



# Meihua. Triptych 2.0

"Meihua. Triptych 2.0" by Yuri Melnikov... in this labyrinthine novel, the eternal archetypes of narrative become not just the plot, but the world's operating system — one that is destined for a fatal error in the finale

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# Book One. A Road of a Thousand Years

## Prologue

On the day Chen Wang closed the door of the old school behind him for the last time, he knew that the new blocks of Beijing would soon rise here, yet he would long remember this moment, just as one remembers the final dream before awakening.

He understood even then that he would never return — not for lack of will, but for lack of anywhere to return to: the walls, steeped in voices and footsteps, would be razed, just as old houses are razed to make room for a future that holds no space for the past.

The classroom was uncharacteristically empty, and his every step responded with a barely audible echo. Outside the window, beyond the clouded glass, the city carried on with its new life: excavators clawed at the earth as if seeking forgotten bones within it, while the wind chased scraps of old notebooks across the courtyard like shreds of other people's memories.

Chen Wang slowly ran his hand over a desk where names had once been carved, and felt that trembling beneath his fingers was not wood, but memory itself. He knew that all of this was predestined: his departure, the school's vanishing, and even this evening, with the sun setting as if bidding farewell not only to him but to everything that had ever been here.

He sat at his table, opened an old, tattered volume of Russian poetry — the very one that had accompanied him his whole life — and suddenly realized that the words on the pages were no longer written for him, but for someone else who might come later, if anyone came at all. It had all happened already: this classroom, this sunset, and even his loneliness, which no longer seemed personal, but part of some ancient, inexorable history.

The wind behind the broken window stirred the curtain, and in that rustle, he thought he heard a voice — not anyone's in particular, but the voice of everyone at once: all who had ever sat within these walls, all who had loved, waited, lost, and forgotten. He knew that on this final evening, he had to remember everything: not because he wanted to, but because otherwise, he could not leave.

He closed his eyes. And then Beijing, this new, merciless Beijing, receded. Only dust remained — not merely the dust of time, but the dust of memories, twisting into strange, invisible whirlwinds. And in this dust, in this dance of non-existent particles, he saw her. The one whose name was written in his heart long before he ever knew her.

*She. Mei Lin. A name like a tiny bell from a distant, forgotten garden. Or perhaps this name is not a name, but the garden itself? And in it, birches bloomed — birches*

*that had never grown here. My teacher. No, not just a teacher. My compass. My road. A road tens of years long. Or merely an instant? Fifty years — how many steps is that? And a thousand years? How many falls? How many times did I have to be mistaken to arrive here, in this empty classroom smelling of chalk and the past? I was a fool. An eternal fool who sought in another's eyes not a reflection, but an entire universe. Her eyes — two inkblots on the pristine sheet of destiny, and I, the fool, wanted to read in them everything that had been foretold.*

## Part One

### Chapter One

Spring arrived early in Beijing that year, awakening something that had not yet fully stirred but was already preparing to spill out onto the streets.

The city froze, as if lying in wait, anticipating something unknown. The school smelled of books, wet wood, and something subtly new — a scent that appears only at the onset of impending, as yet indistinguishable changes. The morning light filtered through unwashed windows, painting the maps and the portrait of the Great Helmsman in faded tones.

It was on such a day that the new teacher arrived at the school. She was unlike the others: tall, with a straight back, in a simple gray dress, with thin, almost transparent hands. Her name was Mei Lin.

The principal, a short man with a wary gaze, spoke of her “valuable experience” gained in the Soviet Union, where she had spent “her entire childhood” and received her education, as he introduced her. For him, that was enough. She spoke Chinese without an accent, yet her speech sometimes held strange, unfamiliar intonations, as if the words were borrowed from another, distant life. But when she uttered her first Russian words, it seemed the very air filled with a crystalline chime — like a stream that had long sought its path to the ocean, suddenly finding it and speaking to you.

“Today we will speak of a great Russian poet,” Mei Lin began, and her tone was surprisingly lyrical, almost intimate. “Of Alexander Sergeyevich Pushkin.”

She spoke of his poems, full of light and sorrow, of his fate, cut short as suddenly as many fates in this world. The class fell silent, mesmerized by her voice, by her accent, which seemed to carry echoes of distant forests and boundless fields.

Chen Wang sat at the third desk by the window, and his pencil, instead of noting facts from Pushkin's biography, traced thin lines on the margins of his notebook of its own accord — lines resembling branches and shadows. He was not listening to the words — he was listening to the sound of her voice, simply feeling her presence. He was a sixteen-year-old boy, and his entire world, so understandable and predictable until this minute, suddenly drifted, spinning in the whirlpool of an inaudible melody.

“What are you drawing there, Chen Wang?” she asked. There was no judgment in her voice, only mild curiosity. “Is Pushkin not interesting to you?”

He started and closed the notebook. His desk mate, Li Zhong, smirked:

“He is drawing you, Comrade Teacher.”

Someone in the class giggled quietly. Mei Lin smiled — not sternly, but somewhat kindly, a little sadly.

“Better to draw Pushkin,” she said softly. “Or at least his muse. That would be far more useful for the lesson.”

Chen Wang blushed but did not look away.

“Why do you tell us about a Tsarist poet?” he asked, unexpectedly defiant, even to himself. “Why not a proletarian one — Mayakovsky?”

Mei Lin tilted her head slightly, as if listening to something within herself. She did not answer immediately; her gaze wandered somewhere out the window, beyond the gray roofs of the city. And it seemed her gaze lingered there longer than necessary. As if she were searching there for the words she had to say to her students.

“There are many fine Soviet poets, Chen Wang,” she said quietly, and that detachment which always set her apart from others appeared in her voice. “Those who wrote of the revolution, and those who wrote of the war, and of the simple human soul... Sometimes poems are not only about power. They are about the human being. About what one feels when everything around is collapsing.”

She turned to the blackboard, wrote a few Russian words, and then, as if obeying an inner impulse, opened a notebook and began to read. Her voice changed, becoming deeper, almost prayerful. These were verses not played on the radio, not printed in newspapers. These were words brought by her alone, like shards of someone else's unhealed wound.

*A sleep broken by a blast,  
Someone's death, someone's gasp  
— Repeats again...  
Burnt flesh, and the earth, like a swing,  
— Is swaying...  
No retreat, and no forgetting,  
— It remains...*

*The houses burned, the streets are bare,  
And silence booms like the echo of a flare.  
Where laughter was and children played — now crosses stand,  
Where lives once were — only ruins of the land.*

*But do those who started it see this plight?*

*They draw their maps, divide the towns in might,  
While somewhere a mother sobs for her child,  
And this pain stays with her, forever wild.*

*They call it “collateral damage,” a phrase so cold,  
But words cannot soften the pain untold.  
Every number is someone’s name,  
Every death — a fresh puddle of blood and shame.*

*Here, all heroes are victims and executioners too,  
Here, there is no victory — only tears and rue.  
Hope's light falls silent in the smoke of war,  
And people perish here, and dreams are no more.*

*Under a weeping sky, the earth conceals  
Those who left silently, without farewells,  
Who did not wish to fall on a bed of pain,  
Marked by this war, again and again.  
Who counted these tears that fall in the hush,  
Stories that never had time to rush,  
Lives that can never be brought back to be?*

*And what of those who stepped beyond the brink?  
Those who drowned, yet managed not to sink?  
— aving known heaven and hell,  
Stepped over that line,  
Where man became inhuman...  
— They are silent; they are dead inside.  
They are dead.*

When the poem ended, silence hung in the classroom. No one knew what to say. Even Li Zhong did not make a joke.

The bell rang unexpectedly loud. The students began gathering their notebooks, but no one was in a hurry to leave. Mei Lin stood by the blackboard, looking out the window where the last drops of winter moisture trickled down the gray roofs.

Chen Wang was the last to leave. On the stairs, he looked back: the teacher was still standing by the window, and her silhouette seemed to him part of another world — one where poems are more important than slogans, and words can be heavier than stone.

On the way home, through dusty and as yet sparsely populated streets, Chen Wang walked as if in a dream. The world around him was the same — red posters on the walls, silhouettes of rare passersby, the familiar smell of street food. But inside him, something had changed.

*I don't know how it happened. She spoke — and the air instantly became different, as if someone opened a window to another city, where it smells not of coal, but of snow, where people speak a language I am only beginning to understand. I was drawing her, but it wasn't a portrait, but an attempt to catch a shadow, a gleam, a reflection in a puddle after the rain. She read poems, and every word fell into me like a drop of water onto dry earth. I didn't know one could speak of war like that — not as a victory, but as pain, as someone else's pain. As pain that doesn't pass. I wanted to ask why she is sad, why her voice trembles when she speaks of long-dead poets. But I stayed silent. I always stay silent when I want to scream. I went out onto the street, and the road was empty, as if the city had died out. Only water dripped from the roof, and in every drop there was something of her voice — quiet, stubborn, relentless. Drip-drip. In childhood, I was afraid of water — not the kind in the river, but the kind that drips from the ceiling when it rains. Mama used to say: “The house is crying.” I thought: if the house is crying, it means it's alive. And if it's alive — it means it hurts too. Drip-drip. I walked home, and it seemed I was walking not on a street, but on a thin thread stretched between the past and the future, between her eyes and my fear.*

The evening wind of Beijing, the very one that would soon carry completely different, furious shouts, already bore within it echoes of an unfamiliar melody, and Chen Wang, then still unaware of it himself, stepped onto a new road he did not understand, which could lead him nowhere but to her, and to that sorrow which would accompany him for the rest of his life.

## Chapter Two

The next day, Chen Wang did not go home. He lingered at the school gates, where the janitor was sweeping last year's leaves and the courtyard was slowly emptying — he knew he had to wait for her.

Finally, she appeared. Mei Lin came out last, in the same gray dress, clutching a small, inconspicuous handbag in her slender fingers. Her steps were light, almost noiseless, as if she were gliding rather than walking. In her eyes, so deep, an even greater weariness lurked today. It seemed she was not surprised to see him.

“Teacher Mei Lin,” Chen Wang called out to her, and his voice sounded higher than he had expected. “May I walk you home?”

She stopped, her gaze lingering on him for just a moment — there was no judgment in it, only that same strange, elusive sadness he had seen yesterday.

“Thank you, Chen Wang,” she said quietly, and in her voice sounded a barely perceptible but unmistakable detachment, like water flowing past. “But I am not going home. I must go to another job — at the Beijing Automobile Works.”

He nodded, not knowing what to say. And she was already walking toward the bus stop, her figure quickly dissolving into the stream of passersby and rare cyclists.

Indeed, Chen Wang did not go home. There was nowhere to go. Home had become a place of silence and frozen pain. His mother, who had survived the horrors of Nanjing, now lived like a ghost — silent, with eyes that reflected only long-past nightmares. After his father’s death two years ago, she had become even more detached, as if the thread connecting her to the world had thinned to the limit. She could stare at the wall for hours, and her love for her son was that thin but strong thread that still bound her to reality. Today, before he left, she had given him some cold rice and a piece of bread wrapped in old cloth. She said nothing, but her hands were attentive, and somehow especially gentle, as if she had sensed something.

Chen Wang turned toward the old National Library. Its heavy doors, having witnessed more than one generation of seekers of truth and delusion, seemed a portal into the past. He hoped to find answers there, to find the keys to attracting her attention, to speak with her in the language she understood — the language of poetry.

The library smelled of old paper and something elusively ancient, like history itself. Sometimes it seemed to him that through this scent something else emerged — a light, almost ghostly sweetness of blossoming plums, as if once, hundreds of years ago, there had been a garden here, and the spring wind still remembered it. Rows of shelves disappearing into the gloom seemed endless, as if they held within them all the spoken and unspoken words of the world. He wandered among them like someone lost in a labyrinth, occasionally glancing at his feet — as if afraid to step on a forgotten book or crush a plum twig.

All the while Chen Wang roamed between the shelves, the librarian did not raise her eyes, turning the pages of the “Little Red Book.” Her lips moved soundlessly, as if she were repeating familiar quotes by heart, and it seemed that even here, among books, there was no escape from other people’s words.

Despite the light, warm spring rain, shouts occasionally drifted in from the street — dull, like blows against a wall:

“Long live Chairman Mao!”

“Down with old thinking!”

“Bombard the Headquarters!”

Water dripped from the roofs, and rare cars drove along the half-empty road, leaving long, trembling reflections behind them. Chen Wang looked at these reflections and thought that perhaps his whole life was also a reflection, a shadow, or a penumbra he was trying to catch, but it slipped away, dissolving in drops of water and in words he dared not speak aloud.

*I don't know why I waited for her. Maybe just to hear her say my name one more time. Maybe to walk beside her, even in silence. But she left — and I remained. As always. On the threshold. Between home and the street. Between the past and the future. Mama looks out the window as if waiting for Father, though she knows he won't*

*return. I am waiting for someone too, only I don't know who. The library smells of wood and other people's lives. I look for her in books, in poems, in lines written by strangers, but I find only myself — someone else, a stranger, not who I was yesterday. What have I found? Only pages filled with others' dreams, others' words. Everything is empty. Like this road she drove away on, leaving behind only ripples on the water. My hand slides along the spines. Where are you? Where are the words that will become my bridge? Where are the poems that will make her look at me not as a boy, but as an equal? Every book is a drop fallen into the abyss, and I am drowning, drowning in this abyss. I am not me. I am merely a reflection in this abyss. And she... she is gone. Gone to the factory. There is iron there. There is noise. There are no poems there. And here? None here either. Only emptiness.*

He found nothing new that evening, nothing that could become his weapon in this invisible battle. But it was then, it was there, amidst the dust and old books, that those lines appeared in his head: “I am all in you, I am all with you, everything is predestined by fate, as if I am someone else entirely, as if I am a complete stranger, but you too are no longer the same...” They were indistinct, like a sketch, but they already carried within them that sadness and predestination which, many years later, would form into a complete poem.

### Chapter Three

The bus, crawling slowly along the dirty, rutted road, seemed to carry Mei Lin into another world.

The Beijing Automobile Works, where production of trucks for the Chinese People's Army was being established, exuded a spirit entirely different from that of the old school walls. Here it was noisy and dirty; the air trembled with the rumble of machinery, the metallic clang blended with sharp blows, and the acrid smell of machine oil and hot metal settled on everything. This was a world that knew no Russian poetry, a world marching inevitably toward its iron future. The road to the factory was wider than the city streets, but just as uneven, covered in potholes over which rare trucks and old buses bounced.

Mei Lin walked up the steps, inhaling this alien, industrial air. Her thin gray dress seemed out of place among the workers' overalls and jackets thrown over shoulders. She was accustomed to the cleanliness and quiet of classrooms, but this factory was her second life, necessary as a second breath.

His office was located in a small but sturdy building constructed in the Soviet style, standing out for its massiveness against the background of Chinese structures. The office door was ajar. He sat at a large desk cluttered with papers and blueprints, his gaze riveted to some drawing of an engine. Sergei Morozov. Military attaché. A large, almost burly man of about thirty-five, with tightly compressed lips and a gaze accustomed to giving orders. He smelled of tobacco and something Mei often

associated with another homeland — perhaps the scent of distant pine forests or simply air that was foreign to this coal-soot sky.

Morozov looked up from his papers when he heard a light rustle and saw her. Mei Lin stood in the doorway, her gray dress seemingly glowing in the dim light of the office.

*Late. As always. These Chinese — their punctuality is like that of our loaders at the dock: if they show up, it's already a holiday. And this one... if only once, like a human being, like a Soviet person, five minutes late, not half an hour. No, here everything is done in their own way. Well, at least not a week late. If only my Sasha were here — she'd show them what discipline means. Or maybe, on the contrary, she'd run away herself after a week. That damn school. I knew she'd come, just as the sun sets over the horizon — inevitably. These Chinese. Like yesterday's dream — always something unspoken, translucent. I need a translator. And not just a translator. But her. Her accent, her knowledge. The Chinese chatter like sparrows, but this one... She knows how to listen. She knows how to be silent. And that is valued here. Go find another one like her — smart, from a good family (by local standards), and knows Russian perfectly.*

“You're late again, Comrade Mei,” he said, and irritation seeped through his voice, but without malice, because her lateness was habitual. He switched to Russian, the language that was native to him, and for her — the language of her childhood. “You know I need a translator all day. This Chinese... The devil knows how you speak it. Communicating with the locals using a phrasebook is like banging a hammer against a wall.”

Mei Lin lowered her head slightly, habitually accepting his displeasure.

“Forgive me, Sergei Petrovich. But I have lessons at school in the morning. I told you.”

*School. What a whim. Found something to rejoice in. Some school. In this Beijing, where dirt gets under your fingernails, and every second person dreams of a bowl of rice out of hunger. As if she doesn't understand her place is here, next to those who drive progress. However, let her amuse herself... My Alexandra. Sasha. In Sverdlovsk. She wouldn't understand this. Work is work. Duty is duty. And this one... so fragile, like a porcelain figurine brought here from another time. And for some reason, she is here. In my office. Just like that.*

“At school?” Morozov finally raised his eyes to her. His eyes, light and piercing, scrutinized her closely, as if seeing her for the first time. “What do you need that school for? Messing around with children? This is state business. You are needed here, not there.”

“I really like working with children,” Mei Lin answered quietly, and to her own surprise, a barely perceptible note of sincerity sounded in her voice. Morozov turned away, grunting.

*My God. An idealist. Probably why she returned to this hole. He understood: in the Union, she would have lived much better. Warmth, rations, apartments. And here? This Beijing, this air soaked in soot and promises that will never come true. A city like an old wound that just won't heal. All this post-war time, the Japanese, the Kuomintang, the civil war — like water that flows, flows, and leaves behind only silt and mud. And his Sasha is in Sverdlovsk. There is snow there. There is cold. There are children. Duty. Responsibility. Everything is clear. Everything is plain. And here... Here everything is unclear. Everything is alien. Except for her. She is like an island, strange, weightless, but so necessary here. Not that he loved her. No. Love is for others. It's for the wife. It's for the children. And this one... She was simply here. And she had to be here. That's just how it turned out.*

“Listen, Lin,” he said, turning to her, and now there was no irritation in his voice, only a strange, almost personal curiosity masking calculation. “Why didn't you stay in the Union at all? Born there, raised there, got an education... Returned to this... ruin.”

Mei Lin looked at him with a long, sad gaze.

“My parents always wanted to return, Sergei Petrovich. They waited for this. When the Kuomintang left the mainland, they decided the time had come. Time to return to the Motherland. Their roots are here. Now they teach at Peking University. Perhaps I too will leave the school someday and teach there.”

She said this with a kind of detached hope, as if the university were not just a place for her, but a distant, unattainable haven. Morozov nodded, saying nothing. In his memory, the faces of workers surfaced — gray, tired, with eyes in which the fire had long since gone out. He himself had become the same. He hated this smell of fuel oil, but hid it — it didn't befit an officer to complain. And everything that was once important remained there, beyond the Urals, in another life. Here he was only a military specialist, only a stranger, only a man who could not learn the language.

Mei Lin looked at him, and it seemed to her that he was not him, but a huge, gray stone brought here by an unknown current. And she — she had to be beside this stone.

*The factory. Iron. Rust. Everything creaks, everything hums. This is not a school. There is no Pushkin, Blok, Pasternak here. His muses are not here. My muses are not here. There are only orders here. And him. Morozov. His smell — not the smell of a man, but the smell of a foreign land. USSR, the Urals. His family is there. His life. And me? My life — what is it? Books. Students. And this. This is the price. The price for the air I breathe. The price for being left alone, for now. He is my protector. My executioner. My ship, doomed to sail these murky waters. Parents. Motherland. All these words.*

*They are like shards. Shards of a mirror in which I try to see myself but see only others' reflections. I speak of children, I think of their purity. But am I — am I pure? Or am I too already covered in dust, like an old book? Or is it the dirty water flowing down the street washing something off me? No. It doesn't wash away. It leaves a mark. A mark on my soul. I know. Father says: "Our duty is to build a new China, even if it breaks us." But when I see his back bent over lectures, I want to scream.*

And behind the wall, behind the clouded windows, the factory breathed and groaned like a huge beast that cared neither for Mei nor for Morozov: it had its own concerns, its own rhythms, its own endless, indifferent work.

## Chapter Four

The summer of that year was hot and restless, as if the city itself did not know what would become of it tomorrow. Dazibao composed by Nie Yuanzi were read on the radio, and the words were like blows — everyone knew: today they could come for you. Chen Wang's classmates no longer laughed; they whispered, exchanged glances, and even threatened:

"We'll tell everything to the Party Secretary. Are you defending your teacher? She is just as much an enemy as those professors."

He remained silent.

On that day, they came with posters to Peking University — against "monsters and demons," against those who did not support the Helmsman. The crowd was noisy, the faces alien, the shouts identical. And suddenly he saw her.

Mei Lin stood at the entrance to the university, next to her parents. She was pale as paper, holding her father by the hand. Her eyes were filled with horror, and she looked straight at him — with a gaze that held everything: fear, farewell, a silent question, and something resembling a reproach. In a moment, she shook her head slightly, as if wanting to say: "Don't. Don't follow them. Don't become one of them." But the words were not spoken — only this barely noticeable gesture, only trembling lips, only clenched fingers.

In that instant, everything around vanished: there was no crowd, no shouts, no posters. Only she. He wanted to approach, to say something, but he could not. His feet were rooted to the ground, and his voice drowned in the roar of the crowd. And he could not look away. And he could not leave.

And then everything began to whirl:

"Forward!" screamed the Red Guards.

"Down with old thinking!"

"Long live Chairman Mao!"

They burned costumes and scenery of the Peking Opera, dismantled the Great Wall for bricks, built pigsties, rode in agitation trains, protested in Wuhan and Guilin. But all that was later, and all that no longer mattered. Because it was then, in the square, that he realized: their lives had parted forever, and no words, no actions could change that. Yes, then, in the square by the university, he met her for the last time.

And it was in that moment, on that day when everything around was collapsing, and he stood in the crowd, unable to take a step, unable to utter a word, that new lines were born in him. Lines of a poem that he would continue to write that night, and finish only many years later, as a different person, no longer a boy — as a teacher, in the same school, in the same classroom where he had first heard her voice:

*but you too are no longer the same  
and darkened now is that hand  
which tenderly caressed me  
when, disregarding those near,  
you gave yourself to me  
but i know the day will come  
when i am replaced by a shadow  
when snows cover everything  
and only a beam from afar  
unexpectedly finds you  
and again you will go there  
and again you will find me*

But he did not know then that these words would become his only memory of her, that everything else would be erased by time, fear, and others' ghosts. He did not know that ahead lay only losses, only gray faces, only long years in which there would be neither forgiveness nor return.

And on this day, amidst the shouts and the crowd, he felt for the first time: everything had already happened, everything had already been written, and nothing could be changed. A new play would not begin — the roles were played, the costumes burned, the stage empty. And only in memory, like an echo, would her name resound for a long time yet.

*Mei Lin.*

## Part Two

### Chapter One

Beijing had become different. The city, which had once seemed infinitely large and noisy to Mei Lin, had now shrunk to the size of a single room, a single window, a single gaze into the void. She no longer went to school — she had been dismissed without explanation, simply barred from entering the gates. On the bulletin board,

where schedules and poems used to hang, there were now only lists of enemies of the people and new slogans.

Her parents had been expelled from the university. Their books, manuscripts, and photographs were thrown into the courtyard like trash. Her father remained silent, her mother cried at night, burying her face in her old shawl, and Mei Lin became the only one bringing any money into the house. She still worked as a translator at the factory, where everything had become mundane to her: the language, the smells, the people, even the air. But sometimes it seemed to her that she was not living her own life, but someone else's, accidentally put on like an old coat in a theater cloakroom.

In the evenings, she sat by the window, watching the street where rare passersby hurried home, and thought of Chen Wang. She did not know what had become of him. After the crackdown on the Red Guards, his name had disappeared from conversations as if he had never existed. Sometimes she felt she had invented him — the boy with the wary gaze who drew her on the margins of his notebook and could not hide his feelings. She remembered his questions, his embarrassment, his silence. She remembered — and didn't know why.

Their home seemed steeped in poverty and fear. Her mother spoke in whispers more and more often; her father would not leave his room for hours. A portrait of the Helmsman hung on the wall, and his eyes followed every movement, every word. Mei had learned to say only what was necessary, and only when necessary. She had learned to be a shadow.

In those days, the conflict on the border began. The radio spoke of enemies, of traitors, of how the USSR was no longer a friend but a foe, that Soviet revisionists were to blame for everything. In the news for the Soviet specialists, the island was called Damansky, and for the Chinese — Zhenbao Dao. Even in this, there was a rift, a crack, an inability to agree on the very name of the land where shots were now being fired.

Mei Lin listened to this news and could not understand: how could it be — the country where her parents grew up, where she had lived for several years, and the country where she was born, were now enemies? Where was her home? Where was her motherland? She felt split in two, like a tree struck by lightning.

Sergei Morozov also listened to the radio and waited for orders. For him, it was Damansky — the name etched in Soviet maps, a small patch of land that had suddenly become the border between the past and the future. For her, it was Zhenbao Dao — the name carved into Chinese soil, an island whose name now sounded somewhat different — as if memory itself had split into two halves.

