly at first, raspy in a throat unaccustomed to laughter, and then louder and louder, covering her face with her hands. It was an avalanche. The crust of ice inside her cracked, and living water flooded through it.

Hinata was howling with laughter, rolling on the mat and pointing at them:

“You... you look like mushrooms! Big black mushrooms after the rain!”

Miko frowned at first, but the corners of her lips quivered. She lowered her head, and her shoulders inside the huge American coveralls began to shake with soundless, cleansing laughter. Tears welled up in the eyes of both girls – and these were the first tears in the camp that held no grief.

“It’s alright,” Miko squeezed out through her laughter, wiping her eyes with her sleeve. “It’s alright. We’ll alter them.”

They altered them in deep darkness, by the dim gold of a kerosene lamp.

Miko cut the coarse fabric with shiny American scissors that Ren Kimura had brought them a few days ago, while Yuriko stitched the edges with quick, precise movements. The thread they used was parachute thread – white, silky, incredibly strong. And from these threads, from these neat white seams against the austere black fabric, the coveralls ceased to be American or Japanese. They became their own. Because a seam is a signature. It says: “I am here. I am alive. My hands are making this world.”

Hinata sat beside them. He was no longer laughing – he watched them with that peculiar, non-human childish attention with which children observe adults at work, remembering every detail. Miko’s hands moved quickly and confidently. Yuriko looked at

those palms, with their short-clipped nails, roughened by washing and chalk. She loved those fingers more than anything in the world – for knowing how to make things in the midst of chaos, for not dropping when the horizon collapsed. With every seam, with every pulled thread, Miko’s hands were making this torn world a tiny bit better. By one centimeter. By one stitch.

Hinata fell asleep instantly – he simply closed his eyes and tumbled onto his side, resting his head on Yuriko’s knees. She gently adjusted the edge of the blanket beneath him and returned to work.

It grew quiet inside the tent. Beyond the canvas walls, the familiar sounds of the camp drifted by: the distant crying of an infant, the barking of dogs, the rumble of a far-off airplane. But here, inside the golden circle of light, peace reigned.

Between two thrusts of the needle, Miko suddenly stopped her scissors. She raised her head and looked at Yuriko.

“Are you angry?”

“About what?”

“At Kobayashi.”

“No... Are you?”

“No,” Miko replied. And unexpectedly, she smiled.

Not just with the corners of her lips as usual, but completely. Openly, warmly, with the nocturnal and defenseless smile of someone who remembered what it felt like to be happy.

From this smile, Yuriko’s entire body ached sweetly and unbearably. She wanted to lean forward, to close those miserable two feet between them, and touch her lips to Miko’s cheek. She wanted to utter the word that had long burned the tip of her tongue – a word that she would most likely never speak in her life, and that would remain with her to the very end.

“Fits well,” Miko said quietly, nodding at the altered sleeve of the coveralls. She was speaking of the fabric, but Yuriko knew she was speaking of their entire strange, vulnerable world.

“It does,” Yuriko replied.

Chapter 8. The Ringing Void

That night, Tamar came for the last time before everything changed. For the last time before the world – not their camp world, and not the world of Okinawa, but the world itself, in its cosmic entirety – did what a shattered teacup does: flew into fragments.

Yuriko lay on the mat and looked up at the tent canvas swaying in the wind. By the beginning of August, the heat over Shimabuku had become unbearable. It no longer descended from the sky, but rose from the very earth – thick, trembling, smelling of salt, mothballs, and the exhalations of thousands of bodies. Time in the camp was melting. Hinata slept nearby on his stomach, his arms thrown wide, moving his lips in a funny way, as if he still remembered the rare sweetness of a rationed sweet potato. Miko breathed evenly,

one arm thrown behind her head, and her face in the twilight of the tent looked like a white, frozen plaster cast.

Yuriko was not asleep. She waited with her body, her skin, that deep place inside that feels the drop in atmospheric pressure before a typhoon. That place knew: Tamar would come. For two weeks now, this scorching delusion had haunted her every night, becoming closer, clearer, more inevitable.

And Tamar came.

Fire was everywhere. The city burned entirely, from edge to edge, with a terrible, fatal beauty. It was a great city of white stone – with narrow, steep streets, arches, and pools in which there was no longer water, but dark, clotted blood. The white stone turned black, covered in soot. On the hill, above this fiery abyss, towered the massive House of God – a Temple with a golden roof. It burned slowly, with heavy dignity, as if not dying, but transforming, turning from stone into pure, punishing light. Below, in the smoke, people screamed and the iron of foreign soldiers clanged, encased in armor that looked like the shiny backs of beetles.

Tamar stood on the flat roof, and the hot wind whipped her long black hair. Tears dried instantly on her cheeks, leaving salty trails.

Beside her stood her father. Tall, strong, with a face dried by desert winds. Yuriko recognized this face – in its terrible, unwavering calmness there was something of the teacher in the exact second when he stood in the entrance of the cave and ordered the squad to die.

Her father embraced her – tightly, until her ribs ached, as if saying goodbye. He smelled of sweat, smoke, and metal.

“It’s time, Tamar,” he said, and his voice was drier than ash. “We are going to our people. We are leaving for the rock in the desert. Everything is over here.”

His arms unclasped. The warmth left, leaving an icy emptiness. Tamar turned to run, but before that, she looked back for the last time at the burning sacred city.

And in that moment, the sky split open.

A flash tore through the darkness above the horizon. It was absolutely soundless, but thousands of times brighter than the midday sun – a blinding, unnatural, retina-searing white light. And behind it, slightly to the left, beyond the edge of the earth, a second flash bloomed. These two impossible suns did not belong to the ancient world. They came from somewhere in the distant future to erase the past forever. The air shuddered, the color of the sky became an impossible violet-gray, and in this ruthless radiance the white city, the Temple, the golden roof, and the screaming people began to melt, thin out, and turn into shadows, disappearing without a trace into the white void.

“Run!” came the distant voice of her father. “Tamar, run!”

Yuriko opened her eyes.

The green canvas ceiling of the tent. Shrapnel holes through which the ordinary, morning tropical light filtered. Hinata’s gentle snuffling. The ordinary world, in which there were no stone cities or burning temples, stood firmly in place, and from this contrast, Yuriko

wanted to scream. The two crescent scars on her left palm ached unbearably, dully – monotonously, the way an old fracture aches before a change in weather. She convulsively clenched her fist, hiding her hand, as if holding the fragments of an alien apocalypse inside the darkness of her fingers.

The morning of August 15, 1945, began as usual. The sun rose viscous, humid, and the tents began to breathe, releasing the night's steam. Rice was distributed on time, the water from the standpipe flowed warm and rusty. The children gathered for lessons, reluctantly dragging their bare feet through the red dust.

Yuriko stood before thirty students, drawing letters on a scrap of plywood with charcoal. The piece of coal crumbled in her fingers from sweat.

“A,” she said, trying to keep her voice steady. “Pronounce it: a.”

“A-a-a...” the children's choir obediently replied.

“I.”

“I-i-i...”

“Thank you.”

“San-kyu...”

The children stretched their lips, making funny grimaces from the effort, and Yuriko offered them a barely noticeable smile. For a second, it seemed to her that through this routine, life could be glued back together.

Sh-sh-sh-kr-r-r-r.

The sound tore through the air of the camp the way one tears heavy silk. It was a sharp, dry electrical crackle sent through wires. The children fell silent in fright and turned their heads. The crackle came from everywhere – from above, from the sides, saturating the air itself. In the square, by the water tower, American signalmen had just finished fastening huge gray loudspeaker horns to poles.

Ren Kimura was walking quickly through the rows of tents toward their improvised school. He wasn't wearing his helmet, the collar of his uniform shirt was unbuttoned, and a muscle twitched convulsively on his cheekbone. The usual fluid grace of the translator had vanished from his movements; he walked as if the sky were collapsing on him in the middle of the camp.

“Stop the lessons,” Ren said, drawing level with the girls. His voice was firm, but stripped of any commanding tone. He didn't look them in the eyes; his gaze was fixed on the gray metal horns. “Gather the children and head out to the square. Everyone is ordered to listen.”

“Listen to what, Mr. Kimura?” Miko set aside the *kankara-sanshin*, her fingers freezing on the string.

“A broadcast from Tokyo,” Ren answered quietly, and his lips pressed into a thin line. “The Living God is going to speak to his people.”

By noon, the Shimabuku camp had transformed into a single organism, holding its breath. Tens of thousands of people – pale women in rags, peasants from the central villages,

fishermen from Itoman, orphans, former officials in torn jackets – stood in this brown dust under the ruthless zenith sun. A dense, ringing silence hung over the square. It wasn't just quiet; it was a total absence of sound that made one's ears pop, like falling into an abyss.

At exactly twelve o'clock, the hissing crackle of an old gramophone needle emanated from the gray horns. Then faintly, through thousands of miles of oceanic static, ethereal noise, and whistling, the solemn, drawn-out sounds of the “Kimigayo” anthem rang out. And after it, a voice began to speak.

The voice was thin, high-pitched, slightly nasal, and... entirely human. It read a text in *Gyokuon-hoso* – an ancient, archaic court language never used to speak with commoners. It was a language created for communicating with gods.

Yuriko stood between Miko and Hinata, listening closely to this crackling, distant sound. The Okinawan peasants around her, whose native *Uchinaguchi* was so unlike the state language, did not understand even half of the words, which were constructed from complex, suffocatingly formal, centuries-old ideograms and vocabulary. But the language didn't matter. The intonation, cracked and weak, spoke for itself. Only fragments of phrases reached Yuriko's ears, floating above the crowd like the wreckage of a shattered ship: “...to accept the provisions of their Joint Declaration...”, “...enduring the unendurable and suffering what is insufferable...”, “...the enemy has begun to employ a new and most cruel bomb...”.

It was capitulation. Unconditional. Complete. Emperor Showa, descendant of the sun goddess, the Living God, was announcing over a radio set up by his enemies that the war was lost.

What happened in the camp in the next second was like a tectonic shift.

The camp collapsed. It literally, physically sank into the dry dust. Old women – the very same ones who just yesterday had followed Yuriko and Miko with contemptuous glares by the cauldrons, hissing about “the daughters of the Emperor who were obliged to die for honor” – fell to their knees. They dug their fingernails into the dirt, covered their mouths with their hands, and howled. This terrifying, primal howl rose over Shimabuku, merging into one unbearable note of collective ruin. Old men sobbed uncontrollably like children abandoned in the forest, smashing their fists against stones. Men covered their faces with their hands, silently rocking from side to side, as large, rare tears streamed down their dirty cheeks.

The Empire, which had seemed eternal and made of granite, crumbled beneath the crackle of American speakers. God turned out to be just a tired, defeated man in distant Tokyo.

Yuriko stood absolutely straight. She did not fall into the dust. On her right, Miko gripped her hand in a deathhold – and Miko's palm was dry, hot, and hard as a rock. On her left, terrified by the howling crowd, Hinata clung to the wide pant leg of her massive, altered engineer coveralls.

Yuriko looked at the gray metal horn, and in her mind, cleansed of the slightest emotion, a frightening, crystalline, icy clarity reigned.

“For the sake of this voice?” she thought.

For the sake of this thin, weak, cracked voice reading a text from a piece of paper in a closed palace thousands of miles away? For the sake of this little man, were they, Okinawans – who had been annexed into this vast Empire less than a century ago, who had always been considered outsiders, second-class citizens – forced to blow themselves up in damp caves? Was it for him that Sensei Kobayashi handed out clay grenades and ordered them to smash their own heads in? Was it for this nasal sound from a radio receiver that her friends had pulled the pins, turning into a bloody mess on the stone walls of Ihamigama? Was it for him that thousands of her countrymen lay at the bottom of the ocean right now, having jumped from the Kiyon cliffs, believing they were saving some higher, sacred “honor of Japan”?

And God had simply walked up to a microphone and given them permission to surrender. Given them permission not to die. Given them permission to stop being the “shield of the Empire” and finally just be human beings.

And in that moment, amidst the hysterically thrashing camp, Yuriko felt the heavy, leaden slab of guilt that had pressed down on her shoulders since the day of her escape slide away like mercury. It was as if those two terrifying, impossible suns from her dream had burned right through her, reducing the past to ashes.

The shame before the dead girls. The fear of condemnation from the survivors. The sticky camp curse of “you should have died there” – all of it burned away instantly, like a dry leaf. Death in the darkness of a cave was not the only valor.

But in the place of the incinerated guilt, neither joy nor relief emerged. What remained was only a ringing, pure, absolute void.

And freedom.

Yuriko turned her head and looked at Miko. Miko looked back at her. Their eyes met through the cacophony of others' weeping and the fading radio static. Miko's face was white as chalk, but deep within her dark, wet eyes, Yuriko saw the exact same saving, liberating thought: *The old world is no more. And thank the gods it is gone.*

Their homes were burned, their country had disappeared, their Emperor had surrendered. They had absolutely nothing left, except for these altered coveralls of a foreign army and a piece of plywood with charcoal. But they were standing on their own two feet.

The voice in the loudspeakers fell silent. The broadcast ceased, leaving only the steady, dead hum of static electricity. The world around them – the sky, the sun, the dust, the dry trees – remained entirely indifferent to the fact that the Empire had just ceased to exist. The world continued to be, and from this cosmic indifference of nature, Yuriko suddenly felt incredibly light. The stone she had been dragging had fallen, not because she threw it off, but because it had grown tired of pressing down on its own.

On her left palm, on the pad of her thumb and at the base of her pinky, the two crescent scars finally faded out. They did not disappear; her skin preserved these markings forever, but they stopped aching, itching, and pulsing. They fell silent, the way a string falls silent when the last, most difficult note has been played. Tamar was gone, or, conversely, had dissolved forever into her body, but the story that had tormented her at night was

finished. The city had burned. The sky had returned to its normal color. Her father had let go of her hand.

Hinata pulled hard on the edge of Yuriko's jacket.

"Yuriko-nee..." he whispered, his voice cracking from fear of the crowd's howling. "What did that man from the box say? What was he talking about?"

Yuriko slowly crouched down, facing the boy. She looked into his huge, round, clear black eyes, at his dirty cheeks and the torn collar of his shirt. She reached out and gently touched his shoulder.

"He said," she pronounced quietly, but distinctly, "that the war is over. Completely over."

Hinata stared into her face for a long time, as if trying to understand whether she was joking. His little fingers clenched convulsively.

"Does that mean... does that mean my mom will come now?"

Yuriko froze. There was no answer. In this new world, just born from radio static, no one knew whether mothers returned from the dead, whether cities would be rebuilt, or whether the sea would remain the same. It was a time of complete, frightening ignorance. But within this very ignorance lay all their future, sole hope.

"She will come, Hinata," Yuriko lied. Or she didn't lie – she didn't know. But she knew that in the world they were beginning to build on this island, this was exactly what a child needed to be told. Because a world where children are promised the return of their mothers is the only world worth continuing to live in.

Hinata sniffled, believed her, and finally let go of her coveralls.

Yuriko stood up and looked at Miko again. Miko reached out and hugged her. The old world was gone, leaving behind only a ringing silence, but they were here. The three of them. On the square, in the camp, among hundreds of tents and boards with paper birds, under a clear Okinawan sky that had never changed its color.

Chapter 9. September Dates

By the beginning of September, the air in Shimabuku had changed. The stifled, ringing, deathly vibration was gone – the one with which people had stared at the sky for months, expecting a fresh portion of fire. The heat became drier, the nights more transparent, and the wind blowing in from the south no longer smelled of the suffocating fumes of burning phosphorus; now it carried the bitter, cooled scent of ash and dry salt.

The camp was no longer a dead end where one waited for the end of the world. It had turned into a large, pulsating, temporary transit station on the way to something new.

The rules of this station changed every day, gradually and imperceptibly – the way morning fog dissipates, turning yesterday's solid wall into an open passageway. The American administration began issuing passes. The barbed wire between the sectors wasn't removed or cut down – simply, one morning, the gates were thrown wide open, and people who had been locked up for weeks walked out to meet one another. The camp ceased to be

a camp; it boiled over, buzzing with intersections, voices, pushing crowds, and the smells of foreign field rations.

Some were already being released for good. Young men were sent south – to clear mines from roads, to clear debris, to build temporary wooden bridges. Women with infants were directed to other points, closer to their surviving hometowns. The elderly were let go just like that: leave, if you have somewhere to go.

But people didn't just flow out of the camp – they flowed into it, too. From the north, from the wild mountain jungles, came those who had been hiding in caves all these months. They arrived in such a state that one wanted to look away: emaciated, overgrown with hair, in rotting rags, with huge black eyes that held nothing but a feral alertness. They smelled of dampness, of prolonged fear, and of that specific, sweet-and-sour odor that appears when the human body begins to consume itself from starvation. The entire island beyond the barbed wire lay in ruins – a lunar landscape, covered in red earth and strewn with crushed stone. The villages of Naha, Mawashi, and Shuri had been erased by bulldozer tracks so thoroughly that returning peasants could not even locate the foundations of their homes.

And so, the canvas city of Shimabuku, with its strict lines for rice, rationed soap, and humming water towers, paradoxically remained the only bastion of order on Okinawa. Here, at least, there was predictability. Here there was a geometry to life.

Ren Kimura sat on the hood of his dusty army jeep, parked in the shade of a massive century-old banyan tree at the very edge of the square, watching the school.

He smoked a “Lucky Strike,” the bitter, strong smoke rising in the still air in a thin, dove-gray thread. Ren's fingers mechanically, out of an old American habit, wove a long blade of dry grass into yet another Indian knot. Before him, on a trampled patch of earth, thirty barefoot children sat in a circle on woven mats. Yuriko and Miko – in their oversized American coveralls, painstakingly altered with neat white stitches – were leading an arithmetic lesson.

In the center of the children's circle gleamed a pile of empty brass machine-gun casings. Out of these casings, they had built their world.

“Five and three,” Miko said loudly and distinctly, setting aside five spent casings to the left and three to the right. “How many is that altogether? Count them.”

“Ni, san, shi, go...” the children's voices chimed out of sync, and Hinata, sitting closest to the plywood board, self-importantly scooped the brass into one common pile, confirming the math. “Eight! Eight, sensei!”

Ren watched Yuriko. She was crouching, using a piece of charcoal to straighten out crooked numbers on a scrap of plywood. In profile, her face, gaunt, with dark circles under her eyes, looked as if it had been carved from faded, brittle wood.

The translator took a drag, and his paternal, Japanese blood asked him the same agonizing question for the hundredth time: “How?”

How did it happen that these ordinary, normal people, these thin-skinned schoolgirls, whose biggest worry back in the spring should have been their calligraphy grades and the color of the ribbons in their hair, ended up at the very bottom of this inhuman hell? Who drove

them into the damp caves of Ihamigama? Who placed heavy ceramic grenades into their childlike fingers? And how do they now, in the midst of this ringing void, find the strength to smile with the corners of their lips, straighten orphans' collars, and stack empty machine-gun casings to teach children math?

In Sacramento, when Ren was leaving for the front, the American newspapers wrote that they were going to fight a fanatical, faceless, ruthless horde. But here, on this dusty square, there was no fanaticism. There were only two girls who, out of tin cans, scraps of parachute silk, and spent shell casings, were stubbornly, stitch by stitch, sewing a torn universe back together. Not because they were heroes. But because the body wanted to live, hands wanted to work, and children wanted to count.

Ren took a deep breath, tossed his cigarette butt into the brown dust, and slowly, heavily crushed it beneath the sole of his army boot. In his breast pocket, right over his heart, lay a piece of paper folded in four bearing the Red Cross letterhead. The answers to their notes from the Wall of Names.

The lesson ended. With noise and shouts, the children scattered toward the field kitchen, where they had just started handing out hardtack biscuits. Yuriko and Miko, brushing coal and dust from their knees, walked over to the jeep.

“Good afternoon, Mr. Kimura,” Yuriko bowed slightly, her back remaining straight. Miko simply nodded, her gaze, as always, scanning, medical, ready for defense.

Ren straightened up, leaning against the hood.

“Good afternoon.” He glanced briefly at Hinata, who was still fussing on the mat, building a long, even path out of the remaining casings. Lowering his voice, Ren said, “I need to speak with you both. Without the boy. Please.”

The smile that had barely begun to form on Yuriko's lips vanished instantly. The space between them contracted in a second, becoming dense and heavy. The very molecules of air seemed to freeze. That ancient mechanism of premonition, which had saved Yuriko in the jungle, stirred dully inside her. Miko did not ask a single question. She simply turned and shouted:

“Hinata! Go to the cauldrons, save us a spot in line for the biscuits! Quickly!”

The boy frowned, casting a suspicious look from Miko to the tall translator in a foreign uniform, but obediently took off running. His dirty bare feet with cracked soles pattered across the sun-baked clay. Yuriko watched him go with a sudden, sharp pain inside – not from pity, but from a deep, unconditional love for this little creature in a three-button shirt.

Ren waited until Hinata's cowlicked head disappeared behind the canvas flap of the mess tent. He slowly pulled the paper from his pocket, but did not unfold it. He knew the text by heart. Every word. Every number.

“The paper birds have reached their destination,” Ren said quietly. He turned to Miko. She had to be spoken to the way one speaks to surviving soldiers – briefly, honestly, without mercy. “Nishida-san. The lists from Itoman and the Red Cross filtration data have been cross-checked. It's official. Your parents... they were killed. Under artillery fire at an intersection near Shuri. In early June. They never made it to the caves.”

Silence.

Not the silence that follows words, but another kind – an absolute void in which the world ceases to exist. Miko did not flinch. Not a single muscle twitched on her face, which was as white as camp lime. Her face instantly transformed into a mask that Ren had seen hundreds of times in this war – the mask of a person who had prepared to hear the worst and had now taken the blow without bending. Only her hands, shoved deep in the pockets of her coveralls, slowly clenched into fists until the joints cracked. She had known. She had carried this knowledge within her from the very second she threw away the grenade in the jungle; only now, the box was opened.

“I understand,” her voice was steady. Frighteningly steady, dry as sand. “Thank you for your work, Mr. Kimura.”

Ren caught his breath, feeling everything inside him clench at her composure, and turned to Yuriko. Yuriko was watching his lips, afraid to take a breath.

“Nakayama-san,” Ren paused and suddenly said her name differently, softly, without official suffixes, simply: “Yuriko. Your father, Jiro Nakayama... he was killed. At the very end of the fighting for Okinawa.”

Yuriko’s knees sharply buckled, the ground slipping out from under her feet, but Miko instantly grabbed her elbow with an iron grip, holding her up, dividing her weight between the two of them.

“He was trying to reach your cave,” Ren’s voice grew quieter, as if he himself were walking barefoot on broken glass. “He was looking for Ihamigama. He wanted to get you out. They found him on the trail. Two hundred meters from the cave entrance.”

“Two hundred meters.”

This number struck Yuriko in the chest. Two hundred meters – that was a three-minute unhurried walk. It was nothing. It was the distance from her tent to the water standpipe. A distance she walked several times every day without noticing. And her father had not walked it. He fell, covered in shrapnel, three minutes away from the place where his daughter lay on a wet stone, listening to water dripping in the darkness. The tears did not flow – the subterranean river of her grief was still too deep; it caught like a dry lump in her throat. Yuriko simply allowed this fact to be. Allowed the world to be this way – broken, unjust, where a three-minute walk transforms into an insurmountable eternity.

“But your mother is alive,” Ren quickly continued, his voice growing warmer. “Kohaku Nakayama is currently in the Haebaru camp, north of Naha. She is fine. She is looking for you... And your brother...”

Yuriko swallowed convulsively, peering into his eyes:

“Soma?”

“He is alive,” Ren replied. “In the Philippines. He was severely wounded defending the garrison, lost his foot. They amputated part of his leg in a hospital in Manila, which is why he wasn’t sent here. But he can walk, on a prosthetic. I submitted a request, and the Red Cross confirmed: flights for the wounded will be organized in the coming weeks. He will be sent home, to Okinawa.”

Lost his foot.

An old, pre-war image instantly flashed in Yuriko's memory: Soma running along the yellow sand of the coast, sand flying from beneath his feet, her brother laughing, the wind tousling his hair, and he runs lightly, quickly, on two whole, strong legs. Now, one leg is gone. It was left there, in a foreign land.

But he is alive. Mother is alive. Brother is alive.

Yuriko closed her eyes, and in the darkness behind her eyelids, her father's face – tired, with a three-day stubble – finally let her go.

Ren remained silent, putting the paper back in his pocket. Then, quietly, no longer sounding at all like a translator for the American army, he said:

"You will both need to go home soon. Your loved ones are waiting for you."

He fell silent, instantly realizing what a foolish thing he had done. Toward Miko, whose parents had just officially been turned into the ashes of Shuri, the phrase "your loved ones are waiting for you" sounded like an exquisite, involuntary violence. Ren swallowed and looked away.

But Miko seemed not to notice. Her face remained a flawless, impenetrable mask, through which only her dark, wet eyes lived. These girls had already crossed the boundary beyond which words could kill. They had seen death, had seen the betrayal of the Living God from a radio receiver, and the death of loved ones was just another harsh coordinate in their new reality.

Miko, still not letting go of Yuriko's elbow, looked Ren straight in the eyes:

"Mr. Kimura. And what about Hinata's mother?"

Ren shook his head:

"Nothing is known. We checked all the filtration camps, all the civilian lists. The boy doesn't remember his last name, and without a last name, searching is impossible. Those who were on that road the night of the bombing... there was almost no chance. She most likely perished. But if she is alive, Mrs. Sanchez from the family reunification service will find her. That's their job."

"Family reunification." For Yuriko, these words had lost their previous meaning. A family is not a broken bowl that can be glued back together from shards. The fabric is torn; it cannot be sewn up with an old thread. You can only weave something entirely new.

"So they will send us home?" Yuriko asked, looking at the neat rows of canvas tents.

And then immediately, in one voice, synchronized like schoolgirls in class, they asked together:

"And what about our school?!"

Ren chuckled sadly and touchingly with a barely noticeable smile. These two, having learned of the collapse of their past lives, asked first and foremost about the place they had built from nothing – from charcoal letters, tin cans, and machine-gun casings. There was more strength in this question than in everything they had survived.

“Mrs. Sanchez said that in a couple of weeks they will start dismantling this sector of the camp,” Ren replied. “People will be transported to the surviving areas. That means your school here will be closed. But...” he looked at them with undisguised respect, “you are awaited at home by more than just your loved ones. Out there, in the ruins of the villages, there are other children. Other schools. Your work isn’t over, girls. It’s only just beginning.”

This word – “beginning” – fell into the silence between them like a stone into deep water. Ripples spread from it. Yuriko suddenly felt something she could not find a name for. Not hope and not a plan – something else. The sensation that when you stand on the edge of a cliff, what opens up before you is not an abyss, but a new road. A difficult, muddy road, but a road nonetheless.

“And when can we...” Miko stopped, collected herself, and firmly corrected: “When must we leave?”

She said “must.” Not “can,” not “want.” Like a soldier asking for the timeframe of a new order. Miko was the one who turned chaos into geometry, and geometry into life.

“There is no exact date,” Ren answered. “I think we are talking about two or three weeks, until the engineering units clear the roads south for the trucks.”

He turned and looked toward the field kitchen. There, among the gray and green pant legs of adult refugees, a small cowlicked head was bobbing. Hinata was standing on his tiptoes, stretching out dirty hands to take three ration biscuits – for himself, for Yuriko, and for Miko.

Ren’s heart contracted at the sight of this slender silhouette against the backdrop of barbed wire.

“Is the boy going with you?” he asked.

Yuriko looked at Miko. Miko looked at Yuriko. In this dual gaze, there was no doubt. There was the instantaneous, absolute agreement of those for whom the question didn’t even exist. Hinata was their third fulcrum. A part of their indivisible triangle. Without him, their entire world would collapse again. Hinata’s paper birds had burned in the June sky, and now Yuriko herself had to become that bird for him.

“Yes,” Yuriko said firmly, and her voice no longer held that childlike fragility Ren remembered from the jungle. “He’s going with us.”

“We’ll talk to him tonight,” Miko added. “We’ll explain everything.”

Ren Kimura slowly nodded. He stood up, dusted off his uniform trousers, turned to leave, but stopped.

“Yuriko,” he said quietly, looking back. His gaze was entirely defenseless, human. “I am very glad... glad that your mother is alive... Miko, I’m sorry.”

And he walked away quickly without looking back. He knew: if he turned around and saw the tears finally flowing down her cheeks, he wouldn’t be able to stop himself from walking over, wouldn’t be able to stop himself from touching her thin wrist, wouldn’t be able to remain just a translator for a foreign army.

Yuriko and Miko remained sitting on the dry earth. Side by side. The space between them, which had once been a safe distance, had now shrunk to zero. They sat in silence, breathing in the same rhythm, and from this shared, rhythmic breathing, the vast destroyed world around them momentarily became small and comforting.

And ahead, in the square, Hinata was already running toward them, clutching the three biscuits to his chest. His bare, quick feet kicked up little clouds of reddish dust; he stumbled, threw his head back, and shouted:

“Yuriko-nee! Miko-nee! Look, I got our spot! I brought them!”

The camp around him was transforming back into a schoolyard. And the schoolyard was their only home.

Yuriko turned to her friend. Miko was looking straight ahead at the running boy. Her face remained white and motionless, like a shard of the white temple from the dream, but her eyes were alive. Within them flowed the deep, unstoppable movement of roots breaking through stone.

“Miko,” Yuriko said quietly, almost soundlessly over the camp noise. “I am so, so sorry.”

Miko slowly turned her head. She looked at Yuriko with a long, open, unguarded gaze. There was no hysteria in this look. There was a final, adult acceptance of the fact that the world was destroyed, parents were dead, and the camp would be disbanded. And none of this could be fixed. The only thing they could do was to keep going. Alter coveralls, count shell casings, feed the child, and live on.

“I know,” Miko replied. “I know, Yuriko.”

The corners of her lips twitched, and she smiled. Fully. Openly.

It was that rare, genuine smile that Yuriko had seen only a couple of times in her life. The smile of a person who had walked through the crucible of hell, left everything behind, but emerged on the other side – wounded, altered, but alive.

Yuriko sniffled, swallowed her rising tears, and smiled back at her. With the same crooked, unpracticed, but absolutely genuine smile of September.

Chapter 10. Little Lily

The late September morning turned out to be strange and piercingly clear. Light came from everywhere: from the evaporating condensation on the canvas tent slopes, from large, trembling drops on the barbed wire, from the damp, rain-flattened grass. The world seemed transparent, like washed glass, devoid of the usual sticky tropical humidity, as if the sky itself were apologizing for all those long months of suffocation. And in this crystal, diffused glow, the tents of the Shimabuku camp appeared not like a military prison, but like faded ship’s canvas, sparkling with sea salt, cast ashore by someone as no longer needed. Just as the broken edge of a baked sweet potato glows when you break it in half at twilight and see the warm sun hidden in the heart of the earth – the day was suffused with this soft radiance.

Yuriko, Miko, and Hinata stood at the edge of the dusty road, straight and still, as they always stood. They were tying up their few belongings into two soldier’s duffel bags made of coarse American canvas, which Mrs. Sanchez had silently handed them before their

departure, securing them with thin parachute cords. Among the three of them, they didn't have much past that could fit into bundles: a couple of changes of altered coveralls, a few handfuls of rice, American scissors, pencil stubs, and a piece of drawing charcoal. At the very bottom of one of the bags, wrapped in a clean cloth, rested a scrap of plywood bearing the uneven charcoal outline of Okinawa, where a tiny dot marked their final destination – the village of Mawashiasato.