In the evenings, behind the closed door, they talked about the weather, about work, and even about things that could not be said aloud. Sometimes he looked at her and thought: how strangely life is arranged — sometimes the person closest to you turns out to be the one you cannot be with.

His family — wife, children — remained far away, in Russia, in the Urals, in Sverdlovsk. Their faces surfaced in his memory more and more often like old photographs: slightly faded, with corners bent by time. He knew he should miss them, but increasingly caught himself thinking: when the order comes to leave, he would miss this place, miss it terribly. But in a different way. He would miss this country, these conversations with Lin, her voice, which had become the only real thing for him in this still alien world. And even the tiresome factory, where everything was wrong, not like at home. All this would become the past, and perhaps the most real part of his life.

One evening, when dusk was already gathering outside the factory windows, they sat in his office. Morozov smoked silently, staring into the clouded glass, while Mei Lin sorted through papers, pretending to read.

“Did you hear?” he finally said, without turning around. “They were shooting on Damansky again. Eight of our men were killed.”

She slowly raised her head, not immediately understanding what he meant.

“On Zhenbao Dao,” she corrected quietly. “It is Zhenbao Dao Island.”

He chuckled, but there was neither joy nor malice in that laugh — only weariness.

“For us, it has always been Damansky.”

“And for us — always Zhenbao Dao,” she replied, and a new, unfamiliar firmness sounded in her voice.

They fell silent. Behind the wall, the factory hummed, indifferent to their conversations, to their fears, to their different words.

“Strange,” Morozov said, “as if even names are now at war with each other.”

“Not just names,” Mei whispered. “Everything is at war. Even memory.”

He looked at her — long, intently, as if seeing her for the first time.

“You don't believe this will end, do you?”

She shook her head.

“No. I think this is only the beginning.”

He wanted to say something but found no words. She remained silent too. That evening, there was more silence between them than ever before.

When Mei Lin returned home, the streets seemed even emptier to her than usual. The entrance smelled of dampness and other people's lives. Her mother, as always, sat by the window; her father did not leave his room. She walked quietly into the kitchen, poured herself some water, and sank on a stool.

*I don't know where my home is. I don't know who I am. I am between two countries, between two languages, between Damansky and Zhenbao Dao, between the past and the future. I am like water flowing through cracks, not knowing where to stop. I am like a letter that doesn't reach the addressee. I am like a ghost no one notices... Sometimes it seems to me that all this is a dream. That I will wake up, and everything will be as before: school, books, children's laughter, spring rain outside the window. But I don't wake up. I only listen to the water dripping in the sink, the trains clattering outside the window, someone whispering in the dark: "Don't speak. Don't ask. Forget."*

Meanwhile, the night outside the window had thickened to such a degree that it was no longer possible to distinguish where one country ended and the other began.

## Chapter Two

That evening, Beijing was particularly gray. The air hung motionless, as if the city were holding its breath, waiting for something that could not fail to happen.

Morozov was driving Mei Lin home — for the last time. The car crawled slowly along the empty road, where there were neither people nor sounds, only rare streetlamps illuminating puddles and scraps of old newspapers.

The cabin smelled of tobacco and something else — something that always remained between them, elusive, like the memory of a foreign country. They hardly spoke. Everything that could be said had already been said. Everything that could not remain inside.

"You could leave with me," Morozov said quietly, without looking at her. "It would be easier for you in the Union. I would help. They are expelling me anyway. Persona non grata. Even sounds inhuman."

"I cannot," she replied. "My parents are here. I cannot abandon them."

He nodded, not arguing. He knew it was the truth. And he knew that arguing was pointless.

They drove on, and the city outside the window seemed alien, as if they both were no longer here, but in some other time, in another life.

"Stop here, please," Mei Lin suddenly said as they passed a wasteland where they had once begun building a new block, but now only concrete slabs and rusty rebar remained. "I will walk from here."

Morozov stopped the car. She opened the door and stepped out without looking back. He watched her walk across the wasteland, small, fragile, almost transparent in the headlights. Then she stopped, and he realized: she was waiting for him to leave.

He slowly pulled away, not looking back, not knowing if he would ever see her again. In the rearview mirror, she was no longer visible — only darkness and emptiness.

Mei Lin stood in the middle of the wasteland. There was not a single window around, not a single person, only the black sky, without a single star, and rare lights on the horizon. She stood listening to the car leaving, listening to everything that had been her life leaving.

Inside, it was empty. No fear, no tears, no hope. Only a silence resembling death.

And suddenly, she screamed.

The scream tore out of her unexpectedly — sharp, hoarse, alien. She screamed as she had never screamed in her life. She screamed into the black sky, into the concrete, into the void, into herself. She screamed for all the years, for all the words, for everything she hadn't said, for everything she hadn't done, for everything she had failed to save.

The scream was long, desperate, almost bestial. It did not sound like a human voice — rather like the voice of someone who can no longer be human.

Then she fell silent.

The silence returned, even deeper than before. Mei Lin stood, breathing heavily, staring into the black, soundless sky, where there was still not a single star.

And only somewhere far away, deep in the city, water continued to drip — as if time had still not decided where to flow next.

### Chapter Three

The train sped westward, through boundless Siberia, where forest succeeded forest, and it seemed nothing else existed here, nor ever would.

Morozov stood by the window, smoking, gazing out in the hope of seeing at least some sign of human life. The compartment reeked of tobacco, sour caviar, iron, and something else — melancholy, perhaps, or simply exhaustion.

He thought about Mei Lin. About how she stood in the wasteland, didn't turn around, didn't say goodbye, only said: "I will walk from here." Would he ever see her again? Unlikely. *Persona non grata* — that was what his status was called now. What a word, he thought, like a brand on the forehead. *Persona non grata*. Even sounds un-Russian. An expellee.

In the next compartment, someone was humming a foolish *chastushka*:

*Damansky Isle is Zhenbao Dao,  
The world is scarred by war and Mao.  
Damansky Isle — now called Zhenbao,*

*Comrade Mao sits drinking cacao.*

*On Damansky — our blood is shed,  
Yet the Chinese push ahead.  
Mao and Brezhnev in a row —  
Who will bury whom below.*

He stubbed out his cigarette, looked at his hands — alien, as if not his own. He remembered how Lin had looked at him for the last time — calmly, almost lifelessly. As if everything inside her had already burned out.

And suddenly — against the backdrop of the Siberian twilight — memory snatched out a completely different, almost forgotten episode.

Beijing. Summer. Heat that made the air hazy. He saw her for the first time in the director's office — young, with a straight back, in a simple dark dress, with thin, almost transparent hands. She smiled at him — not at him, but at everyone at once, but for some reason, he decided it was only for him.

Back then, everything seemed simple: documents, instructions, blueprints — and unexpectedly this voice, soft, with a slight accent, and a gaze that held something elusively kindred.

He remembered how she tucked a strand of hair behind her ear, how she looked at him when translating another phrase, as if between the lines there was something else, something that could not be said aloud.

The memory was short, like a flash, but it made him feel even colder. Everything that was then — alive, real — now remained somewhere back there, thousands of kilometers away, beyond the Amur, beyond a border that could no longer be crossed.

The compartment was stuffy. He went out into the corridor, walked through the carriage where someone was already snoring, someone was quietly arguing about politics, mentioning Brezhnev and Prague almost in a whisper, and someone was drinking vodka from aluminum mugs.

“Men, mind if I join you?” he asked, and no one objected.

“What are we drinking to?” someone asked.

“To the return,” said Morozov. “To the Motherland. To the fact that I was expelled from China.”

“Persona non grata,” he added, and everyone laughed, not understanding what was funny about it.

He poured himself a drink, downed it, and chased it with bread.

“And my wife — she was Sokolova before marriage,” he suddenly said, “but Morozova suits the Urals better.”

“Sokolova?” someone asked again. “A good name.”

“Good,” Morozov agreed. “But Morozova is stronger. For winter, for Siberia, for all of this.”

He drank, looked out the window where only his own reflection stared back, and added, as if casually:

“And they also gave me a rank here. Colonel. Just like that. Now, maybe they'll send me on a mission again. Somewhere warm. To Colombia, for example.”

“To Colombia?” the neighbors laughed. “Wow!”

“Why not,” said Morozov, “they say everyone drinks cacao there. And the coffee is good. Being a Colonel there will probably be easier.”

They drank more, talked about life, about wives, about children, about how everything changes and nothing changes. Morozov listened, nodded, looked out the window where only he was reflected — tired, alien, with a new rank and an old sorrow.

And the train went further and further, and the night outside the window was as boundless as the road on which he was returning home.

Sometimes it seemed to him that he was no longer a person, but simply a passenger between stations, between countries, between the past and the future. Everything that was real remained there, where now no one waits for a call from the Colonel.

And only somewhere in the darkness, behind the glass, the river occasionally flashed by — black as memory, and just as cold.

## Chapter Four

Decades later, when new blocks of Beijing had risen on the sites of old wastelands, Sergei Morozov returned to this city, now with a diplomatic passport, with gray at his temples, and a weariness in his eyes that neither his uniform nor his smile could hide.

He returned not for medals and not for memories — he returned for what had been lost, for what had no name but would not let him go in Sverdlovsk, nor in Warsaw, nor in long dreams where it still smelled of jasmine and tea.

Beijing met him differently. The city was different: the streets had become wider, the cars louder, and the sky lower. Old houses had vanished, just as dreams vanish when one wakes up too early. On the site of the factory, where it once smelled of iron and machine oil, now stood a shopping center with mirrored windows. No one remembered that trucks for the army were once built here; no one remembered either him or her.

He wandered these streets as if through a labyrinth whose exits had long since been sealed. He asked at the embassy, at the archives, at the old library where it once smelled of books and other people's lives. He looked for her name in lists, in telephone directories, in yellowed documents, but found only empty lines, only strange faces, only indifference.

“Mei Lin?” asked a young employee at the library, not looking up from her computer. “No, we have no record of such a person. Perhaps you have the name wrong?”

He tried to find at least someone who might remember her — the Russian language teacher, the translator, the woman with thin hands and a quiet voice. But everyone who might have remembered had already left, died, disappeared, dissolved in the stream of time like raindrops on asphalt.

Sometimes it seemed to him that he was seeking not a person, but a shadow, not a name, but an echo. He went into the old school, where it once smelled of chalk and children's voices, and looked at the empty classrooms where new portraits, new slogans, new rules now hung. He stood by the window, looking at the courtyard where plums once bloomed, guessing: everything that was, is gone. Everything that was, will not return.

In the evenings, he sat in his hotel room, drinking tea, looking at the city lights, and thinking that perhaps he had only dreamt it all. Perhaps there was no Mei Lin, no evening conversations, no wasteland. Perhaps all this was just an old photograph someone had forgotten in a stranger's suitcase.

One evening, when the city had already begun to glow with neon, Morozov finally found one of his old acquaintances — Lao Zhang, a former engineer from the factory where they once worked. Zhang had aged, become stooped, and spoke slowly, with long pauses, as if every word had to be pulled from the depths of memory.

“Mei Lin?” he asked again, looking thoughtfully into his cup of tea. “Yes, I remember such a one. She was quiet, always with a book. After you were expelled, she wasn't seen anymore either. They said her parents took her somewhere, and then...” he shrugged. “Many were taken away back then. Much is forgotten, Comrade Colonel. Everything changes.”

They sat in a small tea house that smelled of jasmine and old wood. Outside the window, rain was falling, and drops trickled down the clouded glass like tears down a stranger's face.

“Everything changes,” Morozov repeated. “Only the tea remains the same.”

He nodded, not knowing what else to say. He looked at Lao Zhang's hands — as old as his own — and thought that perhaps all this really happened long ago, in another life, in another country, in another city.

That night he had a dream.

He was young again, standing once more at the entrance to some old school where it smelled of chalk and rain. Her voice sounded in the corridor — quiet as a whisper, and he could not make out a single word. He walked through empty corridors, looking for her, calling her by name, but instead of an answer, he heard only the rustle of leaves falling somewhere in the darkness. He opened the door to a classroom — and saw that only shadows sat at the desks, and someone had written a name on the blackboard, but it was impossible to read — the letters were blurred by water.

He woke up at dawn, when the city was still sleeping, and stared for a long time at the ceiling, trying to remember what was a dream and what was life.

Everything that was, is gone. Everything that was, will not return.

And only the rain outside the window continued to drizzle.

## Part Three

### Chapter One

That year, spring arrived early in the Forbidden City. The palaces were imbued with the scent of damp earth and old lacquer, and the ponds reflected the faded heavens.

The Emperor, whose name has long been forgotten but whose decrees are still preserved in silk scrolls, was receiving a new concubine.

She was led into a hall where the walls were painted with cranes and pines, and the floors were as slippery as water beneath one's feet. She walked slowly, not raising her eyes, in a dress of the finest Goryeo silk, the color of young foliage. Bracelets chimed upon her wrists, and this sound was the only thing disturbing the silence.

Servants and eunuchs stood along the walls, motionless. There was neither curiosity nor pity in their gaze. All that was transpiring was part of a ritual repeated from age to age.

"They say she is from Goryeo," the maids whispered in the corridor, hiding their smiles behind their sleeves. "She has a strange name, not like ours."

Yeon-ju," the senior eunuch clarified. "In Chinese, it means Beautiful Melody."

"Beautiful Melody..." a young maid repeated, as if tasting the alien word. "The Emperor will like it."

"The Emperor likes everything new," another eunuch noted. "But the new quickly becomes old."

The Emperor sat upon a throne of jade, massive and cold, featuring carved dragons with eyes inlaid with jasper. His raiment was of burgundy silk, embroidered

with golden clouds and phoenixes. His countenance was calm, almost serene, yet his eyes reflected interest — not in the woman, but in how she held her head, how she stepped, how she did not look at him.

She stopped at the foot of the throne and bowed — slowly, with dignity, as she had been taught in distant Kaesong. In this bow, there was no fear or submission, only learned grace.

At a sign from the Emperor, a servant brought a tray with a teapot and two porcelain cups painted with blue clouds. Yeon-ju, without raising her eyes, gracefully took the teapot, and her slender fingers, adorned with silver rings, moved so fluidly that it seemed she was not pouring tea, but playing an invisible instrument. She presented the cup to the Emperor, bowing slightly lower than etiquette demanded, and at that moment, the courtiers watching the ceremony held their breath.

There was neither haste nor bustle in her movements — only flawless precision and beauty. The porcelain cup in her hands seemed an extension of herself: fragile, flawless, almost unreal. She resembled a porcelain doll, created not for life, but for contemplation.

The Emperor took the cup, never taking his gaze from her. A silence hung in the hall, in which one could hear water dripping in the garden behind the wall.

“She is so beautiful,” whispered one of the senior maids when the girl was led away to her new quarters. “But beauty is only the beginning.”

“Beauty is fleeting,” grumbled a eunuch.

That evening, as the sun set behind the palace roofs, candles were lit in the Empress's chambers. The name of the new concubine was discussed in hushed tones, as one discusses a change in the wind or a new variety of tea. No one knew how her fate would unfold, but everyone understood: in this palace, it is not words that decide everything, but silence.

## Chapter Two

In the summer months, when lotuses blossomed in the garden behind the palace, Yeon-ju was often seen on the stone paths between the ponds.

She walked slowly, in a dress of the finest silk, the color of morning mist, and her every step was measured, like a movement in a dance. Sometimes she stopped by an old plum tree, gently touching the petals, as if checking whether it was a dream. Her fingers were thin, almost transparent, and in their movement there was something of a faience figurine, so fragile one dared not touch it.

Sometimes she tucked a stray lock of hair behind her ear — with a gesture that held neither coquetry nor fuss, only a habitual concern for order. Courtiers noticed: when she did this, a barely perceptible smile appeared on her face, like that of a person remembering something known only to them.

The Emperor came to the garden in the evenings. He was accompanied by eunuchs and guards, but upon entering the garden, he remained alone. He watched as Yeon-ju poured him tea — just as flawlessly as on the day they met — and how she, without raising her eyes, presented the cup, bowing slightly lower than etiquette demanded. There was neither fear nor haste in her movements, only precision and beauty.

The Emperor accepted the cup with both hands, his gaze lingering on her fingers, on the curve of her wrist, on the delicate line of her neck. Sometimes he held his breath, as if afraid to startle the fragile balance of that moment. He spoke no idle words, but a softness appeared in his face that the courtiers rarely noticed. Sometimes he nodded slowly, as if agreeing with something known only to him.

Servants and maids, standing in the shadows, spoke among themselves:

“The Emperor has become quieter, and visits the garden more often,” they whispered in the corridors. “He listens to her speak, as if her voice holds something no one else possesses.”

“He smiles when she serves him tea,” remarked the senior eunuch. “That is a rarity.”

“They say he has begun to linger longer in the garden,” added a maid. “Sometimes they simply remain silent, and yet it is clear he does not wish to leave.”

“She asks no unnecessary questions,” whispered one of the senior maids. “That is wise.”

In the garden, amidst lotuses and stones, Yeon-ju continued her slow dance. She touched the flowers, fixed her hair, looked at the water reflecting the clouds and the palace roofs. The Emperor watched her without intervening, as one watches a rare bird or the play of light on the water's surface. In his gaze, there was neither passion nor anxiety — only quiet admiration and a peace that rarely visited his heart.

In the evenings, when the sun set behind the walls of the Forbidden City, the garden grew quiet. Only the rustle of silk, only the light chime of bracelets on her wrists, only the reflection of the moon in the water — and not a single word that could alter the order of things.

“They say she is with child,” meanwhile, whispers ran through the corridors. “The Empress is not pleased.”

“The Empress is never pleased,” someone replied. “But she knows how to wait.”

In the Empress's chambers, this news was met with silence. The Empress did not change her expression, but that very evening, she ordered all the maids in the concubine's chambers to be replaced.

## Chapter Three

On the day it all began, the garden was particularly quiet. The air hung motionless, and even the birds seemed warier than usual.

Yeon-ju, walking along the alley, accidentally brushed against a branch of a flowering plum with her sleeve. The branch broke almost soundlessly, and several white petals fell onto her shoulder and into her hair. She stopped, looked at the broken shoot, but made no attempt to pick it up. The maids watching from afar exchanged glances: in their world, such signs did not go unnoticed.

“It is a bad omen,” whispered one of the senior maids, adjusting the folds of her dark robe.

“Last year, when the old concubine died, a branch broke too,” replied another, young, with a face that knew no wrinkles yet.

“Everything returns,” added a eunuch passing by, and his voice was almost inaudible.

That same evening, the Emperor felt a weakness. His face grew paler, his movements slower. Physicians came one after another, bringing boxes of powders and bundles of herbs. The chambers smelled of burnt incense and bitter infusions. The Emperor lay on a jade bed, covered with a quilt embroidered with blue dragons. His breathing became heavy, and his gaze unfocused.

The Empress sat at the head of the bed, her expression unchanged. She was dressed in a dark blue robe with golden threads, her hair arranged in an intricate coiffure adorned with silver pins. Servants moved about the hall almost soundlessly, lowering their heads and avoiding eye contact.

Twilight reigned in the palace corridors. Scrolls depicting mountains and cranes hung on the walls; porcelain vases with fading flowers stood in the corners. Eunuchs and maids whispered, trying not to catch the eyes of their seniors.

“The Emperor is ill,” they said, hiding their faces behind their sleeves.

“The Empress does not leave his side for a step.”

“And the concubine is not allowed in,” sighed a young maid. “She is like a shadow now.”

“Such is the order,” replied the senior eunuch. “Order is more important than feelings.”

Silence reigned in Yeon-ju's chambers. Her maids whispered by the doors, occasionally casting anxious glances at their mistress. She sat by the window, in a white dress, looking at the garden where the broken plum branch lay on the ground. Her hands were folded on her lap, her movements slow and precise, like those of a zaju actor.

When the Emperor died, the palace plunged into an even deeper silence. Eunuchs and guards stood by the doors, motionless. The Empress gave a brief order without raising her voice. The maids dressed Yeon-ju in white, as custom dictates, and led her out of her chambers. She did not resist, did not cry; only once did her gaze linger on the garden, where plums no longer bloomed.

“The Empress ordered her to be buried with the Emperor,” whispers echoed in the shadows of the columns.

“It always happens so,” replied a eunuch indifferently. “There should be no heirs from other women.”

“And if it had been a boy?”

“All the more so if it were a boy.”

The procession moved slowly along the stone-paved paths, past ponds and pavilions. On that day, there was neither wind nor sun. Only the rustle of silk, only the dull thud of the palanquin against the slabs, only the indifferent faces of servants and eunuchs.

In the evening, when the gates of the tomb were closed, no one wept. Everything was carried out as order dictates. The following year, when new plums bloomed once again in the palace, no one remembered her name.

## Part Four

### Chapter One

The school greeted him with silence.

The corridors were no longer the same — the walls repainted, notices about English clubs on the board, and the staff room now smelled not only of chalk but also of coffee from a new machine. Everything seemed slightly alien, as if he had returned not home, but to a museum where exhibits were arranged not by memory, but by instruction.

New children sat in the classrooms — different faces, different gazes, different questions. They regarded him with curiosity — and a hint of irony.

“Why do we need Russian, Comrade Teacher? Everyone learns English now.”

“Even an enemy must be known — and understood,” he replied, trying to smile. “But, to be honest, I didn't start learning Russian because of politics. I learned it because of one person. Because of a teacher who once read poems to us. I learned it even when I was in a labor camp.”

“And what is the most important thing in a language?” asked a girl by the window.

“The most important thing is not the language,” he said. “The most important thing is what the author feels. The most important thing is what you want to say when all words have already been spoken.”

He opened an old, tattered book, the very one Mei Lin had once held in her hands. Turning the pages, he suddenly felt time contracting, as if no time at all separated the past from the present.

“I want to read you some poems,” he said. “My teacher once read them to us. Perhaps you won't understand all the words, but maybe you will understand the essence.”

He began to read. His voice was calm, but in every word sounded the memory of what had been lost, of what could not be returned. Outside the window, rain was falling, and drops trickled down the glass like lines that cannot be erased.

A sleep broken by a blast,  
 Someone's death, someone's gasp  
 — Repeats again...  
 Burnt flesh, and the earth, like a swing,  
 — Is swaying...  
 No retreat, and no forgetting,  
 — It remains...

He read, and the classroom was quiet. Even those who usually whispered were now listening without interrupting. He closed the book, looked at the students — and suddenly saw something familiar in their eyes: expectation, longing, hope.

In that moment, something changed in the classroom. Someone awkwardly dropped a book — and this sound rang out so sharply that everyone flinched, as if waking from a long dream. But no one laughed, no one said a word. Even when the bell rang, announcing the end of the lesson, the students sat silently for some time, not getting up, as if they did not want to let go of what they had just heard.

It had all happened already: this classroom, this sunset, and even his loneliness, which no longer seemed personal, but part of some ancient, inexorable history.

He knew that all of this was predestined: his departure, the school's vanishing, and even this evening, with the sun setting as if bidding farewell not only to him but to everything that had ever been here.

And many years later, sitting in the emptied old school, he remembered the day when he saw her for the last time.

## Chapter Two

That evening in the old school was particularly quiet.

Outside the windows, excavators continued clawing at the earth, preparing for demolition — and it seemed the city itself was expelling everything it remembered of the past. Chen Wang sat in the empty classroom, where it once smelled of chalk and children's voices, and remembered the day he had never been able to forget.

It was in the camp. There, time did not pass — it dripped, like water from a rusted pipe, and every day was like the one before. One morning, the foreman came and said they were tasked with burying several executed enemies of the people. No one asked who they were. No one asked what for. No one was surprised.

They dug a mass grave beyond the camp fence, in the damp, heavy earth. Then a truck arrived, and bodies began to be unloaded from it — like shapeless, heavy sacks — faceless, nameless. They were dumped into the pit, the workers trying not to look, not to think, not to remember. Everything happened quickly, almost neatly, as if it were ordinary work — no scarier than hauling bricks or peeling potatoes.

When his turn came, Chen Wang took hold of one of the bodies. It was lighter than he expected. He looked up — and saw her. Mei Lin. Even in death she was beautiful, only now her face had become completely transparent, and her wide-open eyes — even blacker, even more indifferent than ever. He did not scream. He did not cry. He felt nothing — only weariness, only emptiness, only the cold that had not let him go for many years.

He looked at her as one looks at a stranger's photograph found on the street: with surprise, with disbelief, with that strange indifference that comes when everything inside has already burned out. He gently lowered her body into the pit, as one might lower a paper boat onto still water — far too gently for such a place — and immediately forgot that it was someone's boat, someone's voice, someone's life.

That day he spoke not another word.

And now, years later, he sat in the deserted school, where everything was ready for disappearance. He found a piece of chalk on the windowsill, went to the blackboard, and with a trembling hand began to write those poems he had been writing all his life — since the first meeting with Mei Lin, since the first lesson, since the first glance.

These were the lines that remained when everything else had vanished.

He wrote slowly, letter by letter, as though he were not just reviving words, but memory itself. Outside the window, it was already getting dark, and in this twilight, it seemed the classroom was filling with shadows — shadows of those who had once studied, loved, waited, lost, and been forgotten here.

When he finished, he stood at the blackboard for a long time, unable to tear himself away from what was written. Then he placed the chalk on the windowsill, ran his hand over an old desk — and walked out, without looking back.

## Epilogue

*I am all in you, I am all with you,  
All predestined by fate, it's true,  
As if I am someone else entirely,  
As if I am a stranger completely.*

*But you too are no longer the same,  
And darkened now is that hand  
Which tenderly caressed me  
When, disregarding those near,  
You gave yourself to me.*

*But I know: the day will come,  
When I am replaced by a shadow,  
When snows cover everything,  
And only a beam from afar  
Unexpectedly finds you suddenly,*

*And again you will go there,  
And again you will find me,  
And again we will be together,  
We will open the door, enter that house,  
And only candles will be there,  
And God will come out to meet us.*

*We will walk this path together,  
Stumbling, laughing, and crying,  
Hiding our eyes from each other,  
Entangled in this damn quest.*

*In this city full of flattery,  
Where love means nothing at all,  
Where no one hides anything,  
This is the place for our revenge.*

*We will walk this path together...*

## Postscript

Mei Lin's eyes were empty and wide open. She stood by the wall in a faded robe, her hands folded over her belly, as if protecting something she did not possess. Her face held no tears, no feelings, no malice, no regrets. Only weariness, only numbness, only the indifference that follows pain endured too long. She was a shell, the shell of a girl who once danced to songs in a language now so distant.

The officer behind her muttered something — words about enemies of the people, about Soviet spies, about duty and justice. His voice was hollow, like the sound of rain outside a window, and bore no relation to her. She did not listen. Words no longer carried weight. They were merely sounds drifting upward into the starless, still-dark sky. She was no longer here.

When he finished, the soldier beside him worked the bolt. The metallic click pierced the silence, but not her.

In that instant, which should have been the last, Mei Lin saw not darkness, but light. Not life flashing before her eyes, but an endless field. A field studded with birches. There was no pain there. There was no fear there. Only lightness.

It was as if she were sinking into soft, warm water. As if all the threads that once bound her to the world had suddenly snapped at once. She was lighter than air, more transparent than glass. She was dissolving, becoming part of this light, this field, this water. And somewhere very far away, she heard music — not the kind that played on the radio, but the kind played for her in childhood. And she saw the shadow of a garden that had long since vanished, and in that shadow — a broken plum branch falling into the void.

The shot tore through the air. Birds took flight from the branches, not knowing where to fly. Mei Lin's body slumped against the clay wall — like the old, gauzy headscarf her mother once wore. Her eyes remained open, gazing into the starless sky.

At last, silence.

## Glossary

**The Great Helmsman** (伟大的舵手 / Wěidà de Duòshǒu) — An honorary title for Mao Zedong (1893–1976), Chairman of the Communist Party of China. It symbolized his role as the one “steering the ship of the revolution.” During the Cultural Revolution, his portraits hung everywhere, and his quotes (from the “Little Red Book”) were memorized. His image was sacralized, and any dissent was brutally punished.

**Beijing Automobile Works** (北京汽车制造厂有限公司 / Běijīng Qìchē Zhìzào Chǎng) — One of the flagships of Sino-Soviet friendship in the 1950s. Built with USSR assistance and equipped with Soviet machinery, it produced trucks under Soviet licenses (the famous “Jiefang” or “Liberation” trucks, copies of the ZIS-150). It was a place where Soviet specialists (like Morozov) and Chinese translators (like Mei Lin) worked together. After the split with the USSR, it became a symbol of China's now independent yet still technology-dependent industry. Today, it is BAW (Beijing Automobile Works Co., Ltd.).

**Nanjing** (南京 / Nánjīng) — A former capital of China under several imperial dynasties, as well as the capital of the Republic of China. In December 1937, Nanjing was captured by Japanese troops, resulting in the “Nanjing Massacre.” The violence continued for six weeks, starting on December 13, 1937, the day the Japanese took the city. During this period, soldiers of the Imperial Japanese Army killed an estimated 40,000 to over 300,000 Chinese civilians and disarmed soldiers, and committed widespread rape and looting.

**National Library of China** (中国国家图书馆 / Zhōngguó Guójiā Túshūguǎn) — The largest library in the PRC. Founded in 1909 as the “Library of the Imperial University of Peking” with the approval of the throne and the government of the last Qing dynasty. After the Xinhai Revolution of 1911, the Imperial University was renamed Peking University, and in August 1912, the library was transferred to the Ministry of Education and opened to the public. In 1916, it was designated as the country's main library. In 1928, it received the status of the National Library.

**Little Red Book** (毛主席语录 / Máo Zhǔxí Yǔlù) — A red booklet containing selected quotations from Mao Zedong. It was not merely a book, but a symbol of faith and a tool of the Cultural Revolution era. It was carried everywhere, waved at rallies, and its quotes were memorized. Citing Mao's “sacred texts” was a mandatory ritual and proof of loyalty.

**Garden / Plum Branch (Meihua)** — In Chinese culture, the garden symbolizes harmony, nature, memory, and loss. It is often associated with seclusion, beauty, and the cyclical nature of time, especially when combined with blossoming plums. The plum blossom (Meihua — 梅花) is an important symbol representing resilience, purity, beauty, longevity, and rebirth. It is also associated with spring, the beginning of the new year, and hope.

**Kuomintang** (中国国民党 / Zhōngguó Guómíndǎng) — A conservative political party of the Republic of China. It was the sole ruling party of China from 1928 to 1949 but gradually lost control during the struggle against the Japanese Empire in the Second Sino-Japanese War and against the Communist Party of China during the Civil War. In December 1949, the Kuomintang retreated to Taiwan after being defeated by the communists.

**Peking University** (北京大学 / Běijīng Dàxué) — Peking University played a significant role during the Cultural Revolution. It became one of the first centers of the student movement where the Red Guards were active. Between 1966 and 1976, the university, like other educational institutions, was embroiled in political campaigns and clashes caused by the revolution.

**Dazibao** (大字报 / Dàzìbào) — Handwritten “big-character posters” used during the Cultural Revolution to publicly denounce “enemies of the people” and

propagate Mao Zedong's ideology. They often contained lists of enemies and slogans calling for the struggle against the “Four Olds.”

**Nie Yuanzi** (聂元梓) — An assistant lecturer at Peking University who, in May 1966, wrote a dazibao that became one of the first and most famous critical publications of the Cultural Revolution. Her poster, broadcast on the radio, is considered one of the signals for the start of the full-scale Cultural Revolution, calling for a fight against “monsters and demons.” Her own fate is a vivid example of the ruthlessness of that era: after the fall of her patron (Mao's wife, Jiang Qing) in 1976, she was arrested, convicted, and spent many years in prison.

**Red Guards** (红卫兵 / Hóngwèibīng) — “Defenders of the revolution” — primarily students and schoolchildren organized into units at the beginning of the Cultural Revolution (1966). Their red armbands became a symbol of the chaos and violence of those years. Inspired by Mao's calls to “Bombard the Headquarters” (criticize party leadership), they ransacked institutions, humiliated “counter-revolutionaries” and “bourgeois academics,” and burned books and artworks. Their rebellious energy, directed against the “old world,” soon became uncontrollable even for the authorities, leading to bloody clashes between factions and their subsequent disbandment and dispersal to the countryside for “re-education.”

**Cultural Revolution** (文化大革命 / Wénhuà Dàgéming) — Officially the “Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution.” A campaign initiated by Mao Zedong in 1966 that lasted until his death in 1976. Formally aimed at fighting “revisionism” and “bourgeois elements” in the party and society, it actually led to large-scale purges, persecution of the intelligentsia, destruction of cultural heritage, and enormous social upheavals.

**Peking Opera Costumes and Scenery** (京剧 / Jīngjù) — Peking Opera is a traditional form of Chinese theater combining music, singing, dance, and acrobatics. During the Cultural Revolution, it was declared “bourgeois” and “feudal” and subjected to persecution; scenery and costumes were publicly burned as symbols of the struggle against “old culture.”

**Agitation Trains, The Great Wall, and Pigsties** — In the autumn of 1966, the Ministry of Transport allocated free trains for Red Guards to travel around the country to “exchange experiences.” These trips were part of a large-scale campaign to spread Mao's ideology. In their fanatical struggle against the “old world,” Red Guards ransacked and burned temples and monasteries, and even demolished part of the Great Wall, using the bricks to build “more necessary” pigsties.

**Four Olds** (四旧 / Sìjiù) — An ideological concept of the Cultural Revolution calling for the destruction of old ideas, old culture, old customs, and old habits, which were considered obstacles to building a new society. This led to the destruction of cultural treasures, book burnings, and repression against the intelligentsia.

**Wuhan and Guilin Incidents** — An armed conflict in the Chinese city of Wuhan in July 1967 at the height of the Cultural Revolution between two opposing factions: the “Million Heroes” and the “Wuhan Workers' General Headquarters” (mainly unskilled workers and Red Guards). After the incident, when the army openly opposed the Red Guards, their weakness became apparent. By the autumn of 1967, Mao himself used the army against the Red Guards. Sometimes the Red Guards resisted. For instance, on August 19, after a long positional war, 30,000 soldiers and peasant militia entered the city of Guilin and, over six days, exterminated almost all the Red Guards in the city.

**Zhenbao Dao** (珍宝岛) / Damansky Island — A small island on the Ussuri River (Wusuli Jiang), which became the site of an armed border conflict between the USSR and the PRC in March 1969. The clashes, where dozens of young soldiers from both sides died, became the crack that turned the recent “brothers forever” into enemies. The dispute was resolved by the river itself, which changed its course and joined the island to the Chinese bank.

**Forbidden City** (紫禁城 / Zǐjìnchéng) — The imperial palace in Beijing, the center of power in China from the 15th to the early 20th century, symbolizing the rituals and hierarchy of imperial power, a complex system of ceremonies and traditions regulating court life, including sacrifices, funeral rites, and the hierarchy of concubines.

**Goryeo** (高丽 / Gāoli) / Kaesong (开城) — The mention of a concubine from Kaesong, the capital of Goryeo (modern Korea), highlights the historical connection between China and neighboring states, as well as the vulnerability of foreigners at court. Yeon-ju is also a reference to the real practice of sending Korean girls to Chinese harems as “tribute.”

**Re-education Camps** (劳动改造 / Láodòng Gǎizào) — A system of forced labor camps in the PRC (Laogai), where people declared enemies of the people or those in need of “re-education” through labor, including former Red Guards, were sent.

#### **Poetry Notes:**

The opening lines of the poem read by Mei Lin and Chen Wang to their students:

*A sleep broken by a blast...*

Are a variation on lines from the poem “Requiem” by Belarusian poet Vladimir Danilyuk.

The final lines of the poem read by Mei Lin:

*And what of those who stepped beyond the brink?..*

Are a variation on lines from the poem “Spring Offensive” by English poet Wilfred Owen.



## Book Two. Paths

*“They told me that this road would lead me to the ocean of death, and I turned back halfway. And ever since, crooked, blind, winding paths have stretched out before me...”*

— Yosano Akiko

### Prologue

Years later, on a shopping center parking lot scorching under the midday sun, where the smells of asphalt and exhaust fumes mingled into the thick, stagnant air, Xia Desheng saw her and realized that time is not a river, but a closed circle, and that some meetings are predestined not to start something new, but to remind us of what never managed to end.

She stood by the rear door of a small white van marked “*Yi Pin Guo*,” trying to lift a heavy cardboard box. The box would not yield, slipping from her hands, and in this simple, clumsy movement lay so much bone-deep weariness that Desheng felt an almost physical pain. Tan Xiangliu. She had hardly changed: the same slender line of the neck, the same dark hair gathered in a careless knot from which an unruly strand had escaped and stuck to her damp temple. She brushed it away with the back of her hand — a sharp, practiced gesture that held nothing of the schoolgirl who used to laugh with her head thrown back, but only endless, mundane labor.

He could have walked over. He could have helped with the box, called out her name, smiled casually, asked how things were. But his feet seemed rooted to the asphalt. Because in that very second, when she frowned and gripped the box again, time cracked for him and flowed backward, dragging him into that day, many years ago, when the three of them — he, she, and Wu Wenbo — were still inseparable, like three threads woven into a single knot. That day which was supposed to be just a day, but became the beginning of the end of their shared story. They did not yet know then that their every step only entangled the paths of their own destiny, that every truth found would poison them like a slow venom, and that the knot of their friendship had already begun to unravel, dooming them to the very loneliness they were so desperately trying to escape.

He watched as Xiangliu, finally managing the box, slammed the van door shut with effort and, leaning her back against it, closed her eyes for a moment, as if trying to catch a second of silence in this roaring world. And in this fleeting peace of hers, in her slumped shoulders and slightly parted lips, Desheng saw not just fatigue, but the echo of that old story, the shadow of the road from which they had all turned away, each choosing their own path.

To approach her now would mean colliding with what he feared most: with the question to which he still had no answer. With the past that continued to live inside

him like a shard. He was afraid — not of her, not of her tired gaze, but that he would see in that gaze the reflection of his own fear and his own defeat. She seemed completely alien to Desheng — and at the same time painfully familiar, like a forgotten melody heard in a dream.

She did not notice him. She got into the car and drove away, dissolving into the shimmering haze of the Beijing afternoon. And he remained standing in the parking lot, realizing that all of this had already happened — this meeting, and this flight, and this bitterness — and all of this would inevitably repeat again, because in some stories the finale is written at the very beginning, and the heroes are doomed to eternally return to the point where their roads parted forever.

## Chapter One

On that day, the afternoon light lay on the tables of the *Yi Pin Guo* restaurant in thick, honeyed layers; dust motes dancing lazily in its rays seemed as ancient as hieroglyphs. The air was dense with smells: the subtle, almost ghostly aroma of jasmine from the teapot vied with the spicy heaviness of star anise and hot oil drifting from the kitchen, where someone's future life sizzled on woks. Tan Xiangliu laughed and pushed her empty bowl away.

“You, Wenbo, are a genius,” she said, her voice holding a warm, friendly mockery. “Dropping out of the math department to dig around in this internet of yours. My father says it's like catching wind with a sieve.”

“Wind is expensive these days,” Wu Wenbo shot back without looking up from his smartphone, his fingers flying across the screen with predatory precision. “And math... that's for those with plenty of time.”

“He doesn't even have time to eat his rice,” Xia Desheng chimed in, nodding at his friend's untouched portion.

He said it, but he wasn't looking at Wenbo; he was looking at Xiangliu. At how the light tangled in her hair, at the delicate line of her wrist as she reached for the teapot. She was here, wholly — in this moment, in this scent, in this light. She was real.

*I look at Xiangliu and think: here she is, close by, and everything is fine. I listen to Wenbo and think: here he is, a friend, and everything is right. I am here now, and at the same time, I am at school, in the back row, and Teacher Chen is saying something about the Russian winter, and I am looking not at the blackboard, but at the back of her head — Xiangliu's — and thinking that the Russian winter probably smells just like her hair, like something clean and cold, something that never exists here. She laughs, and the sound of her laugh is like drops falling into a deep well, and I try to count how many ripples spread across the water, but I lose count, always lose count...*

“By the way,” Wenbo said, putting his phone down so abruptly it was as if he had read his friend’s thoughts in it. He looked at them with a blank, absent gaze. “Did you know that Teacher Chen Wang died?”

The words fell into the silence. Not into silence — into a vacuum that suddenly formed in the middle of their table, sucking out the smells, the light, and the air. Xiangliu’s laughter froze on her lips. Desheng lowered his chopsticks, and they clicked against the rim of the bowl — the only sound in a deafened world.

Died. Teacher. The word was short, dry, like stone striking stone.

“How?” Xiangliu exhaled.

“I don’t know. Last week, I think. His heart. His neighbor told me; I was passing by.”

They were silent. Desheng looked into his cup, where the last unsipped drop of tea had congealed at the bottom — dark as a pupil.

“I hope he was buried decently,” Xiangliu said quietly, looking somewhere aside, out the window, and her voice was the voice of a person trying to find a foothold in the dark. “He lived all alone, after all.”

Then she looked at them — first at Desheng, then at Wenbo.

“Maybe... maybe we should go to his apartment? Sort through his things before they just throw them onto a dump. It would be a pity.”

Desheng raised his head. This thought — simple, correct — seemed like salvation to him.

“Yes,” he said, surprised by the firmness of his own voice. “He was always somehow... not like the others. Always writing something during breaks, remember? Maybe he left some notes. It would be interesting to see.”

Wenbo shrugged, his face becoming impenetrable again. “Fine. This weekend. I’ll have time.”

“This weekend?” Xiangliu asked again.

“This weekend,” he replied.

The decision was made. The silence receded, but the air was no longer the same. Desheng took the heavy ceramic teapot and carefully, trying not to spill a drop, filled Xiangliu’s cup. The stream of tea was dark amber, and for a moment it seemed to him that he was pouring not tea, but time itself — thick, viscous. She nodded almost imperceptibly, without raising her eyes. Her fingers lay very close to the hot bowl.

He looked at her hand and thought of Teacher Chen’s hands — covered in chalk dust, with trembling fingers turning the pages of an old book. And he suddenly felt

afraid of how easily the threads of the living and the dead intertwine, and how a casually dropped phrase can trace a new, unknown path on the map of their habitual life.

## Chapter Two

The air that weekend was still and gray, like an undeveloped photograph. The “High Hong Lin” residential complex greeted them with the dreary monotony of concrete panels and blank, identical windows, and its name held a mockery, like an old, forgotten song about happiness. They walked in silence, and the sound of their footsteps on the pitted asphalt seemed inappropriately loud.

Desheng walked first, carrying a small bouquet of chrysanthemums in his hands — why, he did not know himself, it just felt right.

The door to the apartment on the seventh floor was opened by an elderly woman with a face like a crumpled map, and the smell of cheap tobacco and sleepless nights ingrained in her gray cardigan.

“Ah, it’s you — the students,” she said without surprise, as if she had been expecting them. “Good that you came. The district officer left me the key. Take whatever you need.”

She spoke in the even, tired voice of a person for whom both life and death are merely part of an endless night shift. Handing them the key, she added, looking somewhere past them into the vague gloom of the corridor:

“He died right there, in the square. On a bench. Where the plums bloom in spring. Just sat there, they say, just sat looking at the trees, and then his head fell on his chest. His heart, they say. He was a good man. Left quietly.”

They entered. The key turned in the lock with a dry, reluctant click. The apartment smelled of dust and old paper; the scent was so dense it seemed one could touch it. It was not a room, but a labyrinth constructed of books, textbooks, and old school notebooks. Shelves to the ceiling, stacks on the floor, towers on the windowsill. Books seemed to be the only furniture, the only architecture of this place. The light, filtering through the clouded glass, was dim and gave everything the appearance of an underwater kingdom where time had stopped.

They dispersed around the room, moving cautiously, as if afraid to disturb the fragile order of this chaos. Wenbo immediately headed for the desk, briskly assessing the volume of work. Xiangliu froze in the middle of the room, slowly scanning the walls of books. Desheng simply breathed in this air, absorbing it, feeling like an uninvited guest in a stranger’s universe.

“Here, I think,” Xiangliu said, pointing to a cardboard box in the corner tied with twine. On it, in the teacher’s calligraphic handwriting, a single word was inscribed: “Road.”

They sat down on the floor around the box. Wenbo cut the twine with a practiced movement. Inside, tightly packed, lay handwritten notebooks, notepads, and loose sheets. Not a single printed page. All of it — the breath of one hand. Xiangliu reached for the top notebook, but several sheets slipped out and slid across the floor. Before Desheng could move, Wenbo had already bent down, deftly gathered them, and handed them to her. Their fingers touched for a moment. Desheng looked away.

He picked up another stack; the top sheet was of thick, slightly yellowed paper. The handwriting was familiar — that same calligraphy the teacher had tried to teach them — but in the long, descending strokes of the characters, a barely perceptible tremor was felt, as if the brush had struggled against an invisible current. It was a poem. The first stanzas were written cleanly, almost flawlessly. But further down, after the ninth line, chaos began — a dense, furious web of crossed-out words, a black blackthorn in which thought had become entangled and died. And the last nine lines were crossed out altogether.

But Desheng was not looking at them. He was looking up, above the first line. There, like two sad flags over a battlefield, stood two characters. The title.

Mei Lin.

“Look,” he whispered.

Xiangliu and Wenbo leaned in. They stared silently at those two words, then at the crossed-out lines, then again at the name. It hung in the silence of the room, alien and unfamiliar.

“Mei Lin...” Xiangliu repeated quietly, and her voice sounded like a question. «Who is that? He never spoke of her.»

“Maybe it’s his daughter?” Wenbo suggested.

“Or someone he loved,” Desheng said, and was surprised himself at how easily the word slipped from his lips.

Desheng looked at these two characters and felt how this name, like a drop of ink fallen on a clean sheet, began to spread, staining everything around — the dusty room, the books, and the dim light from the window — in the color of the mystery they had just touched.

“Let’s take this,” Xiangliu said quietly. “Everything that’s left.”

Wenbo nodded. The decision was made. They left without looking back, abandoning the chrysanthemums on the windowsill — a small, forgotten offering among the books. The neighbor took the keys silently, not even asking what they had taken with them.

## Chapter Three

They stepped out of the entrance into the gray, indifferent light of day, and the silence of the teacher's apartment was replaced by the muffled hum of the city. The cardboard box, which Desheng now carried, seemed inappropriately light and at the same time impossibly heavy. They walked without speaking a word until Wenbo's phone began to buzz persistently. He pulled it out, looked at the screen, and with a sigh, rejected the call.

"It's Fang," he said, addressing everyone and no one. "She's calling for the fifth time already. Tomorrow I'll be busy. We have to go to her parents'. She says I spend more time with you than with her."

He fell awkwardly silent. There was no apology in his words, only a statement of fact — of another, parallel world demanding his presence.

"It's okay," Xiangliu said, and her voice was steady and understanding. "I'm helping my parents at the restaurant tomorrow too. On my feet all day."

"Then I'll take this to my place," Desheng said, and no one objected.

"Just don't lose it," Xiangliu said, and her voice was soft, almost caring.

"I won't," he promised.

They parted at the intersection. Wenbo quickly turned toward the subway, Xiangliu headed towards her home, and Desheng remained alone for a moment, clutching the box like a fragile vessel filled with someone else's life. He watched them go until their silhouettes dissolved in the evening light, and only then turned toward his own place.

He spent the evening in his room, where order and emptiness were the exact opposite of the teacher's dwelling. There were no mountains of books here, only textbooks neatly stacked on the table, and a computer whose dark screen reflected his own face. He set the box on the floor, sank down beside it, and began sifting through the papers.

It was not a diary. These were fragments, sketches of thoughts, drafts of feelings scrawled on pages torn from school notebooks. There were no dates, no sequence — merely islands of text in an ocean of empty time. And on several of these islands, like a master's seal on an ancient scroll, the same name was repeated. *Mei Lin.*

Desheng picked up one of these sheets. The entries on it were short, separated from each other by empty space. Each one — like a separate poem.

*Her voice opened a window onto a city that smelled of snow. She is like a twig of flowering plum. My pencil tried to catch her shadow but drew only a reflection in a puddle. Poems about war fell into silence — like raindrops on parched earth. There*

*was pain in them, not victory. I wanted to ask about her sadness, but I stayed silent. As always. But sometimes silence is the only scream.*

Desheng turned the sheet over. On the reverse side were just a few lines, written even more sparingly, as if words cost too much.

*Water drips from the roof — in every drop her voice: quiet, stubborn, relentless. Mama used to say: “The house is crying.” If the house is crying, it is alive — it hurts too.*

He picked up another scrap of paper. The entries here were even more fragmentary, like notes in the margins of someone else’s life.

*Waited for her at the gates. She left for the factory. I remained on the threshold. Mama waits for Father, who won’t return. And I wait for her, not knowing if she will return. In the library, I searched for her in books. Found only myself — someone else, a stranger. Her road left behind only ripples on the water. Iron and noise. There are no poems there. Here — only emptiness. Every book is a drop into the abyss. I am drowning in this abyss. I am not me. I am a reflection.*

Desheng put the sheets aside. He sat in the silence of his room but heard the hum of another time. These notes were like ancient *guohua* painting — a few precise strokes of ink, and the imagination fills in the rest. There was mention of a school. And a factory. But who she was, this woman with a voice like snow, remained a mystery.

The night passed unnoticed. When the first gray light touched the window, Desheng picked up his phone. He opened their group chat with Xiangliu and Wenbo — the very one where they used to arrange meetings, laugh at photos, and share trifles. His fingers typed the message on their own: “I read something. About her. About Mei Lin. He writes about the school. Our school. Maybe we try to find out something there?”

The reply from Xiangliu came almost immediately. One word: “Okay.” A message from Wenbo appeared a few minutes later. Just as short: “On Monday.”

The path was set.

## Chapter Four

The visit to the school yielded nothing.

The school had barely changed over the years: the same walls, the same smell of chalk and damp rags, only the faces in the corridors were different, and the voices seemed to sound a little louder than before. Everything here resembled the past, but was not it.

The secretary in the reception office searched for the necessary papers for a long time, but found only an old class register where Chen Wang's name was listed among the teachers, and opposite it stood a neat date — the year of his retirement.

The principal, a woman with a short haircut and an attentive gaze, listened to them silently, and then unexpectedly said:

“I was at Chen Wang's funeral. Comrade Yang Zixuan, deputy editor of *Xin Wenhua*, was there. He'd studied under Chen at the old school; they'd known each other well. I think he can help you.”