They were ready. Ren Kimura had warned them about the move two days before.

That evening, when they gathered the children on the square for the last time to say goodbye, Yuriko felt her heart crack. It was not a farewell in the conventional sense – no shouting or passionate tears. Thirty pairs of huge black eyes, thirty pairs of dirty hands and bare feet simply froze on the woven mats. The children of Okinawa, with gauze bandages on their heads instead of kerchiefs and wearing tattered shirts, looked at their young senseis with that stoic, frightening silence with which old people watch a train disappearing into the fog. In this absolute childhood resignation lay everything: both “we understand” and “we will miss you.” Miko handed out all the remaining camp peanuts, and Yuriko promised: “We will send you a real sanshin. Made of wood. When we rebuild.” They left their kankara-sanshin with the oldest boy from Itoman, and the children just stood there, following them with their eyes until the girls disappeared behind the corner of the tent.

Later, in the tent, they sat Hinata down in front of them. Miko sat beside him on the mat, and Yuriko, taking a long time to choose her words, began to say:

“Hinata, the camp is closing. People are being taken away. We are going north, to my mother... Do you want to come with us?”

But the boy cut her off mid-sentence, looking with his round, deep eyes, in which the decision had been made long before the question itself:

“Yes,” he said simply. “Of course. I’m going with you. I’ll carry the bag, I’m strong. I can’t leave you two alone, you’d get lost.”

He left them no chance for doubt. He simply solidified his status as the third, stubborn point in their unbreakable triangle.

“Good morning,” Ren Kimura’s voice yanked Yuriko from her memories.

A green army Willys jeep with its canvas top folded back pulled up to them, its engine humming low and heavy. When the engine cut off, a special silence fell – the border between what had ended and what had not yet begun. Ren was in a fresh uniform, but without a helmet; his dark, thick hair was ruffled by the cool morning wind. He jumped out of the vehicle, lightly tossed their canvas bundles into the back, and turned to Yuriko.

In his expression – on his tan, high-cheekboned, hafu face with slightly slanted eyes – lay that very hidden, gentle request that he had never dared to voice through all these weeks.

“Yuriko-san,” he opened the front passenger door, his voice losing a bit of its military dryness. “Sit in front. In the back, it’ll be very bumpy.”

Yuriko looked at the open door, then at Ren. She saw in him the man who had saved them. Who had brought paper for lessons and contraband chocolate, who spent nights

searching for the names of her loved ones in endless lists of the dead. It was a true, pure tenderness, like the warmth of an evening campfire. But the front seat meant an intimacy to which she had no right. Nor did she want it. The answer inside her had long been given, and that answer was Miko. Always – Miko. And this “always” was not a choice, but a property of her very nature, as moss is a property of stone.

She shook her head, stepping back a pace, shoulder to shoulder with her friend.

“No, thank you, Mr. Kimura. I’ll sit in the back with Miko.”

Ren lowered his eyes for a second, nodded, and didn't press further. In that barely noticeable flicker of his eyelashes, his little personal war died. He understood: this place was not his, this gaze was not for him. And this understanding was as clear as the sky after a storm. But right then, Hinata popped out from under Yuriko’s elbow.

“What about me? Can I sit there?” The boy danced on the spot, pointing a dirty finger at the jeep's shiny dashboard. “I’ve never sat in front in my whole life! I’ll be the navigator! Please!”

The tension burst instantly. Ren Kimura burst out laughing – openly, genuinely, as only Americans know how to laugh. In that brief, human laugh, Yuriko suddenly saw in the military police sergeant an ordinary boy from Sacramento, who once upon a time climbed into his father’s truck in the very same way. Ren scooped Hinata up under the arms and set him on the wide seat.

“Hold on tight, navigator. Buckle up,” Ren said, though Hinata had no idea how to do that and simply craned his neck in delight.

The girls climbed into the back, settling onto the wooden bench. The jeep lurched and slowly rolled along the rutted camp trail.

Yuriko sat facing backward, watching Shimabuku recede and shrink in size. She looked at the endless rows of canvas roofs, at the rusty barbed wire against which grey rags had been blown by the wind. Once, they had been notes from the Wall of Names, but now they seemed like flocks of silent white birds nailed to a wall. They had nowhere to fly. The empty, trampled square with marks from the cooking pots drifted past, as did the information boards... This place had been a purgatory. A place where she had learned of her father’s death and where the Empire had left her mind forever. But this very piece of red, barren land had become her first real home in recent times – a home where they had learned anew how to sew, breathe, and feel. Yuriko felt a bright, poignant sorrow. As if she were saying goodbye to her crippled youth.

The jeep rounded a corner, and the camp disappeared. The open road began.

Through the hum of the engine came Miko’s voice. She wasn't looking back. Her gaze was fixed on the back of Ren Kimura’s head through the open cab window.

“Mr. Kimura,” Miko had to speak clearly to be heard over the wind. “What about the other girls from our unit? From Himeyuri? From the upper classes?”

Ren cast a quick glance into the rearview mirror. Yuriko noticed how taut the tendons in his neck grew under the green fabric of his shirt. He was silent for a long time, as if deciding

whether it was worth destroying this crystal morning with the terrible truth. But Miko, as always, did not need pity.

“Most perished,” Ren answered dully, without turning around. His voice had returned to its dry, translator tone. “Those who remained in the caves near the cliffs of Kiyan and Mabuni... when American units closed in... some...” He fell silent for a moment. “We are still clearing the rubble in those caves. There are no precise lists yet, the Red Cross is working, but... few survived. You are among them.”

Yuriko closed her eyes. There had been two hundred twenty-two of them. In that number lay the cold mathematics of the end of the world. Two hundred twenty-two girls with snow-white ribbons in their hair, who only back in spring had been afraid of getting a bad grade in geography, had turned into ash, soot, and sea foam simply because madmen in Tokyo decided that their death would be beautiful.

She looked down at her palms inside the altered sleeves of her American coveralls. Two tiny crescent-shaped scars on her hand, two imprints, had noticeably faded. Now they resembled thin, translucent flower petals. A lily. If in that second in the forest she hadn't overcome her fear and thrown away the ceramic grenade, her name would now also be scattered over the cliffs of Mabuni. Miko's face remained impenetrable, stony, but her fingers gripped the jeep's wooden side with such force that her knuckles turned white. Yuriko silently covered Miko's cold hand with her palm, as she had grown accustomed to doing in the tent.

The Willys broke out onto the dirt road winding through the south of the island.

What they saw defied human comprehension. The road ran through a deep, unhealed wound. Okinawa lay before them like an eviscerated giant. Villages had turned into grey patches of ash. Stone bridges were torn in two. In fields where sugar cane had once swayed, the red clay was so densely pitted with bomb craters that the earth resembled diseased, pox-marked skin. Everywhere – in ditches, on hill slopes – rusted the twisted, burned hulls of tanks, artillery, and shattered trucks. Rust trickled down boulders in brown, orange streams, making it seem as if the earth were still bleeding.

Yet through this infernal, dead landscape of iron, the magic of life was already breaking through.

Okinawa's tropical nature knew no such word as “surrender.” It possessed a blind, fierce, almost mystical power. From craters filled with stagnant orange water rose emerald, abnormally bright stems of wild fern. Charred, pitch-black trunks of breadfruit trees suddenly sprouted lush, neon-green young shoots from their dead, torn flanks. Vines, like slender emerald snakes, uncoiled right before their eyes, intertwining through the rusted tracks of Shermans and the melted barrels of anti-aircraft guns, whistling as they dragged the iron back into the bosom of the earth. It was as if the plants had drunk everything left behind by the war – blood, ash, rust, and tears – and transformed it into a fierce, stubborn growth. Bamboo shot through armor plates; ferns unfurled their living fans from beneath chunks of concrete. Life surged from every crevice, closing the island's scars with a speed that frightened the mind.

Yuriko looked at this lush, damp greenery, and inside her, something untangled once and for all. She shifted her gaze from the sprouting jungle to Miko's thin profile, and to her, they became one and the same. Miko was that very fern pushing through the ash. A stubborn,

unyielding force that paid no mind to tanks or fallen empires, but simply kept breathing and growing, no matter what.

“Mr. Kimura!” Hinata’s ringing voice cut through the noise of the wind and brought them back to reality. The boy was fidgeting intensely on the seat, blushing to the very tips of his ears. “Mr. Kimura, please stop... I need to go... over there, in the bushes.”

Ren smiled understandingly and pulled smoothly onto the wide shoulder where the road looped around.

“Run along, navigator,” he said, opening the door. But then he added strictly, “Just don’t go far! Not a single step deep into the jungle. Do you hear me? Unexploded mines could be left there. It’s dangerous.”

Hinata nodded in agreement, jumped down to the ground in his oversized three-button shirt, and waddled off toward the wall of ferns. Yuriko watched his tiny figure approach the thickets. The boy stepped past the first row of wide leaves – and suddenly dissolved. He hadn’t gone deep; he had simply vanished into the green, chlorophyll haze, merging with the forest as if a drop of water had fallen into the ocean. Simply vanished. The jungle swallowed him without a single sound.

At that very second, a strange, shimmering numbness seized Yuriko. It wasn’t fear. It was a transparent, mystical sorrow. What if Hinata had never existed? What if this boy, who had appeared out of nowhere in the scariest June days, who couldn’t remember his mother’s last name and had never cried from hunger, was simply a forest spirit? A kijimuna tree sprite, a creation of their own exhausted, dying consciousness? A spirit that had made them stay alive simply because someone needed to be cared for? And now, having fulfilled his work, having brought them almost to the border of their home, had he simply returned back into the evergreen, wild memory of the island? Perhaps this whole world around them – the camp, the war – was all just a long, drawn-out dream?

A minute passed. Another. Yuriko held her breath. Miko too stopped looking at the road and strained her eyes toward the rustling foliage. The silence emanating from the jungle felt absolute, ancient, and all-knowing.

And suddenly out of the bushes, with a ringing, pure childish laugh, leaped Hinata. The magic instantly dissolved into reality – he was alive, real, and covered all over in yellow flower pollen. In his hands, he clutched a huge, fluffy armful of piercingly purple, fully bloomed wild haibisukasu flowers. These forest bells bloomed only in autumn, right after the heavy rains, and they smelled of incredible freshness, dampness, and the beginning of a new life.

He ran up to the back of the jeep and, laughing, threw all this purple magnificence right at the girls.

The flowers scattered in a fan across the hood, the windshield, falling onto their coarse dark-olive coveralls, onto Yuriko’s black hair, onto Miko’s knees. The numbness broke. Wet drops fell onto the fabric, and from these tiny, living spots on the American canvas, the invisible barrier inside Yuriko shattered completely. Through the crack, light poured in. He was simply a child who had found flowers and wanted to bring joy to his older sisters.

“Hinata!” Miko shouted. And in that cry, for the first time in all these long months, it wasn't her usual medical composure that broke through, but a ringing, genuine girl's laugh. “You've covered us in dirt!”

“It's a present! The most beautiful ones!” the boy laughed, tossing flowers in the air and climbing back into the cab.

Ren started the engine and looked at them through the rearview mirror. On his face was a smile – not polite or translator-like, but warm, sad, and real. The smile of a person who understands that he is witnessing something elusive and beautiful: a little boy with an armful of flowers in the middle of a shattered world, and two laughing girls.

“Let's go, ladies,” he said, shifting into gear. “We're almost there.”

The road turned behind a hill. In the distance, in the haze of the midday sun, appeared the outlines of what had once been called the village of Mawashiasato.

Nothing remained of the former village. Not a single stone wall, not a single tiled roof, nor a Shinto shrine on the hill. Only red earth churned by tank tracks and charred stumps. But on this lunar landscape, life was already teeming. Like ants after a downpour, people stubbornly rebuilt their world from scratch. Out of corrugated iron sheets, discarded American tents, scraps of plywood, and wooden shell crates, they hammered together new, awkward, lopsided, but living homes. Everywhere axes thundered, blue-grey smoke rose from campfires, and someone's cleanly washed laundry was already drying on a wire stretched between the hull of an anti-aircraft gun and a scorched tree. Every board was a statement: “I am here. I am alive. I am building.”

The jeep slowly drove into this makeshift settlement, raising clouds of brown dust, and stopped by a roughly knocked-together shelter of boards and plywood. An old, charred school desk served as a door, and above the canvas roof, a piece of blue parachute silk fluttered proudly.

Yuriko stood up in the back, holding tightly to the iron arch of the soft top. Near the shelter, bent over a large tin tub of water, stood a woman. Hearing the unfamiliar sound of an engine, she slowly straightened up.

She had aged greatly. Her hair was touched with deep grey, her shoulders had slumped, and her face was lined with sharp furrows of grief for her dead husband. But it was Mother. Kohaku Nakayama. Her own, alive. She was wearing a simple dark dress – not camp issue, not American, but her own, carefully preserved, cleanly washed, and ironed. At the sight of this simple, peaceful fabric, Yuriko's throat constricted.

The woman stood looking at the jeep, at the American soldier behind the wheel, at the strange dirty boy with purple flowers on the dashboard. And then her eyes rested on Yuriko.

She did not scream. She did not rush to the car wringing her hands. She simply dropped the wet shirt she was washing and sank to her knees right in the dry roadside dust. Her lips moved soundlessly, repeating a single word – her daughter's name.

Yuriko didn't remember how she vaulted over the side of the truck bed. She didn't even notice her coveralls catching on a nail, nor did she pay attention to being barefoot. She

simply ran – fast, barefoot, over the red, hot earth of her native village. Stones pricked her soles, the wind whipped her hair, and the whole world around her blurred, melted, and vanished under a rush of tears. There remained only one thin, upright figure in a dark dress, fallen to her knees in the dust.

Behind her, at the vehicle, Miko carefully lifted Hinata down from the seat and set him on the ground, tenderly pressing their canvas duffle bags to her chest. Ren Kimura, cutting the engine, watched the running girl in silence, tears filling his dark eyes that he no longer felt ashamed of. Nobody moved. This was their moment. Their embrace. Their homecoming, into which no one had the right to intervene.

Yuriko fell to her knees right in the dust beside her mother and buried her face hard, to the point of pain, into her shoulder – a shoulder smelling of soap, grass, and home fire smoke. Her mother's arms held her tight in response.

In this single quiet, convulsive embrace, everything dissolved: the damp darkness of the cave, the weight of unthrown grenades, the endless flight through the jungle, the camp's barbed wire, the paper birds on the boards of Shimabuku, Hinata's purple bells, her father who died three minutes from salvation, and Soma – distant Soma, who had lost a foot – and Miko, who had lost her family... All of it was right here, at this single point, and all of it was finally coming to an end. Not forgotten, not erased from memory, but coming to an end. As a long polar winter ends. As a suffocating night ends. As a tropical storm ends.

Together with her, behind her back, stood her Miko and her Hinata. Ahead lay long, hard, filthy work – rebuilding a home from charred debris, planting sweet potatoes in soil churned by tank tracks, teaching orphans the alphabet, and learning once again how to fall asleep without fear.

But above them already shone a huge, calm, warm September sun, having washed the world after prolonged rain. And in the pocket of Yuriko's coveralls lay a damp purple flower, tossed by a boy who had come out of the forest. The little stubborn lily had finally taken root in these ashes. And the world around her – against all odds – was alive.

Chapter 11. Home

October came to the ruined village of Mawashiasato along with scraps of camp calendars, bringing a change in the very substance of island life. The sky lost its heavy, suffocating tropical density, faded to a transparent, crystal blue, and the dry, spicy wind from the ocean began to bring smells not of burning, but of iodine, decaying seaweed, and cooling sand. The sun, which had recently pressed down on the island like a red-hot pillow, now warmed evenly and gently, as if trying to make amends for all the scorched summer months.

The village did not stand still. It crawled. Slowly, stubbornly, the way corals grow over dead limestone: millimeter by millimeter, twig by twig. Out of corrugated iron, discarded American tent canvases, scraps of plywood, and boards from artillery shell crates, the residents built shacks that had nothing in common with their former homes – with their solid stone masonry, heavy roof tiles, and carved window frames. The new dwellings were crooked, lopsided, and absurd: with doors made of overturned school desks and roofs of tin sheets that hummed and rattled at every gust of wind like a discordant orchestra. But in each of

them, a timid kerosene light was lit in the evenings, and from these trembling points of light, the darkening plain seemed inhabited.

The Nakayamas built their corner as a foursome. Kohaku – Yuriko’s mother – was the chief architect, although she did not know the word and simply called herself “the one who points where to put the boards.” Yuriko and Miko obeyed her with a silent, absolute submission characteristic of people who have regained what they thought was lost forever. The older woman knew her way around wood: before the war, she had woven baskets for fishermen and could tell a dry, ready-to-use board from a damp, rotting one just by running her palm over it. Her hands were broad, with thick fingers and short, neatly trimmed nails. When Yuriko looked at these hands, a forgotten, solid sense of security awoke within her: mother is near.

The surviving masonry of the Nakayamas’ former house served as the foundation. American bulldozers had gone through the village thoroughly, but this low outline of brown Okinawan limestone jutted stubbornly from the earth like the ribs of an ancient extinct animal. Kohaku walked around it, rapped her knuckles against the stone, and said quietly: “It’s sturdy. It’ll hold.”

Hinata worked on par with the adults. The six-year-old boy hauled broken stones, handed over nails, and held plywood sheets steady when they were fitted to the uprights – and did all this with such serious, concentrated diligence, as if the outcome of a great battle depended on his work. By the end of the day, his palms were covered in tiny splinters and white watery blisters, but he did not complain. He simply gritted his teeth and carried on. Once, when a poorly secured wall of plywood sheets collapsed and Yuriko sat down in the mud out of surprise, Hinata ran up to her, began brushing off her knees, and said with absolute strictness: “It’s nothing. We’ll rebuild. I’m strong, remember?”

Miko was the engineer. Her medical precision, her habit of neatness amidst chaos, now proved fully useful. She drew a plan on the ground with a stick: where the door would be, where the window, where the corner in which Hinata would sleep. Her lines were straight and confident. She marked out the space just as she had once stitched frayed school uniforms – stitch by stitch, board by board.

As Kohaku had promised, neighbors gradually gravitated toward them. Old Kenji, who had been a cooper before the war and now walked with a cane made of charred banyan, came every morning. Silently, without asking permission, he set about sharpening stakes with his old, miraculously surviving cleaver. His hands remembered wood better than he himself did: they moved smoothly, carving perfectly smooth tenons, and the shavings that fell onto the red earth smelled of fresh cedar and resin. Kenji said nothing. He just worked, reclaiming his familiar craft.

The young widow Sachiko, who was left with three children, brought a tin pot of hot rice cooked on sawdust and dried seaweed every two days. How she managed to feed her own children at the same time – no one knew. And no one asked. She simply set the pot by the threshold, nodded, and left without waiting for gratitude. In return, Kohaku took her a sack of sweet potato tubers from their first provisions. These silent exchanges became the language the village used to speak to itself: we are alive, we are here, we share what we have.

The vegetable garden appeared even before the walls. Kohaku said: "The walls can wait. The sweet potatoes cannot." And at dawn, the four of them set about digging the earth – the very same earth plowed by Sherman tank tracks and watered with blood. The soil on top was heavy, greasy, rusty in appearance, and emitted a sharp metallic smell. But beneath the top, pitted layer lay the real, living Okinawan soil: dark, crumbly, speckled with white coral sand. Kohaku scooped up a handful of this earth, brought it to her face, inhaled deeply, and smiled for the first time in all this while.

"It's alive," she said. "It will bear fruit."

And the earth bore fruit. The sweet potato cuttings, obtained from neighbors and stuck into the beds with a naive, childish faith, took root surprisingly fast. By the end of the third week, lush, bright-green shoots pushed up from the red soil. Life didn't ask permission from generals; it just did its job.

But in Mawashiasato, as everywhere on Okinawa, lived a quiet, silent shadow that was not spoken aloud but was felt on the skin.

Sidelong glances.

Yuriko noticed them in the mornings when she carried water from the well. The women from neighboring yards – the very same ones who shared boards – sometimes froze and exchanged glances when they thought the girls couldn't see them. There was no open malice in these looks. There was a dull, heavy female incomprehension. The entire island knew that the schoolgirls of the Himeyuri unit were supposed to die in the caves down south. Such was the order, such was the duty of honor – *gaman*, *chi-da*, elevated to an absolute. But Yuriko and Miko had not died. They had returned. They walked around the wasteland, built a house from other people's boards, took paper and chocolate from the Americans, ate their rations, and behaved as if they had a right to a future.

Sometimes, it seemed Yuriko could hear this whisper by the well. Quiet, rustling, like dry grass over stones: "They ran away... Good girls don't return from those caves..." This whisper was not directed against them personally – it emanated from the common cauldron of Okinawan grief, where every loss needed an explanation. But Yuriko felt it between her shoulder blades. It was a familiar feeling, like a dull ache in a healing bone.

Miko noticed these glances too, but reacted differently. She didn't lower her head or hide her eyes. She straightened her back, raised her chin, and walked on – evenly, calmly, with that flawless bearing that now served as her shield. Her face remained stony, impenetrable. But Yuriko knew the price of this composure.

One day, when she and Miko were digging a trench for a drain, old Ota-san, who had lost all her sons in the war, walked by. She stopped, leaned on her stick, and stared at them for a long time without blinking her faded eyes. Then she spoke into the space:

"Decent schoolgirls stayed in the Mabuni caves."

And she walked on. Quietly, calmly. Like someone reporting an immutable fact of the weather.

Miko didn't even flinch. Her shovel entered the earth with the same dry, sharp strike – methodically, meter by meter. Yuriko looked at her straight back and understood: Miko was burying other people's words into this earth right now. Deeply. Forever.

"It's nothing," Miko said quietly, not turning around, when the old woman's footsteps faded. "Let them talk. They have their dead. We have our living."

They named their home "Chidi-no-ya" – the paper house, because its plywood walls were thin, and on windy nights it rustled and shuddered all over. But it held. Inside, it smelled of fresh wood shavings, kerosene, and boiled sweet potato. Kohaku hung a small shell amulet above the door, Miko hung old school notebooks on a string instead of curtains, and Hinata made himself a sleeping place in the corner, lining it with clean American sugar sacks. He fell asleep there instantly, the way children fall asleep who are no longer waiting for a bombing.

And that evening, three things happened at once.

First: Ren Kimura arrived.

His green army Willys pulled up to the house at sunset, when the sun was already resting on the horizon like a heavy copper coin, painting the dry earth the color of dark honey. The car smelled of gasoline, hot rubber, and machine oil. Ren got out, as always, in a fresh uniform, but without a helmet. There was something festive in his movements – he was carrying a bundle wrapped in the American military newspaper *Stars and Stripes*.

"Good evening," he said, and his voice sounded softer than usual. "I brought something for you."

He carefully unrolled the paper on the jeep's dashboard. Inside lay three things.

The first was a small stack of thick white paper. Real, clean, smelling of the factory and pine needles. Yuriko ran her fingers over the top sheet, feeling its smooth texture, and her throat caught. In this white rectangle lay more of civilian life than in their entire shack.

The second item was a box of colored pencils – twelve of them in bright packaging with drawn flowers. Their untouched, sharp tips gleamed faintly. Yuriko hadn't held colored pencils in her hands since the spring of '44.

But the third was an instrument. A real sanshin.

Not a tin can with a piece of field wire, which they had left for the children in the camp, but a heavy, rounded instrument crafted by a master. Its body was stretched with snake skin, *habu* skin, taut and cool to the touch, while the dark wood neck gleamed with polished lacquer, holding the warmth of other people's hands. The three thin strings were strung perfectly. The body bore minor scratches and a barely noticeable crack at the base, but it was alive.

"Where did you get it?" Yuriko looked up at Ren, her eyes wet with surprise.

"An engineering battalion was clearing the rubble of a wealthy house in south Shuri," Ren smiled in a somewhat embarrassed way. "It was lying in a wooden case under the collapsed roof. Almost undamaged. I immediately thought of you. Of your music."

Yuriko looked at the instrument:

“We can send it to Shimabuku. For the children. We promised them...”

“The Shimabuku camp is being disbanded,” Ren interrupted her gently. “People are already being transported to distribution centers closer to their hometowns. Don't worry about the children; the civil authorities are taking care of them. I came to say something else. Mrs. Sanchez from the administration asked me to pass this on: you can open a school right here. In Mawashiasato.”

The air between them seemed to ring from these words.

“The military administration will help,” Ren continued, looking at the quiet girls. “Next week, they will bring you a large canvas tent for classes. Pencils are tight for now, but soon new textbooks will be delivered to the island. In real Japanese, without military propaganda. And one more thing: if you take on teaching the children, you and your students will be officially issued army rations. Powdered milk, canned food, hardtack. You won't starve anymore.”

Ren fell silent. He took a small foil-wrapped chocolate bar from his pocket and held it out to Hinata, who stood nearby, not taking his eyes off the shiny neck of the sanshin. The boy grabbed the chocolate, but instead of immediately sinking his teeth into it, he first carefully broke the bar into pieces and handed pieces to Yuriko, Miko, and Kohaku. Only after that did he pop his own piece into his mouth, squeezing his eyes shut with pleasure.

Yuriko turned to Miko. They didn't need long discussions. They remembered their charcoal letters on the scrap of plywood in the middle of the camp tent, they remembered the dozens of pairs of children's eyes looking at them from the darkness. And they remembered the sidelong glances of the neighbors by the well. Yuriko understood: the school was their only way to answer the whole village. The only way to prove their right to life was to start assembling it from the wreckage for these children.

“We agree,” said Miko. The dull, calm sound of her voice seemed to cement this decision into the red Okinawan earth.

Ren left when the sun had completely set, leaving a long streak of cooling gold in the sky. The jeep disappeared behind the hill, raising a cloud of dust that hung in the evening air for a long time.

The second thing that happened that evening was quiet.

They didn't light the lamp right away. For a while, they just sat on the threshold and watched the sky change color.

Then, Kohaku lit the kerosene lamp under the awning anyway.

She sat at the roughly knocked-together table, resting her broad, warm hand over Hinata's small palm. On the table lay a clean sheet of white paper. They were drawing. The lead glided across the paper with a pleasant, dry rustle. It smelled of kerosene fumes, fresh clay walls, and damp night grass. Kohaku didn't teach the boy, she simply traced simple outlines with the brown pencil: a house, a tree, the sun. Hinata watched, biting his lip with diligence, and copied the lines. Kohaku allowed him to make mistakes, knowing that any crooked line is also part of the road.

“What is this?” Kohaku asked, pointing to an uneven triangle in the corner of the paper.

“Mountains,” the boy answered without looking up. “Where mom stayed.”

Kohaku said nothing. She simply placed her hand on his cowlicked crown and stroked it gently. Once. Hinata didn't pull away; he only gripped the pencil tighter, and his mountains grew overgrown with tiny green strokes of trees.

The third thing happened when Miko picked up the new sanshin.

She sat on the low stone wall of the old foundation and plucked the strings. The sound was completely different. Not tinny, not rattling, but deep, rounded, and warm. Every note flowed out of the wooden body and hovered in the cool air, dissolving in the smell of smoke. Miko began to play an old peasant song, “Tinsagu nu Hana” – a song about balsam flowers used to dye fingernails, and about the words of parents that settle in the heart. Her grandmother had hummed this melody to her once.

There were no words in this music, but all their memory was in it. Hinata stopped drawing, walked over to Miko, and leaned against her knee, listening with his mouth smeared with army chocolate wide open. Yuriko stood in the doorway, looking at them: at her mother, at her friend, at the boy. At their fragile world, built of plywood and ash.

And that was exactly when the music broke off.

Miko froze abruptly, pressing her palm to the strings. A sound came from the path leading from the main road.

A step. A creak. A dull, heavy thud against the packed earth.

Step. Creak. Thud.

The rhythm was broken, uneven. Someone was walking toward their lit doorway with immense effort. Yuriko slowly straightened up. Kohaku dropped her pencil, and it rolled across the table with a dry clatter.

Out of the mulberry darkness, a man stepped into the yellow circle of light from the lamp.

He was incredibly thin, emaciated to the bone. He wore a baggy Japanese military shirt stripped of insignia and faded trousers that smelled faintly of carbolic acid, stale sweat, and sea salt. His face was overgrown with stiff stubble, and his eyes seemed like huge dark hollows in a pale face. He leaned heavily on a thick bamboo cane.

Yuriko looked down. From beneath the left trouser leg emerged an ordinary soldier's boot, covered in a layer of dust. And from beneath the right trouser leg, a roughly carved wooden cone of a prosthetic leg, bound with an iron ring, pressed into the earth.

He had come. By himself. No one had brought him in a truck, no one had delivered him on a stretcher. He had walked these last kilometers from the coast on his own two feet, one of which was made of wood. He hadn't waited for medical transports in the port of Naha, but had simply set off on foot, not hoping to hitch a ride – thirty kilometers over ruined roads, across fields littered with rusty iron, past empty ashes – back to Mawashiasato.

“Soma,” Kohaku breathed out. It wasn't a scream, but a quiet exhale with which all the pain of the last months burst from her chest.

Her brother raised his head. His cracked lips twitched, tried to form an apologetic smile, but froze. He surveyed the crooked facade of their new house, Hinata with his piece of paper, Miko with the silenced sanshin, and finally rested his gaze on Yuriko.

"I got a little delayed," Soma said. His voice creaked like parched bamboo in the wind. "I hope you saved me some rice."

Yuriko broke from her spot. She reached him in two bounds, clutched the stiff fabric of his shirt, and buried her forehead into his chest. Soma stood motionless as a stone statue, and his broad palm came to rest on her head. The wooden prosthetic, carved by the hand of a hospital craftsman in Manila, smelled of cheap varnish and fresh wood shavings. This smell mixed with the familiar warmth of his body, and Yuriko only squeezed her fingers tighter on his back.

"You came... You made it, Soma," she whispered.

"I made it," he repeated quietly. "The prosthetic rubbed the skin raw by the end of the road. But I promised I would return."

Miko walked over a little later. She didn't cry or throw herself on his neck. She simply held out her hand to Soma and firmly, like a man, shook his hand. In this brief gesture was everything: the recognition of his strength and a silent "welcome back." Soma nodded to her, and then shifted his gaze to the little boy who was still hiding behind Miko's back.

"And who is this?" he asked, nodding at Hinata.

"This is Hinata," Yuriko answered, wiping her cheeks with the back of her hand. "He's ours. He is staying with us."

Soma looked at the child for a long time. Hinata cautiously peeked out from behind Miko's skirt and stared at the tall, thin man with the bamboo stick. Their eyes met: huge, round child's eyes and the tired, dark-circled eyes of a soldier. Soma slowly, with difficulty, dropped to one knee – on his healthy, left knee – and brought himself to eye level with the boy.

"Hello," Soma said. "I'm Soma. Yuriko's older brother. And who are you?"

"I am Hinata... from the forest..."

"And I am from Manila. That's very far... So, we both came back from far away."

The boy held out his small hand, smudged with pencil lead, and firmly shook Soma's palm. There was no ceremony in this childish gesture. It was an instant decision: you are one of us.

Kohaku finally stood up from the table. She walked over to her son, took his face in her broad palms, peered for a long time at the new wrinkles around his eyes, and then said the only thing that mattered:

"Go into the house. The rice is already done."

And Soma took a step forward. His wooden prosthetic struck the plywood threshold firmly and weightily. The house accepted him. The walls rustled in the wind, the tin roof clinked quietly, and the tin-can lamp swayed, spilling warm light over their faces.