Arranging a meeting turned out to be simple: Xia Desheng, a journalism student, had attended Yang Zixuan's lectures more than once and had even asked him a question about freedom of speech once.

The *Xin Wenhua* editorial office was located in a glass tower where the air was conditioned and smelled of expensive coffee. They were led into an office flooded with cold light, featuring a panoramic window in which the city below seemed a neat, silent diagram. Yang Zixuan, who was well over sixty, looked as if he had just left a gym and a plastic surgery clinic simultaneously. He was fit, his face unnaturally smooth, radiating an almost aggressive energywork was. He wasted no time on pleasantries.

“So,” he said, gesturing them to chairs while remaining standing himself, “students of my old teacher. Why do you need this?”

His question was not curiosity, but rather an interrogation.

“We are sorting through his papers,” Desheng began. “And we found a name... Mei Lin.”

Yang Zixuan froze for a moment, his gaze becoming as impenetrable as polished glass.

“Teacher Chen had a difficult life,” he said, bypassing the topic of the name. “He made mistakes, but the Party gave him the opportunity to redeem them and become a useful member of society. He sometimes mentioned that in his youth he had a Russian language teacher. But he never mentioned her name.”

He walked over to his desk, typed something on the keyboard. A printer in the corner silently came to life.

“As for the old school...” he continued, “we had a big story about it when it was being demolished. A beautiful story about how the past, giving way to the future, reveals another past.”

He handed Desheng several freshly printed sheets. The headline read: “Bidding Farewell to an Era, or A New Page of History.”

At that moment, Desheng felt the paper trembling slightly in his hands — either from the air conditioner or because he himself didn't know what to expect from these pages.

“There might be old photographs in the magazine's archives,” he added, seeing their confusion. “Group photos of classes, teachers. I'll try to find them when I have time.”

He spoke quickly, efficiently, as if dispensing a portion of information, measured and approved.

“Does he have any relatives left?” Xiangliu asked, and her voice sounded especially quiet in this sterile silence.

“I only know that his mother was from Nanjing. After all the... events, in the early seventies, she returned there. A fellow student of mine, a Nanjing journalist, I believe, even did an interview with her many years ago. For an article about survivors. I can try to find his contact details.”

He sat down at his desk again, making it clear that the audience was over. When they were already at the door, he threw after them, and in his voice sounded new, almost fatherly notes that were more frightening than his bluntness.

“Listen to my advice. Don't dig too deep into the past. It might turn out not to be as interesting as it seems. Sometimes ruins are better left underground. Not all shadows should be awakened. Believe me, this is important — both for the country and for you.”

## Bidding Farewell to an Era, or A New Page of History

*Correspondent: Xia Jiang, Xin Wenhua*

Where only yesterday the gray walls of the old Xicheng district school stood, today excavators rumble and the foundation of the future is being laid. On this site, hallowed by the memory of several generations of Beijingers, the modern residential complex “High Hong Lin” will soon rise, another symbol of the rapid development of our capital, confidently striding into the 21st century. The past gives way to the future — such is the immutable law of dialectics and progress.

However, sometimes, shedding its tattered garments, history presents us with amazing surprises. The past, giving way to the future, reveals another, even more ancient past. Just such a surprise awaited the builders of the “Great Dragon” company last week. While digging the foundation pit for one of the buildings, an excavator bucket hit an unexpected obstacle. Work halted at once, and archaeologists from the Beijing Municipal Institute of Cultural Heritage were called in.

They were met with a truly sensational find. Under the foundation of the old school, at a depth of several meters, a solitary burial — highly unusual for the Ming era — was discovered. As the head of the expedition, Professor Wang Delong, explained, the rich decoration of the grave and the nature of the funerary artifacts indicate that a person of the highest status at the imperial court was buried here — presumably, a chief eunuch (*Da Zongguan*) of the Forbidden City.

“This is a unique case,” comments Professor Wang. “The burial is located far outside the known imperial mausoleums. Perhaps this person, for some reason, was honored to be buried here, in seclusion. We continue our research, but his identity remains a mystery for now.”

But the most striking find awaited the scientists inside the tomb. Among ritual vessels and silk scrolls, a small jade box of the finest workmanship was discovered. On its lid, two characters in ancient Korean *Hanja* script were skillfully carved: *Yeon-ju*. Inside the box, on a lining of decayed silk, lay a blackened, broken twig, which botanists believe was once a flowering plum. And beneath it — a fragile paper scroll. The text on it, written in elegant calligraphy, read:

“...her movements were like the dance of a willow in the wind, and her step was soundless, like a petal falling onto water. When she poured tea, her hands, slender as young bamboo, seemed not to touch the porcelain, but merely guided its flight. In her silence was the depth of a lake, but when she began to speak, her voice sounded like a beautiful melody. Perhaps because she came from the distant land of Goryeo. She resembled a fragile porcelain doll, created not for life, but for eternal contemplation...”

School employees, upon learning of the find, were quite surprised. “Old plums always grew in our yard,” recalls the former school caretaker, Mr. Zhang. “In spring, their fragrance filled the classrooms, and after lessons, we often went out under these trees to rest a bit. No one thought that such history lay beneath our feet.”

Who was this mysterious Yeon-ju? Why did a box with her name end up in the grave of a high-ranking courtier? What happened to her? Archaeology is silent for now. apart from this inscription, her name is not mentioned in any known chronicles. The unique find has been transferred to the capital's historical museum, where it will take its rightful place, testifying to the depth and multifaceted nature of our great history, new pages of which we are opening even today, building our new, great China.

The new district continues to grow, and perhaps the scent of old plums will long remind the residents of “High Hong Lin” that every place has its own melody — sometimes very ancient and very fragile.

## Chapter Five

Morning came with a phone call, harsh and inappropriate in the gray dawn light. Yang Zixuan's voice in the receiver sounded different from yesterday — there was neither steel nor fatherly condescension in it, only dry, businesslike energy. As if a night conversation with his own conscience had ended with a business decision being made.

“Xia Desheng,” he said without preamble, “I've been thinking about your interest. You should go to Nanjing. Visit the Massacre Memorial. It's important for

understanding the context. My classmate, Zhang, is ready to meet you this weekend. He's that journalist.”

Desheng remained silent, trying to process this sudden turn.

“And one more thing,” Yang Zixuan added, as if putting a checkmark on an invisible to-do list, “I asked for photographs from the old school archives to be found and scanned. I'll email them to you as soon as they're ready. Maybe it will help. That's all.”

Short beeps. Desheng held the phone to his ear for a long time, listening to the silence.

In the evening, they sat in *Yi Pin Guo* again. The restaurant was almost empty, and in this evening quiet, their words sounded especially weighty. The rain had passed, leaving behind the smell of wet asphalt and cleanliness.

“Strange,” Desheng said, looking into his cup where a jasmine flower floated, “in that newspaper article... a broken plum branch. In his notes, Teacher Chen also compares her, Mei Lin, to a flowering plum, to *Mei Hua*.”

He looked up at Xiangliu. She looked at him with irony, but her eyes were attentive, like those of a person waiting for an answer.

“Are you in love with her? With Mei Lin?” she asked.

The question was quiet, almost playful, but it hung in the air like smoke from an extinguished candle. Desheng found no answer. He simply remained silent, and this silence was louder than any word. And his chest felt hollow and anxious — the way a room feels after the guests have gone.

In love? How can one fall in love with a name on paper, with a whisper, with a shadow? But didn't I fall in love back then, at school, with the way the light lies on her hair, with the sound of her laughter? Is love not an attempt to read in another's eyes what perhaps isn't even there? I look at Xiangliu, but I see her — Mei Lin, and they merge into one image, into one sadness, and I drown in this...

Xiangliu looked away, breaking the prolonged pause.

“And your parents,” she asked, addressing both of them, “do they say anything about those times? About the Cultural Revolution?”

“Mine are silent,” Desheng replied. “Father says remembering is like re-digging the trenches where you nearly died.”

“Mine too,” Xiangliu sighed. “Mom just says, ‘Those were hard times. All kinds of things happened.’ And that's it. As if closing a door... But they were just children back then.”

They turned to Wenbo. He was turning his phone over in his hands, his face impenetrable. He was silent for a long time, and then suddenly said, looking not at them but at the dark screen:

“Fang and I want to leave for the States. She'll study there, at university. And I can work remotely. There are no borders on the internet.”

Xiangliu nodded, unsurprised, but there was something final in her movement, like a period at the end of a letter.

Leave. For the States. To Desheng, these words sounded like an announcement of exit from their world, from their shared history, from their quest.

That evening, when they parted ways, he felt distinctly for the first time that their trio, their unspoken alliance which had seemed so unshakable to him, stood on a slippery, sloping path. He watched his friends walking away — each in their own direction — and realized that Wenbo was already mentally there, across the ocean, Xiangliu — here, in her world of the restaurant and filial duty, and he... he remained alone, alone with a box of strangers' manuscripts and the ghost of a woman with a voice like snow. The path led each of them to their own “nowhere.” But perhaps it is precisely there, in this “nowhere,” that what they are seeking lies hidden.

## Chapter Six

The “Wall of Grief” greeted them not with silence, but with a silent scream of thousands. It was made not of stone but of names — and the air before it hung cold and still, like the air inside a crypt. Desheng looked at the endless columns of characters, and it seemed to him that if he touched them, his fingers would be burned by the icy fire of another's interrupted life.

Xiangliu stepped closer. She was not afraid. She slowly traced the engraved names, not touching them, only following the lines with her fingertips, and her lips moved soundlessly, as if she were reading not a list, but a prayer. She was trying to return their voices to them. Then Xiangliu rested her hand on one of the characters, then pulled her palm away, as if frightened that memory could be contagious. And in that moment, Desheng wanted to crawl into one of the gaps in the wall, to vanish, to crawl away from here, to disappear from this place where the past was too alive, and the present unbearably powerless.

*Every name is not just a character carved in granite. It is someone's voice that fell silent in the middle of a phrase. Someone's laughter. Someone's fear. Hundreds of thousands of cut-off stories.*

Mr. Zhang was waiting for them in a small, almost empty tea house that smelled of damp wood and cheap green tea. He was a man from whose face all color seemed to have drained. It resembled a dried-up riverbed where only wrinkles

remained — traces of long-gone water. He did not smile, only nodded, gesturing to the chairs.

“Did you publish that interview? With Teacher Chen’s mother?” Desheng asked, unable to bear the silence any longer.

“No,” Zhang replied. His voice was as colorless as his face. “The editor said it was too personal. Too gloomy for our era. Readers want success stories, not dirges.”

He reached into the inner pocket of his old, worn jacket and pulled out not papers, but a small plastic audio cassette. An artifact from another time.

“But I kept the recording,” he said, placing the cassette on the table. “Here. Listen for yourselves.”

It lay between their cups — a small black coffin in which a voice was locked.

“Did she mention the name Mei Lin?” Xiangliu asked quietly.

“No. Never.”

“And what... what did she say about her son?”

Mr. Zhang closed his eyes for a moment, as if remembering something.

“I remember she said... that after the camp he became different. Withdrawn. And he studied all the time. He studied obsessively, as if trying to cram his mind with numbers, words, facts... as if he were trying to push something out of his memory with study, something he desperately wanted to forget.”

“Her name was Ming. Chen Ming,” he added. And fell silent. He had nothing more to say to them.

On the way back, in the evening train speeding them back to Beijing, they did not speak. Desheng sat by the window and stared silently into the darkness, where there was nothing but their own ghostly reflection. In his hand, he clutched the cassette — small, black, warm from his palm. He was its new keeper.

Beside him, turned toward the wall, Xiangliu wept quietly, without a single sob. Her shoulders trembled — soundlessly, completely — and in that trembling was everything: the horror of the wall, the sorrow for Teacher Chen’s mother, the dread of the pain sealed inside the small black rectangle they carried home.

## Chapter Seven

They sat on the floor in Desheng's room. Wenbo had brought the tape recorder — an old, cumbersome machine he had found at his father's place. He set it on the floor with the air of an engineer preparing for a crucial experiment, and in his businesslike manner was an attempt to defend himself against what they were about to hear.

“Ready?” he asked, and no one answered.

Desheng nodded. Wenbo pressed the key. There was a dull click, then a hiss, like the sound of wind in an empty field or the breathing of a sleeping giant.

And through this hiss, a voice broke through.

The voice was old, thin as a dried leaf. It did not narrate — it remembered, and every word came with difficulty, as if she were pulling it out from under the rubble of time.

*(Tape hissing)*

“Winter came early that year. Or so it seemed to me. The river turned gray, like iron. And then the soldiers came. They didn't look like ours. They had different faces, like masks. And they spoke a tongue that sounded like dogs snarling. The city fell ill. First, it had a fever — everything burned, screamed. And then it fell silent.

...

I remember, Uncle was sitting at home. They came and just pointed a finger at him. He went with them. Mama said he'd gone to a faraway place. He never came back. Another uncle... he and other men were led to the river. Mama covered my eyes, but I saw anyway. The river turned red that day. Not from the sunset. For a long time after, we were afraid to go near it. We thought if we stepped into the water, our legs would turn red.

...

We hid. Everywhere. In basements. In pits. It smelled of damp earth and fear. One soldier found us. He didn't shout. He just poked me with something cold and sharp. In the leg. It didn't hurt. It was strange. As if a cold finger had left its signature on me. Mama said: 'Hush, hush, it will pass.' This mark... it is still with me.

...

*(Pause. Sound of the woman drinking water. Hand trembling, glass clinking against teeth)*

...

They didn't like girls. Or women. When they came, all the women became quiet, like dolls. And stared at one spot. My older sister... she didn't speak for a very long time after. Just looked at her hands.

...

The last thing I remember is the pit. We huddled in it like seeds buried in the earth. It was dark. We didn't breathe. Mama, Grandmother, Auntie, neighbors... everyone. Mama was pregnant. My little brother was in her belly. He was supposed to be born soon. When it became completely quiet, we climbed out. No. Not we. I climbed out. And Grandmother. All the others... they stayed to sleep in the earth. And my little brother too. He stayed there, never getting the chance to greet this world.

Seven people. No — not seven. Six. He didn't count, after all, he hadn't been born yet...

...

*(Long pause. Only tape hissing)*

...

It always hurts very much when I speak of this. My son... Chen Wang... he knew all this. Maybe that's why he was always so... quiet.”

*(Click. Silence)*

The tape ended. The hissing stopped. But the silence that fell in the room was even more terrifying. It was dense, heavy, soaked in the smell of damp earth, red water, and unfulfilled lives.

Desheng could not move. He stared at the stopped player, and it seemed to him that if he touched it now, it would burst into flames.

Xiangliu sat beside him. She was not crying. She was simply staring straight ahead at the wall, but seeing not the wall. Her face was white as paper on which a terrible, irreparable story had just been written. She slowly raised her hand and touched her face, as if checking if it was still there, if it hadn't become a mask.

Wenbo, sitting a little apart, slowly stood up. He walked to the window and stood with his back to them, looking at the lights of the night city.

“I'm going,” he said without turning around. His voice was hollow. “My parents met at Tiananmen.”

And he left. The door clicked quietly behind him.

But Desheng and Xiangliu remained sitting in the deafening silence left behind by that quiet, frail voice. And both understood: they had sought a love story, but found the source of endless pain. They thought they were following the traces of a mystery, but in reality, they were walking on scorched earth where nothing could grow except silence.

## Chapter Eight

The photographs arrived by email soundlessly, like ghosts. Desheng opened the file, and the past emerged on his computer screen — faded, black and white, inhabited by strange faces. Group photos of classes, rows of identical smiles, identical red scarves. A sea of faces in which it was impossible to drown because it was too shallow, too uniform.

And amidst this sea — one island.

In the photograph of the teaching staff, she stood slightly apart. Tall, with a straight back, in a simple dark dress that seemed alien among the gray tunics and

strict suits. Her gaze was directed not into the lens, but through it, into some invisible distance of her own. There was no smile on her face, only a quiet, almost transparent sadness. She was like a character from another language accidentally fallen into this text.

Desheng looked at her, but his thoughts tangled and blurred. The quiet, senile voice from the cassette still sounded in his head. The red river. The pit in the earth. The silent brother. The photograph superimposed itself on this voice, and the woman's face on the screen began to tremble, like a reflection in water rippled by a breeze.

His stupor was interrupted by the short buzz of his phone. A message from Wenbo. "I found something. Can't send it. Meet at Xiangliu's."

It was quiet in the restaurant. Xiangliu sat at a far table, hunched over her phone. She was examining the photos Desheng had forwarded to her, and zooming in on the image, she held her finger on the face of the woman "from another world."

"Maybe it's her? Mei Lin?" Xiangliu asked, looking up at him.

"Maybe," Desheng replied. His voice was alien, as if he were speaking from behind a door. "I don't know."

Wenbo arrived. He didn't sit down.

"Let's go," he said. "Not here."

They went out into the small square behind the restaurant and sat on a bench under an old acacia tree. Wenbo offered no explanations. He silently took a piece of paper folded in four from his pocket and handed it to them. It was a photocopy of a typewritten text, official, faceless.

## MEMORANDUM

**To:** Secretary of the Xicheng District Party Committee, Comrade Liu Jian

**From:** Head of the Peking University Working Group, Comrade Wang

**Date:** 17.08.1966

**Subject:** On holding a rally to combat "monsters and demons."

*I bring to your attention that on August 17 of this year, a public condemnation action against counter-revolutionary elements from among the university teaching staff was carried out by the "Red Banner" Red Guard detachment. Mei Muheng, Professor of Philosophy, and his wife, Mei Su, Professor of Literature, were brought out to the square in front of the main building.*

*Dunce caps and placards with the inscriptions "I am an enemy of the people" and "I am a poisonous snake" were placed on the aforementioned individuals. During the rally, they were subjected to public censure, including being doused with slops.*

*They were forced to publicly repent for their crimes aimed at denigrating the ideas of the Great Helmsman and promoting bourgeois culture.*

*Their daughter, Citizen Mei Lin, was not present at this event. According to verbal instructions received from the City Party Committee, it is ordered not to touch Citizen Mei Lin, as she is currently carrying out an important state assignment, working as a translator for the Soviet military specialist Morozov Sergei Petrovich at the Beijing Automobile Works.*

Xiangliu finished reading and slowly lowered the sheet.

“Where did you get this?” she whispered.

“Can't say,” Wenbo replied without looking at her.

“Do you think something can be found at the factory?”

“Unlikely. All archives from those years were either destroyed or classified. But I learned something else. In the late nineties, a diplomat worked in Beijing for some time. Sergei Petrovich Morozov. Perhaps it is him. That means I can find something about him.”

Desheng remained silent all this time, his gaze riveted to the soulless lines of the report. The shock from the cassette receded, replaced by a cold, clear rage. The ghosts had acquired names, dates, and addresses.

“Let's find him,” he finally said. “Or his relatives. They must have answers. I will write to them.”

The words sounded simple, almost mundane, but they held a determination that hadn't been there before.

He looked up at his friends. And for the first time in recent days, he was here again, with them. Pain had turned into a purpose.

## Chapter Nine

Morning came with a message, short as an electric shock. It tore Desheng from a viscous, gray dream in which he endlessly flipped through black-and-white photographs. It was Wenbo.

“Think I found Morozov's grandson. On Russian Odnoklassniki. Also Sergei. Born in Yekaterinburg — that's former Sverdlovsk. Lives in Moscow now.”

So simple. A few clicks — and there it was: a thread spun across half a century, thousands of miles. Desheng looked at the screen, and it seemed to him that this digital ease was a sacrilege compared to the heaviness of the history they were trying to unravel.

*I am writing him a letter. No, not her. Him. The grandson. A man whose blood remembers what our books are silent about. I write in Russian; the words come with*

*difficulty, they are alien, viscous as icy water. Hello, Sergei. My name is Xia Desheng. I am a student of a teacher named Chen Wang. Every word is a step on thin ice. Cannot make a mistake. Cannot scare him off. I am still searching for a ghost.*

The answer came a few hours later. Yes, it is his grandfather. Yes, he remembers talk about China. And a photograph. A photograph was attached to the email.

The same woman. The same face. But the light in it had gone out. If in the school photo there was sadness in her eyes, here there was doom. She stood next to a tall man in military uniform, and it seemed that between them was not air, but glass. She looked into the camera but did not see it. As if she were somewhere else, beyond an invisible line where light does not penetrate.

They agreed to call on Saturday. Late evening for Beijing, early morning for Moscow.

They decided to meet at Xiangliu's. But when Desheng and Wenbo entered the restaurant, she did not come to their table. She stood at the counter, her back to them, and methodically, with a kind of fierce diligence, was wiping glasses. Her shoulders were tense.

“What's wrong with her?” Wenbo whispered.

“I don't know,” Desheng replied, though he already sensed: something had broken.

They approached her. Desheng took out his phone, showed her the photo sent by Sergei.

“Look. It's her. Mei Lin.”

Xiangliu didn't glance at the screen. She slammed the glass down—so hard it seemed ready to shatter. And turned around. Her eyes were red, swollen.

“Find your Mei Lin yourself,” she snapped. “I'm not interested anymore. And don't come here again.”

Her lips trembled, her hands too... She was trembling all over, like a taut string.

“Xiangliu, what happened?” Desheng tried to touch her hand, but she jerked it away as if from fire.

They led her outside, into the quiet alley behind the restaurant. She leaned against the wall and instantly went limp, her shoulders shaking, and she began to sob — desperately, soundlessly, as one cries when pain no longer fits inside.

“What happened?” Desheng asked again.

She spoke haltingly, choking on tears.

“I... I spoke to the old neighbor. With Mrs. Song. I asked her... why my parents are silent about those times.”

She caught her breath.

“She told me. About my grandmother. Mom's mom. At school... she was an activist. And when the Cultural Revolution began... She wrote denunciations. On her classmates. On teachers. Half their class then... was taken away. Some never came back. Ever.”

She raised her tear-stained, horror-filled eyes to them.

“Do you understand?” she whispered. “My grandmother... my grandmother was an informer.”

“Did you tell your parents?” Wenbo asked quietly.

“No,” Xiangliu shook her head. “The neighbor said not to. Said they had it hard enough. Said Grandmother was ashamed of it all her life.”

She wiped her tears with the back of her hand, with the same gesture Desheng would see years later in the parking lot. Now he knew where so much pain came from in it.

“Don't come here again,” she repeated, and now there was no anger in her voice, but a dull, dead emptiness. “Ever.”

They turned silently to leave. They understood: this was the end. And when they had already taken a few steps, she quietly called out to Desheng. He turned back.

“Good luck to you,” she said. There was neither irony nor malice in her voice. Only infinite, all-forgiving sadness. “With your Mei Lin.”

And in that instant, Desheng understood: sometimes the past won't let go not because you search for it, but because it finds you itself — in strangers' words, in old photographs, in the tears of those close to you.

## Chapter Ten

The voice in the receiver was young, with a slight Muscovite drawl, but in it one could hear the echo of another voice — the one that had once resounded in Beijing corridors. Desheng sat in the darkness of his room, pressing the phone to his ear like a shell in which a foreign sea murmurs.

“Who is this woman in the photo?” he asked immediately, without preamble. “Is it Mei Lin?”

A pause. Rustling, as if the person on the other end shifted the receiver from one hand to the other.

“I don't know her name,” Sergei Morozov finally replied. “It was never spoken in our house. But Grandfather cherished that photo. It always lay in his desk, in the top drawer, under papers. As if he were hiding it both from us and from himself. Sometimes he would take it out, look at it for a long time, but then put it back.”

The voice traveled across distances, across years—carrying the scent of old wood and all the words left unsaid.

“Mom told me,” he continued, “that Grandfather returned from China somewhat... different. Sad. No, not sad — absent. As if part of him had remained there. Grandmother tried to talk to him, but he stayed silent. Then we moved from Sverdlovsk to Moscow. New apartment, new life. He worked, went on business trips. Spent a couple of years in Poland. But Mom said — he always wanted to return to China. Always.”

Desheng listened, and in the darkness of his room, the outlines of another room began to emerge, another life — the life of a man who carried a foreign country inside him like a shard.

“Grandmother even wondered if he’d started another family there,” Sergei’s voice trembled, either from laughter or from something else. “Children, maybe. She was jealous of this China, as one is jealous of a woman.”

“We think she worked as his translator,” Desheng said, and his own voice seemed alien to him. “Mei Lin.”

“Translator? Possibly. Grandfather spoke little of that time. And why are you looking for her? Is she your relative?”

“No. But it’s a long story.”

And silence again, in which one could hear the breathing of two people separated by continents but connected by an invisible thread of someone else’s memory.

“You know,” Sergei began again, and now his voice held that special intonation of a person telling a family legend, “many years later, in the late nineties, he was finally sent to China again. On a diplomatic mission. He left for a long time, but returned unexpectedly quickly, about six months later. And retired soon after. After that, he withdrew completely. Moved to a dacha near Moscow. Said he would write memoirs.”

The voice grew quieter, as if the narrator were approaching something difficult to speak about.

“As I said, he moved to the dacha. Near Moscow, in Malakhovka. Said he would write memoirs. We visited him on weekends, brought groceries, paper — he didn’t know how to use a computer. He had an old typewriter, still from Sverdlovsk. A ‘Leningrad’, I think. But he never showed what he was writing. He would say: ‘When I finish — you’ll read it.’”

A pause. Desheng heard someone walk across the room on the other end, a floorboard creaking.