Miko returned to the stone wall. She picked up the sanshin again and struck the strings.

The sound burst into the October night – deep, full, absolutely free. The notes drifted over the ruined village, over the red clay of the vegetable beds, over the barbed wire and the rusted carcasses of machines. The music flew further – toward the dark mountains and the murmuring ocean, to where other people on the ashes were also building their homes and listening to the darkness.

Yuriko sat on the threshold. Soma settled next to her, tiredly rubbing his injured stump. Kohaku sat in the doorway, cradling the drifting-to-sleep Hinata. Miko played. And in this simple, unimaginable gathering of people – four Nakayamas, one Nishida, and one boy without a last name – there was music. The music of those who had not yet returned, and the music of those who were already home.

Yuriko closed her eyes and simply listened to the night.

Chapter 12. The Beetles

The school had sprung up on the wasteland where their real one had once stood – the First. Girls' High.

Nothing remained of the former building but a melted, crumbling piece of the brick foundation, half-sunken into the dry grayish-brown soil, and a smell deeply embedded in the earth itself – burnt lime, scorched cement, and some muffled, ancient decay. Yuriko sensed this smell every time she set her bare foot on that scorched patch of earth. It was the scent of memory, the physical trace of what had once been called walls, desks, and blackboards. Touching this place made her heart clench, just as an old, deep bruise aches before the weather turns.

American soldiers had helped stretch a massive khaki canvas tent here, securing it on thick bamboo poles. The tent was old, battered, thoroughly soaked in machine oil, gasoline, and that harsh, bitter army compound that eats into the fabric for years and cannot be weathered away by any ocean storm. During the day, a stifling, thick heat lingered under the canvas, smelling of scorching sailcloth and hot dust, but on rainy days, this rough roof offered protection, and at night, it held in the meager warmth of a campfire. For the village, this tent had become a symbol: a roof meant everything. A roof meant a school. A roof meant the right to a future.

Under the tent, on mats that Kohaku had woven from wild river reeds, sat the children.

There were no longer thirty of them, but nearly fifty. They gathered from all corners of the ruined district – not only from Mawashiasato, but from the neighboring villages: Nishihara, Yaese. Grubby, barefoot, with scratched knees, wearing oversized burlap shirts, they carefully clutched fragments of charcoal in their fists instead of pencils. They arrived at dawn and stayed until dusk. Yuriko and Miko stood before them, turning the chaos of a scorched, war-torn island into orderly, comprehensible rows of numbers and syllables.

Mathematics was savingly honest and straightforward. It held no half-tones and no orders from headquarters.

“Three machine-gun shell casings,” Miko said, holding the dully gleaming brass cylinders Hinata had found by the road in her palm. “And two more machine-gun shell casings. How many is that together?”

“Five!” the children’s chorus exhaled in unison.

“Good. And if the Americans take four out of ten shell casings, how many are left?”

“Six!”

“Hinata, don’t chew on the shell casing.”

“I’m not chewing! I’m checking if it’s real!”

Ringling childish laughter echoed under the tent, along with the patter of bare feet and the dry, rhythmic rustle of fifty pieces of charcoal against gray overseas cardboard. This sound reminded Yuriko of the rustle of the first, long-awaited autumn rain.

Grammar restored to mutilated words their original, peaceful meanings. Water. Home. Rice. Sun. Mother. These were words that the war had filled to the brim with blood, ash, and a cave-dwelling fear. Water, in which people drowned; home, which had burned to the ground; rice, which had been absent for months; the sun, which ruthlessly scorched the wounded on the roads. Now, the children carefully traced the characters with charcoal on cardboard, as if washing these concepts anew of clinging ash and bleach. Mundane normalcy was returning through the tips of the children’s fingers. Yuriko felt how, in this ridiculous, absurd transformation of a wartime wasteland into a classroom, a small but supremely important meaning of her present life was being born – that very anchor holding her here and now.

Yuriko’s brother, Soma, came to the school every day after noon.

In the morning, he worked at home. His wooden prosthesis, bound by a dark iron ring, drove into the damp earth of the vegetable garden with a dull, measured thud: *thump... thump... thump*. Kohaku, standing on the threshold, often froze, listening to this heavy step. In the sweet potato beds, Soma left deep round holes next to the footprints of his mother’s bare feet. He weeded the soil, repaired the leaky tin roof of their shack, hauled water from the well. He did everything in silence, with that sparse, grim concentration characteristic of people who had forgotten how to speak about their pain. The pain went into his hands, into his tense back, into his movements. He smelled of fresh cedar shavings, cheap tobacco, and a dense, tangible silence. This silence had its own woody, damp scent – like the smell of a board that had been sawn for a long time but never finished, leaving its edges rough and exposed.

After noon, Soma would appear at the school tent. He brought along an ax, a saw, and a hammer, laid them out on the burlap, and began knocking together benches and tables out of sawn-up ammunition crates. His movements were precise, sparse, and frighteningly mechanical.

Soma felt like a restless ghost who, by some tragic mistake, had been given back a solid, heavy body. He was the only adult man with a wooden leg in this fragile world of women and children. Sometimes, sitting on an overturned cartridge box and wiping the sweat from

his forehead with the dirty sleeve of his shirt, he would stare at his sister intently for a long time.

He saw Yuriko standing before the children, and he noticed what remained hidden from others. Yuriko's gaze often slipped past the makeshift blackboard and cardboard – toward Miko. Soma saw how this gaze lingered on her friend's thin, charcoal-stained fingers, on her short-cropped hair, on her straight, almost stone-like back, on the way the pale light of the canvas fell across her cheekbone. In this long, quiet contemplation, her brother read an absolute, ringing devotion that surpassed ordinary friendship. It was the look of a survivor who, amidst a churning, shattered ocean, had found her single, unbreakable anchor – one specific person for whose sake it was worth continuing to breathe.

Soma noticed this, silently put another nail in his mouth, raised his hammer, and continued to pound the boards. He asked nothing. He knew that the war had melted down and turned to ash all former laws and decencies, leaving people only the right to cling to one another. Every bench he nailed together was his mute way of saying: "I am here. I see it. I accept it."

But whenever neighbors or the girls themselves tried to question him about the Philippines, about Manila, or about exactly how he had lost his leg, Soma instantly withdrew into himself. His face turned to stone, becoming an impenetrable mask, and his gaze went straight through his interlocutor, fixing upon the horizon where the faded sky merged with the ocean. His lips pressed into a thin white line. The Philippines was a locked, walled-up room in his head, and he had long ago thrown the key to it into the deepest depths.

The October wind was noisily shifting the heavy edges of the canvas when two people arrived at the school.

Yuriko was standing with her back to the entrance, tracing the character for "mountain" with charcoal. Her hand was smoothly drawing the three vertical lines when the air behind her changed. The density of the space faltered, as if a thin trickle of ice-cold water had run between her shoulder blades. She turned around.

At the entrance to the tent stood two girls. Yuriko didn't recognize them right away. Their faces were gaunt, drawn down to the lines of bone, their skin had taken on an unhealthy, earthy hue, and their hair was chopped into uneven, jagged tufts – as if it had been hacked at with shards of glass or a blunt knife. But both were wearing faded, roughly darned remnants of school hakama. A fabric that Yuriko knew down to the last knot.

Seiko and Usagi. Surviving students from the Himeyuri Corps.

They approached quietly; their bare feet left almost no prints in the dry dust. Yuriko hastily handed the piece of charcoal to a senior student, nodded to Miko, and the four of them stepped aside, into the deep shade of a sprawling, half-burnt banyan tree. The tree trunk was monstrous – three arm-spans wide, with black, cracked bark from whose crevices oozed a thick, viscous white sap, resembling milk. Under the banyan, it smelled of rotting wood, moss, and that specific, unsettling decay that emanates from trees that have survived a fire.

The girls themselves smelled of dampness and a long, lingering fear. It was a cave scent, painfully familiar to Yuriko – sour, with a tinge of bleach, stagnant groundwater, and human despair.

“We found out you were here,” Usagi began quietly, not raising her eyes and nervously twisting the hem of her jacket into a tight spiral. Her fingers were trembling, her nails bitten down to the quick. “You opened a school. That... that is good.”

The word “good” hung in the viscous air like an awkward, alien object. Seiko cast frightened, sidelong glances toward Soma, whose prosthesis dug into the dirt with a dull thud as he leveled another board. Miko silently folded her arms across her chest, her scanning, medical gaze instantly seizing the essence of their visit: these two hadn’t come here for the school, nor for idle chatter.

“What happened?” Miko asked evenly, without emotion.

Seiko swallowed loudly, convulsively, as if a word were stuck in her throat. Her fingers dug into the fabric of her jacket so tightly that her knuckles turned white.

“The teacher,” she exhaled, and that short word dropped onto the red clay like a heavy, ice-cold stone. “Minato Kobayashi. He’s returned.”

Yuriko felt as if the ground had given way beneath her feet. A dry electric wave ran from the back of her head down to her tailbone, paralyzing her muscles. The Ihamigama Cave. The heavy, cool ceramic grenade in her palm. The smell of carbolic acid, of rotting flesh. The mad, feverish glint of round spectacles in the dim light of a kerosene lamp. The voice screaming: “You are daughters of the Emperor! You must die with honor!”

“We know he’s alive,” Miko’s voice remained outwardly calm, but Yuriko saw how tightly her jaw clenched, and how a stubborn vein throbbed on her cheekbone. “The Red Cross informed us while we were still in the camp. He was in the hospital, wounded.”

“He’s not in the hospital anymore,” Usagi shook her head, and in her dark eyes reflected a sticky, unyielding, purely childish panic. “He was discharged. And he lives quite close by. In the village over the hill, with his sister – the one who married a farmer from Nagato. We saw him yesterday by the well.”

The white drops of banyan sap fell slowly, heavily onto the dirt at their feet, leaving round marks on the brown earth that looked like pale, blind stars.

“He leans heavily on a cane,” Usagi continued hurriedly, her voice breaking, as if rushing to rid herself of this information like poison. “He has terrible scars on his face. One massive one – from his forehead straight across his right cheek down to his chin. And his left arm... it doesn’t move at all, he wears it in a sling made of dirty linen. But it’s definitely him. We recognized him by his glasses. He still wears those same round glasses. Only one lens... it’s cracked crisscross.”

Round glasses. Cracked glass. The girls fell silent. Having told this, they seemed to have shifted an unliftable, suffocating burden onto Yuriko and Miko’s shoulders, and now fearfully awaited their reaction. But there was no answer. Hanging in this silence were all the unspoken questions: What do we do now? How do we live near a man who sent them to their deaths, yet survived himself, saved by American doctors? Can this be forgiven?

“Thank you,” Miko cut off the silence dryly. Without judgment, without emotion. She merely registered the fact.

After speaking a little more about trivial things – about the issuance of rationed rice and the new well in the north – Seiko and Usagi left. They dissolved into the evening haze as quietly and unnoticeably as they had appeared, leaving behind only the faint, sour smell of that cave-born fear.

Yuriko and Miko headed home in the thick, blue twilight.

They walked in silence, shoulder to shoulder, barefoot on the cooling clay that still held the heat of the day. The air filled with smoke from the neighbors’ hearths – the peaceful, gray smoke of boiling sweet potatoes. It was as if the island were letting out a slow, agonizing exhale after a long, drawn-out breath. Miko walked with an inscrutable face, and Yuriko knew: her friend was currently drawing mental lines, building a plan, deciding what to do with this news. Yuriko did not rush her. She waited for Miko to speak up herself, when her internal plan was finally ready.

The house met them with the soft, trembling light of a kerosene lamp. The plywood walls, assembled from American crates, creaked softly in the wind, resembling the rustle of an old paper folding screen. Kohaku stood by the table, her broad, calloused hands deftly sorting through damp sweet potato tubers.

“Where’s Hinata?” Yuriko immediately cast a glance at the empty, dark corner where the mattress made from sugar sacks lay. Whenever the boy was not home, the world felt fractured.

Kohaku wiped her palms on her canvas apron and nodded toward the darkness beyond the threshold.

“He ran off somewhere,” her mother replied calmly. “Even before the sun went down.”

“Did he at least eat after classes?” Miko frowned, peering into the tin pot.

“He ate a little, a couple of spoonfuls. Then he dug around in his bag, took a few army hardtacks, and vanished. I shouted after him, asked him not to go near the forest, but can you really hold back our navigator? He’s like the wind.”

Yuriko stepped to the threshold and peered into the blackening jungle. The forest breathed with its immense, hollow, rustling life, ticking with millions of insects. The boy, who had grown up in the thicket, had gone back again to where he felt like the master. There was no anxiety – Hinata knew these thickets better than any cartographer. He would return. He always returned.

“Eat,” Kohaku said quietly, setting the steaming sweet potatoes on the table. “We’ll talk later.”

They ate in utter silence. Chewing and swallowing hot, earth-scented food meant affirming their presence in this world. It was a simple, tangible facet of normalcy: table, mother, lamp, food. Yuriko felt how, with every swallow, the suffocating numbness brought on by the news of Kobayashi receded a little.

In the night, the damp ocean wind was suddenly replaced by a parching, dense heat.

Yuriko lay on the mat between Miko and Hinata, who had returned as imperceptibly as a wild cat does, bringing with him on his clothes the smell of flattened wet grass and forest berries. Yuriko lay with her eyes closed, but sleep would not come. Her body seemed to anticipate the sharp drop in pressure before a typhoon. The two pale scars on her left palm, which had long resembled the healed petals of a white lily, suddenly filled with a leaden, aching heaviness. They pulsated in time with some alien, ancient, furious heart.

Tamar returned instantly, without warning.

Space shifted with a single deep breath. Yuriko no longer felt the plywood walls – her consciousness found itself locked in an unfamiliar, tall body, parched by the heat. A bitter, powdery aftertaste of old salt and scorched bone settled in her throat, causing her lips to crack instantly.

She stood on the very edge of a gigantic, sheer precipice. The stone beneath her bare feet was white-hot; it radiated a dry, mineral heat. The air around her was yellow, murky with raised dust, and the sun overhead seemed like a massive copper disc, smelling of execution and red-hot iron. Down below the cliff gaped a dead, bare gray valley in which there was not a single blade of grass.

And in this valley, the beetles were swarming.

They had returned. There were thousands of them, tens of thousands – bronze, faceless, blindingly glittering under the merciless rays. Yuriko saw them through Tamar's eyes and suffocated with horror at their terrifying, mechanical, inhuman precision. They did not shout, they did not fuss. They moved like elements of a single colossal mechanism, forming flawless lines and dense squares. Shield to shield, scale to scale – they seemed like the solid chitinous shell of a giant centipede grinding up limestone.

The beetles were building.

In the gray valley grew a monstrous, unnatural stone tongue. They dragged enormous logs, sacks of dirt, rubble, and boulders, piling up a gigantic ramp. The embankment – slowly, inexorably, the way water creeps, the way lava creeps, the way time creeps – rose higher day by day, biting into the flank of their impregnable cliff. The clatter of wood, the iron clank, and the hollow, guttural hum of millions of feet merged into a single vibrating drone that made the stone beneath Tamar's feet tremble finely and continuously.

The beetles were in no hurry. They knew that time belonged to them. They were building a road to the sky in order to ascend to the summit and devour everyone who had taken shelter there.

There was no salvation.

Suddenly, the yellow sky over the valley split along an invisible seam with a dry crack. Through this fissure poured an unnatural, blinding white light – a sharp, crystalline light. High above hovered two pulsating, ringing white lights. From their inhuman radiance, the shadows on the cliff fell in the opposite direction, and the crescent-moon scars on her palm burned with a crimson, purplish fire. The beetles below froze for a moment like jammed gears, but then resumed their bone-grinding scrape with renewed vigor.

This iron clanking rose ever higher, filling her ears, squeezing the air from her lungs. In Yuriko's consciousness, it merged in a strange, terrifying way with Usagi's words from yesterday: "He leans on a cane, he has scars on his face, but it is him."

The past was building its ramp. The name Kobayashi was growing like this stone embankment.

In terror, Tamar turned and ran deep into the fortress, toward her father, screaming of the impending end, but her cry was entirely swallowed by the hollow, guttural rumble of thousands of marching feet below.

The sharp, piercing cry of a night bird tore through the haze, as though ripping a dried bandage off an open wound.

Yuriko opened her eyes.

A pale, pearlescent morning light barely seeped through the cracks in the plywood walls. The room smelled of cooled ash, dampness, and boiled sweet potatoes. Beside her, Miko was breathing deeply and evenly. A little further away, curled up into a ball on the sugar sacks, slept Hinata – he had returned towards morning, bringing with him the scent of wet grass.

Yuriko sat up on the mat. Her body was wet with a cold, sticky sweat that smelled of iron. The clank of the bronze beetles still echoed in her ears, mingling with reality. The ramp from the past continued to grow. Yuriko looked at her left palm: the crescent moons were slowly fading, turning into pale marks.

At that moment, an absolute, crystal-clear knowledge came to her. The past will not leave on its own. It is building a road. And if they just sit at the top of their plywood shack and wait, this past will rise up, step over the threshold, and devour them alive. Their only chance for salvation was to meet it face to face.

The numbness of the night vanished. Fear gave way to a quiet, firm resolve.

Miko stirred, opened her clear, dark eyes, and looked questioningly at her friend. The morning light softly outlined her calm face.

"We will go see him," Yuriko said quietly. But so firmly that the sound of her voice made the space within the house freeze.

Miko slowly propped herself up on her elbow, with a familiar gesture brushing a short strand of hair from her forehead. She studied her friend's face long and intently. In her gaze, there was not a shadow of doubt or fear – only instantaneous, unconditional agreement. Her body, her own memory of the cave hell remembered the very same thing.

"To whom?" Miko asked. She needed this name to be spoken aloud, right here, in their morning house, so the nightmare would finally take on flesh and turn into a target.

Yuriko lowered her hand to the mat and said with certainty:

"To the teacher. To Sensei Kobayashi."

Chapter 13. The Taste of Grass

Sunday arrived with scents – the aroma of home cooking – rather than simply as another day on the calendar.

Even on Saturday evening, Kohaku had lit the hearth unusually early, and the smoke from the pine firewood – dry, clean, brought by Hinata and Soma not from abandoned artillery crates, but from a surviving grove beyond the far hill – hung over the half-ruined Mawashiasato in a thin, spicy, almost festive thread. This smoke smelled of the old, pre-war world: an unshakable home, a reliable roof, a shared dinner, and a rightful Sunday rest. Kohaku fried thick pancakes made of rice flour mixed with brackish well water on a flat, red-hot stone. They gave off a thick, sweetish, enveloping aroma that made Yuriko's shoulders relax involuntarily, against her will. The pancakes came out uneven, browned on one side and pale on the other, and the steam rising from them smelled of the domestic warmth of a mother's hands.

The four of them ate together: mother, daughter, son, and the boy with no surname. Miko sat nearby, breaking off tiny pieces from the hot dough and chewing them slowly, with the concentration of someone who had spent too long getting used to the idea that every bite could be their last. Hinata didn't chew – he stuffed the pancakes into both cheeks, smearing himself with rice dough and licking his fingers with such blissful, almost animalistic pleasure that Soma, watching him across the table, couldn't help but chuckle.

"Hinata," Yuriko said quietly, her eyes following the sun dipping behind the plywood wall. "Tomorrow is Sunday. Miko and I are going to the neighboring village. Do you want to come with us?"

The boy raised his head, dotted with golden crumbs, and vigorously shook his dark tuft of hair.

"No! I want to go for a walk. To the forest. There are still wild pandanus berries there, I saw them by the stream yesterday."

"Don't go too close to the thicket," Kohaku frowned, wiping her hands on her apron. "The grass is full of unexploded iron."

"I know, I know! I've been there a hundred times!" Hinata wiped his mouth with his sleeve and deftly slid off the bench.

Sunday morning turned out thick and transparent, like congealed cherry tree sap. October was fully coming into its own, drop by drop chilling the night moisture out of the rusty Okinawan earth. The air over the village smelled of fresh wood shavings, seaweed drying in the sun, and a strong, salty ocean wind.

Soma sat on an overturned ammo box right at the entrance to their shack, and methodically, with a dry, strained creak, bound a new leather strap to his wooden prosthesis, which was clamped with an iron ring. He was getting ready to go to Naha, to the Makishi black market. It was a place that had grown straight out of liquid mud and human despair on a wasteland by the ruined port: a colossal, screaming labyrinth of rotten boards, canvas awnings, and rusted American iron. There, for Camel cigarettes, rationed rice, or copper wires found in the ruins, you could barter for absolutely anything – from a skein of thread to a bar of soap or homemade shogi pieces carved from shell casings. Makishi pulsed,

shouted in a dozen dialects, didn't ask for documents, and was thoroughly saturated with the smells of fried fish, gunpowder, cheap tobacco, and human sweat. Soma needed thread and nails – the roof of the house had started leaking again.

Her brother tightened the knot on the strap, straightened up, leaning on his bamboo cane, and looked at Hinata. The boy was hovering by the stone well, stealthily searching for something in the wet grass near his sugar sack, where he kept his simple treasures: green glass polished by the waves, pebbles, and spent cartridges.

"Listen, navigator," Soma called out, tapping his wooden leg. "Want to go to Makishi with me? It's crowded there right now. American quartermasters brought condensed milk, and Chinese smugglers are selling sweet flatbreads. Help me carry the sack, and I'll trade for something for you."

Hinata froze, his bare feet sinking up to the ankles in the cold dew. He looked at the tall, stooped figure of Yuriko's older brother, then at his own canvas bundle.

"No, thank you, Mr. Soma," the boy answered and took a quick step back, as if afraid he would be held by force. "I don't want to go to the market. I want to go to the forest."

He fussily turned away, thrust his hand deep into the sack, fished out some light-colored, dense object, hastily shoved it into his shirt – under the fabric with three buttons – and broke into a run toward the pandanus thicket. His little figure flashed among the broad, sawtooth green leaves and dissolved without a trace into the dense brush.

Soma frowned. His gaze followed the boy and slowly returned to the open sugar sack in the corner. He stayed silent for a moment, then poked the blunt end of his axe into it, pushed the edge of the canvas aside, and sighed heavily, turning to Yuriko, who was just stepping onto the threshold, adjusting the collar of her washed coveralls.

"He took a bandage for some reason," Soma said, pointing the axe handle toward the forest. "A real medical bandage. From those clean supplies Sergeant Kimura brought for the school. I saw the white gauze edge. What does he need a roll of sterile gauze in the forest for?"

Yuriko walked over and peered into the sack. The spot where the bandage had been was indeed empty. She looked anxiously at the wall of the jungle, which lived its own massive, rustling life.

"Probably playing robbers or hospital," Miko answered calmly, appearing right behind her. Her medical gaze was steady. "Kids these days treat trees or bandage wounded bugs. Let him walk. Hinata knows this island better than military cartographers. He always comes back."

Yuriko hesitated, but nodded. For the two of them today, there was only one direction. One name they had to step over in order to move forward.

"All right," Yuriko said. "Let him go."

Soma threw the empty sack, which contained a few of Kohaku's woven baskets and a bundle of dried sweet potato for trading, over his shoulder. His footsteps – tap... tap... tap – slowly faded into the morning silence, leaving round craters in the soft clay next to the imprints of human toes.

Yuriko and Miko met Seiko at the fork of two dirt roads at the very break of dawn. Usagi hadn't found the resolve to come – her fear had proven stronger. Seiko stood alone, thin, with sunken, earthy cheeks, shifting from foot to foot in the road dust. Her eyes hid in the shadow of her overgrown, uneven bangs, and her clothes still carried that elusive, underlying scent of cave dampness that no sun could burn away.

The path to the neighboring village of Nagato lay through a gently sloping valley that remembered far too much. It was a true journey through ghosts – not metaphorical, but material, tangible ghosts of a destroyed world. Dry grass clung to their ankles, as if someone's invisible fingers were begging them to stop. The air felt dense, warped by the unbearable weight of unlived lives. Here was the stone wall of a former temple, half-collapsed, but still bearing a faded wooden plaque with the name of a deity who hadn't saved anyone. Over there was the overturned, mangled bed of a Japanese army truck, half-ingrown into the red soil, with juicy, bright green vines of wild grapes reaching out from its rusted sides. The island continued to devour the war – quickly, greedily, methodically, turning steel and concrete into fertilizer for its roots.

Shadows from charred trunks fell upon the earth incorrectly, intersecting at impossible angles, and in the dry chirping of cicadas, Yuriko kept imagining the metallic clatter of rifle bolts. The earth breathed with the dead. On the shoulder, near a stream, they passed a concrete culvert. Inside it, in the cool shade, was a pile of white stones arranged in a neat pyramid, topped with tiny, faded scraps of colorful girls' clothing. Someone had gathered here the little that remained of the fallen. Seiko walked past without looking, but Yuriko stopped for a second and felt her hands instinctively clench into fists. Her left palm, bearing the crescent-scars, responded with a barely noticeable warmth. It wasn't Tamar's rage – it was a deep, ancient solidarity with the earth that remembered everyone.

"Who else is left?" Yuriko asked quietly, breaking the drawn-out silence. "From our unit? From the parallel classes?"

Seiko walked in silence for a long time, her bare feet stepping noiselessly on the grass. Seiko didn't know how to speak in long sentences – over these months in caves and camps, she had forgotten how to tie words into threads, and now her speech consisted of short, hard, chopped fragments, as if she were chipping pieces off a frozen block of stone, or like the clatter of train wheels constantly falling between the rails.

"I don't know for sure," she answered colorlessly. "But they say there are survivors from the Women's Division of the Normal School. From the "Shirayuri" – White Lily – unit. They were also abandoned in the cave hospitals by the Mabuni cliffs when the mobilization was canceled. They only went outside at night, drank water from puddles mixed with blood and lime. Those who didn't jump off the cliff into the sea are now in the camps up north. There are very few of us left, Yuriko. So few. Just faces. And the smell."

"What smell?" asked Miko, walking ahead. Her back was straight as a taut string; it was as if she were slicing through this phantom air with her movement.

"Like ours," Seiko dropped quietly. "That same cave smell. Bleach, stagnant water, and despair. We recognize each other by it. Like a brand."

Beyond the hill, the road descended into the valley. The village of Nagato had suffered a little less: here a woman stood by a well with buckets, and the sound of a hammer came

from broken windows. Rusty iron shacks stood alongside surviving stone buildings. Seiko stopped at the last house on the edge; above its door hung a dried bunch of wormwood, exuding a bitter, earthy scent. The very same scent that came to Yuriko in her ancient, foreign dreams.

“Here,” Seiko exhaled, her fingers once again frantically picking at the edge of her blouse. “I... I can’t. I’ll wait for you by the fork, in the bushes.”

She had found the strength to bring them here, but she was incapable of looking into the face of the man who had sent her to her death. Yuriko nodded understandingly, and Seiko walked quickly back along the path, dissolving into the greenery as a shadow dissolves.

Yuriko and Miko approached the threshold. It smelled of boiling water, dried herbs, and old, centuries-aged tatami straw. The door was opened by a woman – improbably small, dry, and quick as a field mouse. Her face was round, covered with deep wrinkles near her lips, but her lively eyes shone with a warm, domestic light. She wore a clean, neatly patched cotton dress, and her hands smelled of lemongrass and yarrow. Hisa. Their teacher’s sister.

“Are you here for him?” she asked without surprise or judgment. Only an old, worn-out fatigue sounded in her guttural Okinawan accent.

“We are from Himeyuri,” Miko answered evenly. “From the First Women’s Division. We came to visit Sensei Kobayashi.”

Hisa blinked, took a step back, and threw the door wider:

“Come in. I’ll bring some tea right away.”

Inside, the house was dark and cool. Thin reed mats covered the dirt floor. In the corner stood a low bed, and nearby – an overturned box, on which lay two books wrapped in cloth and round glasses in a tarnished metal frame.

Minato Kobayashi sat on a mat by the far wall, with his back to the light. Yuriko froze, her heart skipping a beat. For the first second, she didn’t recognize him. The man from the Ihamigama cave, whose voice had vibrated with fanatical steel, was gone. Before them sat a slouched, terribly withered man in a clean but faded yukata. His right cheek, from the very temple across his brow ridge down to his chin, was disfigured by a crimson-pink, knotty scar that roughly deformed the corner of his mouth, pulling the skin into a glossy fold. His left arm was pressed tightly to his chest, immobile, paralyzed, supported by a white canvas sling. Kobayashi seemed shorter in stature, as if the mainspring had been removed from a broken mechanism.

Hearing their footsteps, his body instantly petrified. His shoulders tensed, his chin pressed convulsively to his chest. He knew who had entered. His healthy right hand reached slowly, with disobedient fingers, for the glasses lying on the box. He put them on. Round lenses. The right glass was bisected by a deep crisscross crack.

Through this crack, he looked at them. At Yuriko. At Miko. At his living students, standing before him in coarse American coveralls with parachute seams.

“Sensei,” Yuriko began, and her voice traitorously broke into a whisper. “We came to see... how you are. Maybe you need some help. We’re nearby, in Mawashiasato.”

A silence of such density hung in the room that one could hear the flame humming in the kerosene lamp. Kobayashi looked at them for a second, two, three. And then, slowly, with trembling fingers, he took off the glasses. He carefully folded the earpieces, placed them on his lap, and lowered his eyes to the dirt floor.

He did not utter a single word.

But in this muteness, there was neither peace nor resignation. Yuriko felt it just as distinctly as the dry, sour smell of his body – it was a ringing, dull, white-hot rage. But he wasn't angry at the girls. This rage was directed inward, at himself. It was devouring him like acid. He was sitting in front of the students to whom he had personally handed out cyanide and clay grenades... And then the American orderlies came, injected him with morphine, sewed up his torn chest, and left him to live in a world where the Emperor had surrendered, and his "fallen petals" were treading the earth with bare feet. The shame and guilt were so immense that there were simply no sounds for them. Any word now would have been a falsehood. He was burning from the inside, like a deep, smoldering coal, and the ashes of this fire were choking him.

Hisa started bustling about, her movements becoming hurried, as if she were trying to fill this terrifying emptiness with the clinking of dishes. She brought in a coarse ceramic teapot and arranged crooked, handleless cups on the low table.

"Please, drink some tea," she said quietly, addressing the dishes rather than the guests. "It's hibiscus flowers, wild mint, and dandelion root. Minato and I gather them ourselves on the slopes where there was no shelling. The war couldn't kill the herbs. He... he is almost always silent lately. At night he talks to someone who isn't there, begs for forgiveness, screams. But during the day, he's silent. He helps around the house, though. He mends the fence with his right hand, weaves ropes. Drink, it's hot."

The tea smelled of earth, burnt forest, and the sweetish bitterness of a departed summer. Yuriko wrapped both palms around the cup. The clay was warm and rough. She took a sip – the hot liquid scalded her throat, leaving the taste of pollen and mint. Hisa sat down next to her brother and simply placed her small, calloused palm on his healthy knee, like leaving a beacon on the shore.

Miko sat with a flawlessly straight back:

"We opened a school, Sensei. In a tent, on the site of an old foundation. We already have fifty students. We teach them to read and count. We have cardboard and charcoal."

Yuriko noticed Kobayashi's right hand clamp down in a death grip around the wooden cane leaning against the wall. His knuckles went white to the point of flat spots. The corner of his mouth, where the crimson scar abruptly ended, twitched convulsively. He heard everything. Every word entered him like a thin bayonet. Yuriko wanted to say that they held no grudge, that they hadn't come to judge, but she realized: right now, any forgiveness would fall on him like a fresh blow. He needed their silence.