“And when he died, we found only reams of blank paper. Neat, unopened reams. And one sheet. And on it, handwritten, was just a single word: ‘Forgive.’”

There was a rustle in the receiver, as if Sergei had moved away from the window.

“That’s the whole story,” he said. “If you find anything about her, about that woman — write to me. Maybe then I’ll understand why Grandfather spent his whole life asking for forgiveness from a blank sheet of paper.”

“Thank you,” Desheng said quietly. “Thank you for telling me.”

The connection broke. Desheng remained sitting in the dark, holding the cooling phone in his hand. Outside the window, dawn was breaking — gray, Beijing dawn, smelling of rain. And somewhere out there, in Malakhovka, perhaps the old typewriter still stood, and a sheet of paper lay, on which a lonely word waited for its addressee across years and distances.

## Chapter Eleven

They met on the same bench, under the acacia tree, where they had once read strangers' letters and shared silence. The evening was transparent, like water in a glass, and in this clear air, everything seemed a little more real than usual.

Wenbo arrived first. He sat hunched over his phone, but when Desheng approached, he put it in his pocket. His face was tired, his gaze distracted, like that of a person already with one foot in another city.

Desheng sat beside him. The air between them was cold and dense.

“I spoke to him. It’s definitely her, Mei Lin,” Desheng began, and his words, still warm from the night’s conversation, felt out of place in the cooling air. “With Morozov’s grandson. He said his grandfather always kept her photo. I think he came to Beijing back then to find her.”

Wenbo didn't raise his head.

“Did he find her?” his question was short, pragmatic.

“No. But you know... he told his family he was writing memoirs. And after his death, they found only reams of blank paper. And one sheet. On it was written a single word. ‘Forgive.’”

Desheng fell silent, waiting for a reaction. But Wenbo seemed to be listening not to him, but to something else sounding only within himself.

“You forgive me too,” he said finally, just as quietly. “We’re flying out tomorrow.”

Desheng didn't understand immediately.

“Where?”

“First to Hong Kong. From there — to the States.”

The words were simple, but they shattered the world.

“Why so urgently?” was all Desheng could manage to say.

“My parents said it was time,” Wenbo raised his eyes to him for the first time, and his eyes held only an adult’s exhaustion — deep, irrevocable. “They said there’s nothing left for us here. That we have to leave.”

“And Xiangliu... did you tell her?”

“I wrote to her. She didn’t answer.”

Wenbo took a flash drive from his pocket and placed it on the bench between them.

“There’s something else here. Just don't show anyone what's on it.”

He stood up, not looking at Desheng, and added:

“Don't see me off. We’re flying early in the morning.”

Desheng watched the receding back of his friend, who walked without looking back, dissolving into the evening city light.

Desheng stayed on the bench, its chill seeping through his clothes, clutching in his hand this small, cold key to yet another locked door. He understood: his friend hadn't just left. He had fled. Fled from a country where the past turned out to be heavier than the future. And now he, Desheng, remained the sole keeper of all these stories, all these ghosts. He remained alone on this path. Completely alone.

## Chapter Twelve

Back then, on that hot day in the parking lot, Xia Desheng watched Tan Xiangliu lean against the door of her van for a moment and drive away, dissolving into the shimmering haze, and thought that their search had, after all, led to a result. Not the one they expected, but the only one possible. Xiangliu remained alone in her small restaurant smelling of anise and the past, locked in it as if in a fortress she had built herself to defend against the shadow of her own grandmother. And Wu Wenbo dissolved into the digital space of the United States, into his darknet, stopped sending postcards for the New Year and short birthday greetings, as if he had amputated his past before it could poison his future. And Mei Lin never appeared. She remained a shadow in an old photograph, a gaze directed through the lens into another life.

But the truth appeared instead.

The very truth that is heavier than any stone. The truth that does not set you free, but forever chains you to a single moment. And he thought: if he had known back then, on that day when the three of them stood at the door of the late teacher's apartment, what he would find on the flash drive Wenbo left him... Would he have

gone? Would he have opened that door? Or would he have turned back, chosen the wrong path, the wrong turn?

There were documents on the flash drive. Not just lists, not just protocols. There were orders, signatures, lists of names. And among them — a photograph where his grandfather, young, in military uniform, stands in formation. On the back — a neat inscription: “Member of the execution squad. 1968.” In other folders — reports where everything was dry, official: “Sentence executed. Signed: Xia Zhun.” Names, surnames. And even Mei Lin. Perhaps just a coincidence. But this thought burned like icy fire: what if it was *her*, that very Mei Lin? What if it was *his* grandfather who pulled the trigger? What if it was *his* hand that crossed out someone's life, someone's love, someone's memory?

This thought was not a thought, but a physical pain, a blow that makes everything go dark.

He was still standing in the parking lot. Xiangliu's van had long since disappeared. The sun beat down mercilessly. Desheng closed his eyes, and the bench, the acacia, the flash drive in his hand appeared before him again. He realized he'd never turned from that road — the one that led to the ocean of death. He had reached the end. And this ocean turned out not to be somewhere out there, in someone else's history. It turned out to be inside himself.

Yes, their paths parted not because they were looking for the wrong truth, but because the truth always leads to loneliness. Because at the end of any road — there is only you yourself, your memory, your guilt, your love which no one can share. And all that remains is to walk on. In a circle. Along a path that always brings you back to the beginning. But perhaps within the circle itself lies hope — that someday someone will finally turn off of it, to begin everything anew.

## Epilogue

She stood before a large sheet of cheap paper spread out on the floor. The brush in her hand was not a brush — but a scalpel with which she was to excise the tumor of doubt that had infected the body of the Revolution. She saw this tumor every day at the university. In the eyes of the professors, in their soft, yielding voices, in their quotes from ancient, dead books. Their words were cobwebs. Gray, sticky, in which the great red sun gets bogged down, losing its heat. They speak of “humanism,” of “nuances,” of “objectivity,” but she hears only one thing — the whisper of an old world that refuses to die.

The Chairman had lit a fire within her. His words in her head were not just words, but burning coals. “Bombard the Headquarters!” — and she felt this call becoming her own pulse. No. She is an instrument. She is the hand of history. She believed: if she said it loudly, if she wrote it in ink, if she did not flinch — everything would change. Everything would become better. For everyone. For the country. For each person.

She dipped the brush in ink. The black color was absolute. It was not a color, but its absence. Zero point, from which everything must begin anew.

The first character lay on the paper — sharp as an axe blow.

*Resolutely!*

The paper seemed to shudder under this pressure. She was not writing words — she was forging them. Every character was a soldier marching into battle. Every line — a blow, every dot — a drop of venom for the enemy.

*Radically!*

*Wholly and completely!*

She felt no rage, no personal hate. Only the cold, pure fire of righteousness. This was not destruction, but purification. She was uprooting weeds to let the pure, scarlet flower grow. The monsters she was destroying had human faces; they drank tea with her in the staff room, they greeted her in the corridors. But these were mere masks. Beneath them — revisionists of the Khrushchev type, worms undermining the great tree.

Her entire life, all the books read, all the sleepless nights — all of it led to this moment, to this sheet of paper. This was her magnum opus.

*Destroy!*

When the last character was written, she stepped back. Her hand trembled, but not from fear, rather from the colossal energy that had passed through her. She looked at her creation. At the black, angular signs frozen on the white field. For some, these were words of hatred. For her — it was a poem. Harmonious, calibrated, terrifying in its rectitude.

She had created her own “Black Square.” And it was beautiful.

## Glossary

**Yosano Akiko** (与謝野 晶子 / Yosano Akiko) — A Japanese poet (December 7, 1878 – May 29, 1942). Her real name was Hō Shō. The epigraph uses an adapted text of her poem “Cowardice,” translated by Vera Markova.

**Mei Lin, Chen Wang, Sergei Morozov, and Yeon-ju** — Characters from the microroman “A Road of a Thousand Years.”

**Yi Pin Guo** (一品锅 / Yī Pīn Guō) — “First-Class Pot” — a small family restaurant in the Xicheng District in the western part of the Old City. It has been operating since 1983.

**Guohua** (国画 / Guóhuà) — Traditional Chinese painting. It combines the aesthetics of calligraphy, poetry, and painting, merging several artistic images at once.

**High Hong Lin** (海红林 / Hǎi Hóng Lín) — “Rainbow Forest” — a residential complex in the Xicheng District built in the early 21st century. Since the early 2000s, large-scale works on demolishing dilapidated buildings, relocating old factories, and greening the urbanized area have been carried out in the district.

**Xin Wenhua** (新文化 / Xīn Wénhuà) — “New Culture” — a weekly publication founded in 1952. The weekly circulation is about 120,000 copies.

**Memorial Hall of the Victims in Nanjing Massacre by Japanese Invaders** (侵华日军南京大屠杀遇难同胞纪念馆) — Built in 1985 and expanded in 1995. The memorial is located in Jiangdongmen, one of the sites of the mass burial of victims.

**Tiananmen** (天安门广场 / Tiān'ānmén Guǎngchǎng) — A square in the center of Beijing, traditionally considered the symbolic heart of the Chinese nation. From April 15 to June 4, 1989, it became the center of student protests.

**Dazibao** (大字报 / Dàzìbào) — A handwritten wall newspaper in China used for propaganda, protest, etc. On June 1, 1966, after the reading on the radio of a *dazibao* composed by Nie Yuanzi (聂元梓), a graduate student and philosophy lecturer at Peking University ("Resolutely, radically, wholly and completely eradicate the dominance and malicious schemes of revisionists! Destroy the monsters — revisionists of the Khrushchev type!"), millions of schoolchildren and students organized into Red Guard detachments and began seeking out "monsters and demons" to be eradicated among their teachers, university leadership, and then among local and city authorities. This marked the first stage of the Cultural Revolution.

**Black Square** — A suprematist painting by Kazimir Malevich, created in 1915. It is one of the most famous paintings in world art.

## Book Three. The River

### Foreword

*From the archives of the Shenbao newspaper, Shanghai. December, 1946.*

### A COURTROOM WHERE NOT MEN, BUT WAR ITSELF IS ON TRIAL

A report by our special correspondent Liu Feng from the Nanjing War Crimes Tribunal.

Nanjing, December 4. — In the hall of the former Ministry of Communications, where justice is meted out today, the air is still and heavy, like an unshed tear. Here, under the scrutinizing gaze of the judges and the silent eye of history, the final act of the tragedy named Nanjing unfolds. In the dock sit generals and officers whose names, until recently, inspired terror. But today, our attention is drawn not to them, but to those appearing as witnesses — the ordinary soldiers by whose hands these atrocities were committed.

The prosecutors read aloud lists of victims, exhibit photographs, present the testimonies of survivors. The numbers strike like a judge's gavel. Tens of thousands. Hundreds of thousands. But when the accused take the stand, their voices hold neither remorse nor malice. Only fatigue and bewilderment. Their testimonies, monotonous, devoid of emotion, merge into a single, faceless voice. The voice of war.

The prosecutor asks questions. Dry, procedural. The answers are the same.

Private First Class Takeo Kenji: “The order was to eliminate anyone offering resistance. But who was offering resistance? How do you distinguish a soldier from a peasant? They told us they were all partisans. We simply did as we were ordered... Yes, we entered houses. We were starving. We hadn't been fed in weeks. Sometimes we would find a sack of rice, sometimes a chicken. That was happiness. We didn't think about the people. We thought about food.”

Sergeant Watanabe Goro: “We were taught that the Chinese were not quite human. That they were beneath us. They showed us films where they tortured our POWs. We believed it... When you see your comrade killed, something breaks inside. You cease to feel pity. Pity is a luxury. We were young. We drank a lot of sake whenever we could find it. When you are drunk, everything seems simpler. You don't think. You just act.”

Second Lieutenant Suzuki Kentaro: “Discipline is the foundation of the army. We were taught: the commander's order is the will of the Emperor. To doubt an order is to doubt the Emperor. That was unthinkable. When Major Hashimoto ordered the district by the river cleared... I relayed the order. What else was I supposed to do?”

Private Tanaka Jiro: “The cold was terrifying. We had no winter uniforms. We burned whatever would catch fire — furniture, doors, books. Once, we found a coal

depot, thought we got lucky. But there were people hiding inside. Women with children. The sergeant said... he said the coal was more important. That without heat we would freeze, and the Emperor has no need for dead soldiers.”

Second Lieutenant Yamaguchi Shigeru: “I am a soldier of the Emperor. My duty is to execute orders. I was ordered to carry out the execution of a group of prisoners at the Zhonghua Gate. I carried it out. It was my job. Just like cleaning my rifle or marching on the parade ground. Did I feel anything? I felt exhaustion. And I wanted it all to be over as soon as possible.”

Sergeant Nakamura Yoshio: “War is war. We weren’t sent on a parade. The Chinese killed our men in Tongzhou; we remembered that. Every house could be a trap. Every resident a partisan. Yes, there were excesses. But show me a war without excesses.”

When the prosecutor asks about specific orders, Nakamura replies: “The orders were clear: suppress resistance, establish control, ensure the security of our units. How to achieve this was decided on the spot. I am a soldier, not a philosopher.”

Corporal Hiroto Takamuro: “We were following orders. The order stated: eliminate all prisoners. And so we eliminated them. There were too many of them to feed. We didn't even have enough rations for ourselves.”

“We were following orders.” This phrase echoes here more often than the strike of the judge's gavel. It has become their shield, their justification, their sole reality. They speak of mass executions as though discussing the weeding of a rice paddy.

One of the lieutenants, testifying against his commander, Prince Asaka, let slip a phrase that sent a chill through the room: “We were told the Chinese were not quite human. That they were cowardly, deceitful, and placed no value on their own lives. That killing them was almost like killing an animal. At first, it was strange. But then... then you get used to it. You stop seeing the difference.”

“You get used to it.” Here, this phrase is the key to everything. They grew used to the sight of blood. Grew used to the stench of death. Grew used to their own fear and to the pain of others. War became their norm, while peaceful life turned into a distant, almost forgotten dream.

They sit before the tribunal, these “ordinary soldiers,” and in their eyes there is a void. They are not villains from ancient legends. They are cogs in a vast, soulless machine that first stripped them of their humanity, and then forced them to strip it from others. And looking at their calm, exhausted faces, one cannot help but ask: who is truly on trial in this room? These men? Or the ideology, the orders, the war that forged them into what they have become?

The judges and prosecutors listen, take notes, ask questions. But the answers are always the same: “I was just a soldier.” “I was following orders.” “I don't remember.”

To be continued.

## Prologue

The sterile air of Lukou Airport smelled of nothing — a calibrated, artificial void of disinfection. Ichiro Miyazaki passed through customs leaning on a cane of light wood; its smooth handle was an extension of his own withered hand. His single small bag contained almost nothing: a change of shirt, shaving supplies, and a small pouch of dull silk drawn tight with a faded cord. He moved slowly, like a man carrying an invisible yet unbearable weight within.

A taxi bore him through Nanjing. The city beyond the glass was alien, composed of glass, concrete, and neon characters layered over old, gray scars. But the air seeping through the cracks was the same — damp, carrying the aftertaste of coal dust, raw earth, and something sweet, elusive, like the scent of decaying leaves. Ichiro did not look at the buildings. He inhaled this air, and memory, dormant for decades, stirred lazily at the bottom of his soul.

In the faceless hotel room, the first thing he did was take the silk pouch from his bag and place it on the nightstand. Inside was ash. All that remained of the house in Shitamachi. Of Yuki. Of Ayame.

He did not know why he had come. He could not explain it to himself, nor to those who remained in Japan and had long since stopped asking questions. He was neither a pilgrim, nor a tourist, nor a repentant criminal. He was simply a man who had once lost everything and had lived ever since as stones live at the bottom of a river: without resisting the current, without hoping for the shore.

The next day, he went to the Memorial. A geometry of sorrow, cast in gray concrete. A wall of silent screaming, inscribed with thousands of names. He walked along it, his cane tapping out a hollow, steady rhythm. But he was not looking for names — he was searching for an absence. A single one. Here, in this earth, in this mass grave, among thousands of shadows nameless to him, Daisuke could have lain. But he knew: buried here was everything that had once been his own life as well. Here, in this mass grave, lay not only ash, but memory — an alien memory, needed by no one but himself. This monument was not a tombstone for this city. It was a tombstone for his, Ichiro's, world.

He did not pray. He simply stood, listening to the wind drive last year's dry leaves across the paving stones, thinking how the river would, in the end, receive everyone — the guilty, the innocent, and those who simply found themselves on the wrong side.

A young Chinese woman was photographing the wall. The shutter clicked beside him; she apologized in Chinese. He nodded. She did not know who he was. To her, he was just a tired old man with a cane. A tourist. One of many.

And now he was here, on the embankment. At the edge of the great Yangtze River. The wind coming off the water was winter-cold, yet it already carried the promise of spring. It smelled of river silt and blooming plum. The *meihua* was shedding its last blossoms on old, gnarled trees; the wind tore away the pale pink, almost transparent petals, twirled them in the air, and lowered them onto the gray, indifferent water. Ichiro Miyazaki sat on a cold bench. His hand inside his coat pocket clutched the silk pouch. He had come to scatter their ashes here. Perhaps. He had not yet decided. He had not come to repent. Repentance is for those who believe that words can alter the past. He had come here because it was the only place on earth where his memory was still alive. The river had seen everything. It remembered Daisuke's face, how he laughed that day he cooked a real meal. In it, in the river, in its murky, eternal water, his own history had not yet turned to ash. He watched the river carry the petals, just as water and time carry everything that falls into them. He was a stranger here. A guest in a city he had once helped destroy. But the river was not a stranger. It was a mirror reflecting the sky and its emptiness. An emptiness devoid of past, of future, devoid even of himself.

Why was he here? There was no answer. Only the wind, only the river, only the falling petals. And memory — the only place where Daisuke was still smiling, where Yuki was playing the *koto*, where Ayame was taking her first steps.

He sat on the bench, an old man with a cane, and looked at the river. He had not come for repentance — the river is no confessor. Not for forgiveness — the dead do not forgive. He had simply come. To the only place where his past still breathed. Where December of '37 had never ended. Where he was still a young soldier, and Daisuke was alive.

The sun was dipping toward sunset. It was time to return to the hotel. But he did not move. He sat and watched the pale petals swirl above the gray water. He was waiting for the river to claim his reflection as well.

## Part One

### Chapter One

On the day he turned five, the world fractured. Before that, it had been whole, warm, and had belonged to him entirely, just as the interior of a paper lantern belongs to the light of the candle. He had been the emperor of this little world, woven from the scent of *tatami*, the creak of floorboards, and the quiet voice of his mother humming a lullaby. Everything around him was an extension of himself: a ray of sunlight on the wall, an ant crawling along the veranda, the taste of a rice cake on his tongue.

The punishment arrived suddenly, like a summer thunderstorm. He did not remember his offense, only the sensation of sticky shame and the heat flooding his cheeks. He had broken a cup, perhaps. Or simply cried too loudly. His father entered the room, and his shadow fell across the floor, crossing out the square of sunlight. He did not shout. His voice was even and cold, like water in a winter well.

“You are no longer the emperor, Ichiro,” he said, and these words were not an explanation, but a verdict.

Little emperor — that was what they had always called him. From his first cry, from his first step. He had been the center of their little universe; the sun around which the planets of parental love revolved.

“There is only one Emperor,” his father continued. “His name is Hirohito. And you are his future warrior. His samurai.”

Ichiro looked at his mother. She sat in the corner, her eyes cast down, her hands folded in her lap like two frightened birds. She remained silent. And in her silence lay an agreement, firmer and more irrevocable than his father's words. The world that had been his suddenly recoiled, became alien, acquired sharp, cold edges.

Then his father handed him a sword — his “*gendaito*.” It was made of pale, smoothly polished wood, yet it felt impossibly heavy. On the blade, along the *hamon* line, a clumsy yet diligent hand had burned the characters — a name he was only just learning to write. The name of the Emperor. The hilt of the sword was too large for his palm, cold and alien. He took it, and his fingers closed around the wood, but felt no warmth. For the first time, he sensed this coldness, emanating not from the object, but from within. The cold of loneliness.

He struggled to hold it, and the point jabbed into the mat.

“You will learn to hold it. The sword is the soul of a warrior,” his father said. “Every morning you will practice. A hundred swings. Without fail.”

“But I...”

The blow landed on his cheek — not hard, but sharp, like the crack of a whip. Ichiro did not cry. Not out of bravery, but out of astonishment. His father had never struck him before.

“A samurai does not say ‘but,’” his father’s voice was as even as the surface of water. “A samurai says ‘*hai*’. Do you understand?”

“*Hai*,” Ichiro whispered.

From that day on, everything changed. The games were over. The day was regimented like a military campaign map. Waking with the first rays of the sun. Dousing oneself with ice-cold water. Memorizing the names of ancestors and the feats of heroes. His father, a petty official with tired eyes and a back straight as a rod,

saw in him not a son, but a project. The project of a loyal soldier whose life would be offered as a gift to the nation.

In the evenings, when the house fell silent, Ichiro lay on his *futon* and stared at the wooden sword standing by the wall. Moonlight glided along its blade, and the burned-in characters seemed to glow from within. The sword was his only confidant, his shadow, his future. *I am no longer an emperor*, he thought. *I am a soldier*.

Once, during a military parade to which his father had taken him, he saw a real *gendaito*. It hung at the belt of a handsome young officer with flawless bearing. The steel blade flashed in the sun, and this cold, lethal gleam blinded Ichiro. The steel, cold and perfect, with a bluish tint, shone like a winter sky before the snow. The hilt was wrapped in white ray skin, and the *tsuba* gleamed with dull gold. He realized: his wooden sword was but a pale copy, a larva. But this — steel, alive, capable of taking life — this was true, absolute beauty. A beauty that contained nothing superfluous — neither warmth, nor doubt, nor pity. Only the purity of function.

From that day on, his own wooden sword ceased to feel heavy and alien. It began to seem beautiful in its incompleteness. It was a promise of that ideal, steel beauty toward which his soul now yearned.

But back then, at night, he could still hear his mother crying softly behind the thin paper partition. And in the morning, she was once again silent and submissive, and her hands, handing him his bowl of rice, were as cold as the hilt of his wooden sword. Discipline became his second skin. It shielded him from pain, from thoughts, from his very self. And when he started school, it turned out he was better prepared for it than the others. He already knew how to keep silent, how to endure, and how to obey. He already knew how to be a sword.

## Chapter Two

The school was not a building, but a rock garden. Each student was a stone, which the teacher chipped and shaped with strikes of his pointer, sharp shouts, and a cold, evaluating gaze. The goal was not knowledge. The goal was form. The perfect, smooth form of a stone, devoid of all individuality that would become part of the flawless composition of the Great Japanese Empire.

Teacher Hiraoka was a man of indeterminate age — he could have been thirty, or fifty. His face was a mask hewn from stone, and his voice was an instrument tuned to a single note: absolute submission.

“*Bushido*,” he would say, and in his mouth, the word sounded not like a path, but an order. “The way of the warrior. But what is a warrior without the Emperor? Nothing. Dust. Your life does not belong to you. It belongs to Japan. To the Emperor. To Heaven.”

He spoke, and outside the window the *sakura* bloomed — delicate, impossible in its beauty. The petals fell like snow, like ash, like the promise of an early death. There was poetry in this, perverted and beautiful all at once. Death as the highest manifestation of life. Falling as flight.

“The samurai of antiquity served his *daimyo*,” Hiraoka continued, pacing between the rows. “But you — you serve the highest *daimyo*. The Emperor. God in the flesh. To doubt his will is to doubt the rising of the sun. A samurai does not cry. A samurai pities neither himself nor others.”

“A human life,” he enunciated, his words dropping into the silence of the classroom like iron filings, “is lighter than a feather. The life of a warrior is a feather flying into the furnace of our divine Emperor’s great glory. Duty — that is the only weight you must feel. Pity and fear are rust on the blade.”

Punishments were part of the curriculum. For being late — kneeling for an hour, holding a bucket of water over your head. For a wrong answer — a strike of a bamboo cane across the palms. For tears — double the punishment. Pain became the language the school spoke. But worse than the pain was the humiliation. They were forced to crawl on all fours, to bark like dogs. To eat off the floor. To clean the latrines with their bare hands.

“Pride is the enemy of the warrior,” Hiraoka would say, watching a boy from a good family sobbing as he scrubbed the floor. “Break it. Trample it. Only in the mud is the true purity of spirit born.”

Ichiro endured all this with a cold, detached calm. His body had already grown accustomed to pain, and his soul had learned to hide in the furthest, darkest corner, leaving only a smooth, impenetrable shell on the surface.

It was in this rock garden that he first saw Daisuke. He arrived mid-semester, a quiet, gangly boy with eyes that seemed to reflect the sky of another, softer world. He was not a stone. He was a lump of raw, pliable clay, retaining the imprint of every rough touch. He did not know how to fight, his bows were clumsy, and during drill lessons, he constantly fell out of step. The other boys, already chipped into shape, already part of the collective gray mass, ignored him. He was a defect, an error in the flawless geometry of their formation. They skirted around him as one skirts a puddle on the road, with squeamish indifference. Ichiro ignored him, too. But sometimes, stealthily, he watched him. He saw how Daisuke, receiving another strike of the pointer across his hands, did not clench his teeth, but quietly, almost imperceptibly, winced, and for a moment, not anger, but bewilderment flared in his eyes. As if he simply could not grasp the rules of this cruel game. He was too alive for this rock garden. And Ichiro, who had almost become a stone himself, looked at him with a strange, cold mixture of contempt and an almost forgotten, painful curiosity. He was a reminder of what Ichiro was so diligently killing within himself.