The monster from the cave turned out to be just a broken, miserable man locked in the prison of his own survival. The fear that tormented Yuriko at night crumbled, leaving behind only a bitter, dry sense of pity. The embankment in her dreams was destroyed. The

past no longer had power over her – it remained here, in the dim room, sitting on a mat with broken glasses on its lap.

They didn't stay long. Having finished their tea, they bowed politely and headed for the exit. Kobayashi didn't even stir, but his fingers on the cane finally relaxed, slowly and with effort.

Hisa walked them to the gate. On the threshold she lingered, then took a small paper bundle from her apron pocket and handed it to Yuriko:

"This is for your mother from us. Tell her it's from us. Herbs for tea. He will be pleased. He won't say it – but he will."

Yuriko took the bundle; dry leaves crunched under her fingers.

"Thank you," she said quietly. Hisa nodded and closed the door.

The journey back was different. The sun stood at its zenith, mercilessly burning away shadows and dissolving the ghosts of the valley. They walked in silence; the soil had grown scorching hot, and their bare soles sank into the soft ground, hot as dough. The clay underfoot no longer felt alien. It was just hot earth that held them up.

Seiko was waiting for them at the fork. She didn't ask what had happened, just walked alongside them in silence. Three girls in strange clothes made from altered coveralls and old kimonos moved along the road like three dark silhouettes, still smelling of the unweatherable military past. At the intersection by her house, Seiko quietly said goodbye and disappeared behind the bushes.

When the sun was already sinking to the west, the tin and canvas roofs of Mawashiasato appeared ahead. Hinata was running across the wasteland in front of their house, waving a long stick like a sword and shouting loudly.

"A bandage. Why did he take a medical bandage?" The thought flashed through Yuriko's mind, but immediately melted away in the evening coolness.

Soma had already returned from the market; a coil of copper wire and a little rice poked out of his sack. He was sitting on the threshold, methodically hammering nails into fresh wood, and this rhythmic sound of the axe had a calming effect. Yuriko went into the house and silently placed the bundle of herbs on the table. Kohaku looked at her daughter questioningly, but Yuriko merely shook her head: later.

In the evening, when Hinata fell asleep, curled up into a ball on his sugar sacks, and all sounds in the house died down, Miko and Yuriko went outside and sat on the low stone wall of the foundation.

The night was transparent and starry. The Okinawan sky had nothing in common with the Japanese one: it seemed deeper, closer, and heavier with constellations. They looked huge, improbably bright, as if someone had scattered a handful of red-hot, pulsating coals across black velvet. The air smelled of cooling clay, smoke from the neighbors' hearths, and the distant, barely discernible breath of the ocean.

Miko stayed silent for a long time, peering into this bottomless blue. Finally, she spoke, and her voice sounded unexpectedly loud, clear, with an undeniable metallic resolve:

“Yuriko.”

“Yes.”

“We must remember them,” Miko’s words dropped into the night coolness like stones into clear water. “All the dead. Our girls from Himeyuri. From the First High School. From the Normal School. Everyone who remained in the darkness of the caves, who was buried in the hospitals, who jumped from the cliffs. We don’t have the right to simply survive and forget. We must honor their memory. Make sure their names do not turn to dust like this island.”

Yuriko looked at her profile – sharp, delicate, as if carved from dark stone in the flickering starlight.

“How will we do that?” she asked quietly.

“I don’t know yet,” Miko replied, inhaling deeply the smell of the sea. “But we will find a way. Maybe it will be stone. Or wood. Or just names written on something enduring. So that the people who walk this earth after us will know: girls lay here... They deserve to be remembered.”

Miko fell silent. Yuriko didn’t answer, because words were no longer needed here. She simply lowered her left palm onto the cold stone of the foundation between them – open, palm up. The petal-scars on her skin were quiet and calm. In this gesture, her skin said what her tongue could not express: yes. We will not forget.

Miko turned and covered Yuriko’s palm with her hand. Firmly, securely. And this time, she didn’t let go of her hand until morning.

Chapter 14. The Boy

The strangeness began on Tuesday, when the thick smell of freshly planed wood that continuously wafted from the school tent suddenly mixed with the sharp, rusty, metallic scent of an approaching ocean squall.

It happened at the very height of the midday lesson – at the moment when Miko, standing before forty pairs of expectant children's eyes, was explaining the difference between the numbers “twelve” and “twenty.” Instead of an abacus, she used brass machine-gun casings, laying them out with a dry clink in a neat row on an overturned American ammo crate. The sound of children's voices filled the canvas tent the way warm, still water fills a terracotta bowl: it was the monotonous, lulling rustle of collective counting, the whispering of characters, and the scrape of charcoal sticks against gray packing cardboard. The sun mercilessly pressed down on the canvas from above, turning the tent into a red-hot, stuffy, heavy-breathing membrane, and the heated tarpaulins gave off the old, bitter smell of machine oil that had eaten into the fabric’s fibers over the years of the war.

Yuriko didn't notice the absence right away. She was standing at the very edge of the tent, helping the youngest students trace the character for “water” with charcoal – three wavy vertical lines, simple and natural as breath itself. At some point, she felt that the space in the third row, by the farthest bamboo pole, was strangely empty. Usually, Hinata, acting as the self-appointed class monitor, sat there with the most self-important air, and after lessons, he helped gather the casings back into the sack. Now, on the crumpled mat that

still held the warmth of his thin body, lay only a piece of charcoal and a pencil stub. Hinata himself was gone. He had slipped away noiselessly, as if dissolving into the hot air.

Yuriko turned to Miko. Their eyes met halfway – this short, mute, instantaneous signal they had learned to catch over their months of living together in the caves. Miko gave a barely noticeable, fleeting shake of her head: not now. Not in front of the children. Later.

But when the story repeated itself the next day, on Wednesday, the anxiety – which had been light and transparent as a morning spiderweb – turned by evening into a sticky, tangible, cold lump at the very bottom of Yuriko's stomach. The jungle that crept right up to ruined Mawashiasato was no place for children's strolls. The island was still mortally dangerous: the thickets breathed with hidden threats – unexploded mines in the thick grass, rusted artillery shells, poisonous snakes, and stray dogs maddened by hunger.

"We need to talk to him," Miko said firmly, washing coal dust from her hands at the stone well just as the sun touched the tops of the hills. Her voice sounded dry and even, like the snip of surgical scissors. "No evasions. A clean slate."

Yuriko nodded silently, looking at the darkening, quieting edge of the forest.

The four of them waited for him. Kohaku made a point of not lighting the kerosene lamp, and the plywood house was filled to the ceiling with the thick, violet, shifting shadows of the October evening. In the hearth, baked sweet potatoes were slowly cooling with a barely audible hiss, filling the room with a sweetish, dense, domestic aroma that now seemed almost like a mockery of their tense, ringing anticipation. Soma sat by the threshold, his wooden prosthesis – bound with an iron hoop – resting motionless on the packed dirt floor. He methodically, with a barely noticeable scraping sound, sharpened his cleaver against a whetstone without looking up. Miko and Yuriko sat frozen on low benches. The silence in the shack was of such density that it seemed one could hear a solitary carpenter ant crawling along the old rafters.

Hinata appeared when the first sharp and cold stars, like needles, had already broken through the inky sky, and the village was finally steeped in thick blue twilight.

The boy entered sideways, trying to appear unnoticeable, literally rubbing his back against the doorframe. In his hands, he carefully carried something tightly clutched – tiny, white, crumpled. His three-button shirt reeked of damp earth, mold, and a strange, sharp, suffocating smell of rotting forest leaves – the very smell Yuriko remembered all too well from her wanderings. The boy's knees were covered in fresh, still-wet purple clay, and on his right cheek glared a thin scratch from a thorny bush. His voice, when he spoke, sounded unusually quiet, almost soundless – the way children speak when they know for sure they are guilty and hope that if they speak quietly enough, punishment can be avoided.

"Good evening," Hinata mumbled without raising his head, and his small dirty heels tapped nervously against each other: tap-tap, tap-tap. An unconscious, frightened rhythm.

"Good evening," Yuriko answered, sliding off the bench into a crouch to be at his eye level. "Come here. Sit down."

The boy obediently perched on an overturned ammo box. His bare feet didn't reach the floor and dangled forlornly in the air.

"Hinata," Miko took a step forward, her arms strictly crossed over her chest. Her voice remained as even as a taut thread. "You ran away again right in the middle of a lesson. You leave every day and only return in the dark. You don't say where you go. And you are taking things from the house."

The boy flinched. His dangling heels instantly stopped. His lower lip jutted out stubbornly, his shoulders tensed, turning his little figure into a small, impregnable fortress.

"Why do you need them?" Yuriko asked quietly, peering into his round, frozen eyes.

Hinata remained silent, frantically crumpling the dirty hem of his shirt with his fingers.

"The bandage," came a hollow sound from the darkness of the corner. Soma set aside the cleaver. The metal clinked against stone. "You took a clean medical bandage. From those sterile supplies Sergeant Kimura brought for the school. What do you need clean gauze for in the forest, navigator?"

In the child's huge, dark eyes froze that specific, breathless expression with which wild forest animals look at a hunter: not defiance, not fear, but absolute, concentrated attention, ready at any second to turn into flight.

Then Soma slowly stood up from his place. With a heavy, dull thud – *thump* – his wooden leg struck the floor, making the boy pull his head into his shoulders. The soldier walked over to Hinata and knelt before him on his healthy knee. Soma smelled of strong tobacco, cedar shavings, and that reliable, tired masculine strength that Hinata lacked so much.

"Listen to me, Hinata. Look at me." Soma reached out his huge, rough palm and gently touched the boy's shoulder. "We are your family here. Do you understand? A real, actual new family. And a family shouldn't have secrets that can get someone killed. The forest is full of iron that explodes. If you're in trouble, or someone else is in trouble – just tell us. Tell us. We won't scold you. But we have to know."

The boy stared unblinkingly at Soma for a long time. Then he shifted his gaze to Yuriko. To Miko. To Kohaku, who stood frozen by the washing block with a wet cup in her hands, nodding encouragingly and understandingly from the darkness. Four pairs of eyes. Four people who hadn't abandoned him. Who waited for him every evening by this hearth.

Hinata's little fortress cracked. He let out a heavy, shuddering sigh from his full child's chest, pulling his thin shirt tight over his protruding collarbones, sniffled, and began to speak. His voice sounded flat, disjointed, with that particular childish incoherence with which one recounts nightmares, confusing cause and effect and not fully understanding exactly which detail might prove dangerous to adults.

"It was recently... a couple of weeks ago," he began, squeezing the edge of his shirt tighter. "I saw a man. He was very, very skinny and dirty. Really scary. He was climbing around in someone else's garden, over there on the very edge of the village, where the old grandma with the stick lives. He was digging in the dirt with his hands. By himself. Like this – digging and digging, looking for something. Sweet potatoes, probably. Or radishes. He looked very sick, he was even swaying. I thought it was a thief, so I followed him. Very, very quietly, like a cat. He didn't hear me, because he kept looking back and limping."

The boy caught his breath, gathering words like one gathers pebbles scattered on the floor.

“He went deep into the jungle. Out there, past the big vat of rotten water, where the stream comes out from under the rocks. There's an old, deep pit there under the roots of a big tree. I hid behind the wild pandanus bushes and watched. There are two of them there. Soldiers.”

“Soldiers?” Kohaku echoed quietly, involuntarily pressing her hand to her chest.

“Yes. In uniform, only it's all torn, black from dirt and smells burnt. One is really bad. He lies on the dry leaves and moans all the time. Softly, like this: ‘ooh-ooh,’ so the Americans don't hear. His leg is... broken, probably. It's really, really crooked, swollen, and turned blue like a plum. And it stinks real bad. And the second soldier, the one who was looking for food in the garden, he's big, with a black beard, but he has white hairs on his head, like a grandpa. He sits next to him. They don't have anything, just one iron canteen and dirty rags. The one with the beard, he cries sometimes. I heard him. He lies there and cries. And then he stops. And then again.”

Yuriko felt her throat go dry. Miko stood motionless as a stone statue, only her fingers digging slightly harder into her own elbows.

“Are they Japanese soldiers?” Miko asked evenly.

“Yes,” Hinata nodded. “Their clothes are green. And one of them has a little iron knife hanging on his belt. But they aren't scary, really! They're just very, very sad. And hungry. I... I didn't want them to die like the ones in the caves. I know what it's like... when you're alone in the forest and it's scary. So I brought them food. Took it from our supplies. Their hardtacks, the army ones, the hard ones. And carried water in a tin can. I would come, quietly leave the food on a rock next to their pit, and run away right after.”

The boy stumbled, his face twisting convulsively, as if he had caught that forest smell again.

“And then... I got scared his leg would rot completely. I saw that in the forest before. Before you. When a wound rots, the person dies. And I... I took our clean bandage. The gauze. I tried to change his dressing. The old rag was all wet, black, and stinky. I took it off, and underneath... it was very scary. Everything was swollen. He screamed so loud when I touched it! But I said: ‘Don't scream, mister.’ And he went quiet, because he understood I was helping. I wrapped it with the new bandage. Very, very carefully, just like Miko-nee taught me. She always says: you have to wrap it evenly, not too tight and not too loose, so the blood can flow. That's what I did. But today, that mister with the beard caught my hand...”

Kohaku set down her cup.

“They caught a bird, a little one, boiled it in a can. And the mister gave me a leg. It was still warm when he caught it... But I didn't eat it.”

“Why not?” asked Miko quietly, with a barely noticeable tremor in her voice.

“Because I felt sorry for the little bird,” Hinata lowered his head. “It was warm, you know. Alive.”

Yuriko closed her eyes. Behind her eyelids, an image rose with frightening clarity: a child, an absolute orphan of war, kneeling in a damp forest pit before an adult man rotting alive, and carefully, with tiny fingers, winding a white gauze bandage. Doing it evenly. Not too tight and not too loose. Because he remembered. Because on this cursed island, he had no other answer to another's pain.

The silence in the house became thick and heavy, like molasses. Soldiers of a non-existent army. Ghosts who hadn't surrendered, hadn't heard the Emperor's voice on the radio, or were simply madly afraid to surrender to the Americans.

Soma exhaled slowly through his nose as he rose from his knee. His wooden prosthesis thudded dully against the clay once again.

"Tomorrow morning, at dawn," he said harshly, in a military tone, shifting his gaze to his sister. "Hinata will take me to them. I'll talk to them. If they're ours, we have to get them out of the forest before patrols find them."

"No," Miko cut in. Her voice sliced through the twilight of the room like a blade. "Yuriko and I will go. If the wounded man has gangrene or an infection, he doesn't need your conversation, Soma. He needs urgent medical attention. I know how to open, wash, and clean festering wounds; I saw it in the hospital hundreds of times. You have not. If you go alone, you'll only bring them soldier talk. We will bring them a chance to survive and make it to the village on their own two feet. Hinata will guide us."

Soma frowned, biting his lip in displeasure and shifting his body weight onto his prosthesis:

"This isn't women's work, Miko. They could be armed. Feral, desperate men in the forest are mortally dangerous; they could shoot out of fear."

"One of them has a rotting leg, he can't stand," Miko parried adamantly, looking Yuriko's brother straight in the eyes. "They won't shoot. We can handle it. These are our patients, Soma."

Yuriko stepped forward and stood next to her friend. Their shoulders touched:

"We will go together, brother. It's the right thing to do. And tomorrow, you'll be in charge of the school. You'll run the classes instead of us while we're in the forest."

Soma blinked. His mouth opened, then closed, his face expressing the utmost degree of astonishment, as if he had been asked to dance in front of an American general.

"What?!" he practically choked on the air. "At the school? Me? What am I supposed to do with them, Yuriko? I'm not a teacher! I mix up your characters; I've forgotten half the signs. I'm a former soldier with a piece of wood instead of a leg. What am I going to tell them? How to dig full-profile trenches or how to clean the bolt of a Type 38 rifle?"

Yuriko allowed herself a brief, soft smile – for the first time during this long, exhausting evening. The tension in the room finally began to ebb.

"No trenches, Soma. Just the opposite," she said quietly. "Teach them something useful. Something that will actually be handy in this new, broken life. Before the war, you were a cooper's assistant, I remember. Your hands remember wood. Keep them busy with work. Give them a shop class. Show the boys how to hold a hammer properly so they don't

smash their fingers. How to drive a nail into a board so it doesn't bend. How to use a hand saw without breaking the blade. How to whittle a sharp stake for a fence, how to tie a strong knot in a rope, how to fix a crumbling wall. All these children live among debris, Soma. If they learn to make at least something tangible with their hands, they'll stop feeling like helpless victims. Give them this survival skill."

Soma was silent for a long time. He shifted his gaze from Yuriko to Miko, and on his gaunt, prickly-stubbed face, slowly, with difficulty – as if an old rusty hinge were turning – appeared an expression Yuriko hadn't seen since the moment of his return from captivity. It wasn't a smile – it was something far more important. A tiny, barely discernible glimmer of newfound meaning. He had always worked with his hands, but he had worked silently, sullenly, seeing labor only as a heavy, loathsome necessity. And now his sister was telling him: *these children need your hands. Your skill is not a relic of the past. It is their salvation.*

"All right," Soma grumbled hollowly, sheathing his cleaver. "All right. I'll try. But if this kindergarten tears the tent apart or scatters into the bushes – don't blame me."

"They won't scatter," Miko replied confidently. "They have nowhere to run."

Soma let out a short, dry chuckle. There was more warmth in that sound than in all the paragraphs of school textbooks. He looked at Hinata, who was sitting on the box, shifting his gaze from one adult to the other like a spectator at a tennis match. The boy's shoulders finally relaxed completely, his back uncoiled. He had carried this colossal, unliftable burden – the secret of two men hiding in the dirt – for several weeks. And now he had finally shifted it onto strong, reliable adult hands.

Kohaku, standing by the well, wiped her hands on her apron, walked over to the boy, and gently took his tiny palm, drawing him inside the house:

"Go wash up, navigator. Wipe your feet clean. Then eat, and go to sleep. You have to get up early tomorrow – you're leading the girls into the jungle."

Hinata obediently followed her. At the very threshold, he turned and looked at Yuriko – with a long, deep, very unchildlike gaze, in which there was no longer any fear, nor guilt for the stolen bandages. Only absolute, pure trust: *I told you everything. Now you know. Now everything will be right.*

That night, Yuriko lay on the thin mat between Miko and Hinata and couldn't close her eyes. The boy slept soundly, evenly, and deeply, curled up in a ball. In his sleep, his little fingers had firmly, convulsively grasped her index finger – this familiar, nocturnal, unconscious child's gesture made Yuriko's heart clench every time with aching tenderness. A six-year-old child who couldn't walk past another's suffering. A child who felt sorry for a warm, living bird. A child who had bandaged the rotting flesh of an adult man the way Miko-nee had taught him.

She thought about those two men who were currently freezing in a damp pit under the roots of a tree beyond the far hill. About the fact that tomorrow at dawn, she would see their faces. What would she feel? Anger? Pity? Sticky fear? These were Japanese soldiers. The very ones who had shot at Americans down to their last bullet, whom artillery had ground into mince on the island's southern cliffs – and at the same time, the ones who had once been

little boys just exactly like Hinata. With mothers exactly like theirs, who had once waited for them on the thresholds of distant paper houses in the prefectures of Yamagata or Kumamoto.

Next to her, Miko lay absolutely motionless, staring at the ceiling, and Yuriko knew for a fact: she wasn't sleeping either. Miko never slept on the eve of something that required quick and precise decisions. She lay there, tensely listening to the night sounds of the island, mentally going through the contents of the school's first aid kit: gauze squares, scissors, permanganate solution, clean soap, Hisa's dry herbs. She was building geometry out of chaos, drawing up a clear plan of action. Because tomorrow morning she wouldn't need to think or cry. Tomorrow, she would need to act.

Yuriko closed her eyes. The crescent-scars on her left palm remained silent. Outside the thin plywood walls of the house, the jungle rustled with its vast, damp, deep life, absolutely indifferent to human grief.

And out there somewhere, in the darkness beneath the roots, two men were waiting for dawn. They were eating dirty sweet potatoes dug up from a stranger's garden, crying quietly so no one would hear. They didn't yet know that the boy had told everything. They didn't know that someone was already coming to them.

Chapter 15. The Lizard, the Soldier, and the Sentinel

The stone remembered the morning.

It lay on the very edge of the barely discernible path, ingrown into the rich red earth on one side, and on the other – flat, broad – facing the rising sun. The boulder absorbed the first ray with the same greedy, silent, all-consuming avarice with which it had absorbed all previous mornings here on this island, thousands of dawns before people appeared in the jungle, and thousands of dawns after they would leave. The stone was cut through with veins of white quartz, looking like lightning bolts frozen in time. Its surface – rough, covered with microscopic pits and grooves – still held the deep cold of the night, but deep inside it, the underlying, heavy heat of past days was already waking up.

On the stone lay a lizard.

It was small, gray-brown, with a long, elegant tail that curved away from its body in a perfect arc, like a phrase the observer hadn't managed to finish. The emerald scales on its back caught the first slanting rays and turned them into dull, shimmering sparks, resembling scattered green sand. It lay absolutely motionless, spreading its mottled belly across the quartz fracture with that stoic, trusting diligence accessible only to creatures with cold blood. The lizard let the dawn into itself through its scales, through the thinnest bone plates of its skull, turning the solar heat into pure life, into an underlying readiness to vanish into a crevice in an instant if the world around it suddenly became unsafe.

But for now, the world was not unsafe. The forest breathed.

The lizard warmed itself and watched. Its round, bulging, amber eyes with vertical pupils registered reality with frightening, almost painful clarity. It saw every heavy drop of dew on the fuzzy underside of a wild pandanus leaf; it saw how a dry stalk of forest ginger slowly straightened after an invisible creature had passed over it; it saw the finest thread of a spiderweb on which three dried mosquitoes shimmered.

Suddenly, the vibration of the earth changed its usual rhythm. The lizard raised its head on thin little legs. It saw them.

Three figures were moving along the path below, in the green, wet cleft between the rocks, parting the heavy, damp leaves. They walked single file, bare feet stepping noiselessly on the soft, springy moss. First came the human cub – Hinata. He smelled of fresh dust, dry grass, and bird tracks. He moved confidently, like a beast born in these shadows. Behind him came two females. Their scents were much more complex – a mixture of wood smoke, iodine, bitter soap, and a strange, metallic human tension.

On the path, overgrown with creeping fern, the female with long dark hair – Yuriko – suddenly reached her hand backward. Without turning around, simply reached out, knowing exactly where the second one was. Her fingers softly but confidently clasped the wrist of Miko – the one following behind with a heavy canvas sack on her shoulders. In this touch, there was no fear of the forest. It was the movement of two branches intertwining for stability in the face of a storm. For a second, their steps slowed. Their eyes met – long, deep, full of unspoken, thick human meanings that were inaccessible to the lizard, but it felt an instantaneous change of heat in the air. The heat around them became denser, sharper. Miko did not pull her hand away. She squeezed Yuriko's fingers a little harder, convulsively, answering this fleeting confession, and they walked on, through the green, stifling twilight, holding on to each other.

The lizard blinked its transparent membrane, absorbing the heat of the growing day, and froze again, becoming part of the stone. The world was simply the world.

The path finally disappeared at the third kilometer, dissolving into a sea of ferns.

The air here was different – thicker, darker, wetter. The crowns of the banyan trees closed overhead in a dense, impenetrable dome, and the sun penetrated inside only in rare rays, thin as needles, dropping golden spots like coins onto the wet moss. There was a draft of rotting leaves, wet purple clay, and something else – thin, sour, cave-like. Yuriko knew this smell all too well: the smell of a human body that hadn't seen clean water or a roof in a long time. The smell of fear, eaten into the pores like paint.

“Quiet,” whispered Hinata, stopping by a huge, uprooted tree where the roots had formed a sort of cave. From above, the pit was covered by the thorny hide of a shrub. “It's here.”

The boy parted the bushes. In that very second, a dry, distinct metallic clank tore through the damp silence of the jungle. It was the sound of a rifle bolt being cocked.

“Halt! Don't move!” a hoarse, guttural voice, breaking into a falsetto, cut through the gloom. “Who goes there?! Answer, or I shoot!”

From the green thickets appeared the faceted barrel of an *Arisaka*. Long, thin, with the dark, flat tip of a bayonet-knife, which gleamed faintly and menacingly in the wet air. The blade trembled finely. Behind the barrel appeared a face – an obscenely thin man with sunken cheeks, covered by a stiff black beard in which rare white hairs glinted. His military shirt hung on him as if on a scarecrow. His eyes, inflamed and mad, darted between Yuriko and Miko.

Behind his back, on a bedding of dry leaves, lay a second soldier, motionless. From there, from the depths of the pit, came the heavy, sweetish, nauseating smell of rotting flesh.

“Don't be afraid, Mr. Ozawa!” Hinata shouted ringingly, running forward and spreading his arms to the sides, like a small, dirty shield. “Lower your gun! They're with me. These are my new moms! They will help. They were nurses.”

“Moms.”

Yuriko felt a thick, hot flush rapidly flood her cheeks, reaching all the way to her ears. Next to her, Miko froze, and on her pale cheekbones appeared the same unaccustomed, bright blush. They exchanged glances for a fraction of a second – frightened, embarrassed, but in this brief look there was so much warmth that Yuriko for a moment forgot about the bayonet in front of her face.

The rifle in the hands of the bearded soldier trembled. He slowly lowered the barrel, as if the weapon had lost all meaning in front of these girls. The dry, cracked lips of the military man parted:

“Are you... the Lily Princesses? From Himeyuri?”

“Yes,” answered Miko, instantly collecting herself. She dropped the canvas sack to the ground and knelt by the edge of the pit. “We are from the First Women's Division. Our names are Miko Nishida and Yuriko Nakayama. We were nurses in the hospital at the Ihamigama cave. Sit down, Sergeant Major.”

The bearded soldier slowly sank to the ground, leaning his rifle against a root. His hands were shaking violently.

“I am Temotsu Ozawa,” he introduced himself hoarsely, rubbing his pus-filled eyes with dirty fingers. “Sergeant Major Temotsu Ozawa. And this is... Private Shiro Sakai. He broke his leg here in the forest three weeks ago. Fell off a rock when we were looking for water. Hasn't gotten up since.”

Without a single word, Miko reached into the sack. Out came rolls of clean bandage, a bottle of potassium permanganate, soap, scissors, and wooden splints that Soma had carefully whittled the previous evening from a shell crate. With neat movements, she cut the black trouser fabric, stiff with dirt and blood, on Sakai's leg.

Yuriko suppressed the nausea rising to her throat, helping her friend. The wound that opened up was terrifying. The fracture was compound; the shin was swollen up to the knee, the skin had taken on a violet-blue, dead hue, and thick greenish-yellow pus oozed from the torn, inflamed leg. Sakai groaned without opening his eyes, his body convulsing at the touch of the gauze soaked in potassium permanganate. The liquid turned into a brown, murky foam.

“We will wash it and apply a splint,” Miko said quietly, in an even voice, methodically placing clean gauze soaked in Hisa's herbal ointment onto the wound.

“But without penicillin...” she said slowly. “A scalpel and potassium permanganate will only delay the inevitable. Sepsis has begun. Without a real hospital, he will lose his leg. And in a few days, his life.”

Ozawa remained silent, clutching his head with dirty hands bearing black nails.

"He needs surgery," Yuriko added, approaching the Sergeant Major. "A real hospital with an X-ray and surgeons. The war is over, Ozawa-san. You know that. The Americans will cure him and feed him. They won't torture you, we saw it ourselves. We were also found in the jungle. It's better to surrender... But you are the senior officer – you decide."

The Sergeant Major didn't raise his head. He looked at Miko's hands. She was applying the even splints to the shin on both sides of the fracture, binding them with white bandage – evenly, not too tight, not too loose, the way only she knew how. And with every turn of the clean gauze, the mangled leg slowly began to resemble something that belongs to a living person. This whiteness of the bandage was the most peaceful, cleanest sight Ozawa had seen in the last year.

"All right," he said after several long minutes. His voice was absolutely empty, burned out from the inside. "We will surrender."

Yuriko slowly exhaled the air she had been unconsciously holding. Miko tied the last knot on the bandage and stood up, brushing off her knees.

"Are you alone here?" she asked, wiping her fingers with a clean rag.

"Yes," the Sergeant Major answered quietly. He slowly raised his hand and pointed somewhere deep into the thicket, behind the bushes of wild ginger. "The rest are over there..."

Among the fern thickets, ten paces from the pit, the ground was uneven. Four neat, even mounds of red earth stood out against the dark forest humus. Graves. Small, abandoned, without names or markers – just four mounds on which lay rusted, shrapnel-pierced Japanese helmets. The young, juicy-green forest grass was already beginning to eagerly sprout through them, taking the dead back into the earth.

Ozawa turned away, hiding his eyes.

"Let's carry him," Miko said curtly, grabbing the canvas bag.

Private Peterson was chewing gum, leaning his back against a sandbag heated by the evening sun at the entrance to the American military commandant's office. The day dragged on lazily, dusty and unbearably boring. The war on Okinawa had ended long ago, and his only task was to stand at this checkpoint and make sure heavy army trucks didn't run over locals on the sharp turn of the road. From the heat and dust, his shirt clung to his shoulder blades; it smelled of rusted iron and dry grass.

Peterson lazily slid his gaze along the empty dirt road and suddenly froze, stopping chewing. Out of the shimmering, dusty haze, a strange, almost ghostly procession was approaching the post.

In front walked a small barefoot boy in a torn shirt, who spun underfoot like a loyal puppy. Behind him moved three people, heavily, dragging their feet with difficulty. A girl in a green work coverall – too large for her, with the rough letters USACE on the back – and a dirty Japanese soldier with a thick black beard were carrying a third person. The wounded soldier could barely stay upright; his face was the color of wet cement, and he dragged one leg, which was fitted with a crude wooden splint wrapped in a surprisingly clean white bandage. Even from several dozen yards away, a heavy, sour smell of pus and rotting leaves came from this group.

Bringing up the rear was a second girl. Peterson instinctively straightened up and took his rifle off his shoulder, feeling his partner in the bed of the jeep tense up.

This second girl – thin, pale, with short, unevenly cut hair and a straight, almost unbending back – carried a heavy bundle on her shoulder. Behind her back, secured by a canvas strap, dangled several Japanese *Arisaka* rifles with fixed bayonets.

The procession stopped three meters from the checkpoint. Yuriko, who was bringing up the rear, slowly, without sudden movements, with a groan of relief, threw the bundle off her shoulder. The weapons fell with a dull, heavy metallic clank right into the red roadside dust at Peterson's feet. The bayonets gleamed faintly in the sun.

“We are not leaving them in the jungle,” Yuriko said in broken but distinct English, breathing heavily and wiping sweat from her forehead with the back of her hand. She pointed to the wounded Sakai: “He needs hospital. Broken leg. Very bad infection.”

Peterson was taken aback. He shifted his gaze from the dropped rifles to the exhausted, half-dead Japanese soldiers who stood with their eyes fixed on the ground, and to these two Okinawan girls who looked at him without fear.

“We are from Mawashiasato,” added Miko, whose trembling, tired voice sounded surprisingly soft, with neat, bookish intonations. “Sergeant Ren Kimura and Miss Umi Sanchez know us. We are the schoolteachers.”

The sentry blinked, digesting what he had heard, and then quickly turned and shouted to the duty medic sitting in the shade on the porch of the commandant's office building:

“Hey, Doc! Drag the damn stretcher and the guys with water out here! We got... surrenderers here. And it looks like it's the teachers from the local school!”

They returned home late in the evening, when the red-hot sun had finally slid behind the line of hills, leaving behind only a thick, violet twilight and the smell of cooling clay. Kohaku was waiting for them on the threshold of the shack; the house smelled deliciously of boiled rice and smoke from the hearth. Hinata, unbearably tired from the forest trek but proud of a duty fulfilled, collapsed onto the sugar sacks in the corner and fell asleep instantly, not even taking off his shoes or waiting for dinner.

Soma sat on the threshold. He measuredly ran a whetstone along the blade of his cleaver and waited silently. He didn't ask what had happened in the forest. He simply raised his eyes, looked at his sister, at Miko, at their tired but calm faces – and his hand with the whetstone froze for a second. This silent understanding was more than enough.

At dinner, Yuriko barely touched her food. She slowly chewed the bland rice, looking at the kerosene lamp that trembled and smoked, casting long, moving shadows on the plywood walls of their house. Before her eyes still stood those four uneven mounds of red earth among the tall forest ferns, on which rusted helmets lay.

After dinner, when Kohaku went to wash the cups at the well, Soma remained sitting on the threshold, peering into the darkness. Miko settled on the edge of the wooden bench, methodically washing the medical instruments in a weak iodine solution. Yuriko walked over to her and stopped, looking at the darkening wall of the jungle outside the window.

“Four mounds,” Yuriko said quietly but firmly. Her left palm with the deep crescent-scars instinctively clenched into a fist. “Without names. Without crosses. Just wild earth that takes away their memory. And grass.”

Miko stopped sorting the scissors. The water in the jar splashed quietly.

“There could be a dozen of them. A hundred. Thousands all over the island,” Yuriko continued, and a string, stretched to the limit, rang in her voice. “In the jungles, in the fields, in the caves, at the bottom of the ocean. Okinawans. Japanese. Americans... What difference does it make now? They all stayed here, under this brown clay. Without names, without memory. A year will pass, and nothing will be left of them but white bones in the grass.”

She turned to her brother and friend:

“We have to bury them. For real. Not the way this indifferent forest buries them. With names – if we can find out from the survivors. With stones instead of headstones – if names can't be found. Okinawans, Japanese, Americans – everyone we can find in these thickets. Every person... Every single one. We can't let them remain just mounds that people trample underfoot.”

Soma raised his head. His stern face in the flickering light of the kerosene lamp seemed heavy, hewn from stone, but deep in his dark eyes something shifted painfully. He remembered the Philippines. Manila. Another red-hot land, other jungles and the graves of his comrades, which there was no one to dig back then.

“Who's going to look for them and dig the earth?” he asked hollowly, shifting his weight onto his wooden prosthesis.

“We will,” Yuriko answered, looking her brother straight in the eyes. “And the children. We will make it part of our school. It will be our main lesson. A lesson in memory. Let them know that under every path they run barefoot on today, lies someone who was once alive and loved this world too. We will teach them to respect death.”

Soma was silent for a long time, listening to the pandanus leaves rustling in the wind. Then he slowly, heavily nodded:

“All right. I'll get good shovels and spades. Saw some at the resellers at the Makishi market. I'll bring them by the end of the week.”

Miko raised her eyes from the first aid kit. She looked at Yuriko – openly, evenly, with all that deep, ringing tenderness that was born between them on the morning path. Miko reached out and confidently placed her palm over Yuriko's clenched fist. It was a silent agreement that required no extra words.

“I'll help,” Miko said quietly. “We will write down every name Ozawa or the others manage to remember. On white paper. In clear characters. So they don't disappear in the dark.”

Yuriko nodded and sank onto the bench next to her. Their shoulders pressed tightly together, giving each other long-awaited warmth. Behind the plywood wall of the paper house, the sleeping Hinata breathed evenly and deeply. And on the sweet potato beds, the night ocean wind rustled quietly.

Chapter 16. The Arithmetic of a Glance

Ren Kimura arrived on Thursday, when the October sun had already passed its zenith. It had been deceptively gentle in the morning, but now it baked like summer, turning the canvas dome of the makeshift school into a tightly stretched drum, humming with the heat. Golden, rectangular patches of light fell through tears in the canvas onto the dirt floor, looking like the pages of an open, giant book. His green Willys rolled up to the edge of the square almost noiselessly – as noiseless as an army vehicle can be on a red-hot road – and stopped under the canopy of a half-burned banyan tree.

Ren cut the engine but did not get out of the cab. He sat relaxed, leaning his back against the leather seat, and watched. The engine cooled with an occasional, methodical metallic clicking.

The air above the wasteland shimmered, slightly distorting the proportions of objects. Yuriko stood before the class. She was wearing the same oversized, altered coveralls, gathered at the waist with a piece of fabric from an old, colorful kimono. On her outstretched palm, she held brass casings from an American carbine, explaining arithmetic to the younger children – the ones who still confused their numbers. She spoke quietly, frequently leaning down to a frightened child in the front row. With every such movement, a heavy dark strand of hair slipped from behind her ear and fell onto her face, and without interrupting her explanation, she would tuck it back with her fingertips, leaving a thin, white streak of chalk dust on her temple. The sun, breaking through the torn edge of the tent, fell on her hand, and the fingers clutching the cold metal of the casings seemed sculpted from warm, translucent amber.

In her awkwardness, in this stubborn, quiet Okinawan resistance to chaos, there was so much unearthly, luminous warmth that Ren felt his breath catch. His right hand lay on the steering wheel, his left on his knee, and both were motionless. And on his dark, high-cheekboned Nisei face froze an expression that he himself was barely aware of: open, defenseless, like an outstretched palm.

Miko stood at the opposite edge of the tent, using a piece of charcoal to write a list of characters for the older students on a scrap of cardboard. She felt the foreign gaze instantly. Not on herself – past herself. This gaze slipped through her like a sunbeam through clean glass and stopped on Yuriko.

Miko slowly turned her head. She saw Ren in the cab of the jeep. She saw his face. And she registered what an experienced doctor registers during an examination: a quiet, cautious, unstoppable tenderness. In his dark, slightly slanted eyes burned a soft, steady light – not a demand, not a soldier's lust, but something far more dangerous to the fragile peace of their paper house: the kind of tenderness that asks for nothing in return. The tense tendons on the sergeant's dark neck gave him away completely.

Miko returned to the cardboard. Her hand with the charcoal continued to trace the characters – evenly, precisely, without a single mistake. But the corners of her lips dropped almost imperceptibly, and on her pale face, a shadow appeared for a moment and then vanished. Not offense, not jealousy. It was a fleeting, cold recognition. It came and went, like the barely noticeable ripple on the water where an invisible hair has fallen. She simply recorded this symptom on her internal map of reality.

Classes ended with the sharp strike of a bamboo stick against an empty artillery shell casing. The children spilled out from under the canopy with a hubbub, like dry peas from a torn sack, rushing toward the field kitchen, from which the smell of boiled tubers was already wafting.

Hinata, as always, was first. Quickly eating his sweet potato, he dashed from his mat, vaulted over a crate with a flourish, and rushed toward the green jeep, kicking up little clouds of red dust with his bare feet.

“Sergeant Kimura! Sergeant Kimura!” the boy shouted ringingly, drawing himself up like a string in front of the vehicle and giving an awkward, quasi-military salute.

His huge round eyes greedily, with desperate hope, scoured the dashboard, the narrow glove compartment, and the backseat. Sweet condensed milk? Hardtacks? Or that magical, slightly bitter dark square in silver foil that they called “chocolate”?

Ren got out of the car, smiling only with the corners of his lips, and placed a heavy palm on the boy's cowlick-covered, sun-smelling crown.

“At ease, navigator,” he said. “How are things at school?”

“Good! I learned the katakana ‘ki’ today!” Hinata proudly puffed out his chest. “Katakana ‘ki’! ‘Ki’ – like Kimura!”

“Good job.”

Hinata stood for a second, shifting from foot to foot, his face lengthening, and his lower lip thrusting forward traitorously. He peered into Ren's pockets:

“Did you... not bring anything? Nothing at all? Not even cookies?”

Ren sighed, and on his face appeared that special, nameless sadness left only by children who are used to never asking for too much and are prepared in advance for a refusal.

“No food, navigator. Empty hands this time. I only brought something heavier than chocolate. Textbooks.”

Hinata sniffled, instantly took control of himself, swallowed his disappointment, and gave an exaggeratedly grown-up nod:

“That's okay. Textbooks are good too. We like to learn.”

When Yuriko and Miko approached the car, Ren had already thrown back the canvas flap of the backseat and unloaded two heavy bundles tied with dry twine. They emanated a thick, peaceful smell – the scent of fresh factory paper, printer's ink, and dry library glue. A smell of quiet, completely alien to this camp wasteland.

“This is from Mrs. Sanchez,” Ren untied the first knot. Inside lay neat stacks of gray, coarse, but clean paper for the children, wooden penholders with metal nibs, and four glass bottles of purple ink.

Yuriko gently, as if touching the wing of a rare butterfly, ran her fingers over the top sheet. The paper answered her with a thin, lively rustle.

“And this,” Ren pulled out the second bundle, wrapped in thick brown kraft paper, “is personally for you.”

“For us?” Miko frowned in surprise.

“For you,” Ren handed the books to Yuriko. On the dark cover of the top one was written: *Fundamentals of Pedagogy for Elementary School. Volume One*. Beneath it lay textbooks on geography, history, and literature for high school. “The war didn't let you finish high school. But in reality – you are already teachers. You took on the responsibility for the children of this island. And that means you need to keep learning too. So you have something to give them.”

Yuriko clutched the heavy volumes to her chest. In this gesture from the American administration, there was something more than just humanitarian aid. It was recognition. They were no longer considered frightened girls from the caves. They had been recognized as *sensei*.

“Thank you, Ren-san,” Yuriko said quietly, lowering her eyes. And then, overcoming her emotion, added: “Tell me... those two soldiers we found in the jungle. What happened to them? Ozawa and Sakai.”

Ren grew serious, his back instinctively straightening in a military posture.

“They are alright. As much as possible. Sergeant Major Ozawa, after disinfection and a full medical examination, was transferred to a POW camp in the north. Right now it's just a filtration point; it's safe there, and he's being fed. But Private Sakai... He's in the field hospital. Severe sepsis set in, so amputation below the knee couldn't be avoided. But the surgeons told me to tell you: your wooden splint and clean gauze saved the rest of his leg. And his life. If you hadn't found them... if you'd been a couple of days later... he wouldn't have survived.”

Yuriko gave a barely noticeable nod. Two days. The time separating life from death was measured by the thickness of a gauze bandage and a child's persistence. Miko should be proud of herself. Her diagnosis turned out to be correct, and this brought a cold, professional satisfaction – a quiet pride for her friend.

“Ren-san,” Miko took a step forward, looking the interpreter straight in the eyes. “We have a big favor to ask of you... We want to honor the memory of everyone left in this earth. To bury them properly. Not in mass, nameless trenches, but each one individually. Okinawans, Japanese, Americans. We need lists. Lists of the dead, the missing in action, lists of battalions. Everything that exists in the commandant's archives.”

Ren was silent for a long time. He stood leaning against the fender of the jeep and mechanically, out of old habit, wove a dry blade of grass into one of those intricate Indian knots his Navajo mother had taught him in childhood. His fingers moved quickly, autonomously. He understood what an unliftable mountain these girls wanted to hoist onto their shoulders.

“It will be difficult,” he said quietly. “The Japanese archives are total chaos; half of them burned during the storming of Shuri Castle. The administration's lists often contradict the Red Cross data. But... I will talk to Mrs. Sanchez. If anyone on this splinter of land is capable of extracting these grains of information, it's her. I'll do everything in my power.”

“Thank you,” Miko exhaled, looking at Yuriko.

“Thank you,” she said.

“Alright, pack up, I'll give you a ride,” Ren waved a hand toward the seats. “The heat is unbearable, I'll drop you off in Mawashiasato. Navigator! To your post!”

With a triumphant whoop, Hinata flew into the front passenger seat, digging his dirty fingers into the leather edge of the dashboard with a death grip.

“Show the way, but no sharp turns!” commanded Ren, starting the engine.

Yuriko and Miko settled in the back, carefully balancing the heavy stacks of books on their laps. The jeep took off, bathing the wasteland in a dry, gasoline-scented wind and kicking up a trail of red dust.

While the vehicle bounced over the bumps, Yuriko felt her thigh pressed tightly, without any gap, against Miko's on the narrow wooden bench of the back. From this daily, close presence, it seemed to Yuriko that Miko was slightly tense – like a taut string that had been accidentally touched by a finger. Miko looked away, at the passing gray ruins and the rare green shoots pushing through the ash, and remained silent. But her silence today was not a protective shield. Rather, it was like a curtain behind which heavy, hidden mental work was taking place. Yuriko, who knew her friend's every sigh, felt this approaching storm by the barely noticeable change in pressure between them.

The house greeted them with the measured, dull thud of an ax. Soma, leaning heavily on his wooden prosthesis, was hewing pegs for new beds in the garden. Kohaku was hanging washed laundry on a line stretched between a slanted post and the rusted skeleton of a burned-out Japanese truck.

Ren braked right by the porch. He got out and bowed politely and respectfully to Kohaku:

“Good evening, Nakayama-san. How are your sweet potatoes?”

Kohaku smiled warmly, with her customary dignity, wiping her hands on her apron:

“The earth is good, Kimura-san, everything is growing. Thank you for giving them a ride.”

Soma stopped his work, raised the ax, and gave the American sergeant a brief, heavy scowl from under his brows. Ren answered with the same short, reserved nod. In this silent male exchange of glances there was neither enmity nor friendship, but there was the main thing: “you hold this shore, I'll hold mine.”

Without lingering further, Ren turned the jeep around. The vehicle quickly disappeared behind the hill, leaving in the evening air only a bluish trail of exhaust fumes, which for a long time could not dissipate in the stillness.

Dinner passed in deep silence. Bland rice, boiled sweet potatoes, and pieces of dried fish that Soma had bartered for at the Makishi market. Hinata ate with his eyes closing, and barely swallowing the last bite, he collapsed onto his sugar sacks in the corner, instantly plunging into a deep sleep. Kohaku gathered the dishes and left for the well. Soma, grabbing a pack of cheap cigarettes, went out to the backyard to smoke.

Only the two of them remained in the room.

The light of the kerosene lamp trembled and smoked, snatching their silhouettes from the darkness of the plywood walls. Yuriko sat on her mat, methodically wiping the new metal

ink nibs with a damp cloth. Her hands moved on their own, monotonously: swipe, swipe. The metal gleamed faintly. Nearby, out of established camp habit, Miko was darning the torn hem of her old *hakama*, using a sturdy thread from an American parachute line. The needle entered the thick fabric with a dry, rhythmic sound: pierce, stitch, pierce.

Suddenly, Miko stayed her hand. The needle froze halfway. Her dark, clear eyes settled on Yuriko's face – with a long, even, studying gaze.

Yuriko turned over another nib, but her fingers trembled slightly. She felt this gaze with her skin, the way one feels a gun sight aimed at their back.

“What is it?” Yuriko asked, trying to make her voice sound casual, without raising her eyes.

Miko remained silent for a moment, waiting for the flame in the lamp to steady itself.

“I noticed,” she said in her usual, almost clinical voice, devoid of overt intonations, “how Sergeant Kimura was looking at you today.”

The rustling of the cloth broke off. Yuriko froze but did not raise her head.

“Yuriko, he looks at you not as a fellow teacher,” Miko continued, as if stating an obvious symptom on a patient's body. “He looks at you as a man. Too long. And too tenderly.”

The air in the small room instantly became unbearably thick, hot, suffocating. Thick, scorching blood rushed to Yuriko's face – from her very neck, flooding her cheeks, creeping to the tips of her ears. Her skin burned as if singed by a nearby fire. It was a blow she hadn't expected. And the most terrifying thing was that this blow had been delivered by Miko.

Yuriko sharply, forcefully slammed the tin box of nibs shut. The sound was dry and loud, like a gunshot. Dust motes danced in fright in the yellow beam of the lamp.

“That's not true!” Yuriko threw out sharply, almost with anger. Her voice broke into a hoarse whisper.

She jumped up, nearly knocking over the bottle of purple ink. A metal nib slipped from her lap, fell onto the dirt floor, and rolled away, leaving a thin, ugly line in the dust. Yuriko didn't look back. She darted toward the exit, her shoulder barely missing the plywood doorframe, and dashed outside – into the saving, cool, damp darkness of the October night.

Miko remained sitting in the yellow circle of light, her eyebrows raised in surprise, holding the needle in frozen fingers. There was no offense on her face. Only the deep, sincere, absolutely pure bewilderment of a child who had stepped on a dry branch, only to find it was a snake. She didn't understand. She had simply registered the fact of another's warmth and another's gaze. She didn't know – and couldn't know – that what Yuriko carried away into the darkness was not embarrassment from a conversation about the sergeant. Miko knew how to treat the wounds of others, but she had never looked in a mirror to see her own reflection in someone else's eyes.

Yuriko ran to the corner of the house and sank weakly onto the cold stone foundation, pulling her knees to her chin. Above her stretched the vast, indifferent Okinawan sky, strewn with heavy, prickly stars. The air smelled of cooling earth, the bitter smoke of Soma's cigarette somewhere in the dark, and the distant, salty breath of the ocean. Her heart beat

so hard and fast that it seemed the pounding would keep Hinata from sleeping behind the thin plywood partition.

She squeezed her eyes shut. Before her eyes stood Miko's face – her calm, clear forehead, even eyebrows, and that unruffled voice: “I noticed how Kimura was looking at you.” Miko's words rang in her ears like a taut wire. Miko, who could find a damaged artery by touch in pitch darkness. Miko, who could determine the onset of gangrene by a single smell. Miko, who saw right through people.

And behind this question lay another, which she couldn't utter: “And where am I looking?”

Through the cracks in the plywood came a quiet, even sound from the room. Miko had pulled the thread again. Pierce, stitch, pierce. A measured, endless stitch, sewing the fragments of their lives together.

Yuriko opened her eyes, took a deep breath, filling her lungs with the damp night air, and stood up. She brushed the clinging grass from the legs of her coveralls and slowly returned inside.

Miko didn't raise her head from her sewing. Yuriko silently sank onto her mat, leaned over, picked up the fallen nib, wiped the dirt off it with her finger, and picked up the damp cloth again.

They sat shoulder to shoulder, separated only by half a meter of trembling air, which could easily hold an entire universe of unspoken words.

Miko, without interrupting her work, said quietly:

“I'm sorry. I didn't mean to offend you.”

“You didn't offend me,” Yuriko answered, looking at a purple streak on the metal. “Everything is fine...”

They both lied. They both felt it was a lie. And they both kept silent about it, continuing their work – stitch, stitch; cloth, cloth; nib, nib – in the faint, warm glow of the kerosene lamp, in the middle of a wounded island they had decided to bring back to life.

Chapter 17. A Stone for Names

January arrived on Okinawa with heavy, lingering rains. They poured for three days straight – fine, slanting, piercingly salty torrents brought in from the ocean. The air smelled of wet iron and cooling ash. The red clay of Mawashiasato turned into a liquid, bubbling mush that clung tenaciously to wooden geta and bare feet, as if the island itself refused to let anyone go. The thin plywood walls of the Nakayama house swelled from the dampness, became covered with dark streaks, and rustled softly with every gust of wind, like an old folding screen. The rusty tin roof hummed incessantly, turning the shack into the womb of a huge, unevenly beaten drum.

But by Sunday morning, the lingering storm had exhausted itself. The sun rolled out over the hills sharply, greedily, and blindingly, as if in a hurry to scorch away the traces of bad weather. The island gleamed, washed down to its very bones: the mangled earth shone with a deep burgundy luster, the pandanus leaves sparkled like polished copper, and thick white

steam rose above the flat roofs of the camp barracks. Okinawa was breathing – heavily, humidly, but with full lungs.

Death on this island did not go deep underground. It lay on its very surface, like a scattering of chipped shells after a fierce storm. By winter, Okinawa, stubbornly overgrown with young, toxic-green grass, had come to look like a magnificent emerald shroud beneath which thousands of unburied fates rested.

Every Sunday, as soon as the first rays broke through the fog, groups of surviving volunteers would set out for the southern coast. Old people, women, teenagers – they slowly made their way along the coastline of the Kiyan and Mabuni cliffs. Where the sharp, jagged coral rocks, resembling the fangs of prehistoric monsters, tore footwear and skin to shreds, people searched for what months of winds, rains, and tides had left behind. They didn't dig. They gathered. Fragments of bone, pieces of rotted army cloth, rusted buckles, buttons engraved with cherry blossoms, American dog tags, darkened chains with Buddhist amulets. The shore returned its dead reluctantly, in pieces.

In the jungle, it was even harder. Over half a year, the tropical greenery had swallowed the traces of battles: it entwined broken artillery with vines, buried cave entrances under ferns. But the locals – hunters and herbalists who knew every crevice – found what nature had hidden. Sometimes a skull fragment, sometimes just the darkened bolt of a rifle and a heavy, sweetish smell that could not be mistaken for anything else. At the site of a discovery, they would drive in a wooden peg wrapped in a piece of white parachute fabric.

Seiko and Usagi became the coordinators of this grim, patient labor. The same two girls from the unit who had once brought the news of Kobayashi's return to the school. Over these months, their faces had acquired the hue of old rice paper, and dry camp dirt seemed forever ingrained beneath their fingernails. Now, with the cold diligence of archivists, they sorted the findings. Seiko drew maps on scraps of American cardboard ration boxes, marking spots with crosses. Usagi kept the records: names, if an engraving could be made out, or simply numbers if only a piece of metal remained of a person.

Yuriko and Miko usually joined them on weekends, when the school tent was empty. Their fingers, accustomed to chalk and book pages, uncomplainingly touched the earth's cold memory. But not this Sunday. On this day, they were expected at home.

Soma returned from the Makishi market by noon.

He walked in heavily, and the house shuddered from his steps: first the dull, hard thud of the wooden prosthesis against the threshold, then the creak of a sagging floorboard, and immediately after that – the smells. Lately, Soma smelled not only of cedar shavings and sweat. He brought with him the sharp, bitter smoke of cheap Japanese tobacco, which he smoked at the market with a cigarette clamped in the corner of his mouth, and this smoke ate into his broad, calloused palms.

The Makishi market had become a new front line for Yuriko's older brother. Amidst the chaos, rusted iron, and rotten planks, he had cobbled together a small workshop: an awning made of holey canvas, a workbench out of boards from an American warehouse, and three artillery shell crates instead of chairs. He fixed stools, sharpened ax handles, and planed boards for fences. People went to him because his work was honest and cheap.

But carpentry was not Soma's only trade. At the market, people whispered that one-legged Nakayama knew how to get things that not even the administration distributors had: American condensed milk, medical alcohol, coils of copper wire, bars of real factory soap. His prosthesis, thudding dully through the mud of Makishi, had become a sort of pass into the world of gray-market contraband, where survival was measured by the ability to keep quiet and quickly exchange what one had for what one needed.

Hinata went with him on Saturdays. The boy hung around the workbench, handed over tools, and absorbed the laws of market life faster than katakana. It was Hinata, dangling his bare legs on the porch, who had first blurted out Soma's secret a week ago.

"Uncle Soma found someone," he had announced then, diligently smudging charcoal on a piece of cardboard. "A woman. Beautiful. She came to the workbench three times. He fixed a chair for her. And then they drank tea from a thermos together. She's quiet. Very quiet. Like Miko-nee. Only Miko-nee is quiet because she's thinking, and this one is quiet because she's sad."

Yuriko had been amazed then at how accurately the six-year-old child had caught the difference between the two types of silence. Soma had only blushed deeply through his black stubble and said nothing. And today, this woman had come to their house.

Nanami Kato crossed the threshold of the shack as if she were entering an ancient teahouse, not a plywood barrack. Beneath her shawl, she wore a real silk kimono – a faded, gray-blue color, with a barely discernible pattern of withered autumn leaves. It was old, faded from frequent washing, with neat, almost invisible patches on the fold of the right sleeve, but impeccably clean and pressed. The fabric rustled softly, nobly, bringing with it the dry, clean aroma of sandalwood and wormwood – the smell of an old trunk in which the garment had been kept safe throughout the war. Nanami's hair was gathered in a low, tight braid, held by a simple horn comb.

She was about twenty-five. Fine, regular features, dark skin, and deep, attentive eyes that looked at the world with a hard-won, calm seriousness. And a thin scar on her cheek, slipping down to her collarbone.

Soma led her in, and by his movements – too abrupt, stiff – Yuriko realized how intensely nervous her brother was. His prosthesis tapped on the floor hurriedly: *tap-tap-tap*, without its usual pauses. His healthy hand kept crumpling the hem of his clean shirt. At this moment, he didn't seem like a stern frontline soldier, but rather a boy who had brought someone infinitely important home for the first time.

"This is Nanami," Soma said hollowly, looking somewhere at the floor. "We... met at the market. Nanami is the fiancée of Kero Keano. My comrade-in-arms. We were together in the Philippines. He died there. Right next to me."

The word "died" fell into the room heavily and ordinarily. In their world, the dead introduced the living more often than visiting cards.

Kohaku, wiping her hands on her best, clean apron, bowed low:

"Come in, Nanami-san. Our home is modest, but guests are welcome."

They sat around the low wooden table Soma had knocked together. Miko poured the hot, emerald liquid into mismatched ceramic cups. The smell of tea steam instantly filled the room – it was real green tea scented with roasted rice, dry and tart, brought by Soma from the market. The smell of a pre-war, peaceful home. Yuriko watched as Nanami's slender, cool fingers carefully clasped the warm, rough clay covered with fine glaze cracks, and how the guest's shoulders relaxed almost imperceptibly from this warmth.

Lunch dragged on unhurriedly: rice, boiled sweet potato, spicy radish, fish. Hinata ate in silence, not taking his round, studying eyes off Nanami. He seemed to be weighing this rustling silk and quiet voice, deciding if she could be trusted. Nanami talked about pre-war Shuri; Soma interjected with short, dry remarks. The shared pain of loss made their conversation even, devoid of anguish.

When Kohaku cleared away the rice bowls, leaving only the steaming teapot on the table, Nanami straightened her back. The silk of her kimono let out a soft, sighing rustle.

“Soma told me what you are doing,” she said, looking straight at Yuriko and Miko. “About how you collect remains on the coast and in the forests. I know what happened to the Himeyuri unit in the Haeburu caves. My younger sister... she was also mobilized. But they were taken to the north of the island. She didn't come back.”

Nanami fell silent, lowering her eyes to the cup, where a tea leaf floated on the green surface.

“You can't just leave them in nameless forest graves or write them down on pieces of cardboard,” she continued, and a firmness appeared in her voice. “They need a monument. A cenotaph. A place where people can come to weep not over empty, indifferent earth, but before a stone that preserves their names... A stone on which the names are carved. Everyone. Whom you can find. Whom you cannot – too. Because even the unfound deserve a stone.”

“Where will we get the stone?” Miko asked quietly, and her voice sounded uncharacteristically hollow. “There are no intact workshops left on Okinawa. Everything has been smashed to rubble.”

“My father is a stonemason,” Nanami raised her gaze, and in her eyes Yuriko saw the same stubborn strength that had led them through the war. “Before the war, he carved tombstones and built walls in Shuri. He is alive. He still has his tools. When I told him about your school and the girls, he himself asked me to pass this on. He will carve the cenotaph. Without payment. It is the least an old master can do for the daughters of his island.”

Such a deep silence hung in the room that one could hear the canvas of the school tent cooling down outside. Yuriko shifted her gaze to Miko. Her friend's fingers, clutching her cup, had tensed so much that it seemed she was about to crush it. A real stone. Heavy, eternal, light-gray coral limestone that no typhoon could wash away, no fire could burn.

“Where?” Miko asked curtly. “Where will we put it?”

“On the hill,” Nanami answered. “Where the buildings of your First Women's School stood. The foundation is still there. The stone will stand on the very spot where you studied. The earth will unite with memory.”

"Thank you, Nanami-san," Yuriko exhaled, feeling a hot wave catch in her throat. "We accept this gift. Please convey our deepest gratitude to your father."

When the sun touched the peaks of the hills, painting the plywood walls a thick, anxious gold, Soma stood up. Throwing on his jacket, he went to walk Nanami to the road. The tapping of his wooden leg – *tap, tap, tap* – slowly faded in the evening twilight, mingling with the rustling of Nanami's silk.

Kohaku watched them go for a long time through the open door. In her eyes, surrounded by deep wrinkles, shone a quiet, maternal sadness. She returned to the table and began wiping it with a damp cloth, sweeping crumbs into her palm.

"A good woman," Kohaku said thoughtfully, without looking at the girls. "Quiet, proper. And Soma seems to have come alive with her. Started smiling for the first time, even if he hides it."

The mother stopped her hand, brushed the crumbs into the bucket, and as if in passing, in the most everyday tone, added:

"It's time you girls also started thinking about the future. Enough digging around in the dead and babysitting other people's children. Life goes on, look at how the grass shoots up after the rain. You should find yourselves good grooms... reliable ones. Maybe even someone with a car..."

Yuriko, who was about to take a sip of cooled tea, froze. The air caught in her throat. Her mother's hint was so transparently dense that it felt like it could be touched with bare hands. An army Willys. Ren Kimura. Kohaku, with her eternal busyness by the well and cooking pots, saw everything. She had noticed both the interpreter's frequent visits and how long his car took to cool down under the banyan tree.

Miko, sitting opposite, slowly turned her head with the precision of a metronome. Her dark eyes settled on Yuriko's face. It was that very same look – the calm, studying, slightly ironic gaze of a doctor recording the predictable deterioration of a patient's condition. "I told you so," read in her pupils.

Yuriko felt a thick, scalding flush rapidly flood her neck, cheeks, and the tips of her ears. She lowered her head, ready to fall through the dirt floor.

And then the silence of the shack was shattered by the ringing, enthusiastic shout of Hinata, who until then had been peacefully tinkering in his corner with his shell casings:

"Can I find grooms for them?!" the boy jumped to his feet, his eyes burning with excitement. "I know so many guys at the Makishi market! I'll be right back! I'll pick the strongest ones, the ones who carry sacks of condensed milk! We need strong ones!"

At this, Kohaku couldn't hold back. She threw her head back and laughed – genuinely, loudly, at the top of her voice. It was the first real, pure laugh in this house in many, many months. The sound made the plywood walls seem to widen, and the kerosene lamp swayed, spilling an even golden light.

"A bit early for you to sign up as a matchmaker, boy," Kohaku said through her laughter, playfully flicking the boy on the nose. "First you finish school and learn to read without stumbling. And the strong grooms will run away on their own at the sight of you in torn pants."

Hinata scowled, examined his knees sticking out through the tears, but stubbornly shook his head:

“Well, let them run! I'm not looking for myself, but for them!”

He pointed a finger at Yuriko and Miko with such unwavering, adult seriousness that even Miko couldn't hold back – the corners of her lips twitched, and she laughed silently, with her shoulders, squeezing her eyes shut, together with Kohaku.

“Better eat some more fish,” she said, pushing a plate with a second helping toward Hinata. “You need to grow.”

Soma returned late, when the lamp was already smoking and the “matchmaker” was asleep, his nose buried in a sugar sack. Her brother undressed in the dark, unstrapped his prosthesis with a clatter, leaned it against the plywood partition, and sank heavily onto his mat.