Once, when the teacher was explaining how a samurai must know how to die, Daisuke raised his hand.

“And what if one does not want to die?” he asked quietly.

Silence hung in the classroom. The teacher looked at him like a speck of dirt on a white kimono.

“Then you have not yet become a samurai,” he said. “Then you have not yet understood what honor is.”

During the break, they surrounded him.

“Hey, new kid,” an older student, Yamada, poked him in the chest. “Show us what you can do.”

Daisuke backed away. There was neither grace nor strength in his movements. Only fear and a sort of almost comical clumsiness.

“I... I don't know how to fight,” he muttered.

The laughter was cruel, cutting. Yamada raised his fist, and Daisuke did not even try to defend himself. He simply closed his eyes and waited for the blow.

The blow never came. Ichiro himself did not understand why he stepped between them. Perhaps because there was something unbearable in that submission. Perhaps because he saw himself in Daisuke — the self his father had killed on his fifth birthday.

“Leave him be,” he said quietly.

Yamada sneered.

“Found yourself a protector? Miyazaki wants to be a hero?”

The fight was brief. Yamada was older, stronger. But Ichiro fought with the cold fury of a man defending not another, but his own lost innocence. When the teachers pulled them apart, both had split lips.

The punishment — a week of cleaning the latrines. For both of them. For Ichiro and Daisuke.

They worked in silence, side by side. On the third day, Daisuke suddenly said:

“Thank you.”

Ichiro shrugged.

“Don't mention it.”

“No, really. No one before...” he trailed off, then added: “You know, my father says that true *Bushido* isn't about dying. It's about how to live properly.”

Ichiro looked at him. In the gloom of the latrine, Daisuke's face seemed almost ghostly.

“Your father is wrong,” he said.

### Chapter Three

After that week in the latrines, something shifted. Not immediately, not overtly — the way the light changes before dawn, when the darkness still seems absolute, but is no longer quite so dense.

Daisuke was the first to cross the invisible boundary. After classes, when the others were heading home or staying for extra drills, he approached Ichiro.

“Want to come over? My father is making *unagi* today. Real eel, over coals.”

Ichiro wanted to refuse. The habit of solitude was stronger than curiosity. But the smell of the eel Daisuke spoke of suddenly seemed more real to him than anything surrounding him at school — more real than the portraits of the Emperor, more real than the bamboo canes, more real than the memorized words about duty.

“Alright,” he said.

The Yoshikawa home was located in an old district where the streets were narrow as crevices, and the air smelled of smoke, soy sauce, and something elusively domestic. Above the entrance hung a faded *noren* with the character for “taste,” written as if the calligrapher had danced rather than written. His house smelled different from Ichiro’s. It smelled not of discipline and wood polish, but of the warmth of a hearth, the spicy aroma of *dashi* broth, ginger, and sweet soy sauce. The Yoshikawa family were hereditary cooks, and their home was a temple of food, not a temple of war.

Inside, it was cramped and hot. The kitchen took up half the first floor, and Daisuke’s father — a short man with hands covered in tiny burn scars — was working his magic over the coals with the intense focus of a surgeon.

“This is my friend, Ichiro,” Daisuke said.

His father nodded without looking up from the coals.

“A friend is good,” he said. “My grandfather used to say: ‘A good friend is like a good knife. Hard to find, but serves you for a lifetime.’”

From behind a screen peeked a girl of about seven — slender, with huge eyes brimming with curiosity.

“This is Yuki,” Daisuke sighed. “My little sister. Yuki, don’t bother us.”

But she had already run up to Ichiro, holding a battered doll in a faded kimono.

“Do you want to play?” she asked. “This is Princess Kaguya. She lives on the Moon, but sometimes she comes down to Earth.”

“Yuki!” Daisuke tried to pull her away. “We’re not little kids. Go play by yourself.”

“But it's boring alone,” she pouted. “And a princess needs a prince. Or at least a samurai.”

Ichiro looked at her and felt a strange warmth in his chest. When was the last time someone had offered him to just play? Without conditions, without hidden motives, without a test of endurance?

“Another time,” he said softly. “I promise.”

Yuki beamed as though he had gifted her an entire kingdom.

Over dinner, Daisuke's father spoke of the subtleties of preparing rice — how important the water temperature was, how one must sense the exact moment to lift the lid. His hands moved to illustrate his tale, and in those movements lay the same precision found in the strokes of a master calligrapher.

“Food is not merely fuel,” he said. “It is a language. A way of saying ‘I care for you’ without words.”

Ichiro ate slowly, trying to memorize every flavor. At home, bland rice and his father's silence awaited him. Here, every bite was saturated with warmth, care, and life.

“Ichiro wants to serve in the army,” Daisuke suddenly said. “Just as his father dreams.”

Father Yoshikawa nodded, but a shadow flickered in his eyes.

“Service is an honor,” he said cautiously. “But remember, boy: a sword cuts both ways.”

After dinner, they sat on the veranda. Yuki nestled between them, clutching her doll to her chest. The first stars were kindling in the sky.

“You know,” Daisuke said, “I'm thinking of joining the army, too.”

Ichiro looked at him in surprise.

“You? But you...”

“Can't fight?” Daisuke chuckled. “I'll learn. Not all soldiers have to be heroes. Someone has to cook the rice. Someone has to... just be there.”

“Why would you want that?”

Daisuke fell silent, looking at the stars.

“My grandfather was in the army. Not an officer — a simple cook. But he said that feeding a hungry soldier is also service. Maybe I won't be able to hold a sword. But I'll be able to hold a ladle. I will feed the soldiers so they have the strength to protect our country. To protect Yuki.”

Yuki, meanwhile, had already fallen asleep, leaning against Ichiro's shoulder. Her breathing was light, like the breath of a baby bird.

“She likes you,” Daisuke said quietly. “She doesn't usually approach strangers.”

Ichiro carefully tucked a stray lock of hair behind her ear. In that gesture lay a tenderness he thought he had lost forever.

As he was leaving, Daisuke's father pressed a wrapped bundle into his hands.

“These are *onigiri* for tomorrow,” he said. “With *umeboshi* inside. The sourness helps you wake up.”

On the way home, Ichiro thought about the strangeness of the evening. About how easy it had been to just be a boy, and not a future soldier. About the little girl with the doll who saw in him not a weapon, but a potential playmate. About a friend who wanted to serve not out of a thirst for glory, but out of a desire to care.

At home, his father was already asleep. His mother sat by the window, darning his school uniform. She looked up, a mute question in her eyes.

“I was at a friend's,” Ichiro said.

She nodded and returned to her sewing. But the corners of her lips twitched slightly — the ghost of a smile she had almost forgotten.

That night, Ichiro slept peacefully. He dreamed not of swords or marches, but of the smell of coals, the taste of *umeboshi*, and a small hand trustingly placed in his palm. The hand of a girl who resembled a small, curious sparrow.

They did not know then — neither he nor Daisuke — that in a few years they would find themselves on the same ship, sailing west. In the same platoon, in an alien, frozen land, where their only food would be cold rice balls, and their only beauty — the gleam of a bayonet in the moonlight. They did not know that the friendship born in a school latrine would pass through fire and blood, through the mud of trenches and the bitter cold of foreign soil.

At the time, they did not yet know that war is not a game, and that spring can end at any moment.

## Chapter Four

In the year the bullet cut short the life of Prime Minister Inukai, the wind blowing over Japan changed its course. It grew harsher, colder, and acquired the scent of steel. This wind tore into their school, stripping away the last remnants of its former tranquility. Discipline, which already resembled a tightly drawn string, was pulled taut until it hummed.

From that day on, the school changed. The portraits of the Emperor grew larger, the teachers' gazes harder, and military uniforms flashed through the corridors with

increasing frequency. Officers came to classes, speaking of the glory of the empire, of sacred duty, of the fact that soon — very soon — Japan would take its rightful place in the sun.

Ichiro observed them with a cold, respectful curiosity. He saw in them the embodiment of that steel beauty he had dreamed of since he was five. Their bearing was flawless, their faces impenetrable, their movements precise and economical. They were perfect mechanisms, created for a single purpose. They were what he wanted to become.

Teacher Hiraoka now walked with the expression of a man whose hour had come. In class, he no longer spoke of the ancient samurai. He spoke of new heroes — of those who had not feared to shed blood for the purity of an idea.

“Inukai was old,” he would say, contempt lacing his voice. “He wanted peace with the West. Peace! As if a lion can negotiate with sheep. The young officers understood what politicians do not: sometimes, the sword must speak first.”

The classroom was silent. Even Daisuke, who usually stared out the window during such speeches, sat up straight, looking at the teacher. But in his gaze, Ichiro saw not admiration, but something akin to fear.

A week after the assassination, they were summoned to the principal's office. Not just them — five other top students as well. They stood in the office, lined up like soldiers at an inspection. The principal — a dry man with a face like old parchment — swept his gaze over them.

Beside him stood an officer. Young, with sharp cheekbones and eyes that held nothing but cold evaluation. He looked at them the way one looks at horses before a purchase — studying their build, checking their teeth.

“The Empire needs new warriors,” the officer said, adjusting a glove of fine, snow-white leather. “Educated, loyal, ready. You have been granted the honor of continuing your education at the prefectural cadet corps.”

He paused, letting the words settle.

“Miyazaki Ichiro,” he looked directly at him. “You will make an excellent soldier. Your discipline, your loyalty — this is what the army needs.”

Ichiro bowed. His chest was hollow. Neither joy nor fear — only a sense of inevitability, as if he had been walking toward this moment his entire life.

“Yoshikawa Daisuke,” the officer shifted his gaze. “I know your grandfather served as an army cook. A noble tradition. The army requires not only warriors, but those who will feed them. You will continue the family trade.”

Daisuke bowed. Out of the corner of his eye, Ichiro saw his shoulders tremble. Just for a fraction of a second. But the officer noticed it.

The principal smiled obsequiously:  
 “This is a great honor for our school, Major. A great honor.”

“Any objections, Cadet?” the officer continued, ignoring the principal and looking straight at Daisuke.

“None at all, Major, sir,” he replied. “It is an honor.”

“Exactly,” the officer nodded. “An honor you must live up to.”

When they left the office, the other students looked at them with envy and fear. The cadet corps — it was simultaneously an elevation and a sentence. Elevation above the rest. A sentence to serve.

That evening, Ichiro came home and told his father. His father was silent for a long time, looking at him. Then he stood up, went to the old cabinet, and took out a bundle wrapped in white cloth.

“This was mine,” he said, unwrapping the cloth.

Inside lay a *gunto* — an army sword. Not a parade sword, but a working one, with signs of use on the hilt. His father placed it before Ichiro.

“I was never able to become an officer,” he said quietly. “But you... you will. You will become what I did not.”

There was pride in his voice, but beneath it — something else. Something resembling regret. Or a warning.

His mother stood in the doorway, clutching a kitchen towel to her chest. She was not crying. She simply looked at her son the way one looks at a departing train — knowing it will not return.

In the Yoshikawa home, silence reigned. His father sat at the table, staring into an empty cup. Yuki hid behind the screen, but Ichiro could hear her quiet sniffles.

“An army cook,” Daisuke’s father finally said. “Like your grandfather.”

“It is an honor,” Daisuke repeated the words from the principal’s office.

“An honor,” his father scoffed. “Do you know what your grandfather used to say about his service? ‘I fed boys who went off to die.’ That was all the honor there was.”

He stood up, heavy, like an old man.

“But there is no choice. When the empire calls, we answer. It has always been so.”

Yuki ran out from behind the screen and hugged her brother’s legs.

“Don't go,” she whispered. “Who will play with me?”

Daisuke stroked her head.

“I will come back,” he said. “And I’ll bring you a new doll. The most beautiful one.”

That night, Ichiro lay awake, staring at his father’s sword. Moonlight glided along the blade, and in that cold gleam, he saw his future. Clear, straight as the line of the blade.

And in the neighboring district, Daisuke was not sleeping either. He was thinking of his grandfather, of his stories about the army kitchen. About how important it was to preserve at least a drop of warmth in the food, at least a hint of home. “Sometimes,” his grandfather would say, “a bowl of hot soup is all that separates a man from a beast.”

In the morning, they met at the school gates. Both with small bundles — all they were allowed to bring to the corps. Both silent, immersed in their own thoughts.

“Ready?” Ichiro asked.

“Is there a choice?” Daisuke replied.

They walked toward the gates. Behind them lay childhood, home, their former life. Ahead lay honor. Or what the empire called by that name.

## Chapter Five

The cadet corps reeked of carbolic acid, sweat, and the raw earth of the parade ground. Life here was governed not by the cycle of day and night, but by the rhythm of the drum. A beat — reveille. A beat — formation. A beat — lights out. This rhythm seeped beneath the skin, into the blood, becoming the beating of the heart. Individual names were erased, supplanted by numbers and surnames. They were no longer boys. They were a platoon, a company, a regiment. A singular entity, where each was merely a cell submitting to the collective will.

The days were indistinguishable from one another, like gray stones at the bottom of a river. Drill training. Hours spent beneath a scorching sun or freezing rain, honing a single, absolute skill — to move as one. In lockstep. The turn of the head — simultaneous. The thud of hundreds of boots against the earth melded into a viscous, hypnotic drone. At first, Ichiro could not grasp the purpose of this senseless, grueling drill. He believed the marching to be a mere rehearsal for a parade, a display of beauty and order. But only later, much later, in the province of Shanxi, would he comprehend the true meaning behind these endless marches. It was not about discipline. It was about transmuting them into a single organism, where the loss of one cell meant agony for the entire body. Where your mistake was the death of a comrade. Where there was no “I,” only “We.” They were being forged from a scattering of stones into a monolithic, indestructible wall, where the falling of one stone would not fracture the whole. Their bodies were being bound by invisible threads, so that later, in battle, they would move and die as one continuous entity.

There were no real weapons. Instead of rifles — heavy, smoothly planed wooden poles that rubbed their shoulders raw and bloody. Instead of swords — the same *bokken* as in school. But now, in every swing, in every lunge, lay not a game, but the rehearsal of murder. They bayoneted straw dummies, and the cry of “Banzai!”, ripping from hundreds of throats, was no mere battle cry, but an exhalation that purged them of the remnants of their humanity.

In the evenings, in a dimly lit auditorium, they were shown a map of the world. It resembled a patchwork quilt that begged to be stitched into a seamless whole.

“*Hakko ichiu*,” the instructor would say, a man with a shattered nose and a scar on his cheek. His voice was raspy, like that of an old hound. “Eight corners of the world under one roof.’ Our roof is the roof of the House of Yamato. Our divine mission is to gather these corners, to bring light and order to the savage peoples of Asia. To forge the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere.”

Newsreel footage flickered across the screen: smiling Japanese soldiers handing food to Chinese children in Manchukuo; grateful Koreans waving flags bearing the rising sun. And then — other frames: cruel white colonizers beating the natives; treacherous Chinese generals peddling opium. The world was as simple as a bayonet thrust. Light and dark. Us and them.

In this world, constructed of discipline, pain, and propaganda, Daisuke, to Ichiro's astonishment, did not break. On the contrary, he found his place. The cadets, exhausted by the drills, humiliated by the officers, stripped of home and warmth, gravitated toward him as toward a faint, yet singular source of light. On Sundays, when visits from relatives were permitted, the parade ground swelled with the scents of home-cooked food. Mothers and sisters brought bundles of *onigiri*, fried fish, and sweet beans. And here began Daisuke's sacrament. He gathered all the provisions into a communal pot. His hands, clumsy with a rifle, discovered their magic here. He chopped, mixed, added a pinch of salt, a drop of sauce he had somehow managed to procure. And from these disparate, meager rations, he forged something collective. Not merely food — a dinner. A ritual that, for one hour, returned them home. He divided everything equally, ensuring each received their share. And in that moment, he was not the feeble Cadet Yoshikawa. He was the keeper of the hearth for their small, battered brotherhood. Ichiro looked at him and saw how the one he had once protected had now become a protector himself. He protected them from hunger, from despair, from their ultimate transfiguration into faceless cogs of the war machine.

Daisuke became their indispensable part. Their shared secret. Their small, quiet rebellion against the soulless rhythm of the drum. A rebellion embodied in the taste of a salted plum inside a rice ball...

Left-right. Left-right. In step. Always in step. To the very end.

## Part Two

### Chapter One

War arrived not as a tempest, but as a relentless, freezing rain that at first masquerades as mere dampness, only to seep into the marrow, the thoughts, the dreams. Everything that had preceded it — the drills, the marching, the barks of the instructors, even the aromas of Daisuke's cooking — dissolved into a single, viscous instant.

The Shanxi mountains received them with a cold that gnawed at the bone like a famished hound. The September sun here was deceitful: brilliant, yet devoid of warmth, like the smile of a corpse. The 5th Division advanced through the narrow gorge, uncoiling like a serpent between the crags — a serpent that was blind, deaf, and absolute in its certainty of its own invulnerability.

The air was thin and frigid, redolent of stone and wormwood. The silence was so dense it felt as though it could be severed with a blade. Too dense. Ichiro felt it upon his skin, the way one senses the brewing of a thunderstorm. He marched shoulder to shoulder with Daisuke, and their breath, escaping in pale plumes, was the sole movement in this petrified world.

And then the silence ruptured. The sound did not originate from without; it was born inside Ichiro's skull, the way a scream is born. The world around him shattered into a million trembling shards, like a reflection upon water struck by a stone. Time halted, then bled backward, coiling into a taut, vertiginous spiral.

The earth beneath their boots heaved like the spine of an awakened dragon. Geysers of black soil surged toward the heavens, and within them, like the petals of bizarre, carnivorous flora, bloomed scarlet chrysanthemums. They were agonizingly exquisite in their fleeting, furious existence. Ichiro watched one such chrysanthemum blossom exactly where Cadet Yamamoto had stood a fraction of a second before. He perceived no body, heard no shriek. He beheld only the immaculate, symmetrical beauty of the crimson flower against the ashen sky. He watched a bullet enter the chest of the infantryman ahead — neatly, with an almost tender grace, like a needle piercing silk. He watched the man fall, and the descent spanned an eternity, every inch of its trajectory painted upon the air like a brushstroke on a scroll. He watched the red flower burst from the wound — vivid, impossible in its splendor, unfurling petal by petal.

The air grew heavy with an insistent drone, as though a myriad of iron dragonflies had taken to the hunt. They danced through the void, trailing thin, invisible threads in their wake. One such dragonfly sang intimately against Ichiro's ear, and he felt a warm, viscous caress upon his cheek. He observed the former cadets around

him commence their grotesque, absurd dance. They collapsed, convulsed, and froze in unnatural postures, like clumsy marionettes stripped of their strings.

A carousel of memories that were not his own spiraled in Ichiro's mind. The fragrance of his mother's perfume entwined with the stench of cordite. The savor of salted plum *onigiri* met the tang of iron on his tongue. Yuki's face, clutching her doll, superimposed over the contorted visage of a lieutenant who now bore a second scarlet flower where his eye had been. He attempted to raise his rifle, but his limbs were alien, rendered in cotton; they refused his command. He was but a spectator in a theater, captive to a play performed in a tongue he could not comprehend.

Through this kaleidoscope of delirium, he felt a hand upon his shoulder. Resolute, unyielding. It dragged him, tearing him from the embrace of this beautiful and terrifying reverie. It was Daisuke. His face was painted in mud and something darker, but his eyes were lucid, entirely sober. They harbored neither beauty nor dread. Only a stubborn, feral will to endure.

He hauled Ichiro from that gorge, from that theater of shadows, casting him into the dirt behind a massive boulder. Ichiro lay upon the freezing earth as the world slowly reassembled itself from the shards, reclaiming its familiar, hideous forms. The scarlet chrysanthemums had vanished, leaving behind only butchered meat. The dance of the dragonflies had ceased, yielding to a silence punctuated only by the rattling of breath and groans.

They were among the few spared. The remnants of their platoon, once the pride of the academy, were reduced to a huddle of filthy, terrified boys in tattered uniforms. They were ordered to Beiping. For reformation.

They trudged along the rutted, mechanized ruin of a road. Ichiro, his head still humming like an agitated hive, leaned heavily upon Daisuke's shoulder.

"Thank you," he rasped. "You... you have become a true warrior, Daisuke."

Daisuke offered a crooked smirk. His eyes held no triumph, no elation. Only an infinite, mortal exhaustion.

"I simply refused to starve to death in that cursed gorge," he murmured, gazing up at the bruised sky. "I hope they feed us in Beiping. I hope they let us rest. I am so tired of cold rice. I just want to sleep."

Ichiro studied his face and, for the first time, did not see his cook-friend, the gentle keeper of the hearth. He saw a man who had stared into the exact same void that he had. And this shared nothingness bound them tighter than any oath to the Emperor.

## Chapter Two

The respite in Beiping was as fleeting as a breath drawn between two commands. Yesterday's wounds remained unsealed, yet the air already reeked of

carbolic acid, sweat, and the damp soil of the parade ground. The military cadence returned like a recurring fever: roused before dawn, the marching, the barks of the sergeants, the crushing weight of the rifle. But now, new faces stood among them — boys untouched even by the rigors of cadet school. Their eyes were too wide, their wrists too fragile for the steel they carried. They gazed upon the survivors as though they were demigods, men who had already waded across the river where the waters run black. Their stares pleaded: “*Teach us to die with such grace.*” To them, Ichiro and his comrades had ceased to be flesh and blood; they had become myth.

Ichiro saw his former self in them — the boy he was before the gorge, before the blooming of the scarlet chrysanthemums. They still harbored faith in a noble death, in glory, in the illusion that war was merely poetry articulated through other means. Daisuke fed them in silence, lacing their rice with slightly more salt than usual, as if attempting to mask the bitter foretaste of their destiny. There was a vulnerability in their eyes, akin to pups newly severed from their mother’s teat.

To galvanize these raw recruits, General Itagaki orchestrated an assembly with two officers — Lieutenants Toshiaki Mukai and Tsuyoshi Noda. They strode onto the parade ground like deities from an ancient scroll: towering, immaculate, their features wiped clean of both terror and fatigue. Their tunics were flawlessly pressed, their *gunto* swords polished to a blinding, mirror-like sheen.

“We fought side by side,” Mukai began, his voice resonant as struck bronze. “And we resolved to determine which of us is the truer samurai. Who could sever more lives in the crucible of hand-to-hand combat.”

He recounted the slaughter with the breezy detachment of a student discussing an archery tournament at a summer festival.

“Initially, I held the vanguard,” he continued, “but then Noda matched my pace. We advanced shoulder to shoulder, like two tigers prowling a bamboo grove. Every arc of the blade — a flash of lightning; every kiai shout — a clap of thunder.”

“I recall,” Noda interjected, “how the blood sprayed across the snow like sakura petals caught in an April gale. We did not tally the strokes; we tallied only honor.”

“By the day’s end,” Mukai declared, “I had cut down one hundred and five men. Noda — one hundred and six.”

He smiled, and within that smile lingered the innocence of a boy parading a new toy.

“Yet the number is immaterial,” Noda said. “What matters is being worthy of the blade. Being worthy of His Majesty.”

The recruits listened, spellbound. To them, these lieutenants were not mortal, but living avatars of the Bushido they had been spoon-fed since infancy: absolute duty, immaculate honor, eternal glory.

Ichiro observed them, noting a profound artificiality in their narrative, reminiscent of sanitized folktales where the heroes invariably triumph, and blood is not blood, but mere vermilion ink brushed upon parchment.

“To kill with the sword is an art,” their academy instructor had once lectured, echoing the maxims of some long-dead master. “The first strike demands everything. The second requires less. And eventually... eventually, you cease counting altogether. It simply becomes a profession.”

He remembered, too, the words of Senior Officer Shintaro Uno, who, in a rare lapse of candor, had confessed:

“In the mud of battle, all illusions dissolve. There is no honor there, no aesthetic beauty. There is only raw terror and absolute exhaustion. The rest is fabricated for the morning papers.”

The theater concluded. General Itagaki stepped to the fore.

“You have borne witness to true heroes,” his voice thundered. “Soon, this supreme honor will fall to you. In two days, we march on Nanjing.”

The recruits erupted into a feral roar of “Banzai!” Their cries were saturated with juvenile ecstasy and an insatiable thirst for martyrdom. Ichiro remained mute. He watched the retreating backs of the lieutenants. They did not resemble heroes to him; they appeared as high priests of some archaic, blood-drenched cult. And he, adrift in the cheering mass, was but a lamb being herded toward their sacrificial altar. The sole distinction was that he, unlike the boys beside him, could already feel the glacial kiss of the ritual blade against his throat.

That night, when the parade ground lay desolate, Ichiro sat for a long time on the barracks steps, examining his hands. They trembled — not from dread, but from a profound, marrow-deep fatigue. He pondered the city that awaited them, a city that had transitioned into legend before they had even breached its gates. He considered how legends invariably carve out space for heroism, but possess little tolerance for the truth.

Daisuke settled beside him, offering a bowl of steaming rice.