The room smelled of cold tea, Soma's bitter tobacco, and wormwood – the faint, barely perceptible trace of Nanami Kato.

Yuriko lay with her eyes open, listening to Miko's even breathing nearby. She thought about the stone. About the large, gray block that would soon rise above the red-gray earth of the school hill. Names would be carved on it. And the stone would stand in the wind, washed by rains, and speak for those whose voices had been taken away.

She remembered her mother's words about “someone with a car.” She remembered Miko's gaze. Yuriko's heart beat faster, pounding against her ribcage from the inside. Miko noticed someone else's interest, noticed Ren, but remained absolutely, perfectly blind to what was happening half a meter away from her, on this very mat.

Yuriko turned on her side, pressing her palm to her chest. The scars on her left palm were silent. She closed her eyes, slowly drifting into sleep, to the equally slow, measured sound of the night ocean crashing against the jagged cliffs of Mabuni.

Chapter 18. April Rain

It was raining that day. It covered Okinawa in a gray, weightless mist of water. This rain was nothing like the fierce winter storms; it was quiet, endless, and so fine that it felt like the very air had suddenly become tangible, damp, and brackish, rather than drops falling from the sky. It erased boundaries: the hills dissolved into the sky, Cape Kiyan faded into the leaden haze of the ocean, and the entire island seemed submerged in transparent, warm river depths. The pandanus leaves under this rain merely grew heavy, dropping water into the red clay with a dull, sparse thud, like the tapping of old prayer beads.

Early in the morning, an old army truck rolled out of Mawashiasato – a dark-green Studebaker with scuffed sides, procured through an engineering battalion not without the silent assistance of Umi Sanchez. The vehicle lurched heavily over the bumps, its wheels sinking into the waterlogged track heading to the southernmost tip of the island – toward Itoman, to the village of Ihara.

In the bed of the truck, secured with thick hemp ropes, lay a stone.

It was local coral limestone – fragile in appearance, but a stubborn, porous skeleton of the island itself. Old Goro Kato, Nanami's father, had searched for it for two weeks among the ruins of Shuri's destroyed walls. This stone remembered the sea from which it had risen thousands of years ago, and the war that had scorched it with gray soot. Goro had carved out of it an austere four-sided pillar slightly taller than a man. Three of its sides remained rough, retaining traces of shells and ancient coral pores, but the front face had been leveled and polished to a matte, silky sheen. The old man had carved every character by hand, leaving tiny, white chips inside the figures, like grains of unmelting ice.

Goro himself rode right there, in the back. He sat on a low crate, a tarpaulin-covered bag with chisels and a heavy wooden mallet resting on his knees. His hands – gnarled, with fingernails darkened by embedded lime dust – lay motionless, like two cooled stones. Beside him sat Nanami, wrapped in Soma's jacket thrown over her silk kimono. The cloth smelled of fish and damp timber, and this mundane scent of the Makishi market seemed right now like the only reliable thing in a world filled with gray moisture.

Behind the truck, keeping its distance so as not to catch liquid clay in its ruts, came the Willys. Ren Kimura sat silently at the wheel, staring through the windshield where wipers crawled lazily. In the back of the jeep, sheltered beneath the canvas top, sat Yuriko, Miko, Kohaku, and Hinata.

The boy was quiet. Usually talkative, constantly asking about everything he saw along the road, now he simply pressed his shoulder against Yuriko's and watched the wet ferns floating past. The day before, Yuriko had tried for a long time to explain to him where they were going and why, choosing simple, un-frightening words, but Hinata seemed to have understood everything in his own way – through that special, grown-up silence that had settled in their plywood house for a whole week.

The air in the back of the jeep was dense with moisture. Miko sat up straight, her hands on her knees. Her face seemed carved from the same limestone that lay in the first vehicle.

"It's terrifying to go back," Yuriko said softly, barely moving her lips, as she watched the fog cling to the tops of the roadside banyans. "A year has passed, Miko. But it feels as though if I just close my eyes – that smell is there again..."

Miko didn't turn her head, but her fingers on her knees tightened almost imperceptibly.

"It is terrifying," she echoed. "Maybe it's right that we agreed and didn't put it in Shuri. Remember what that prefecture official said? 'The school hill needs to be cleared for new barracks, and memory should be at the center'... Perhaps he was right."

"No," Yuriko shook her head. "Not barracks – a school. And Seiko and Usagi said the same thing. Let the school be a school. Our tent is there, children are learning to read there, arguing over pencils, look at Hinata collecting shell casings... Life should be there. And the monument... yes, the monument should stand by the cave. Where their silence remained."

Miko said nothing, but nodded imperceptibly. A school for the living. A cave – for eternity.

The Third Surgical Bunker in Ihara met them with a dead, frozen stillness. The earth here was pitted with craters where rusty water had pooled. The *gama* itself – a natural cave

in the thickness of the limestone – gaped among thickets of wild pandanus like a black, unhealing wound. Its entrance had partially collapsed from explosions, and the ceiling inside was blackened with old soot. Here, it still smelled different from the humid jungle: breaking through the aroma of wet greenery was the heavy, cold scent of burned lime, of rusty iron – if iron can have a scent – and of that suffocating phosphorus smoke that seemed to have eaten into the porous stone for centuries.

People had already gathered near the entrance. There were about fifty of them. They stood on the trampled clay clearing under black paper umbrellas or simply with pieces of canvas thrown over their heads. Here were the relatives of the deceased – mothers in dark pre-war kimonos, old fishermen from the nearby town of Itoman who had come in their woven hats. Slightly ahead stood the surviving girls from the Himeyuri unit – Seiko, Usagi, and several other students located in distant refugee camps. They stood in a tight group, shoulder to shoulder, in their clean, patched work coveralls. No one spoke. Only the monotonous, lulling rustle of rain on leaves could be heard.

The truck stopped at the edge of the clearing. The engine sputtered and fell silent. Soma was the first to vault over the side, his wooden prosthesis thudding dully against the wet ground. Clay immediately clung to the sole, but ignoring the slippery sludge, he took hold of the ropes alongside Nanami's father and three local men.

They unloaded the stone slowly, by hand. You could hear the men breathing heavily, raspy, and Soma's prosthesis sinking with a creak into the yielding red soil. At last, the pillar stood in its prepared spot – a small mound of natural rocks right before the dark maw of the cave.

Old Goro approached the cenotaph, carefully removed the canvas covering it, and stepped back.

The rain instantly washed over the gray surface of the limestone. The porous coral stone began greedily absorbing moisture, darkening before their eyes. Because of this, its texture stood out more clearly: thin veins of pinkish and bluish hues, hidden until then by dry stone dust, surfaced on the front face like veins on a wrist.

At the top of the pillar, large and deep, the words were carved: “Monument to the Himeyuri Unit.”

Below were the names. The lists Seiko and Usagi had gathered bit by bit on scraps of cardboard boxes, old Goro had transferred onto the stone with absolute, submissive accuracy. Line by line. The names of the students, the names of the teachers. Dozens of names of those whose deaths were confirmed, and dozens of names of those who remained here – in the darkness of their final refuge under the attack of phosphorus grenades, and those who perished later on the cliffs of Mabuni. At the very bottom, near the base, a final line stretched in thin lettering: “The remaining names are unknown. May they not be forgotten.”

People began to approach the monument. Slowly, one by one. There were no speeches here, no official representatives of the American administration or prefectural addresses. This was their own quiet Okinawan grief that required no interpreters.

An elderly woman in a black kimono sank to her knees right in the mud. Her hands, trembling with grief, touched the carved characters. She was searching for her daughter's name. Finding it, she pressed her palm to the stone and froze, her head lowered. Rain trickled down her graying hair, fell onto the limestone, and it seemed as if the stone were drinking those tears, sharing them half-and-half with the mother.

Usagi and Seiko stepped forward together, holding modest bouquets of wild flowers – purple *haibisukasu* bells and pink *tinsagu*, gathered that morning by the road. They placed them at the base, where the coral pillar met the earth. Their faces were pale, but calm. In their silence, there was none of the former camp anguish; it was the quiet of people who had fulfilled their duty to the dead.

Yuriko stepped forward. Miko walked half a step behind.

As Yuriko approached the cenotaph, it felt as though that very same unbearable, suffocating heat of June '45 wafted from the cave's dark void. Her heart pounded in her ears – fast, frantic. She felt afraid, truly, down to the trembling in her knees. She felt that if she turned around right now, she would see the gray army blankets, hear the groans of the wounded and the groundwater dripping from the ceiling.

She extended her left hand and placed her palm against the wet face of the pillar.

The limestone was cold. But beneath that chill, Yuriko suddenly felt the barely perceptible, deep warmth of the earth heated by April's breath. Her scars – pale, resembling lily petals – pressed against the rough coral surface. And in that moment, the fear released her. As if those who had screamed in the dark, those who had suffocated from smoke in this *gama*, had finally found their home here, in this stone. They were no longer trapped in the darkness under the collapsed ceiling. Now their names stood in the light, washed by the clean April rain.

“We have returned,” Yuriko thought, closing her eyes. “We placed it here. Let the school be for the children. And you stay here, under the protection of this island.”

Miko stood beside her. She didn't touch the limestone. She looked at the pillar directly, sternly, like a sentry who has finally waited for the relief of the guard and is handing over the post. Her face was wet from the rain, but her eyes remained dry and clear.

Little Hinata slipped out from under Kohaku's parachute silk. He approached the stone very closely, squatted down, and gently placed a tiny, crumpled wild chamomile flower on the brown clay, which he had been hiding in his fist all this time. The flower lay right by the last, nameless line. A raindrop fell into its center, sparkling like a tiny crystal facet.

By noon, people began to disperse. The gray watery veil grew thicker, turning into a damp fog that slowly crept in from the ocean. People left in silence, in small groups, carrying their black umbrellas with them. The clearing before the cave emptied, returning to its age-old, natural solitude.

Yuriko and Miko walked to the Willys last. The clay squelched heavily under their wooden geta. Soma and Nanami were already helping Hinata into the truck cabin.

Stopping at the foot of the hill, Yuriko turned to look back at the monument one last time.

And then she saw him.

He stood off to the side, about twenty meters from the cave, right at the jungle's edge. Minato Kobayashi.

The teacher stood beneath the sprawling, heavy branches of a huge old banyan tree whose aerial roots hung down to the very ground, looking like gray streams of a frozen downpour. He wore the same faded, pale-gray yukata, soaked through and clinging to his thin, stooped body. He was without an umbrella. His left, paralyzed arm hung limply in a dirty cloth sling that had turned almost black from the water. His right hand feverishly clutched a bamboo cane sinking into the slush, his knuckles white.

Water ran down his face – along the deep, crimson scar left by shrapnel, over his sunken cheeks, trickling behind the rims of his round glasses. One lens was shattered, and through the film of water covering the cracks, his right eye seemed huge, murky, and infinitely lonely.

He did not approach the monument. As if he did not dare step across the invisible line between the forest and the cave. Between life and death.

Yuriko saw his sister, Hisa, walking slowly among the departing people. From time to time she looked back at her brother, her face under the paper umbrella full of anxiety and quiet, accustomed pain. But she did not go to him. She knew that here, before this *gama*, her brother had to stand alone. This was his place. His personal, lifelong circle of hell.

Kobayashi did not cry. In his motionless gaze fixed on the coral pillar, there was no remorse, no plea for forgiveness, no fear. There was only resignation. The earth of Okinawa had not accepted him beneath its emerald shroud, leaving him to wander among the living like a *sensei* with no place in either a destroyed school or a nameless grave. He was bound, as they all were – the survivors – to this island by a memory heavier than any headstone.

“Let's go, Yuriko,” Miko said quietly, touching her elbow. Her voice was even, devoid of condemnation – the voice of a doctor noting the inevitable.

Yuriko nodded. They got into the Willys. Ren Kimura, without a word, put the car into gear. The jeep lurched, its wheels whistling in the liquid clay, and the vehicle slowly rolled away along the broken rut, moving away from the Third Surgical Bunker.

Yuriko sat in the back, pressed against Miko, looking back through the slanted mesh of the April rain.

There, behind, two silhouettes dissolved in the gray mist.

One was a light, austere pillar of coral limestone, standing stubbornly before the black maw of the cave. An eternal, silent guardian of names, having absorbed the salt of the ocean and the tears of mothers.

And not far from it, beneath the heavy branches of the banyan – the motionless, dark figure of a man with a bamboo cane. A man left standing in the rain that this island would never, to the end of his days, be able to wash off him.

The truck ahead picked up speed, its rear vanishing behind the bend of the hill. From the cabin of the Studebaker, cutting through the steady hum of the engine and the rustle of water, came Hinata's thin, uneven little voice. Quietly, without stumbling, the boy was

singing “Tinsagu nu Hana” – a song about the balsam flowers used to dye nails, and about the words of parents that remain in the heart forever.

Yuriko closed her eyes. The scars on her left hand no longer burned. Everything had fallen into place. The world around had not returned to what it was, nor had it become just or kind. But it had found its proper, heavy earthly gravity. Just as a stone settles into place when it is finally brought to where it must stand forever.

Chapter 19. The Proposal

After the installation of the cenotaph in Ihara, time on Okinawa began to flow differently – not like during the war months, in frantic, ragged jerks when every dawn felt stolen from death, but heavily, viscously, like cooling lava. Days folded into weeks, weeks into long months, and by January nineteen forty-eight, the island began to slowly, with a quiet groan, grow new skin.

The school in Mawashiasato had also changed. The canvas tent, once completely soaked in American machine oil, buzzing from the suffocating summer heat and slashed by typhoons, had finally disappeared. In its place stood a real building – a long wooden barrack with a sloping roof made of corrugated iron sheets, which during the frequent winter downpours rumbled dully and rhythmically, resembling the sound of distant surf. There was no glass in the wide window openings – it was replaced by thick, oiled paper, through which the winter light penetrated inside in a soft, diffused amber haze.

Inside, it smelled of fresh pine resin, drying wood shingles, and the clean, barely perceptible scent of children's sweat. The floor was no longer just packed red clay: Soma, together with the old men, had paved it with even wooden planks, and this flooring creaked quietly underfoot. Instead of ammunition crates, there were now long, smoothly planed benches. But the most important thing was something else. The suffocating smell of phosphorus and ash no longer hung in the air; now a fine, weightless, white dust of real school chalk reigned here. This scent of cleanliness and new life had finally pushed the war out of these walls.

Children now came not only from Mawashiasato. They were brought along broken ruts from distant, half-blind-with-grief villages – Nishihara, Yaese, even from Itoman itself. There were already more than eighty students. Hinata, now in his ninth year, had noticeably grown taller, grown stronger, and broadened in the shoulders. From a frightened forest animal convulsively clutching spent shell casings in his fist, he had transformed into the angular, proud monitor of the junior class. Now he personally made sure that the little ones sedately washed their feet before entering and were not late for the start of classes.

Ren Kimura arrived on Tuesday, when a piercing, dry January wind rose over the island, driving in the chill from the East China Sea.

His dark green Willys froze in its usual place under the old banyan tree. Over the years, the tree's aerial roots had descended so low that they seemed to entangle the car's hood in a semblance of a living, gray cage. Ren didn't get out of the cabin right away. He sat at the wheel, having raised the high collar of his American uniform jacket, and watched Yuriko through the half-open door of the school.

Inside the classroom, a penmanship lesson was coming to an end. The rhythmic, lulling squeak of chalk on the slate board merged with the whistle of the wind tangled in the crowns of the pandanus trees. Ren took out a cigarette, flicked his lighter, and inhaled. The smoke slowly melted in the cold air. Having smoked it down to the very filter, he habitually pressed the ember against the sole of his heavy army boot and hid the butt in his pocket. He never threw trash on Okinawan soil – it had become his unspoken, strict vow.

When the strike on the bell rang out – an old brass shell casing hung by the entrance – the class exploded with cheerful noise. The children poured outside in a turbulent, colorful stream, slapping their woven sandals against the numerous puddles. Hinata jumped out among the first. Seeing the jeep, he braked sharply, for a moment regaining his former childish liveliness, but immediately caught his breath, bowed sedately, and said seriously, man-to-man:

“Good afternoon, Sergeant Kimura. The school roof doesn’t leak anymore; Uncle Soma and I finished laying the shingles last week.”

“Good afternoon, navigator,” Ren smiled faintly, but the smile remained a pale shadow on his face and didn't touch his eyes. He reached into his pocket and handed the boy a flat tin can. “Here. American hard candies. Just don’t break your teeth.”

Hinata beamed, pressing the tin to his chest, but Ren gently placed a hand on his shoulder:

“Listen, navigator... I need to talk to Yuriko-san. Alone. Find Miko-san and ask her to wait outside. Alright?”

The boy looked closely at the interpreter's sharpened face with unexpected adult perceptiveness, unerringly reading the deep, concealed anxiety. Nodding briefly, he rushed back into the barrack.

A minute later, the classroom was empty. Only two remained in the spacious room, flooded with cold January light.

Ren stood by the window, holding his cap in his hands. Yuriko suddenly noticed with distinct, painful clarity how much he had changed. In his coarse dark hair at the temples, an early, dry grayness had thickly appeared. His facial features had become sharp, angular, as if starved for peace. That well-fed American nonchalance with which he had once handed out chocolate bars to refugees in the Shimabuku camp had completely weathered away. Before her stood an exhausted soldier whose personal war had also reached some invisible precipice.

“You look tired, Yuriko. You have chalk on your cheek,” he tried to smile, but the smile came out pitiful.

“There are already eighty of us, Ren-san. Soma can’t build desks fast enough.”

He stayed silent, examining his army boots. Then he raised his head sharply.

“Yuriko,” he managed to say. His voice sounded so hollow, as if there wasn't enough air in his lungs. “The order came. My unit is being demobilized. I’m going home. To Sacramento.”

The space between them instantly became dense, motionless, like Ryukyuan limestone. A lone speck of chalk dust twirling in a slanted beam of light seemed to freeze in place, turning into a tiny dot in a frozen piece of amber ice.

“When?” Yuriko asked quietly. Her voice remained even, but the two pale petal-scars on her left palm suddenly responded with a sharp, prickling chill, as if warning of a new loss.

“In two, maybe three weeks. A transport is leaving from the port of Naha straight for San Francisco.” Ren took a step forward. His fingers convulsively gripped the edge of a rough wooden desk. “Yuriko, listen to me. You can come with me. To America.”

That word – “America” – dropped between them like a heavy metal object fallen from the sky. A distant, unreal country of chrome, neon lights, concrete skyscrapers, and sun-smelling apples, existing somewhere on the other side of a bottomless ocean. A place where there had never been phosphorus grenades, suffocating caves, funeral pyres, and sticky red clay. A country where every pharmacy had penicillin, where children went to stone schools with real glass windows and chalkboards. Yuriko tried to picture herself there – in a clean dress, with a book under her arm, walking into a bright university hall. The picture turned out vibrant, painted in someone else's colors. It looked like the cover of an American magazine that Ren had once brought Hinata, along with a gum wrapper.

Yuriko looked at him, clutching a stack of children's notebooks to her chest, and couldn't take a breath.

“I know what you're thinking,” Ren began speaking quickly, stumbling and growing pale. “Military laws are merciless, the commandature won't let Okinawans on the transport just like that. But we can get married. Formally, you understand? Just for the documents, on paper. As the wife of an American serviceman, you'll get a legal visa and a spot on the ship. Over there, in California, there are large Japanese communities. You'll be able to study at a real university for women. You'll become a real teacher. There are huge libraries, laboratories... You'll forget this ash, Yuriko. I... I will ask nothing of you in return. You will be absolutely free. I just want you to be safe.”

He looked at her with such desperate, naked pleading that it made Yuriko physically ache. There was no pity or charity in his eyes. It seemed this man loved her – devotedly, long, and hopelessly, since the very day he had first seen her, emaciated, in a dirty school sailor suit under a torn canvas tent. He wasn't just offering her salvation. He was offering to rewrite her destiny from a blank page.

“I'm not asking you to abandon those you love. I'm asking you to give yourself a chance...”

Yuriko looked down at her fingers, stained with white chalk. Hands that drew letters for orphans, hands that dug the frozen earth for sweet potatoes until they bled, hands that had touched the rough coral stone in Ihara. She closed her eyes, and before her mind's eye flashed not the skyscrapers of San Francisco, but the quiet rustle of pandanus leaves above the Third Bunker.

“I can't, Ren,” she said. Every word came to her with such difficulty, as if she were tearing it from her own body along with the blood vessels. “I cannot go.”

Ren exhaled sharply, his fingers on the desk whitening even more.

“Why, Yuriko? Look around! They are turning the island into one massive airfield; they'll start building military bases here soon. There will be nothing here but the memory of the dead!”

“I can't leave my mother,” she raised her head, looking straight into his soul with eyes that held a vast, age-old Okinawan sorrow. “Soma is marrying Nanami, they'll leave to build their own home. Mother will be left alone. I can't abandon Hinata – he's only just stopped screaming at night and calling out to the dead in the forest. And I... I will never be able to leave Miko.”

The last name echoed in the empty barrack like the clean, ringing strike of a tuning fork. Final and irrevocable.

Ren Kimura slowly lowered his head. In that long exhalation, his last, crazy hope died. He was an intelligent man and knew all too well the power of this cursed Okinawan gravity: these survivors had grown their roots into each other so deeply and terribly that to tear one away meant killing the rest. And the way Yuriko said Miko's name – with such a ringing, protective intonation – explained to him what he had long suspected but cowardly chased away.

“I understand,” Ren said quietly. He slowly put on his cap, pulling the lacquered visor low over his forehead to hide his eyes. “I'll give you a ride to the village. Get ready.”

“No,” Yuriko shook her head, taking a step back into the shadow. “Thank you for everything, Ren-san. But we will walk.”

He didn't argue. He simply turned in silence, walked out of the school, yanked the starter lever, and the Willys, roaring its engine, tore off, leaving behind only a blue-gray trail of gasoline smoke and dust kicked up by the wind. And Yuriko suddenly realized with frightening clarity: he would never belong there. A man with Japanese eyes and Navajo blood in his veins would forever remain a captive of this crossroad, of this island.

Yuriko made the journey back to Mawashiasato inside an invisible, thick glass dome.

The ocean wind hurled dry dust in her face, tearing at the hem of her old, altered light coat, but she felt nothing. Hinata ran slightly ahead, constantly looking back, hopping on one leg and enthusiastically chattering about how old Kenji had promised to carve a bamboo kite for him, and how the candies in Sergeant Kimura's tin smelled like real wild strawberries. Yuriko didn't hear him. She placed her wooden geta mechanically, like a wind-up doll.

She looked at the road beneath her feet and saw footprints in the red clay – hers, Miko's, Hinata's, layered over each other during months of these daily crossings. The path from the school to the house was trodden so deep that it looked like the bed of a dried-up stream. They had carved it themselves. Barefoot, in the rain, knee-deep in liquid muck. And now this rut held them, as a riverbed holds water: not letting them spill over, not letting them stray.

Yuriko thought: if I were to leave for America, who would walk this path tomorrow? Hinata – alone? Miko – alone? And in this question, in its simple, childlike clarity, there was neither sacrifice nor heroism. There was only a warm, heavy feeling, like a sweet potato in the hand: I need to be here. Not because I have to. But because without me, this world – with all its cracks and holes in the roof – would not be complete.

Miko walked on the right, slightly behind. She threw quick, perceptive glances at her friend several times, trying to pierce this sudden, deathly wall of silence.

“What did he tell you, Yuriko?” Miko asked when they passed the fork by the old bridge.

Yuriko didn't turn her head.

“Yuriko, what happened? You look completely drained. Is it from the commandature? Did they find new lists of the dead? From Shuri?.. Is something wrong with Ren?”

Yuriko remained stubbornly silent. Her silence was so tangible, thick, and heavy that it seemed the ocean wind itself collided with it and crashed to the ground. Miko sighed heavily and didn't utter another word all the way to the village.

Evening fell on Mawashiasato swiftly, flooding the narrow passages between the plywood shacks with inky darkness and bitter, blue-gray smoke from damp firewood.

At dinner, Yuriko never touched her portion of boiled sweet potato and thin soup. She just sat, staring at the fire in the hearth with unmoving, glassy eyes. Kohaku, gathering dishes from the table, cast a long, wise look full of quiet anxiety at her daughter. When Hinata, after eating, poked his head toward the door to call Miko to look at the stars, Kohaku gently but firmly caught the boy by the shoulder.

“Come on, navigator, you can help me sort dry beans at the neighbor's,” the mother said quietly but authoritatively. “Don't bother them. The girls need to be alone.”

Miko silently slipped out the door. Yuriko followed, and the winter air instantly slammed shut behind them like a heavy shutter. They sat side by side on the cold wooden boards of the threshold.

The night was moonless and immense. The stars over Okinawa burned sharply, like grains of crushed ice scattered across black velvet. The air smelled of salt from the nearby ocean and cooling clay. Miko did not rush her friend. She sat perfectly straight, hands folded on her lap, merging with the night shadows and patiently waiting for the glass dome around Yuriko to finally shatter.

“Ren is leaving for America,” Yuriko finally said. Her voice sounded dry, flat, as if she were reading aloud someone else's official document. “His unit is being demobilized. Soon. In two... or three weeks there's a ship.”

Miko didn't stir, but Yuriko felt with her skin how her body nearby almost imperceptibly pulled taut like a string in the dark.

“He offered for me to go with him,” Yuriko continued, staring fixedly into the impenetrable night darkness of the jungle. “Said that we could get married... formally, just for the documents. So I could get a visa. To California. Said I could study at a university, get a degree, become a real teacher. It's sunny there. There isn't this dirt there.”

Miko's silence became unliftable. It rested on Yuriko's shoulders like a sack of wet coastal pebbles. Miko stared straight ahead, digesting what she'd heard, sorting everything onto her internal, strict medical shelves. It was an offer of salvation. A real, clean ticket off the island-cemetery to a shining new world.

“I refused,” Yuriko breathed out.

Miko slowly turned her head. Her eyes flashed like two cold sparks in the faint twilight from the window.

“Why?” she asked. One short word. Without reproach, without joy. The simple question of a doctor demanding a medical history.

Yuriko turned to her sharply. The heart in her chest pounded so hard it felt like it was about to shatter her ribs. All this unsaidness, all the deaf, unwept pain that had built up in her since June of forty-five, suddenly flooded to her throat in a hot wave. She looked at Miko – at her shortly cropped hair, at her sharp, thin cheekbones, at this young woman who had once forcefully dragged her from the darkness of the cave, forced her to release the ceramic grenade from trembling hands, who had been restitching their torn lives anew with harsh parachute threads. Yuriko loved her so desperately, so deeply and hopelessly, that this feeling had long ago replaced her air. And that is exactly why she had to do what she had planned.

“Because my place is here!” Yuriko’s voice suddenly broke, cracking deeply. “I have my mother here. Soma. Hinata. My friends are buried here, do you understand? I’ve grown inextricably into this cursed red clay, Miko! I won’t be able to breathe in their California...”

She swallowed convulsively, gathering all her fading will into one white-hot, ringing knot, and shouted out that exact, terrifying thing that had burned her heart the entire way home:

“But you... Miko! You must go instead of me!”

Miko froze, as if she’d been struck backhand with a heavy log.

“What are you saying, Yuriko?..”

“You have no one left here!” the words rolled out of Yuriko in a frantic, cracking torrent, she spoke sobbing, choking, afraid to stop because she knew: if she fell silent, she would simply scream from unbearable pain. “Your home in Shuri is burned to the ground! Your parents died under the bombs! This island has given you nothing but death, blood, carbolic acid, and dirt! You shouldn’t rot in this plywood shack till the end of your days because of me! Kimura is a good, noble man. He’s reliable. He... he will understand everything if I ask him. He will make these documents in your name! You’re smart, you know English perfectly, you will become a real doctor in America! You will study, you will save hundreds of lives! You must live. You must go, Miko. Do you hear me?! Live a real, true life, and not bury yourself alive in these graves for me! I... I will write to you. Every week. I swear to you, every week!”

Yuriko fell silent, convulsively gulping the cool night air. Large, hot tears, which she hadn’t noticed, rolled down her cheeks like hail, burning her skin. She had just voluntarily, with her own hands, tried to tear from her chest the most precious and alive thing she had left – just to save her from the ghosts of this island. From herself.

“Go, Miko... please, go...” she repeated quietly.

Miko was silent. She looked at the sobbing Yuriko as if seeing her for the first time. Her gaze slowly slid over her friend’s wet cheeks, over her trembling lips, over her hands clutching convulsively at the fabric of her skirt. And in that instant, the strict, cold doctor

inside Miko, accustomed to analyzing everything and hiding emotions under a thick surgical gown, disappeared. Her protective iron cuirass crashed into the Okinawan mud.

Miko suddenly understood everything.

She didn't just see Yuriko's words – she peered into that colossal, frightening abyss of love and sacrifice from which these words were born. She understood why Yuriko withdrew into herself at every mention of Ren. She understood why she had unhesitatingly thrown her only ticket to paradise into the ocean. Yuriko was offering her, Miko, someone else's enamored man, someone else's glittering America, and someone else's salvation – just so Miko would be alive, fed, and happy. Miko, who had never known how to look at herself from the outside, finally saw her true reflection. And that reflection was her – Yuriko.

“Foolish...” Miko's voice broke, turning into a quiet, hoarse, trembling whisper. “How foolish you are, Yuriko.”

Miko jerked forward. She didn't explain anything, didn't argue or lecture. It was a desperate, impulsive, and almost furious lunge. Miko threw her arms around Yuriko and pressed her to herself with such inhuman, bone-crushing force that Yuriko's breath caught at once. Thin fingers dug with a death grip into the fabric of the coat on Yuriko's back, as if she were panicking that her friend would right now dissolve, vanish, fly away with the January ocean wind into the pitch-black night.

Miko buried her face in Yuriko's tear-soaked, hot neck and froze. In this embrace, there were no and could be no words – human words no longer held any weight in this minute.

Yuriko went blind for a moment from the rushing feelings. She closed her eyes, dropped her head onto Miko's firm shoulder, and her own hands – timidly, uncertainly, and then with all the desperate strength accumulated over the years – locked dead tight on her friend's back.

It seemed that at this moment some primal, magical gravitational pull of the earth kicked in: two slender girlish figures on the threshold of a plywood shack intertwined so tightly and inseparably that in the thick night darkness they seemed like a single being, having sent roots through the wooden floorboards deep into the porous limestone of Okinawa. Two surviving girls from the Third Surgical Bunker, who had lost their entire former world, but despite everything found each other among the ash.

The January wind roared fiercely in the thickets of wild pandanus, driving heavy, ragged clouds across the black sky from the ocean, but on the small wooden threshold it was piercingly quiet, hot, and secure. And for the first time in long, agonizing years, Yuriko thought neither of the ghosts of the past, nor of the dead left behind in the dark. She simply breathed in rhythm, feeling a strong, living, another's heart beating right opposite her own.

And below, under the wooden flooring, in the coral limestone, something crunched quietly and with satisfaction. The island drew her into itself, accepted her, sealed her in. And the ocean wind, shattering against the invisible dome of their embrace, suddenly changed direction, carrying the smell of salt and clay away – to the caves of Ihamigama, where no one cried anymore.

Chapter 20. Letters

Miko and Ren's wedding passed so quietly, as if it had been written in the margins of history in small, almost unnoticeable handwriting.