“Eat,” he instructed. “They say Nanjing will be a hungry place.”

Ichiro accepted the bowl. He inhaled the vapor, a synthesis of soy, scallions, and an elusive phantom of home. He reflected that, perhaps, the purest form of courage was not the severing of a hundred heads, but the simple act of remembering the taste of hot rice on a bitterly cold night.

Two days. A mere two days until Nanjing.

## Chapter Three

They entered Nanjing only after the city's agony had surrendered to rigor mortis. They were not the vanguard. Preceding divisions had swept through the capital like a plague of locusts, leaving in their wake a scorched, disemboweled earth. The avenues resembled opened veins, long drained of their vitality. The soldiers witnessed the unspeakable and felt nothing akin to surprise. Surprise is a luxury afforded only to those who still possess the capacity to delineate between the waking world and a nightmare. The reality around them was a canvas rendered by a lunatic, and they had become the very pigment.

The air was oppressive, thick as felt, steeped in the stench of char, human waste, and that sickly, cloying sweetness that Ichiro had learned to identify, yet still refused to name.

Plunder devolved into routine. Every residence offered the same tableau: rifled chests, pulverized porcelain, and occasionally, a forgotten bowl of rice wearing a shroud of mold. Now and then, a trinket emerged that might be bartered for tobacco or an extra ration of bread. But predominantly, they found only a resonant emptiness. They, too, became scavengers. Yet they sought neither silk nor jade. They hunted for sustenance. Hunger had assumed absolute command, reigning with a cruelty no general could muster. It hollowed them out from within, reducing men of the Emperor into a pack of rabid wolves.

One afternoon, beneath a sky that pressed down upon the ruins like a slab of lead, a recruit sprinted into their encampment. His eyes were alight with a febrile, manic luminescence.

"Food!" he gasped, doubling over. "We found it! Real food! Pork! There are even vegetables!"

The lethargic camp stirred instantly. The word "pork" possessed the cadence of an incantation, a whisper of paradise. Ichiro followed him. They navigated a suffocating alleyway toward a modest dwelling with a caved-in roof of clay tiles.

"And the owners?" Ichiro asked. The inquiry slipped out unbidden, as utterly futile as questioning the trajectory of a typhoon.

"Over there," the recruit gestured lazily toward the courtyard. "In a pit. Hiding."

He offered a smirk. It contained no deliberate malice, merely a warped, adolescent bravado.

Ichiro stepped into the yard. Near the perimeter wall, a hollow had been excavated and concealed beneath rotting floorboards. A stifled, rhythmic weeping emanated from the earth. He approached and hooked one of the boards with the butt of his Arisaka rifle, dragging it aside. Below, in the damp gloom, a cluster of humanity cowered. Women. The elderly. Their faces were drained of all color, rigid with terror

like porcelain masks from the Noh theater. Among them, he noticed a girl, perhaps ten years of age. She was not weeping. She stared up at him with immense, ink-black eyes that harbored neither fear nor malice. There was only a quiet, absolute incomprehension.

Ichiro lowered the muzzle of his rifle into the pit. He did so without intent, without wrath. He did it with the casual detachment of a man placing a marker so as not to lose his place in a book. The bayonet met something soft. The girl's thigh. She did not scream. She merely released a sharp, quiet gasp, and the woman beside her — her mother — frantically dragged the child against her breast, murmuring breathless prayers. Ichiro held the girl's gaze for a second longer. Then he withdrew the steel and turned away. He felt nothing. Not a flicker of sadistic triumph. Not a pang of mercy. Only a frigid, metallic curiosity. He was an entomologist, clinically observing the twitching of an insect on a pin.

That evening, the camp held a banquet. Daisuke, whose features had reanimated for the first time in weeks, presided over the scavenged field kitchen. Within a massive, hermetically sealed industrial boiler they had hauled from the ruins, the meat simmered, exhaling a divine, intoxicating perfume — the rich, heavy soul of pork fat. Nearby, Daisuke rhythmically diced the unearthed vegetables. His movements had reclaimed that forgotten, elegant choreography of the master chef. He was smiling.

“Tonight, we dine as human beings, Ichiro,” he announced. “As though we were home.”

The men formed a tight perimeter, inhaling the steam with feral greed, their eyes glassy with anticipation. It was an oasis of warmth and vitality amid a necropolis.

And then, Ichiro saw it.

Time dilated, assuming the same viscous quality it had possessed in the gorge. He watched a seam along the flank of the pressure-swollen boiler begin to yield. A hairline fracture, spreading slowly, mimicking the grin of a madman. The iron bulged, pregnant with explosive force.

Ichiro opened his mouth to scream, but the sound died in his throat. He stood paralyzed, an unwilling witness as the weld ruptured. A hiss of escaping pressure was instantly eclipsed by a volcanic eruption of boiling fat, propelled outward in a geyser of scalding liquid, rice, and shredded meat.

He stared directly at Daisuke. He did not hear the howl. He only witnessed it — the violent contortion of the vocal cords, entirely muted, like a frame in a degraded cinema reel. He watched Daisuke collapse, watched his uniform disintegrate, fusing instantaneously with his flesh. The massive blisters across his back swelled and ruptured in the same heartbeat, unveiling the weeping, incandescent pink tissue

beneath — a grotesque, magnificent lotus blooming upon the soil of hell. It was abhorrent. It was sublime.

No one moved to assist him. The entire unit recoiled in unison from the fountain of boiling death. Then, the hiss subsided. Daisuke writhed upon the earth. The screaming had ceased. He was emitting low, wet groans, and the cadence of that suffering was infinitely more horrifying than any shriek. Ichiro walked to him. He gazed down at what, mere moments ago, had been the face of his closest friend. He searched himself for a reaction. There was absolutely nothing. The void within him had expanded, becoming bottomless. It effortlessly devoured the stench of cooked meat, the agony of the groans, the trauma of the memory. He turned on his heel and walked away. Into the silence. Into the absolute nothingness.

## Chapter Four

Winter was obstinate that year, refusing to yield its grip. Even in Tokyo, the air possessed a crystalline sharpness, and the sky hung above the capital like a canopy of faded silk. Ichiro rode the train home on medical leave, yet his spirit remained utterly barren of joy. This reprieve was not a reward; it was a mere punctuation mark — a comma inserted into a sentence whose fatal conclusion had already been drafted.

Nothing had altered within his parents' home. It retained the same scent of polished cypress and stagnant silence. His father regarded him with a novel, almost reverent pride. The patriarch did not see a son; he saw an instrument of the Empire, forged in the fires of the continent. He pressed for tales of combat, of martial glory, but Ichiro's replies were clipped, monosyllabic. The words lodged in his throat like fish bones. How could he articulate the reality of the war? How to convey the texture of the stench? The density of the silence? The absolute muteness of the boiler? His mother observed him with a quiet, internalized agony. She possessed the intuition to see that the hollows behind his eyes had grown unfathomably deep. He treated their house as a mere inn. His true residence was elsewhere now.

He made the pilgrimage to the Yoshikawa household. He bore a small, cloth-wrapped parcel containing the sum of Daisuke's existence: a frayed notebook brimming with recipes he would never execute, a small stack of letters from his sisters, and a set of professional kitchen knives encased in wood — the very instruments his father had bestowed upon him before deployment. In a secondary, government-issued box rested the posthumous honors: the *Bukōkishō* of the Third Class, and a diminutive silver sake cup, engraved with the Imperial chrysanthemum. The artifacts were physically weightless, yet carrying them required more strength than shouldering a rifle.

Yuki slid the door open. He scarcely recognized her. The metamorphosis was complete; the boisterous girl with the doll had vanished, replaced by a young woman of solemn grace, eyes downcast, draped in a subdued grey kimono.

“Ichiro-san,” she murmured, sinking into a deep bow. “Please, enter.”

The interior was heavy with the fragrance of incense and the tangible weight of mourning.

Daisuke’s father had withered. His shoulders bowed inward; his hands, which had once wielded a blade with surgical authority, now rested impotently upon his thighs. Ichiro knelt and wordlessly presented the parcels. He undid the knots. The old man stared at the wooden case for an eternity before extending a trembling finger to trace the cold steel of the blade. He shed no tears. His grief was completely desiccated, dry as cremation ash.

“He was a good boy,” the father whispered, speaking not to Ichiro, but to the empty air beyond him. “His only desire was to feed people.”

Ichiro presented the commendations. The silver cup felt like ice against his palm.

He departed without accepting the customary tea. Yuki hurried after him, catching him in the street.

“My brother wrote of you. Constantly,” she said, her voice fragile in the cold air. “Thank you for returning his soul to us.”

“It is my duty (*giri*),” he replied rigidly.

They stood suspended in the silence. Snow, sparse and unseasonably late, began to drift down, catching in the darkness of her hair.

“Will you... will you write to me?” she asked suddenly, her gaze fixed firmly upon the ground. “Will you tell me... what it is truly like out there?”

“I shall write,” he pledged.

Their subsequent correspondence was the dialogue of two phantoms. They never mentioned the war, nor the crushing weight of their bereavement. They composed elegant verses regarding the weather, the shifting of the seasons, the precise blooming of the camellias in the garden. Their letters were a desperate attempt to stretch a delicate *shoji* screen over the yawning abyss that separated them. Yet, hidden beneath the calligraphy praising the autumn moon, lay the unwritten text of their mutual, profound desolation.

His next return to Tokyo was mandated by injury. Shrapnel had lacerated his leg — a superficial wound, but sufficient to grant him a temporary exile from the mud of the trenches. The capital felt altered; the air was thick with a suppressed, manic anxiety. Yet the Yoshikawa residence remained an inviolable sanctuary of quietude.

One evening, as they sat upon the veranda observing the garden over tea, Ichiro fixed his gaze upon Yuki, then turned to her father.

“I ask to receive your daughter as my wife.”

He delivered the request with the same flat, emotionless cadence one might use to ask for the passage of salt. Yuki’s father remained motionless, staring deeply into the bitter green depths of his tea.

“You are an honorable man, Ichiro. But the war has taken residence in your eyes. It shall never vacate them.”

“I am aware,” Ichiro replied evenly. “But I shall provide for her. I gave my word to Daisuke... I will do as he would have done, were he still of this world.”

It was a fabrication. He had promised no such thing. Yet this falsehood appeared to him as the sole remaining truth in the universe worth anchoring his life to.

They were wed within the week. A stark, perfunctory ceremony at a local shrine. There was no romance, no spark of passion. There was only the absolute dictation of duty. His obligation to the comrade he had failed to preserve. Her obligation to the brother she had failed to anchor to the earth. Their marriage was not the union of man and woman, but the desperate attempt of two shadows to draw warmth from the dying embers of a shared memory. By the tradition of *mukoyoshi*, he abandoned his own name and took hers, ensuring that the specter of Daisuke would stand eternally between them, the silent witness of their desolate union.

## Chapter Five

The war upon the continent did not arrive as a purging tempest, but as a relentless, corrosive drizzle. It offered no purification; it merely dissolved the boundaries of the world, reducing the earth to a primordial mire and men to insubstantial shadows. Ichiro reverted to the nature of a blade. His muscles remembered the cadence of the march; his hands, the frigid bite of steel; his eyes, the absolute apathy toward the carrion left rotting on the shoulders of the road. His brief domestic existence in Japan, beside Yuki, felt like a hallucination born of a fever. The only tangible realities were the absolute authority of the command, the gravitational pull of the rifle, and the ashen, indifferent sky.

The letter arrived with the mail brought by a supply truck. A frail envelope, inscribed with characters drawn by Yuki’s familiar, meticulous hand. As he opened it, his fingers — calloused and steeped in gun oil and filth — felt grotesquely alien against the pristine, brittle paper. The words were austere, stripped of all emotion, exactly as befitted the wife of an Imperial soldier. Yet, beneath their rigid discipline, he felt the quiet, insistent throb of new life. She was with child.

He submitted a petition for leave. The commanding officer — a man whose face resembled an ancient, weathered map where the wrinkles served as rivers and the scars as ruined cities — denied it. His refusal was as stark and terminal as the calligraphy in the letter.

“There is a war on, Yoshikawa,” the officer stated. “The Empire requires capable soldiers far more than children require fathers. Your duty is here.”

Ichiro accepted the rejection without a tremor of dissent. Absolute discipline was his second skin. He continued to strip his rifle, to march on patrol, to sleep upon the freezing earth. But now, within the vast architecture of his internal void, a foreign element had manifested. Not warmth — no. Rather, a focal point of tension. An invisible, agonizing knot.

The subsequent letter arrived months later. A daughter had been born to them. Yuki had named her Ayame. In honor of Daisuke’s grandmother, just as they had once agreed.

“She is remarkably quiet,” Yuki wrote, “and she possesses your eyes. Had she been a boy, we would have named him Daisuke.”

He read that singular line repeatedly. *Daisuke*. The name of the comrade buried in this foreign soil, a name that might have belonged to his son. He stared at the ink characters until they dissolved, bleeding together to form Daisuke’s face, laughing through the steam of a rice boiler. The crushing weight of the duty he carried had suddenly acquired a name. *Ayame*.

Leave was granted abruptly, half a year later. *For exceptional valor in combat*, the official dispatch read. He possessed no memory of valor. He recalled only the shrieks, the arterial mud, and the frigid, mechanical satisfaction of the sear releasing beneath his trigger finger. The journey back to the archipelago was a trance. And then, he was standing upon the threshold of his own home. Yuki bowed low to the tatami, and in her eyes, he found neither reproach nor elation. Only an infinite, crushing exhaustion.

“She is inside,” Yuki murmured. “She is learning how to walk.”

He stepped into the interior, and the first image that struck him was a minuscule figure draped in a crimson kimono, hesitantly moving her small feet. Ayame clung to the edge of a low *chabudai* table, took one step, then another, before collapsing onto the woven rushes of the tatami. She laughed, and pulled herself up to try again. She looked at him with massive, ink-dark, solemn eyes. *His* eyes. He knelt upon the mat, and she, swaying unsteadily, managed a few steps toward him. He did not extend his hands to catch her. He simply observed. He sought to dissect her tiny, unformed features, desperately hunting for traces of Daisuke. The curve of the lip, the architecture of the ear, the precise geometry of her gaze. He was searching for his lost comrade, his severed half, his ultimate absolution. But she was too small, too

impossibly new to this world, to harbor the ghost of another's memory. He finally lifted her into his arms, and she reached out, her tiny fingers tracing the topography of his face as though trying to memorize his features for eternity.

“Daisuke would have wanted to see her,” Yuki said softly one evening.

“Yes,” Ichiro concurred. “He would have... he would have prepared something exquisite for her. Sweet rice balls, perhaps.”

They lapsed into silence, entombed in their shared memory.

“Take care of yourself,” Yuki told him on their final night. “You are needed by more than just the Emperor now.”

He returned to the continent an altered mechanism. The void inside him had not sealed, but it now possessed an echo. He no longer fought solely for the abstract divinity of the Emperor, nor merely for the austere, frigid beauty of Imperial duty. He fought for that tiny, radiant ember of life awaiting him in Tokyo. Daisuke had marched to war to shield his sister. Now he, Ichiro, was bound by blood and ghost to protect the daughter who bore the name of their lineage. He remained the absolute soldier of Hirohito. But now, when he severed a life, he was not merely defending the Empire. He was defending the reflection of his dead friend's eyes hidden within the face of his child. The steel of his will had not softened. It had simply undergone a new, intensely personal, and infinitely more lethal tempering.

## Epilogue

He sat on a bench by the river, and time flowed through him like water through his fingers. Plum blossoms, almost as white as the first snow, drifted down onto his shoulders, onto the earth, onto the grey, indifferent waters of the Yangtze. The wind carried them, and in their dance there was neither beauty nor sorrow. There was only the mechanics of the fall.

His hands gripped the smooth handle of his cane, polished by the friction of time. It was carved from pale, almost white wood, and once, an eternity ago in another life, it had borne an inscription. Now it had worn away, rubbed smooth into faint indentations — characters of a dead language that no one understood anymore.

He had found the strength — or perhaps merely the apathy — to return here, to this city he had once departed as a soldier. To return decades after the Empire he had served had crumbled into dust. Capitulation. Defeat. Yet he had never found the strength to return to Tokyo. Never. Not even to die.

...and memory, like a drop of ink in a glass of water, bled into the grey day, coloring it in shades of fire and ash. That March day had been bright, almost summery. He was traveling on leave. He was going home to Yuki and Ayame. He carried a silk scarf for his wife, bartered from a merchant in Shanghai, and for Ayame — a small wooden doll he had taken from a Chinese man in exchange for a pack of cigarettes.

He had imagined how she would laugh, how her tiny fingers would explore the carved kimono of the toy. But when the train approached Tokyo, he did not see a city. He saw its funeral. The sky was pitch-black with smoke, and through it pierced a sickly, tangerine sun. He did not recognize his district, Shitamachi, where every alleyway had been steeped in his childhood. There were no streets. There were only riverbeds carved through the cooling ash. There were no houses. There were only blackened, charred skeletons, lifting their dead limbs toward the heavens. His city was gone. His home. His Yuki. His Ayame. Nothing. Only the wind, chasing scraps of what had once been life across the wasteland. And the smell. That same sweetish, nauseating stench he knew so intimately from Nanjing.

When they, the last soldiers of the Empire, were repatriated from China, he did not travel to Tokyo. He disembarked the train in Kyoto and never again returned to the city of his birth. To the city that had become a mass grave for his entire world. He became Miyazaki once more.

He drew a small silk pouch from his pocket. Fingers, trembling from the chill, untied the faded cord. Inside lay ash, within which, if one looked closely, minuscule, unburned fragments could be discerned. Grey, faceless, like dust. He brought it to his face. The ash smelled of nothing. It smelled simply of the void.

He closed his eyes.

A young Chinese couple strolling along the embankment saw the elderly man suddenly twitch in a strange manner and begin to slump sideways. His cane clattered against the paving stones.

“Nín hǎo? Xūyào bāngzhù ma?” they rushed over, the young man cautiously touching his shoulder. “Do you need help? Should we call an ambulance?”

But Ichiro could no longer hear them. The final sound he deciphered in his fading consciousness was not their questions, not the murmur of the river, not the rustle of last year’s leaves.

It was a quiet, distinct clatter.

The clatter of his wooden sword falling against the tatami mat on the day he turned five.

<i>Et</i>				<i>victor,</i>
<i>Et</i>				<i>victus,</i>
<i>In</i>	<i>ludo</i>	<i>huius</i>	<i>mundi</i>	—
<i>Non</i>	<i>plus</i>	<i>quam</i>	<i>gutta</i>	<i>roris,</i>
<i>Non diutius quam fulguris micat.</i>				

## Glossary

**Shenbao** (申报) — A daily newspaper published in Shanghai from April 30, 1872, to May 27, 1949.

**Nanjing War Crimes Tribunal** — Established in 1946 by Chiang Kai-shek's government to try four officers of the Imperial Japanese Army accused of war crimes committed in Nanjing during the Second Sino-Japanese War. It was one of thirteen tribunals organized by the Nationalist government.

**Shitamachi** (下町) — Literally “Low City”: A historic, densely populated district of Tokyo traditionally inhabited by artisans, merchants, and the working class. It was completely obliterated in the firebombing of early March 1945.

**Nanjing Massacre Memorial** — A real-world memorial complex located in Nanjing, China, bearing the names of the 300,000 victims of the massacre.

**Gendaitō** (現代刀) — “Modern Sword”: In the context of this novel, a wooden training katana bearing the name of Emperor Hirohito.

**Futon** (布団) — A traditional Japanese quilted mattress laid directly on the floor for sleeping.

**Hirohito** (裕仁) — The 124th Emperor of Japan (1926–1989), and the last monarch of the Japanese Empire, which ceased to exist following its defeat in World War II. He served as the Generalissimo of the Japanese armed forces. Under the 1889 Meiji Constitution, the emperor held divine authority over the nation, derived from Shinto myths of the imperial family's direct descent from the sun goddess, Amaterasu.

**Bushido** (武士道) — “The Way of the Warrior”: The traditional samurai code of honor and morals. In imperialist Japan, this code was heavily adapted and weaponized by the state to justify aggressive foreign expansion and extreme militarism.

**Daimyō** (大名) — “Great Name”: Powerful military feudal lords in medieval Japan; the absolute elite among the samurai class.

**Noh Theater** (能) — A form of classical Japanese musical drama characterized by its slow, stylized movements and the use of masks symbolizing absolute, frozen emotions.

**Noren** (暖簾) — Traditional Japanese fabric dividers hung in doorways, across windows, or between rooms to separate spaces.

**Unagi** (うなぎ) — The Japanese word for freshwater eel (*Anguilla japonica*), a highly prized and popular ingredient in Japanese cuisine.

**Onigiri** (お握り) — Traditional Japanese rice balls, often formed into triangular shapes and containing various fillings.

**Umeboshi** (梅干) — Intensely sour and salty pickled plums. A common filling for *onigiri*.

**Dashi** (だし) — A traditional Japanese stock that forms the fundamental flavor base for many dishes, including soups and sauces.

**Princess Kaguya** (かぐや姫) — The central figure of *The Tale of the Bamboo Cutter* (the Moon Princess). A Japanese folktale believed to have been created in the late 9th or early 10th century, considered the ancestor of all Japanese *monogatari* (narrative tales).

**Tsuyoshi Inukai** (犬養毅) — A liberal Japanese politician and Prime Minister (1855–1932). He was assassinated by radical naval officers during an attempted military coup.

**Guntō** (軍刀) — The standard-issue military sword provided to Imperial Japanese Army officers during the World War II era (1934–1945).

**Banzai!** (万歳) — Literally “Ten Thousand Years! (Long Live!)” Frequently used as an ultimate battle cry by charging Japanese soldiers.

**Bokken** (木剣) — A solid wooden training replica of a medieval Japanese sword (katana).

**Shanxi** (山西省) — A province in Northern China, which served as the site of fierce, protracted battles between 1937 and 1945.

**House of Yamato** (皇室) — The Japanese Imperial House, also known as the Imperial Family or the Yamato Dynasty.

**Hakkō ichiu** (八紘一宇) — “Eight Crown Cords, One Roof” (All the World Under One Roof). The primary political and philosophical slogan used to justify Japanese imperial expansion across Asia.

**Manchukuo** (満洲国) — A puppet empire established under the influence of the Japanese military administration in the region of Manchuria; it existed from March 1, 1932, to August 19, 1945.

**Dragonfly** (蜻蛉 / *Tombo*) — In Japanese culture, a symbol of the samurai. It was known as the “victory insect” (*kachimushi*) because it can only fly forward and never retreats.

**Toshiaki Mukai** (向井敏明) and **Tsuyoshi Noda** (野田毅) — Imperial Japanese officers who engaged in a notorious “contest” to see who could kill 100 people first using a sword. The “duel” took place en route to Nanjing, immediately preceding the Nanjing Massacre. Both men were extradited to China, tried, and executed by firing squad in 1948.

**Seishiro Itagaki** (板垣 征四郎) — A General in the Imperial Japanese Army, Minister of War (1885–1948), and one of the primary architects of the invasion of Manchuria. He was hanged at Sugamo Prison in Tokyo for war crimes.

**The Girl in the Pit** (Part Two, Chapter Three) — Chen Min, the mother of teacher Chen Wan, characters featured in the author's interconnected works *The Road of a Thousand Years* and *Paths*.

**Bukōkishō** (武功徽章) — The Badge for Military Merit. The 3rd Class was awarded exclusively to enlisted ranks.

**The Bombing of Tokyo, March 9–10, 1945** (Operation Meetinghouse) — During this raid, 334 B-29 bombers of the United States Army Air Forces dropped over 1,700 tons of incendiary bombs on the city, triggering a massive conflagration and firestorm. The bombing resulted in the deaths of an estimated 80,000 to 100,000 civilians, injured over 40,000, and left roughly one million people homeless.

**Et victor, et victus...** — A poem by Ōuchi Yoshitaka (1507–1551), a daimyo of Suō Province who lost an intra-clan conflict to a rival and committed ritual suicide:

*Both* *the* *victor,*  
*And* *the* *vanquished,*  
*In* *the* *game* *of* *this* *world* *—*  
*Are* *no* *more* *than* *a* *drop* *of* *dew,*  
*Last no longer than a flash of lightning.*

# The Observer Effect

*To see a World in a Grain of Sand  
And a Heaven in a Wild Flower,  
Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand  
And Eternity in an hour.*

— William Blake

*But should the eye close — all sinks into gray.*

## November 24

I think this is my final entry. Writing is becoming increasingly difficult — the letters blur, the paper loses its substance, even the fire in the stove no longer yields color, casting only a gray reflection upon the walls. It is becoming almost impossible. The ink no longer argues with the whiteness of the page; it rests upon it like a shadow upon a shadow. The very act of forming letters demands physical effort, as if I were scratching them into the surface of frozen mercury. Everything is bleeding together into a single, gray static — the paper, the flames in the stove, the world beyond the window.

If anyone ever finds these pages, let them know: I tried to remember. But memory, too, is fading.

Padma sits by the fire, huddled against Lyosha. Her eyes, once like two deep, dark lakes, are now merely two smudges of fog on a pale face. Lyosha hasn't spoken in forty-eight hours. Silence has become his way of showing care. Silently, he feeds wood into the stove. Silently, he tucks the blanket around the girl. And silently, for the third time now, he rereads my grandfather's book, tracing his finger along lines that, to me, crumbled into dust long ago. I no longer understand what he is searching for in there — the words are losing their meaning, the lines bleeding into a single, pale smear. I just don't understand. Perhaps he knows the whole book by heart. Or perhaps what he seeks in those written words is not meaning, but merely a familiar ritual — the final proof that order once existed.