There was no ceremonial exchange of sake cups, no opulent silk kimonos embroidered with pine branches, no dignified processions beneath paper lanterns. Everything fit into a small, hastily whitewashed room in the American military commandature building. The air held a heavy, lingering scent of fresh oil paint, mixed with disinfectant and cheap tobacco. The military chaplain – a gray-haired, nearsighted American with the tired eyes of a man who had seen too much death – businesslike and brisk, read out a short formula in English. His words sounded dry, like the rustle of fallen leaves.

Miko stood in her only good pair of coveralls, which Yuriko had washed in the river until midnight the day before and smoothed out with a heavy stone heated over coals. Ren wore his dress army uniform, with crisp, flawless creases on his trousers and boots shined to a mirror reflection. The witnesses were two complete strangers, soldiers from the transport division whom the chaplain had simply plucked from the hallway for a couple of minutes. It was a clean, flawless transaction – an exchange of signatures for freedom, the right to receive a visa, and a spot on an ocean transport. They both knew it. And Yuriko, standing by the whitewashed wall, knew it best of all.

Seven minutes later, the chaplain brought down a purple stamp onto the thick paper with a dull thud. Miko Nishida became Mrs. Kimura.

On the eve of the wedding, Yuriko did not sleep.

She lay on the mat beside Miko, listening to her friend's even breathing, and stared at the ceiling of the plywood house, where the kerosene lamp's golden shadows drew slow, flowing patterns. Beyond the wall, the ocean thudded dully, with heavy intervals between strikes.

Miko slept on her back, one arm thrown behind her head. In the half-light, her face seemed white, smooth, calm – like the surface of a stone that could no longer be touched. Tomorrow she would put on clean coveralls, sign an official form, and become someone else's wife on a distant continent. And this entire plywood room – with its scents of sweet potato, kerosene, and children's sweat – would remain here on the island, turned into memory.

Yuriko reached out her hand in the dark. Her fingers gently, almost without touching, rested on Miko's wrist – where beneath thin, pale skin a steady, strong pulse could be felt. Alive. Real. Departing.

Miko did not wake. But her fingers moved slightly in her sleep and intertwined with Yuriko's – familiarly, unconsciously, like the roots of two trees growing too close together. Yuriko lay like that until dawn without closing her eyes, counting the beats of another's heart that tomorrow would sail across the ocean.

On the pier in the port of Naha, amid the bustle, shouts of longshoremen, and the roar of steamship horns, only Hinata cried. The boy, in his ninth year, held out until the very last moment, standing tall as a string, but when Miko squatted before him, his face contorted. He caught hold of the sleeve of her formal dress with a death grip, smearing tears across his

face, and wailed – desperately, wildly, as if he were being left alone again in the dark June forest of forty-five.

“Don’t leave, Miko-nee...” he pleaded, choking back sobs. “Don’t go to America. Stay with us.”

Miko pressed him to herself so tightly that the boy heard the dull, steady thud of her heart through the thick cloth.

“I’ll return, navigator,” she promised him quietly, yet surprisingly firmly, into the crown of his head that smelled of river soap. “As soon as I can, I’ll return. And you take care of Yuriko. Do you hear me? You’re the man of the house now.”

Yuriko stood nearby, hands hidden in her pockets. She did not shed a single tear. Inside her, an immense, echoing hall seemed to have formed, where every outside sound reverberated with an icy echo. When Miko straightened up and walked up the wooden gangway holding Ren’s elbow, Yuriko did not look away. She watched her friend’s silhouette dissolve into the gray mass of passengers on the deck, and knew: if she faltered now, Miko would drop her canvas sack and step back down onto the Okinawan shore.

But the ocean settled between them as an unbearable, ringing silence of the heart, dividing them by thousands of nautical miles.

Letters from California began arriving by the autumn of forty-eight.

Postwar mail service worked in strange ways: envelopes might not arrive for months, and then the prefectural mailman would deliver a whole bundle at once – five or six of them tied with coarse jute string. These light-blue airmail envelopes smelled unaccustomed and sweet: of vanilla, an unfamiliar laundry detergent, printer’s ink, and dry, foreign sun.

Miko filled the pages in small, cramped handwriting. She wrote about Sacramento – a city without a single shell crater or scorched banyan tree. She wrote of how stiflingly sweet the apple orchards smelled in the valley, and how Ren had helped her enroll in nursing courses at the local hospital, where American doctors marvelled at her underlying, terrifying experience working in field bunkers.

“You know, Yuriko,” Miko wrote in one of her first letters, “here at the hospital I have my own stethoscope. A real, chromed one with a rubber tube. When I press it against someone’s chest and listen to their heart, every time I remember how you slept beside me in the Shimabuku tent, and I could hear your pulse through the thin wall of the mat. Everything is different here...”

Inside the envelopes there were always glossy black-and-white photographs. On one of them, Miko and Ren stood on the porch of a neat wooden house. Ren gently put his arm around her shoulders, and Miko smiled – restrainedly, with just the corners of her mouth, but her eyes no longer looked like dead wells. On another picture, Miko sat by the window with a cup of black American coffee, her hair grown past her shoulders and styled in a lovely, soft wave. In these photos, they looked like a real, solid family.

“Come visit us, Yuriko,” Miko invariably wrote at the end of every page. “As soon as it becomes possible, take Hinata and come. It’s beautiful here. It’s warm here. I am waiting for you.”

Yuriko kept these letters in an old English biscuit tin that Ren had once given to Hinata. At night, when the village fell asleep to the chirping of cicadas, she would take out the thin sheets and slowly run her fingers along the inked lines, as if trying to feel her friend's pulse through the depth of the ocean water. And in the half-darkness she would look at the photos... their photos... photos of Miko.

Chapter 21. Ash

Soma and Nanami's wedding, on the contrary, was real – dense, loud, smelling of fermented rice *awamori* and fresh cypress shavings.

By October of forty-eight, her older brother's business at the Makishi market had fully taken off. His carpentry crew had expanded; he hired two assistants from among the returning refugees, and now his heavy workbench stood not under a torn army canvas, but beneath the sturdy tin roof of a new, spacious hangar. Soma and Nanami rented a real wooden house on the outskirts of rebuilding Naha – three bright rooms with tatami smelling of dry grass and a tiny inner garden.

The wedding was held at a surviving Shinto shrine whose ancient stone *torii* gate had miraculously weathered the bombings. Nanami was dazzlingly beautiful in a genuine white wedding kimono embroidered with silver-thread cranes – her father had buried the trunk in the earth just before the assault on Shuri began and managed to preserve it. The thin, pinkish scar on her left cheek was artfully powdered, and her eyes shone with the quiet, mature joy of a woman who had finally allowed herself to shed her mourning and return to the living.

Soma stood beside her – unusually dignified in a custom-tailored black suit. The fabric completely concealed his disability, and the wooden prosthesis he had polished to a mirror shine himself barely creaked today. He leaned heavily on a bamboo cane, but his face, usually grim and focused, radiated an open, proud smile.

When the priest finished the prayer and the guests began to fill the courtyard, Nanami approached Soma, who was shifting his weight heavily from the prosthesis to his good leg. She silently adjusted his collar, brushing off an invisible speck of dust. Soma looked at her – a long, heavy gaze mixing gratitude and shame for his own disability.

"Forgive me," he said softly. "I can't embrace you standing up. My leg won't hold. It's tired."

Nanami smiled. She took his broad, rough palm, brought it to her cheek, and closed her eyes.

"You are embracing me," she answered. "You just don't realize how."

They celebrated in the house's courtyard. The *sanshin* rang out ceaselessly, carrying lively, bouncing Okinawan tunes. Guests made noise, clinked cups, smelling of fried fish and sweet rice *mochi*. Yuriko sat on a low bench in the corner, slowly sipping cooled green tea and watching this burst of returning life as if through clear water.

A man approached her. He looked to be about twenty-five – a sturdy, sun-tanned tableware vendor from the Makishi market, an acquaintance of Soma's. He wore a light, dapper suit jacket, and his hair gleamed with pomade.

“Nakayama-san, right?” He bowed politely, flashing a gold crown. “My name is Kenji Arakawa. Your brother has told me a lot about you. It’s not right for such a lovely young woman to sit sadly to the side when music is playing. May I ask you for a dance?”

Yuriko looked at his outstretched, broad palm. All this wedding noise, the smell of alcohol and strange perfume suddenly felt suffocating and infinitely distant. She belonged to an entirely different realm – the world of white school chalk, coral pillars by dark caves, and letters locked away in a tin box.

She gently but firmly shook her head, hiding her palms in the sleeves of her coat.

“Thank you, Arakawa-san. But I already have an escort for the evening.”

She turned her head and pointed to Hinata. The boy sat nearby on an overturned vegetable crate, ecstatically devouring his third serving of glazed treats. He was wearing a clean white shirt buttoned all the way up to his throat and real dark trousers with crisp creases bought by Soma. Hearing Yuriko’s words, Hinata instantly swallowed the *mochi*, hurriedly wiped his mouth with his sleeve, and approached the bench with an absolutely serious, unchildishly stern expression. He decisively pushed the surprised merchant aside with his shoulder and extended his hand to Yuriko.

“Yuriko-nee, let’s go. I know how to dance; Uncle Soma showed me the steps,” he announced importantly.

“Good job, kid. Keep it up,” Arakawa laughed understandingly and stepped back.

Yuriko placed her fingers in the boy’s warm, rough little palm, and they stepped into the circle of guests. A ten-year-old child who had seen death in the forests and a nineteen-year-old teacher who had left her heart on the other side of the world twirled to the rattling notes of the *sanshin*. Hinata led her carefully and terribly seriously, stepping on her wooden *geta* every now and then and blushing deeply with effort. Yuriko looked at his sweaty forehead, at the neat part in his hair, and thought that this was the most honest and purest dance of her life.

The last chord of the *sanshin* faded. Hinata stepped back, bowed awkwardly, and hurriedly wiped his wet palms on his trousers. For a moment he froze, looking up at Yuriko with his huge, round, moist eyes. And Yuriko saw in that glance the very same six-year-old child who had once walked out of the dark forest in a torn shirt with three buttons and said: “I came from the forest.” Except now he was ten, wore trousers with crisp creases, and knew how to dance.

They returned to Mawashiasato late at night, when a thick, damp fog hung over the hills. Kohaku immediately led Hinata, who was falling asleep on his feet, behind the screen, while Yuriko lit the kerosene lamp above the dining table.

A small stack of letters lay on the wooden tabletop – a neighbor had brought them in from the field post office during the day. The top two envelopes were from America, with familiar light-blue stamps. Yuriko carefully set them aside to read later, when absolute silence settled over the house.

But the third letter was different.

The envelope, made of thick, rough government paper of a yellowish hue, was sealed with an official stamp and the postmark of the Tokyo Prefecture. Yuriko opened it slowly with a bamboo knife. The scent of archival dust, stationery glue, and cold, official smoke from capital city ministries blew into her face.

The letter was written in flawless, calligraphic India ink.

“Dear Nakayama Yuriko-san,

This is Tamotsu Ozawa writing to you, former sergeant major of the Seventh Engineering Regiment of the Imperial Army. You may remember me: in the autumn of forty-five, you and Nishida-san saved my life and Private Sakai’s life in the forest thickets near Mawashiasato.

I hereby wish to inform you that our affairs have taken an important turn. I currently hold a position as an official in the Tokyo Prefectural Administration, in the Department of Repatriate Affairs. Shiro Sakai works as a reporter for a major city newspaper. A month ago, he published a lengthy feature on the Himeyuri unit – on the sacrificial feat of the Okinawan students and teachers. The article provoked a massive response in the capital; hundreds of letters from mothers who lost children and war veterans are coming to the editorial office and ministries.

Leveraging my official position, I submitted a formal petition to the Ministry of Health and Welfare (*Kōseishō*). I initiated the proposal to officially equate all mobilized students of the Himeyuri unit to the status of military personnel and civilian employees of the Imperial Army (*gunzoku*).

Ministry officials have already begun preliminary consideration of this matter. This is a great undertaking, Nakayama-san. This status will not only provide the survivors with state support, but, most importantly, will allow the names of all your fallen friends to be officially included in the sacred rolls of the Yasukuni Shrine. Their souls will not remain in obscure pits of Okinawa – they will be recognized as *kami* who fell for their loyalty to the Emperor and the Homeland. The state will finally restore their honorable names.

With deepest respect,

Tamotsu Ozawa.”

Yuriko read to the very last line. The paper slipped from her fingers and fell soundlessly onto the table.

In that exact second, a wild, unbearable phantom pain pierced her left palm. Two small crescent-shaped scars, almost faded over three years, suddenly flared with a crimson, throbbing fire. The pain was so tangible and physical, as if someone had pressed a red-hot branding iron against her skin.

And immediately the lamp on the table began to smoke. The yellow flame stretched upward, and Yuriko felt as though the oscillating shadows on the plywood wall gave rise to the outlines of a massive, ominous Yasukuni building – a dark, bone shrine constructed from skulls and crushed ribs of dead children. From the corners of the room crawled the very same soldier-beetles from her old camp nightmares, only now they wore not dented helmets,

but strict, pressed suits of capital city bureaucrats. They reached out their chitinous limbs toward the coral monument in Ihara, as if trying to scrape off its living names.

The temple from her ancient, biblical dreams – the Temple of Tamar – was burning again, but now it was being consumed not by Roman legions, but by dry official quills.

The paper trembled in her fingers.

“*Gunzoku*.” Civilian employees of the Imperial Army. Auxiliary personnel. A dry, bureaucratic word from Tokyo.

The Empire that handed clay grenades to sixteen-year-old girls and ordered them to swallow potassium cyanide in the darkness of caves; the Empire that cowardly surrendered over the radio, leaving them to suffocate in phosphorus smoke while generals signed papers on battleships... that very same Empire was now returning. It was returning to steal their death.

But Yuriko remembered them alive. She remembered Midori laughing at a silly joke. Shinju crying out of fear in the darkness of the cave. How they ate sweet potatoes stolen from soldiers and licked their fingers. They were not heroines. They were children who were forced to die.

With a single stroke of the pen, ministry clerks in the capital were planning to turn frightened, crying girls – who in their final minutes had called for their mothers and simply wanted to live – into brave, obedient soldiers. Into silent idols of militarism, whose supposed “heroism” new generations of politicians would use to justify new slaughters. Their future had been stolen, and now, with beautiful words about “supreme justice,” the very truth of their death was being stolen from them.

And this was being done by a man whose life she, Hinata, and Miko had once saved in the jungle – sincerely believing he was doing them the greatest good.

Yuriko sat on the bench, pressing her burning left hand tightly to her chest. There were no tears. There was not even rage. An absolute, ringing, sterile void spilled within her – as though her soul and heart had been burned to the ground, flooded with lime, and sealed with official sealing wax. Everything they had survived for, carried boards for, built a school for, and carved letters onto coral stone for, dissolved into gray, weightless ash.

She slowly stood up, took the thick sheets of the Tokyo letter from the table, and walked over to the hearth where embers were still glowing. Yuriko lowered the paper into the fire.

The official prefectural letterhead reluctantly darkened, the corners curled, and then Ozawa’s ink flared into a bright, angry flame. A moment later, only a fragile, black skeleton remained on the embers, which crumbled at the slightest draft and mixed with the ash, leaving behind neither names nor ranks.

Hinata quietly stepped out from behind the screen, rubbing his sleepy eyes.

“Yuriko-nee? What’s burning like that? It smells like paper... Is that a letter from Miko and Ren?”

Yuriko turned back to him. The pain in her palm was slowly fading, leaving only the accustomed cold in her scars. She walked over to the boy, gently stroked his coarse hair, and smiled – the way people smile when defending their final boundary.

“No, navigator. The letters from America are good; we will read them together tomorrow. And this... this was just old paper no one needs anymore. Go back to sleep.”

Chapter 22. The Gods of Tokyo

The years on Okinawa slipped by unnoticed – just as the temples turn white unnoticed on a person you see every day. The world around hastily shed its skin, healing wounds with fresh asphalt and washing away traces of soot with spring downpours.

Umi Sanchez came to the school on her last day on the island, when the March of nineteen forty-nine was already driving the smell of wet clay and young rice across the hills. She stood in the doorway of the classroom – stern, in a dark-blue American dress, looking foreign among the pine boards, but gazing at the desks as if trying to memorize the location of every knot in the floorboards.

She set a heavy packet of thick archival paper, tied with twine, down on the teacher's desk. Inside rustled folders filled with small, soul-less clerical handwriting: hospital discharge summaries, reports from engineering battalion burial details, Red Cross lists. Hundreds of names. Mostly these were Americans – boys from Ohio and Idaho whose bones remained lying in the coral soil, but among them were also those Okinawans who had been identified before bulldozers filled in the trenches.

“I’m going back. I’m being transferred to the States, Nakayama-san,” Umi said, touching the packet with her short fingers, roughened by paperwork. She smelled of tobacco, archival dust, and dry, bitter sandalwood. “And I’m giving this to you. Someone has to keep these papers. You’ve taken on a terrible undertaking. But archives are a terrifying thing. They pull you in. Don’t let the dead take up more space in your life than the living.”

“I know, Mrs.,” Yuriko replied, clutching the heavy packet to her chest as if shielding herself with it from the wind. “But if we don’t preserve them, they will simply disappear. As if they never existed. Thank you.”

Sanchez nodded – shortly, with military dryness – and walked out, dissolving into the shimmering spring air. Yuriko never saw her again.

Meanwhile, the school in Mawashiasato grew and transformed, obeying some internal, almost natural rhythm. The canvas tent under which the children had once taken shelter from the sun first turned into a plywood barrack, and by nineteen fifty acquired a real concrete foundation. The walls were leveled, the roof was covered with gray corrugated slate, and glass appeared in the wide window frames – clean, clear, reflecting the high Okinawan sky without a trace of airplane vapor trails.

Other teachers appeared as well: a young, vibrant girl from Shuri who smelled of cheap powder, and an elderly repatriate from the mainland, a former accountant who taught arithmetic to the younger children, no longer using spent machine-gun casings as counting material. Yuriko held chalk in her hands less and less often. In her early twenties, she had become the principal. The youngest female principal in the prefecture. Her life now

consisted of endless, exhausting schedules, ledgers for flour and rice, searching for notebooks, and attempting to build normalcy on a land that, during heavy rains, still pushed rusted shrapnel and white human bones to the surface.

The book arrived from Tokyo at the end of nineteen fifty. It was delivered by a mailman on a creaky bicycle – an ordinary gray package with a red printed stamp.

The novel was titled *Himeyuri no Tō* – “The Tower of the White Lilies.” It was written by Keiichirō Ishino – a man born on Okinawa who had left for the capital as a teenager. He had not sat in the suffocating darkness of the Ihara cave, had not choked on phosphorus smoke, had not heard sixteen-year-old girls in delirium calling for their mothers and begging for water, licking moisture from the walls. But he had written a beautiful story.

It was a book about young, pure, translucent maidens who, with smiles and patriotic songs on their lips, voluntarily fell to the ground like flower petals, defending the sacred will of the Emperor. Their death was symmetrical, cleansed of pus, blood, and excrement. It was complete and aesthetic, like a ritual bowl of green tea. The novel instantly became a bestseller on the mainland; it was read on trains and in cafés by people who wanted to weep bright, sublime tears over someone else's neatly washed death.

Yuriko read it in a single night, sitting by the kerosene lamp while twelve-year-old Hinata quietly snuffled in the corner, his nose buried in a notebook. She turned the final page and froze, listening to herself. She had expected rage, anger, a desire to tear the paper apart and scream that it hadn't been like that. But inside there was nothing. Only that same vast, ringing, sterile void. The author's words were so smooth and round, like sea-tumbled pebbles, that memory could not catch on them. This story had nothing to do with her, nor with Miko, nor with those girls they had buried in the forest. These were some other creatures, invented in a clean Tokyo office.

The same thing happened again in fifty-three, when a film based on the book, directed by the famous Tadashi Imai, was brought to the school for a private adult screening. The renowned Takarazuka Revue theater troupe had already managed to turn the tragedy into a musical revue, and now the Toei film company was packing theaters across Japan, which had barely freed itself from the American occupation of the mainland.

In the dark classroom, the projector hummed monotonously. On a white sheet stretched over the chalkboard, beautiful actresses with flawless cinematic makeup died tragically and sublimely to the music of a pathetic orchestra. Women in the room sobbed, wiping their eyes with handkerchiefs. Soma, sitting at Yuriko's right hand, stood up silently twenty minutes in, his polished wooden prosthesis thudding heavily, walked outside, and smoked greedily in the darkness for a long time, looking at the stars.

Yuriko watched until the end. And again – emptiness. Only now this void was larger – it held not just a single book, but an entire cinema hall full of warm, living people who sniffled and did not know that they were weeping not over the truth, but over a myth of the national spirit.

And in nineteen fifty-five, the void acquired a state seal. The Ministry of Health and Welfare in Tokyo made the decision: to officially equate the Himeyuri students to the status of *gunzoku* – civilian employees of the Imperial Army. This granted them the right to be included in the rolls of the Yasukuni Shrine. They were becoming *kami* gods.

The Okinawan Association of Bereaved Families organized a trip to the capital for the official ceremony of entry into Yasukuni. Local newspapers wrote about it as a grand return of justice. Included in the delegation were Yuriko, Seiko, and Usagi – surviving “Lilies” whose faces Tokyo wanted to see on its ceremonial platforms.

The train traveled north for three days. Outside the window of the comfortable car, smelling of varnish and expensive tobacco, flashed the well-tended, even fields of mainland Japan. There were no craters here, no scorched banyans. This land did not remember the war; it was sated and indifferent.

At Tokyo Station on a gray March day, they were deafened by the crowd. The capital, risen from the ashes, smelled of gasoline, roasted coffee, and a bustling, greedy life. When the Okinawan delegation stepped onto the platform, the air exploded with white flashes of magnesium. Cameras clicked like rifle bolts; microphones shoved into their faces.

They were met by Tamotsu Ozawa. The former sergeant major whom they had once dragged out of a rotting pit in the forests of Mawashiasato now wore an impeccable dark-blue suit, a snow-white shirt, and a silk tie. His face had rounded, the scar on his cheek had faded and looked almost like a mark of quality. Beside him stood Shiro Sakai – a trim capital-city reporter leaning confidently on crutches.

“Nakayama-san, welcome,” Ozawa bowed politely, wafting expensive cologne at her instead of forest dampness. He lowered his voice almost imperceptibly, and beneath his polite tone emerged soft, bureaucratic steel: “There will be questions from the press now. Please... stay as calm as possible. For postwar Japan, this is vital right now. We must show the world our fortitude and purity of spirit.”

Journalists surrounded them in a tight circle. Pushing through to the microphones was an elderly woman from the Okinawan delegation who had lost her daughter in the war. Her face, lined with deep wrinkles, paled under the stage lights, but she straightened up and spoke a learned, proper phrase that the *Ryūkyū Shimpō* would print the next day:

“Okinawans are currently legally not Japanese; we are under American occupation. However, our children fought for Japan. As a Japanese woman, I am extraordinarily happy that they have become the first Okinawan schoolgirls enshrined at Yasukuni.”

Reporters hurriedly jotted in their notebooks. A flash – and another – blinded Yuriko. A microphone was thrust at Seiko. She froze, her thin neck trembling, but she found the strength to repeat what was expected of her:

“When I recall what happened back then, I do not want war to ever happen again. Many of my friends died... I want all of them to be enshrined at Yasukuni. It is an honor for them.”

Yuriko looked at Seiko and saw how, beneath this mask of proper words, a frightened girl from the cave was thrashing in a vise. Tokyo had gotten its ideal picture. Beautiful female self-sacrifice, washed clean of the smell of gangrene.

A camera flash burst in her eyes. For a second she was blinded. When her sight returned, she saw before her an open reporter's notebook – clean, white, flawless paper on which foreign fingers drew even, beautiful lines. And suddenly it felt as though she were seeing the very same thing she had seen in the Ihamigama cave: someone else's hand

handing out ceramic grenades. Only now, instead of clay – paper. Instead of explosives – words. Instead of “die with honor” – “become a legend.”

But Yuriko did not say a word. She simply stood, hiding her left hand in her pocket, waiting for it to end.

That evening, the three of them sat in a small room in a cheap Tokyo hotel. Outside the window hummed a neon, victorious city that knew no mercy. On a low wooden table stood a porcelain bottle of cheap sake and three tiny cups.

They drank in silence, scalding their lips with the bitter rice alcohol. Usagi was the first to break. She set her cup down on the table with a sharp clatter, covered her face with her hands, and her shoulders shook convulsively. Seiko immediately moved over to her on the futon, put her arms around her, pressed her close, and a second later began to cry as well – soundlessly, terribly, biting her lips until they bled.

These were not tears of relief. These were tears of absolute, total helplessness before a colossal state machine. Tokyo had stolen their friends for the second time. The first time, it had taken their lives in the caves. Now it was taking their death, transforming it into a ceremonial myth in which there was no room for truth. And the most terrifying thing was that they, the survivors, had themselves stood before the cameras and nodded, because they no longer had the strength left to resist this sated, polished normalcy.

Yuriko did not cry. She stroked Usagi's trembling back, feeling the vacuum inside her turn completely into glass and freeze solid.

That night Yuriko fell into a heavy, deep sleep like a blackout. But toward morning, while the city still slept, wrapped in March fog, the glass dome steeped in alcohol shattered into pieces in her head.

She dreamed of the Dry Mountain again.

But here there was no longer the humid, rot-filled stifling heat of the Okinawan jungle; it did not smell of sea mud and burnt lime. The air on this mountain was absolutely, sterilely dry. Sharp, like fine crushed glass. With every breath, it scratched the throat, settling on the tongue with the taste of scorched dust and ancient bronze. The sun above the Dry Mountain had nothing in common with the benevolent goddess Amaterasu warming the rice paddies. It was a blind, furious, white eye that scorched the stones down to their blackest basalt foundation. It smelled of execution and iron.

Yuriko looked at the world not through her own eyes.

She saw it from inside heavy armor, heated red-hot in the sun. The leather strap of the helmet chafed her chin; her shoulders ached from the weight of the bronze cuirass. A thick smell of sweat, gun oil, and old, thickened blood struck her nostrils.

She was a Roman legionnaire.

She was standing on the summit of Masada. The massive earthen ramp, built in her past nightmares by faceless soldier-beetles, was completed. The fortress walls were breached. Rome had entered within.

But there was no battle. There was silence. That very echoing silence that Yuriko knew better than anything else in the world – the silence of the Ihara cave after the explosion, the silence of the Shimabuku camp, the silence of a Tokyo hotel room.

The legionnaires moved among the bodies methodically, without rush. Their heavy sandals – *caligae* with iron nails in the soles – clattered against the scorched stones dryly and rhythmically, like grave-diggers' hammers: clank, scrape, clank. They turned over the dead, checked pulses, entered data into scrolls. This was not a slaughter, but an inventory of property. A bureaucratic accounting of losses.

Men, women, children lay in neat, terrifying rows. They had killed each other themselves, preferring a sublime, pure death in the fire to disgraceful slavery.

Yuriko-the-legionnaire stopped at a ruined stone wall. On the yellow, hot sand lay a young woman.

Her long black hair, held by a simple leather strap, was scattered across the stones. On her neck gaped a smooth, terrifying dark-red stripe from a blade. But her huge, almond-shaped dark eyes were open. They looked straight into the bottomless, scorched sky.

Tamar.

The legionnaire slowly sank to one knee. The heavy joints of armor pierced the silence with a rasp. He reached out a hand in a leather gauntlet to close her eyelids and complete the accounting.

And suddenly the girl's dead, dry lips twitched. From her torn throat, bypassing burned vocal cords, straight into Yuriko's consciousness struck a voice – quiet, rustling like sand rubbing against basalt:

“Are you Gods now, too?”

This dry, pitiless question echoed above the Dry Mountain, tearing off masks and shattering scenery. And in that voice, Yuriko heard everything all at once: Ozawa's insinuating whisper on the platform, the grandiose music from the film, the crackle of magnesium flashes, and Usagi weeping into her pillow.

Dead children, transformed into *kami* gods. Girls whose names were carved onto the granite slabs of militarism's shrines only to justify future slaughters and send new children to the butchery. Tamar, who had perished thousands of years ago in Judea, and the Himeyuri students, burned in forty-five – they looked at each other through the well of time, and at the bottom of that well was reflected the very same soul-less face of the state that takes from its children first their life, and then – the truth of their death.

Yuriko wanted to scream, but the red-hot desert air scorched her lungs.

She woke with a sharp, shuddering breath, as if surfacing from the bottom of the ocean.

Yuriko sat up on the futon. Her heart pounded right against her teeth; her shirt clung to her back, wet with icy sweat. The room was quiet. In the predawn twilight of Tokyo, Seiko breathed evenly, while Usagi slept curled up, hiding her face.

Yuriko raised her left hand. In the faint pinkish light filtering through the curtains, she looked at her palm. Two small, pale crescent scars. The seal of survival.

Tamar had asked a question to which the Empire had no answer. But she did.

Yuriko stood up slowly, trying not to creak the floorboards. She dressed in the dark, threw on her jacket, and quietly left the room.

The hotel corridor greeted her with cool air and the smell of an old carpet. She went down the wooden stairs into the lobby. Behind the reception desk, an elderly Japanese man in a worn uniform was dozing. Hearing steps, he started and straightened up:

“Good morning, ma'am. Has something happened? It's still too early for breakfast.”

Yuriko approached the desk. Her face was pale, but her eyes looked clear and cold, like the water in a mountain stream on Okinawa. The dome in her head had completely vanished. All that remained was pure, absolutely clear resolve.

“I need a telephone,” she said. “The international operator.”

The clerk blinked in surprise, adjusting his glasses:

“International? But, ma'am, at such an hour... It is incredibly expensive, and overseas calls currently go through military lines...”

“Connect me to the United States of America,” Yuriko said clearly, separating each word. “The city of Sacramento, California. Please.”

The clerk looked at her straight back, at her left hand tightly gripping the edge of the wooden counter, and without asking any more questions, reached for the heavy ebonite phone.

Yuriko picked up the black receiver. Crackling and clicking filled the earpiece, and across thousands of miles of ocean floor, through the hum of undersea cables and static, a distant, endless sound of waves reached her. She pressed the receiver to her ear and waited for someone on the other side of the ocean – where evening was just getting underway – to pick up the phone and speak her name.

Chapter 23. Okinawa

Six years had passed since that March dawn in Tokyo. April of nineteen sixty-one on Okinawa turned out to be so transparent that it seemed all the air over the archipelago had been carefully pulled from the celestial net, washed in the ocean, and returned to a transparent, crystal ringing. The island, which had once seemed to Yuriko completely gutted, burned, and turned into limestone crumbs, was now blooming with some ruthless, purely tropical, non-human splendor. The fiery cups of hibiscuses blazed along the flat shoulders of new asphalt roads, heavy purple sleeves of bougainvillea choked the concrete fences of American military bases with their smell of gasoline and cheap coffee, and the pandanus, whose roots had once absorbed phosphorus and blood, now stubbornly stretched their fleshy, glossy leaves to the sun, as if no war had ever happened.

Sixteen years... Yuriko noticed this not by the calendar, but by the color of her mother's hair: from the thick shade of a raven's wing to pure winter cotton. Time here had stopped moving in a straight line. It had coiled into a heavy, damp ring and circled, like a well-

fed sea bird, over the endless runways of Kadena and Futenma. Sixteen years had passed since the old world was blown to pieces, and sixteen years since this world hastily, noisily, and fussily reinvented itself. Chrome-plated American “Chevrolets” and heavy army trucks now rushed along the roads, kicking up red dust, and the blue, high sky was constantly cut by jet fighters with a deafening roar that tore eardrums, leaving even, white, surgical scars of contrails on the azure dome.

The United States Civil Administration – all those strict officers and officials from USCAR – diligently printed green “B-yen” banknotes, opened new cinemas, and zealously ensured that the word “Okinawa” was mentioned as rarely as possible in official papers. It was ordered to be replaced by the half-forgotten, majestic name of the Ryukyu Kingdom. The Americans believed that if they rewrote the signs and changed the name of the currency and the authorities, it would be possible to neatly and painlessly cut the mental umbilical cord connecting the locals with the distant northern mainland. But the island’s memory was like a wild sweet potato: it was trampled, scorched with flamethrowers, buried under rock fragments, and yet it still sprouted deep underground – invisible, stubborn, and bitter.

Yuriko sat in her principal’s office at the school in Mawashiasato. In her thick, once blue-black hair, thin threads of early gray now distinctly shimmered – this internal frost, often found in those who managed to make it out of the underground caves of Okinawa, appeared not from age, but from contemplating the darkness for too long. Her face, round and soft in her youth, had acquired a strict, almost sculptural clarity, as if it had been carved from coral stone by the long, tireless surf. On the wide oak desk before her stood neat stacks of student notebooks, teacher duty schedules, rice registers, and dry reports printed on a hectograph for American inspectors. The school no longer resembled a canvas tent flapping in the wind, nor a plywood barrack; now it was a sturdy concrete building with wide windows, in the clean glass of which the lazy midday glare of the East China Sea was reflected.

The office door opened without a knock, quietly and unusually.

Usagi appeared in the doorway. She was still just as thin, in a simple, starched cotton dress, but her eyes – deep-set, surrounded by dark, indelible shadows – still harbored the eternal, midnight gloom of the Ihara cave. Usagi never greeted her first, as if their conversation, which had begun in the autumn of forty-five, had never been interrupted at all. She silently walked to the desk, put a twice-folded sheet of the fresh mainland newspaper “Asahi Shimbun” on it, and smoothed the fold with a dry, nervous movement of her long fingers.

“Read it,” Usagi said. Her voice sounded even and flat, like an overturned clay bowl. “I don’t know which of ours wrote this to them... And I don’t want to know.”

She turned and walked out without waiting for an answer. Her quick, absolutely silent steps instantly died away in the echoing school corridor, leaving behind only a faint, barely perceptible smell of sea salt, cheap soap, and roadside dust.

Yuriko looked down at the newspaper page. It was a column of short notes and human stories, printed in a large, neat Tokyo font.

“Larks for the Lilies,” read the headline. “A touching gift from the mainland for the spirits of Okinawa.”

Yuriko began to read, and with every line, her stomach clenched into a heavy, cold knot. The article recounted in a saccharine, warm tone how some successful businessman from Osaka or, perhaps, from Tokyo received a letter from distant Okinawa, in which an unknown author tearfully asked: “I want to send larks from the motherland-Japan (bokoku Nihon) to the spirits of the fallen Himeyuri girls... If we send these birds to the Himeyuri cenotaph, the spirits will rejoice, seeing the birds multiply.” The touched capital merchant immediately organized a fundraiser among his colleagues to buy a large batch of songbirds on the mainland and solemnly transport them by plane to the southern island.

Larks. Hibari.

Birds of northern fields and temperate latitudes, which had never, since the creation of the world, been found on Okinawa. They had never flown over the crimson clay of Mawashiasato, never sung over the sharp rocks of Cape Kiyari, never built nests in the crevices of coral limestone. The fallen girls from the Himeyuri unit – all those with whom Yuriko shared the last sip of rotten water – didn’t even know what these larks looked like, how they smelled, or how their morning trill sounded. They knew the cries of piercing sea terns, they knew the quiet hissing of emerald lizards, they knew the dull, mournful murmur of the wind in the thickets of prickly pandanus.

But the distant, well-fed mainland did not need the harsh, bleeding truth of Okinawa. The mainland vitally needed a beautiful, sentimental fairy tale, into which it now sent decorative songbirds so that they would beautifully reproduce over abandoned bones.

Yuriko closed the newspaper. A bright, blinding April light poured into the wide window, smelling of salt and blooming bougainvilleas. In the schoolyard, children played tag, and their ringing, carefree shouts reached through the glass muffled, as if through a thickness of clear ocean water. Yuriko sat motionless, staring at one point, until the sun slowly passed the zenith. She carefully picked up the newspaper sheet with two fingers, folded it in half, then again, and again, until it turned into a tiny dense square, and with a sharp movement threw it into the wastebasket.

At home in Mawashiasato, she was expected.

By the plywood porch – which Soma had long ago lined with sturdy pine boards, whitewashed with lime, and turned into a real, reliable porch – stood the familiar, heavy army “Studebaker”. Soma had once traded it on the black market in Naha for a few sets of homemade furniture. From behind the body of the car, a cheerful, demanding childish chirp could already be heard, and when Yuriko turned the corner of the house, she involuntarily stopped, admiring this picture.

Soma sat on the low stone wall of the vegetable garden, tossing his healthy leg over his knee and leaning heavily with his hands on a thick bamboo cane. He was thirty-eight years old, but he looked a full forty-five: his face, heavily weathered and darkened by the sun, was covered with deep creases at the mouth; his hands had become bumpy from constant work with wood. His wooden prosthesis, to which he had long been accustomed as to his own body, no longer emitted that pitiful iron squeak – an old master in Naha had replaced the rough ring with a soft, oiled leather strap. Next to him on the grass sat Nanami in a simple, but surprisingly elegant chintz dress. The thin scar on her left cheek had paled over time,

turning into a barely noticeable silvery thread that flashed when she smiled. Nanami, just like in the old days, smelled of dry wormwood, coziness, and home-baked bread.

At their father's feet sat two girls. The eldest, Keiko, was seven years old; she inherited her father's penetrating dark eyes and her mother's soft grace. Keiko was already in the first grade at Yuriko's school and proudly wore a clean blue apron with an ironed white collar. The youngest, four-year-old Yumi, held a branch of blooming hibiscus in her tiny fingers and enthusiastically fed the bright petals to a toy wooden horse that Soma had carved for her from a solid piece of pine.

Kohaku stood on the threshold of the house, wiping her hands on a long blue apron. She was over sixty, her hair had turned completely white, looking like pure winter cotton, and her shoulders had noticeably drooped under the weight of her past years, but her hands remained as strong, tenacious, and precise as before. She looked at her granddaughters and smiled with that deep, silent, all-forgiving maternal smile that never required words.

"Yuriko-nee, we brought fish!" Soma shouted, noticing his sister and giving a welcoming nod towards the well, where a wet hemp sack lay. "Red snapper, from the very morning catch in Itoman. Fresh, still smells of the sea."

Yumi, the youngest, ran up to Yuriko and pulled the edge of her dress. Her round, tanned face wore an expression of utmost seriousness.

"Aunt Yuriko," she whispered, looking up with huge eyes. "Dad says you're the principal. Is that true?"

"It's true," Yuriko squatted down to be at her level.

"And what does a principal do?"

"A principal makes sure all the children wash their feet before lunch."

Yumi thought for a moment. Then she nodded strictly:

"Then you're a bad principal. Keiko doesn't wash her feet. I saw her."

At dinner, the conversations flowed slowly and smoothly, like a hot, rich rice broth. Soma thoroughly talked about a new large order: his carpentry artel, which had grown into a real workshop, had taken up the construction of a wooden building for a fishing cooperative on the south coast. Nanami quietly, with a soft smile, complained that Keiko didn't want to diligently learn the multiplication table, while the girl, burying her nose in her plate of fish, angrily muttered that numbers were terribly boring, but the stories about the ancient kings of Shuri Castle that Aunt Yuriko told them were the most interesting thing in the world.

Yuriko looked at her little nieces and felt how deep in her chest, under many years of layers of hardened ash, something very warm, alive, and sharp, resembling a fresh ginger root, was slowly and stubbornly uncoiling. Life went on. It was wounded, limping, covered with deep scars, but it stubbornly and victoriously went on.

When Soma and Nanami left, putting the sleepy, yawning girls into the spacious back of the "Studebaker", and Kohaku went to the well to wash the wooden dishes, the house plunged into a dense, blue, velvet silence. The kerosene lamp on the table smoked slightly, casting long, moving shadows on the plastered and thoroughly lime-whitened walls. Yuriko

went to the narrow wooden cabinet standing in the corner of the room, knelt down, and opened the lowest door.

Immediately, a dry, sweetish smell of old paper, dried herbs, and confectionery vanilla drifted from there.

She took out a tin box of English cookies darkened by time, on the lid of which a faded royal crest could still be faintly guessed. Yuriko opened it and poured the contents onto the table. Inside lay letters. Tens, hundreds of light blue airmail envelopes, carefully tied with thin twine. Some of them had yellowed with time, their corners frayed and cracked, others looked completely fresh, as if they had been delivered only yesterday.

Yuriko began to slowly sort through these envelopes, and all her past, forever cut-off life began to unfold before her like a long, detailed scroll. She did this not to reopen old wounds, but because tonight she needed to finally close all the circles of her memory.

She unfolded the very first letter from Miko, dated October forty-eight. The handwriting – familiar down to the last dash, small and cramped – made Yuriko smile:

“Dear Yuriko. We finally arrived in Sacramento. Our apartment is quite small, but very clean, and from the large window you can see a real apple orchard. Yesterday I tried local American coffee for the first time in my life. Yuriko, it’s terrible! Black, thick as axle grease, and bitter, but Ren laughs and says I’ll get used to it soon. I hope not...”

The letters followed a strict chronological order, and Miko’s life appeared on these pages in all its tactile, sensual fullness. She enrolled in nursing courses, and the American professors at the California hospital were in sincere amazement at her incredible field experience. “They just don’t understand,” Miko wrote, “how it was possible to apply tourniquets and do dressings without soap, without clean water, and in the absolute darkness of the cave. I tell them about it, and they look at me as if I fell from the Moon. I guess I really did fall from there.”

Later Miko transferred to the veterinary faculty. She chose to treat animals. “People remind me too much of those I can never help again,” she explained in one of the letters from fifty-one. “And dogs, horses, and cats don’t ask stupid questions about duty and the nation. They just want to live. And in this striving, I understand them better than anyone else.”

Ren, together with his former battalion comrades, opened a construction company. They engaged in the erection of standard, quick-assembly modernist houses – using the Eichler Homes system. “Ren is constantly disappearing on construction sites,” Miko shared. “He tells me: ‘Miko, we just build sturdy wooden frames and walls for people, and they themselves put life into them and make a home out of it.’ And I laugh and answer him that he’s still a translator, just now he translates American blueprints into the language of human comfort.”

The photographs in the box also changed from year to year. Miko grew her hair long; her face rounded, completely losing that terrible, cave-like, hungry sharpness of the cheekbones. In one photo, she stood in a snow-white medical coat against the background of a neat sign reading “Sacramento Veterinary Clinic”. In another, she was laughing, standing in a light summer sundress in the middle of a violently blooming apple orchard. In the third

photograph, sent in the winter of fifty-one, she and Ren, both incredibly happy, held a small, tightly swaddled lace bundle in their arms.

“Yuriko, we had a boy,” Miko wrote on the back of the card. “For four months I didn’t know what to name him. I didn’t dare to give him the names of my fallen parents – this burden is too heavy for our sunny, quiet city. Can we name him Jiro? In honor of your father. You won’t mind, will you? I thought, let my child have the name of at least someone’s father who didn’t run away, didn’t betray, but died trying to save the children and reach our cave.”

Yuriko pressed this photograph to her chest and closed her eyes for a second. Behind the plastered wall of the house, the ocean breathed rhythmically and soothingly. Little Jiro Kimura was growing up a healthy, black-haired boy with the wide, white-toothed American smile of his father Ren.

Yuriko sorted through these letters slowly, like rosary beads during a long evening prayer. She perfectly remembered that icy March morning of nineteen fifty-five in Tokyo. That dawn in the hotel lobby, when she, shaken by a nightmare and the rustling voice of the Jewish girl Tamar, went down to the telephone switchboard. Yuriko called Sacramento not at all to hear Miko’s voice, and not to ask Ren to take her out of this ruined world. Miko was already a beautiful, completed part of her past – a part that she herself had cut off and handed into the reliable hands of a man capable of giving her happiness.

She called for Hinata.

The boy who, at the age of six, dragged wounded soldiers out of the forest rot. The boy who knew by heart the price of every cracker in the Shimabuku camp. The boy who danced so bravely and cheerfully with her at her older brother’s wedding. Yuriko then realized that he should not stay here, on this damned, blood-drenched piece of land, among coral tombstones, American tanks, and the false state myths of Tokyo. He deserved a completely different life – a life where the sky doesn’t fall on your head like phosphorus rain, where you can study and breathe freely. And Ren understood her then without a word.

Three weeks after that call, Ren sent a telegram from Sacramento: “Processing documents. The boy is coming. Everything will be fine. R.K.”

It took almost a year of correspondence, petitions to the military commandant’s office, and guarantees to get the young man a student visa. But they still pulled him out.

Yuriko took out another stack of letters from the tin box. The envelopes were slightly smaller, the paper rougher, and the postage stamps were local, Okinawan – depicting the ancient gates of Shuri Castle. From Hinata. She pulled out the freshest photo, sent just a couple of months ago. In it, against the backdrop of a strict California college building, stood a tall, broad-shouldered young man in a clean white shirt with carelessly rolled-up sleeves. Under his arm, he confidently held thick textbooks on higher mathematics. Her navigator.

“Dear Yuriko-nee! I’m writing from the dorm, it’s very noisy here, the neighbor upstairs plays the guitar and is always out of tune,” Hinata’s lines were fast, flying, and uneven. “Mathematics turned out to be cool – better than katakana, which I never learned properly, remember? Professor Foster says my head works. I tell him: ‘Because I was taught to count using bullets.’ He didn’t understand. Americans generally understand very little. On weekends I go to Ren-san’s, I help him with the blueprints. He says I’m a born engineer. I tell

him – no, I’m a navigator. And we both laugh, because we both know it’s the same thing. Yuriko-nee, I really miss the sea. Ours. And Grandma Kohaku’s sweet potatoes. American potatoes are not the same.”

Yuriko carefully re-read this letter three times, then neatly folded all the pages back into the tin box and closed the lid tightly. She wasn’t crying. In her soul, there was no longer any ringing emptiness, nor bitter resentment towards fate. Inside her reigned a heavy, calm, crystal-clear peace, similar to the water at the very bottom of a deep well, from which people drink on the hottest day. Her life was not unhappy or lived in vain. Her life was her own, conscious, and proud choice.

She gave Miko to a man who idolized her. She gave Hinata to a country that gave him a future and mathematics. And for herself, she kept this island, her aging mother, and this memory. Because someone had to stay here, on Okinawa, just to hold these stones and not let them finally crumble to dust.

She stood up, wiped her hands on her skirt, put the box away, and went to the dark window...

The next morning, the sun rose over Mawashiasato as a piercing, blindingly yellow disk. The air smelled of dew, damp grass, and the sweet smoke of the hearth, over which Kohaku was already boiling the morning rice early in the day, rhythmically stirring it with a large wooden spoon. Yuriko quickly had breakfast, rinsed her face with icy well water, and went to school.

That morning was fresh, permeated with young greenery and the eternal smell of ocean salt. The concrete walls of the school building glowed in the rays of the early sun like smooth, scrubbed skin. Yuriko walked down the corridor past her principal’s office, past the bright bulletin boards with lesson schedules, and stopped at the slightly open door of one of the junior classes.

At the even wooden desks sat children. They were only six or seven years old; all of them were barefoot, tanned, in clean blue aprons with white collars. They cheerfully exchanged glances, whispered; someone enthusiastically drew with colored pencils in the margins of their notebooks. Soma’s daughter sat in the third row by the window and, seeing her, began to straighten her apron with an important, adult air.

The young teacher, who had very recently arrived on assignment from Naha, raised her eyebrows in surprise, noticing the principal in the doorway:

“Nakayama-san? Good morning. Do you want to check something?”

“Good morning, Ms. Takada,” Yuriko said quietly, walking into the classroom. “Excuse me. May I take a few minutes of your lesson?”

The teacher bowed respectfully and immediately stepped aside to the window.

Yuriko walked to the blackboard. At her appearance, thirty pairs of round, clean, lively eyes that knew absolutely nothing about caves, gas, and grenades instantly fixed on her. The children froze, standing at attention, with that special, reverent respect with which first-graders always look at the school principal. Yuriko cast a glance over these faces and felt how something colossal, simple, and clear, like this dawn itself, was uncoiling inside her.

“Good morning, children,” she said. Her voice was quiet, but it instantly filled the classroom from corner to corner, silencing even the most inveterate whisperers. “Starting today, a new, most important subject appears in the schedule of our school. We will begin to study history. But not the history that is written in Tokyo’s textbooks, and not the one the Americans brought with them on ships. We will study the true history of our own archipelago. The history of Ryukyu. Our land, our ancestors, our ancient kings, our defenders, and our seas. You must know where we came from to this land. Only then will you clearly understand where you need to go next.”

The children listened to her, their mouths literally open in amazement. Little Keiko in the third row looked at her aunt with huge eyes shining with pride.

Yuriko turned her back to the class. She reached out and took a piece of clean white chalk from a special stand. It rested in her palm surprisingly familiarly, firmly, and confidently, as a master’s most important, time-tested tool rests in his hand. It seemed that the chalk smelled not of lime, but of dry, strict cleanliness. The two pale, faded crescent scars on her left palm – the seal of her survival – were now absolutely calm. They no longer burned or hurt.

Yuriko raised her hand high and began to write on the black slate board. Every stroke was laid down clearly, sweepingly, and confidently, leaving fat, blindingly white, glowing lines on the dark surface. The chalk squeaked rhythmically and dryly in the silence of the classroom, and fine white dust fell on the wooden floor like a quiet, blessed rain.

When she took a step back, the children read:

“We are Okinawa.”

Epilogue

She walked, and the whole world moved with her – obediently, rhythmically, without asking for directions. Her fragile body remained the motionless center of the universe, and the earth itself spun beneath her bare feet like a red-hot, damp potter’s wheel. From time to time, this wheel brought to her feet ever new scraps of itself – now rich ochre clay, now white coral rubble crumbling into dust, now dark, musty, humus-rich soil smelling of recent thunderstorm rain. And the girl accepted each of these steps as an inevitable gift.

She did not remember how long this journey had been going on. She did not even know if such a dry, calculating word as “how much” existed in this world. Time for her here was neither a straight arrow shot from a bow, nor a closed, creaking wheel; it seemed like a thick, transparent amber resin. In this resin, the flies of the distant past and the light-winged dragonflies of the unborn future were frozen side by side, forever, and any departed moment could be examined in detail up close, simply by holding it up to the light, like a cloudy antique bead.

The sun froze at its zenith when the trail – or that stubborn semblance of it that had not yet managed to become completely overgrown with prickly, piercingly green wild pandanus – turned sharply between two colossal stone boulders. These stones were strangers here. They clearly did not belong to this island: leaned against each other like two heavily breathing, dead-tired travelers, they radiated a deep underground, mineral cold. This cold crept under the skin in defiance of all the daytime heat.

Between the stones gaped a cave.

It did not look like an entrance into a rock; rather, it resembled a deep, ragged, convulsive exhale of the earth itself. From the dark, velvet limestone maw, a cool, tangible draft streamed outward. It smelled of wet limestone, underground springs, primeval moss, and something else – a barely discernible, sweetish and bitter scent. That is how centuries-old archival paper, parchment, dried library glue, and ink smell.

The girl stopped at the very opening. She did not need to make decisions. Everything had long been decided for her by this place itself – its centuries-old weight, its patient, non-human silence. She simply stepped over the invisible boundary between furious light and muffled gloom.

The cave let her in. The darkness descended on her shoulders like a heavy woolen blanket warmed by someone else's heat. Her eyes took a long time to adjust. At first, there was only a dull, impenetrable blackness in which neither forms nor distances existed. But then, slowly, as a watermark emerges on a soaked sheet of paper, the outlines of a huge, temple-like space with a flat, hard-packed floor began to grow out of the twilight. And at that very moment, an invisible lock clicked barely audibly behind her back – or so it seemed: the sound was as quiet as an old book snapping shut.

The girl reached out her left hand and touched the wall. The porous limestone rock beneath the pads of her fingers responded with a living, underlying warmth. The stone was inhabited. It consisted entirely of other people's touches, notches, and traces, as if thousands of hands before her had tried to leave their invisible manifestos here.

And she saw the signs. The entire cave was written over from top to bottom.

The lowest, archaic layer had almost dissolved into the stone. These were pale, barely discernible silhouettes of fish and sea turtles, scratched with the tip of a charred stick thousands of years ago, when the sea stood higher and the archipelago itself was just a bare coral reef. The fish swam one after another in the eternal stone water, smoothly and silently, without touching the corners of the rock.

Higher up, right over the fish, someone in other centuries had deeply carved angular, solemn characters. They stretched along the walls in a continuous ribbon, weaving into patterns in which, upon long examination, strange, alluring pictures began to pulsate: a burning signal tower, the thin figure of a girl on a fortress wall, a man running towards the sea, and a huge white bird flying away towards the mainland.

Even higher darkened letters traced in charcoal, ink, and something brown, similar to dried blood. Alphabets replaced one another, the lines tangled. Someone wrote flawlessly evenly, as teachers write on blackboards; someone traced the signs crookedly, with childish pressure and mistakes. Some left on the limestone only a single name, a date, or the mark of a fingernail.

The girl could not read these texts, but her skin, absorbing the age-old dust of these walls, understood everything without translators. These were lists. Endless lists of losses, confessions of love, recipes for barley bread, blueprints of houses, and desperate pleas for saving water. But her fingers, gliding over the rough stone, distinguished something else: where the letters were deep, firm, confident – there the hand was not afraid. Where they

trembled, broke off, crumbled under the fingernail – there the hand begged. And where only a thin, almost invisible trace remained on the wall – there the hand simply wanted someone to know: *I was here*.

In the depths of the cave, in a natural hollow by the far wall, towered books.

There lay old tomes in cracked leather bindings, smelling of tanned hide; scrolls neatly rolled into bamboo tubes and tied with hemp thread; student notebooks with calligraphic flourishes; crumpled scraps of American cardboard and yellowed newspaper clippings. Their pages rustled from the invisible underground draft – quietly and rhythmically, like a well-fed beast breathing in its sleep. And in this rustle, the girl heard one endless, polyphonic, unceasing echo: “Do not forget. Please, do not forget us.”

Among the stacks of paper, right on the dry earth, in the endless chaos of other people's losses, lay objects. And among thousands of rusty keys, worn coins, and fragments of bones, her gaze caught familiar outlines: a piece of white chalk, worn down to the very middle... a fragment of a brass shell casing, polished to a mirror shine by long keeping in other people's pockets... a thin silk thread, cinched at the end with a simple knot... a stalk of wormwood that had preserved the smell of the desert... a dark coin depicting a ritual bowl... and a piece of porous dark clay the size of a child's fist – with a thin seam from a casting mold and a barely noticeable crack at the very base.

They were not put on display. They simply lay quietly in the general mass of memory, having become part of this huge, breathing world.

The girl squatted down before this treasury of memory. She did not touch the objects – she simply absorbed their presence, losing track of centuries and minutes. Here, under the stone dome, death had no power, because everything that was named and preserved continued to live its quiet, underlying, invisible life.

A ray of the setting sun struck her in the face suddenly, as if calling her by name.

This golden, slanting ray pierced the thick twilight at the entrance, which smelled of red-hot basalt and salt. It glided along the walls, and for one short, absolute moment everything inside the cave came to life: the fish and turtles flared with bright ochre, the charcoal letters filled with a warm amber gleam, and the old photographs acquired a frightening depth. The people in them seemed to flinch, sigh, and freeze again. The light illuminated the white chalk, the copper coin, and the clay shard.

The sun was setting.

The girl stood up and went outside. The evening sun had already touched the horizon, resembling a huge, red-hot copper coin. The whole sky over the wasteland bloomed with a thick, anxious, purple-pomegranate glow, resembling a giant chrysanthemum. The air smelled of cooling earth, wormwood, and the distant, barely discernible smoke of a hearth – that very bitterish, native smell that she knew better than her own name.

She sat on a flat boulder by the entrance, cut through with white veins of quartz resembling lightning frozen in time. The stone accepted her as its own – it was still hot, it remembered all this long morning, remembered that girl who sat here a long, long time ago, wrapping her arms around her sharp knees. The stone asked no questions. The stone simply stored the warmth.

And it was then, just to the left of her thigh, on the most heated cleavage of quartz, that she saw it.

There lay a lizard. A small, ancient dragon, as if cast from malachite chips and liquid, darkened bronze. Its emerald speckles faintly gleamed in the dying rays. It lay absolutely motionless, spreading its speckled belly on the rough boulder, and greedily, trustingly drank the departing sun – with all its scales, with every cell of its small body.

It had no tail.

In the place where a long, elegant scaly arc once extended from the flexible body, now only a short, even, blunt stump was visible. It was covered with young, tender, translucent skin – lighter and cleaner than the rest of the body. The tail did not grow back. It simply healed.

The girl held her breath. Slowly, trying not to make any sudden movements, she reached out her hand, stopping her fingers, stained with chalk dust, an inch from the reptile. The lizard did not move. It only slightly turned its triangular head, and its yellow eye with a vertical pupil looked at the girl without fear – with the age-old, calm indifference of a victor.

And then, from a narrow, warm crevice between the stones, a tiny shadow slipped out into the light. Behind it – another. And another.

Three microscopic, translucent little lizards, no bigger than a child's pinky finger, cheerfully and fussily ran out onto the hot boulder. Their scales were blue-green, clean, not yet knowing either roadside dust or torn-off tails. They scampered briskly around the large tailless lizard, stepped on its head, tumbled comically off the quartz ledges, and immediately clambered back up, getting tangled and stuck in their own long, perfect, flawless little tails.

The mother did not turn around and did not watch them. She did not need to. She was simply here – warm, alive.

The girl looked at this impossible, tiny triumph of life over decay, and exactly the same green sparks lit up in her eyes.

She lowered her gaze to her left palm. The two pale, faded crescent-shaped scars – the seal of the lizard, its brand – suddenly stopped seeming like a sign of misfortune. They turned into the most ordinary human lines. Lines that are on the hand of everyone who has ever taken chalk in their fingers to write the most important word on a blackboard, or held an axe to build a sturdy home for their children, or embraced a loved one before a long journey.

The girl smiled. Not the way tired adults smile – with effort and hidden sadness, but the way only pure children know how to smile: with her whole face, her whole body, as if this smile were simply another natural way to breathe this air.

The sun completely rolled behind the edge of the earth. The sky thickened, becoming heavy, velvety, and in this deep indigo blue, sharp and clean as crushed ocean ice, stars began to flare up one after another – huge, pulsating, bright, as if someone had generously scattered a handful of glowing coals across the celestial cloth.

The girl did not move. She carefully closed her palm, keeping the last warmth of the departed day in it, leaned back, resting her hands on the solid, reliable quartz, and began to

look at the sky. The stone beneath her slowly, drop by drop, gave back the heat accumulated over the centuries.

Everything was exactly as it should be.

The world was.

Notes

The “Himeyuri” Students The “Himeyuri” (ひめゆり) 学徒隊 – Himeyuri Gakutotai, Lily Princesses Student Corps, or Lily Corps) – a group of 222 students and 18 teachers from the Okinawa Daiichi Women’s High School and the Okinawa Shihan Women’s School, formed into a nursing unit of the Imperial Japanese Army during the Battle of Okinawa in 1945. They were mobilized by the Japanese military on March 23, 1945.

Before the “Himeyuri” unit was disbanded, only 19 students had been killed. On June 18, 1945, the unit was given a simple disbandment order to “go home” amidst a total war. As a result, the schoolgirls suffered heavy casualties, caught in the crossfire of Japanese and American troops. Early the next morning (June 19), 5 teachers and 46 students hiding in the Ihara Third Surgery Shelter were killed by white phosphorus munitions during an attack by American forces who were unaware of the students’ presence.

In total, out of the 240 girls and teachers mobilized into the women’s student corps, more than half – 136 people – died.

Some of them committed suicide in various ways out of a fear for their chastity, driven by threats of systematic rape by US soldiers. Before the fighting could finally end, some students threw themselves from the jagged cliffs of the Arasaki coast, poisoned themselves with cyanide (previously administered to soldiers in terminal condition), while others killed themselves using hand grenades given to them by Japanese soldiers.

In addition, 91 students and teachers from the “Himeyuri” schools who were not mobilized as part of the student corps also died in the Battle of Okinawa. In total, out of all the students and teachers mobilized by the Japanese army in Okinawa Prefecture, 1,552 boys (including those from the “Tekketsu Kinnōtai” or Blood and Iron Student Corps, formed from high schoolers), 441 girls, and 99 teachers died during the fighting – a total of 2,092 people. The Battle of Okinawa was an unprecedented ground battle involving the civilian population, resulting in the deaths of about 200,000 people – up to a third of the island’s population.

Before its annexation by the Japanese Empire in 1879, Okinawa was a separate independent state – the Ryukyu Kingdom. The islands speak the Okinawan language (part of the Ryukyuan language group), which differs significantly from standard Japanese.

After World War II, Okinawa was under US administration until 1972, which is why large American military bases are still located on the islands today.

Added note: *Today, the memory of the girls is preserved at the Himeyuri Peace Museum in Itoman, Okinawa. It was founded in 1989 through the tireless efforts of the surviving alumni – women much like Yuriko – who dedicated their lives to ensuring that the tragedy in the caves would never be forgotten or rewritten by the mainland.*

The Sicarii The Sicarii – a militant Jewish group that operated in Judea in the 1st century CE. A radical, later breakaway wing of the Zealot movement that took the path of direct attacks and acts of terrorism. The Sicarii fought against Roman influence in Judea, attacking representatives of the Roman authorities and loyal members of the local nobility, and destroying their property.

The ancient Roman-Jewish historian Flavius Josephus wrote that the assassins preferred to operate in crowds, which allowed for a greater psychological effect while simultaneously giving the attacker a chance to escape. As their weapon, they used a short sword or dagger worn hidden under their clothes, which gave the group its name (*from the Latin word “sica”, meaning dagger*).

Along with the Zealots (though often conflicting with them), they were one of the driving forces in the First Jewish-Roman War (starting in 66 CE). They conducted active combat operations, at one point even destroying their own people’s food supplies to force the besieged Jews to fight with greater desperation. After the fall of Jerusalem (70 CE), the last of the Jewish Sicarii committed mass suicide at Masada in 73 CE following a three-year siege.

According to the writings of Flavius Josephus, when the Roman legions finally breached the wall of the Judean citadel, they found 960 corpses. The defenders had preferred to kill their wives and children, and then (by drawing lots) each other, so as not to fall into slavery. The last of the Sicarii set fire to the fortress and took his own life. Only 2 women and 5 children survived. They did not share the common fate, but instead hid deep within the underground water pipes (cisterns).

Added note: *The historical echo between the Siege of Masada and the Battle of Okinawa highlights a haunting universal tragedy. In both instances, civilians and defenders were trapped in confined underground spaces (cisterns and coral caves), facing an impossible choice between capture by a foreign empire and mass suicide. Tamar’s survival in the cisterns mirrors Yuriko’s survival in the limestone caves, connecting two distant points in human history through a shared trauma of war.*