Not a single sound has drifted up from the village for a week. It has become something else entirely.

When we arrived here, what feels like an eternity ago, it rang with life. The sharp, almost painful blue of the sky. The screaming colors of prayer flags snapping in the wind — blue, white, red, green, yellow — each color a distinct note in a shared song. The air smelled of dung smoke, juniper, and yak butter. Life pulsed in every stone, in the deep wrinkles of the old people's faces, in the chiming bells on the necks of the yaks.

I can barely remember what the faces of the people who lived here looked like. Sometimes I feel they never existed at all. Just the three of us, the stove, and this diary, which will soon vanish alongside me.

Now, the village is a charcoal sketch drafted on gray cardboard. The flags are just bleached scraps of cloth, the exact same tone as the sky. Sounds died first, as if years ago. Scents followed. Now, color is draining away. Only static remains. Not the howl of the wind, not the whisper of snow. Just the background static of an existence stripped of all its properties.

Lyosha is searching grandfather's Triptych for an answer. But I think the text itself was the answer.

We have simply reached its final page.

## November 1

Three weeks ago, the bus, looking like a tired, multicolored beetle, died on the final mountain pass. It hissed, shuddered, and fell silent, releasing a cloud of steam from under the hood that instantly mingled with the thin air. From there on out — only on foot.

Polina took a deep breath. The air was thin, cold, and so pure it seemed to burn her lungs. All around, stretching to the very horizon, were the mountains — mute, silvered giants propping up a sky the color of the most expensive blue porcelain. Here, at an altitude of four thousand meters, the world looked primordial, newly created.

“Oxygen... I need oxygen,” panted Sergey, a pale university student, clutching his inhaler to his chest as if it were the last surviving artifact of a bygone civilization. Yet, he was entirely happy — for the first time in a long while, no one was rushing him or demanding he “measure up.”

“Breathe deeper, my boy,” Dmitry Stanislavovich chuckled amiably, adjusting his backpack straps. His wife, Natalya Sergeevna, small and frail as a mountain bird, was already pointing ahead.

“Look! I think that's it.”

Down below, in the bowl of the valley, a village clung to the slope. From a distance, it looked like a handful of discarded stones. But as they drew closer, the stones came alive. Bells chimed on the necks of shaggy yaks, prayer wheels creaked, and a gaggle of children in bright, threadbare clothes poured out to meet them, laughing and shouting. Their faces were weather-beaten, darkened by the sun, and their eyes shone with a lively, unspoiled curiosity.

Padma was among them. She didn't shout, but stood slightly apart, earnestly studying the newcomers with her black eyes, as deep as the night.

They were welcomed warmly, without unnecessary questions. As if they were not strangers, but long-lost relatives who had finally returned home. Natalya Sergeevna and Dmitry Stanislavovich, consulting a battered Russian-Tibetan phrasebook, tried to string together a greeting, their faces shining with the delight of explorers. The Tibetans nodded, smiling with wrinkled faces upon which life had drawn a map of dried-up rivers, and led them to the largest house.

Alexey Malyanov walked in silence, as he always did. He didn't look at the people. His engineer's gaze caught on the details: the way the house walls were assembled from stone and clay, the ingenious system of wooden troughs channeling water down from the mountains, the construction of the smokeless stoves. He saw not the exotic, but the functional — a logic of survival honed over centuries.

They were seated on low benches and offered tea. *Chasuima*. A thick, salty beverage made with yak butter and milk. It smelled of smoke and something cured, and from the very first sip, it coated the insides with a strange, wild warmth. Sergey winced, but Polina drank slowly, trying to truly register the flavor — the taste of the place itself, ancient and alien.

They were lodged in an empty house on the edge of the village. The house was empty, but not abandoned: photographs hung on the walls, a carved chest stood in the corner, and the air smelled of yak butter and juniper. The owners, as it was explained through gestures and broken phrases from the guidebook, had moved to Lhasa a year ago, seeking civilization, leaving everything exactly as it was, as if intending to return the very next day. Most of their tour group had stayed behind there as well — too afraid to travel further on the old bus, preferring the comfort of a hotel to this final, wildest leg of the journey.

That evening, Polina stepped out onto the porch. The sky had turned deep purple, and stars ignited across it one by one — massive, brilliant, close. Muffled sounds drifted up from the village: someone's guttural laugh, a dog's bark, the quiet, melodic hum of a prayer. Everything was saturated with peace and tranquility. No premonitions. No omens. Just another evening on the roof of the world.

The bus was scheduled to return in three days. They had exactly three days of absolute, ringing freedom. Polina smiled at her own thoughts. Here, beneath this improbably starry sky, her own life in Moscow — the divorce, the job, the lonely evenings — seemed distant and entirely inconsequential.

## November 2

Morning. The sun here doesn't warm; it sterilizes, flooding the valley with a harsh, white light. The air is perfectly still. The silence is so thick that you can hear your own heart beating within it. I slept poorly, dreaming of charts and diagrams — the remnants of my Moscow life.

On the plane, while we flew above endless clouds, I re-read my grandfather's triptych, *Meihua*. In my youth, this book had felt like a revelation — as if my grandfather, who had lived his entire life in Balashikha, had suddenly seen and understood something completely inaccessible to anyone else around him. China, Japan, alien cities, alien destinies, alien words — back then, it all seemed incredibly important to me, almost mystical. I devoured his descriptions, searching them for answers to my own questions, of which I had far too many at the time. It was intoxicating, like your first taste of cheap wine. I walked around feeling like an initiate, perceiving hidden meanings in the patterns on the wallpaper.

But now... His entire Asia was invented at a kitchen table, somewhere between drinking tea and watching the evening news. He wrote about China and Japan, but in reality, he was writing about himself — about his own fears and hopes that had never found an outlet. My grandfather, clearly, was fascinated by the idea of a vicious infinity, like a snake biting its own tail. He described worlds nested within one another, like *matryoshka* dolls. A beautiful metaphor for a man who spent his whole life in the exact same apartment. His universe was so small that he had to invent others just to keep from suffocating within it.

At seventeen, books like this seem like a revelation. At forty, they read like a diagnosis. The diagnosis of a man who found his own life far too cramped. But what if that cramped life was also a fiction? What if my grandfather didn't invent Asia, but invented Balashikha instead?

Since morning, Alexey has been trying to get a satellite lock. Useless. Starlink is behaving strangely. A signal appears on the terminal for a few seconds — strong, steady — and then melts away as if it had never been there. Once, he managed to load the homepage of a news site: it bled onto the screen halfway, like an ancient fresco, and froze into a meaningless jumble of pixels and fragmented headlines — messages that looked more like static. He hasn't been able to make a single call.

Dmitry Stanislavovich and Natalya Sergeevna are simply overjoyed. "A digital detox, Polina! Finally!" Sergey is whining that he can't post photos to Instagram. Alexey frowns and silently tinkers with the settings. He is the only one truly unsettled by this. His engineer's soul cannot tolerate irrational glitches.

As for me... I feel a strange calm. As if the world has simply unplugged us from the network, like a bothersome peripheral device. My grandfather would have said this was the first glitch in the Matrix. But I think it's just a bad ISP on the roof of the world. And, honestly, I don't care. Perhaps for the first time in many years.

## November 2

In the afternoon, they went to the gompa — a small local monastery clinging to the cliff face like a wasp's nest. The road to it led steeply upward, past stupas draped in faded flags and flat stones carved with mantras. Inside, it smelled of yak butter,

juniper, and centuries. In the half-light of the main hall, lit only by narrow windows beneath the ceiling, statues of deities gleamed dully with gold — many-armed, wrathful, and serene. Their faces, veiled in shadow, seemed to watch the newcomers with an inhuman calm. On the walls were rows of prayer flags, faded to near transparency, and murals where the colors had long ago bled into a single ochre palette. In the corner sat a bronze drum, upon which a local was softly beating a rhythm resembling a heartbeat.

Dmitry Stanislavovich and Natalya Sergeevna walked around the hall in reverent whispers, consulting the guidebook and trying to read the names on the *thangkas* — ancient scrolls depicting scenes from the lives of saints. Sergey photographed everything on his phone, complaining that it was too dark without a flash. Polina just stood in the middle of the hall, feeling the weight of this ancient, alien faith pressing down on her. She didn't just feel like a stranger here — she felt transparent, insubstantial.

When they stepped back out into the blinding light, Alexey fell into step beside her.

“I noticed you have a book,” he said quietly, barely parting his lips. “Are you reading it?”

Polina started in surprise.

“I brought it for the trip. My grandfather wrote it.”

Alexey was surprised, even stopping for a moment.

“Your grandfather? I’ve read that book. I really liked it.”

“In my youth, I also thought it was something special,” Polina replied. “Now I see it differently. My mother told me that grandfather wanted to write a screenplay after watching some Chinese movie. He thought about it for a few years, and then suddenly wrote the first ‘micro-novel,’ then the second, and then the third — literally in a couple of months, as if someone was dictating to him.”

Alexey nodded, looking off toward the snow-capped peaks.

“May I borrow it to read? Maybe I’ll look at it differently now, too. When I read it, for some reason, I imagined my grandfather in the place of one of the characters. He was in science, physics. And then, after a few strange incidents, he dropped everything and withdrew into himself.”

He fell silent, then added with a wry smile:

“I suppose we don't choose our paths; our paths choose us.”

At that moment, they were approached by the village elder, Tashi-Tobgyal — a tall, withered old man with a face like a baked apple. Trotting beside him was a huge, shaggy dog resembling a bear cub. Padma was holding onto its tail like a rope, giggling.

The elder began to speak, helping himself along with gestures. Natalya Sergeevna, peering into the phrasebook, translated with pauses:

“He says... on the television... they are reporting strange things. All over the world... communications failures. And their TV is acting up, even though it’s new. Sometimes... instead of a color picture... it’s black and white. And sometimes the screen just... fades.”

As he spoke, the dog suddenly froze. The hackles on its neck stood on end. It growled low in its throat, staring into the void, and then, bolting from its spot, dashed somewhere down the trail with loud, panicked barks. Padma was about to dart after it, but the elder stopped her with an authoritative gesture.

“He says... stay with the white people,” translated Natalya Sergeevna. “They will take you home. He’ll find the dog himself.”

The old man nodded to them, turned around, and with a swift stride that belied his age, strode down the trail following the barking, which grew further and fainter until it died away completely. Padma obediently remained beside them, but kept looking in the direction the dog had run. Her face was grave and guarded.

## November 2

I gave the book to Alexey. He is by the window now, reading. It’s strange. He is an engineer, a man of schematics and systems, a practitioner to his very marrow. What could he possibly find in this ornate, metaphorical text, in this *glass bead game* invented by another engineer who desperately wanted to be a poet? Perhaps because within it, everything is governed by its own hidden laws, like a complex circuit where every element is in its proper place, even if it appears chaotic from the outside. Or perhaps because tech people are the biggest dreamers of all — only they dream of order.

And what happened to me? Where did that seventeen-year-old girl go, who read these very same lines locked in her room and couldn't hold back her tears? She believed every word. She wept over Mei’s fate, over Wang’s loneliness, over the very idea that the world could be cruel and unjust. The girl who believed that words could alter reality, that books were keys to other worlds, rather than just a way to escape one's own. When did I forget how to cry over books? When did I stop believing that the best was yet to come? Where did she get lost? Did she shatter against a divorce, dry up amidst endless sociological reports, suffocate in the Moscow smog?

Perhaps this is what growing up is — when even the most powerful emotions become memories, and memories become mere words on paper. Or perhaps it is simply exhaustion, accumulated over years of every day looking exactly like the last, to the point where even a miracle feels like an inconvenience, something completely out of place.

The village is already asleep. It is dark outside the window. Neither the elder nor the dog has returned.

Silence. Sleep won't come. Everything feels alien, even my own thoughts.

### November 3

The morning broke cold and transparent as glass. Polina stepped out onto the porch — Alexey was already sitting on the bench, the book on his lap. He clearly hadn't slept all night: his eyes were red, his movements slower than usual.

“What do you think?” she asked quietly, so as not to shatter the fragile morning silence.

Alexey slowly turned his tired but lucid face toward her.

“It's astonishing,” Alexey said. “When you read it a second time, knowing your grandfather wrote it, the triptych seems even more fascinating and profound. I kept catching myself thinking: how did he manage to create such a world, so alive and real? It's not just a description of events — it's as if he built the history himself, brick by brick, through the fates of his characters. It's astounding how he could forge an entire world out of nothing, out of thin air. So realistic that you believe in it more than...”

He waved his hand vaguely toward the snow-capped mountains.

“Yes,” Polina agreed. “Grandfather always said that history isn't what happened, but how we remember it. He wasn't just describing — he was creating.”

“More than creating,” Alexey picked up, a new, tense note entering his voice. “The reader becomes more than just an observer. By empathizing with the characters, the reader creates this world alongside the author. Forces it into existence. Just like in quantum physics — a system collapses into a definite state only at the moment of observation. As long as you're looking, everything exists; it vanishes when you stop seeing it. It seems he understood this intuitively.”

He stood up and paced across the porch.

“Why do you think I came here... To try and see the world again. In Moscow, these past few years... nothing mattered to me besides blueprints, code, and schematics. Everything became somewhat flat, like on an old monitor screen. But here...” He fell silent again.

Polina listened to him, and in that moment, something strange happened to her. She felt, almost physically, how Alexey's figure, standing there, momentarily became somehow... faded. As if his outlines grew less distinct, and the colors of his clothes less saturated, as though he were losing color against the backdrop of this morning light. *Maybe it's just exhaustion*, she thought. *Or maybe something else.*

At that moment, Sergey appeared in the yard, out of breath, his hair disheveled and his eyes wide with fear. His face was chalk-white.

“They found the elder!” he gasped. “He’s... different somehow. He’s silent, won’t respond to anything, and he’s just all... gray.”

“And the dog?” Polina asked quietly.

“No...”

### November 3

In the evening, the entire village gathered in the elder’s house. In the center of the room, on a low bench, sat Tashi-Tobgyal himself. He didn’t look sick or insane. He looked like an object. A statue made of gray dust, with eyes staring through the walls, through the mountains, through reality itself.

For the tourists, this was a pure, unadulterated ethnographic spectacle. Sergey took out his phone, hoping to shoot a good video for YouTube. Dmitry Stanislavovich and Natalya Sergeevna sat in the corner, adopting the postures of respectful observers at a scientific symposium. Polina, as a sociologist, felt an almost professional thrill. A classic exorcism ritual, apotropaic magic, a community's attempt to restore disrupted order through symbolic action. She made mental notes.

The shaman appeared. Not a majestic elder from the movies, but a small, withered man resembling a ginger root, with restless eyes. He moved without fuss, laying out his implements: a bronze bowl of murky water, bundles of dried herbs, a small drum made of tautly stretched leather.

And the ritual began.

At first, it felt like theater. The shaman walked in circles, muttering something guttural and rhythmic. He fumigated the elder with smoke that smelled bitter and sweet all at once. Then he took up the drum.

The initial beats were sparse, muffled. Like a slow heartbeat.

*Thrum... thrum... thrum...*

And with each new strike, the air seemed to grow thicker, the space tighter. The villagers, seated along the walls, picked up this rhythm, beginning to sway, emitting a low, droning sound in unison — softly at first, then louder and louder, until the drone resembled the humming of a hive. Polina continued to analyze. *The creation of a unified acoustic field, inducing a state of mild trance in the participants...*

But the rhythm accelerated.

*Thrum-thrum. Thrum-thrum-thrum.*

The voices grew louder, more insistent. The shaman began to move faster, his movements turning sharp, jagged. He was no longer walking; he was dancing — a wild, fractured fight dance, a dance of combat. He flicked water at the elder, threw herbs

at him, shouting words that no longer sounded like a prayer, but like commands, like curses, sending a chill down Polina's spine.

Polina's analytical barrier began to crack. The sound was everywhere. It penetrated beneath the skin, vibrated in the bones, made her teeth ache. This was no longer a ritual. This was an attack. An attack of sound, smell, and movement against the gray silence that had settled within the elder. Sergey lowered his phone. Natalya Sergeevna clutched her husband's arm. Intellectual curiosity gave way to primal, irrational involvement. They were no longer spectators. They were inside it.

The shaman reached a crescendo. He froze before the elder, raising both hands, and let out one final, piercing cry — a cry that seemed intended to shatter the very fabric of existence.

And in that moment, everything broke.

It wasn't like the lights being turned off. It was like the soul being drained from the world. The red coals in the hearth didn't go out — they turned ashen gray, retaining their shape but losing their fire. The vibrant patterns on the blankets upon the walls devolved into shades of dirt. The golden threads on the shaman's garments ended up looking like dull straw. And the sound. The sound didn't vanish; it thinned out. The drumbeats that had just been shaking their ribcages now sounded like a dry twig tapping against a cardboard box. The droning choir of villagers turned into an emotionless, flat hum, like a malfunctioning transformer.

The shaman lowered his hands. His dance broke off. He looked at the elder, and there was no longer any power in his eyes. Only terror. He had tried to exorcise the grayness, but instead had merely proven that it was stronger.

In the ensuing dead silence, the elder sat just as motionless as before. Nothing had changed.

The villagers, slowly, as if in a dream, began to disperse. No one looked at each other. They stood up in silence and walked out into the gray night.

Polina sat there, unable to move. Her sociological theories had crumbled to dust.

This wasn't an exorcism. It was an act of diagnosis.

## November 4

In the morning, I realized that my grandfather, for all his insight, was wrong about the most important thing. He would have described our situation using the title of a story by a writer he revered: "The Garden of Forking Paths." A multitude of futures branching out from every point in the present. But he was wrong. The paths are not forking. They are vanishing, leaving behind only the theoretical possibility of their existence.

The day began with a visit that could have been considered a message from another, parallel world, had it not been obvious that even that world, too, had begun to disintegrate into incoherent fragments. Padma's parents arrived, leading her by the hand. Their faces were calm, but it was the calm of people who had stopped asking questions and focused on practical tasks. They brought news, gleaned from an old radio receiver hissing like a snake. Martial law had been declared in the country. The reason was unknown. The information was incomplete, corrupted, much like those scraps of news Alexey had managed to download. The main fact, the only undeniable constant in this equation: all transportation had been halted. There would be no bus.

It seemed to me that we all received this fact with a kind of perverse relief. The uncertainty of waiting had been replaced by the certainty of a trap.

Then came the second piece of news, even stranger in its mundanity. Padma's parents, preparing to head to the regional center on their old, rattling motorcycle for salt and candles, asked us to look after their daughter. "Padma wants to stay with you, if you don't mind."

We didn't object, of course. Dmitry Stanislavovich even tried to joke that now we had an "official guide to local customs."

There was nothing surprising about this. Children are always drawn to the new. But in the context of what was happening, this act — handing a child over to the care of strangers during a crisis — felt like the passing of the last valuable manuscript from a besieged library. It seemed to me that she hadn't chosen to stay with us; rather, some higher logic, or the total lack thereof, had left us this artifact, this anchor to reality, which we were now obligated to preserve.

Dmitry Stanislavovich, trying to hold on to the familiar fabric of existence, asked a practical question: "And what about the elder?" The answer was like a report on a failed scientific experiment. The parents had gone to see him in the morning. There was no one in the house. He had vanished. No one saw him leave. In a small village where everyone's every step is known, a man had simply ceased to exist within the confines of his dwelling. His disappearance wasn't a Conan Doyle-style mystery. It was a logical paradox. Yesterday's ritual had not been a diagnosis. It was an annihilation.

After the roar of the motorcycle faded into the distance, leaving us with the silent girl, Sergey, in a fit of proactive despair, proposed the unthinkable to Alexey. To haul the Starlink terminal higher into the mountains. His logic was the logic of a Stone Age man: to see further, you must climb higher.

The ensuing argument between Sergey and Alexey was like a dispute between two scholastics over the nature of angels while the cathedral around them was already being consumed by fire. Alexey, with the patience of a man explaining the laws of thermodynamics to a child, laid out the theory:

“It’s not about altitude, Sergey, it’s about the satellite’s coverage area, its trajectory. We are in a ‘dead zone,’ in a shadow. Taking the terminal a couple of hundred meters higher is like trying to shout at the moon by standing on a chair. It won’t change a thing.”

He was absolutely right from the perspective of his engineering universe. But in our new reality, his correctness was just as meaningless as Sergey’s delusion. They were arguing about the rules of the game, failing to realize that the very board they were playing on was missing.

I looked at them and understood: we were trapped in a labyrinth that had neither entrance nor exit. Just walls, between which all paths abruptly sheared off.

We wait for tomorrow.

## November 5

They found him the next morning, at the foot of the cliff the locals called the “Demon’s Finger.” But it was no longer Sergey.

What they were looking at was an installation. A cruel, meaningless piece of art created by a dying reality. He lay on the rocks not as a man, but as a broken doll, discarded by an angry child. His body was bent at an impossible angle, one arm reaching up toward the sky he had never managed to touch.

And the colors. God, the colors. In this world, which had almost forgotten what color was, his death was a scream. The blue of his jacket wasn’t just blue — it was a toxic, synthetic, sickly ultramarine, a color that doesn’t exist in nature. It burned against the backdrop of the gray rocks like spilled chemical dye. And the blood... it wasn’t red. It was the color of an overripe cherry, thick and lacquered, as if someone had knocked over a can of enamel. It didn’t soak into the stones; it lay upon them as an alien, glossy stain. The blood, if it even was blood, didn’t look like blood — more like a patch of rust on old iron that no one had cleaned for years. Even the earth beneath him seemed not to be earth, but broken glass or scattered salt, glittering under the dull sun. His face was turned to the sky, and his eyes reflected the sky — not blue, but faded, like watercolors washed out by rain. His mouth was slightly open, as if he were trying to say something, but the words had gotten stuck somewhere between his throat and the clouds.

Nearby, a few meters away, lay the Starlink terminal. Black, shattered, resembling the chitinous shell of a dead giant beetle. Its small LED, the indicator of life, was not a steady glow. It was pulsing. Pulsing slowly and steadily, at a perfect interval. But its color was wrong. Not green, not red, not white. It was purple. A neon, toxic color that Polina had never seen on any electronic device.

This was not a tragedy. This was a glitch in the code. A bug. A visual error in the rendering of reality, which had decided to demonstrate its agony in the ugliest way possible.

The villagers who approached, their faces indistinguishable from the surrounding stones, related everything simply and matter-of-factly. They had been looking for a stray yak. Saw a bright spot. Walked over. He had probably climbed up during the night. Slipped. Fell. Their words belonged to the old, comprehensible world. But they had absolutely no relation to the surreal tableau lying before them.

And then, after the initial shock, came the true horror. Not metaphysical, but nauseatingly practical.

What were they supposed to do with the body?

This question hung in the thin air. Dmitry Stanislavovich, a man of protocol and order, was the first to vocalize what was spinning in everyone's head.

“We must... we must follow procedure.”

But procedure no longer existed.

Notify the parents... but the phones are silent. Contact the embassy... but the embassy is an abstraction, existing somewhere out there, in a world that might no longer be. Repatriate the body... but there are no planes, no roads, and no homeland as they remembered it.

They stood over this bright, screaming stain of death, and understood: His death was a fact. It was material. It was a problem that had to be solved.

## November 6

Today I dreamed of Sergey. Not the one lying on the slope, but another one — transparent as water, yet dense as stone. He wasn't lying on the rocks. He was floating in a gray, airless void, like an astronaut whose tether had snapped. He wasn't dead. He was fading. First, the toxic blue of his jacket vanished, as if washed away by an invisible rain. Then the lacquered cherry of his blood evaporated. Only a black-and-white figure remained, like on a negative. And then the black and white began to mix, turning into a single, faceless gray mass that slowly dissolved into the surrounding grayness.

During the day, I found Alexey. He was sitting on the porch, scratching something into the frozen earth with a stick — some formulas, diagrams, resembling kabbalistic signs. He spoke for a long time, and his speech sounded like the raving of a madman. Or a revelation.

He talked about some Vechevsky, a friend of his grandfather's, who was also a physicist. About a theory of his, which they used to discuss at night in a smoke-filled kitchen while their children slept.

“Vecherovsky said that the universe rests upon two pillars,” Alexey began, not looking at me; his gaze was glued to his own drawings. “On the law of non-decreasing entropy, which leads everything to chaos, and on the development of reason, which strives for order. If there were only chaos, everything would fall apart. But if reason prevailed — omnipotent, continuously developing — the structure of the universe would also be disrupted. It would become something else entirely, because such a mind could have only one goal: altering the nature of Nature itself.”

He spoke more quietly than the crunch of frost beneath his stick. He wasn't explaining — he was illustrating.

“The world has two opposing pulls,” he drew a line, “toward decay and toward order. If you leave only one, everything rots and crumbles. If you give absolute power to the other, everything becomes glassy and motionless, like a display case. The world holds on in the middle, like the pan of a scale: it trembles — and therefore it is alive.”

He circled one of his symbols.

“That is why the essence of ‘Vecherovsky’s Law,’ as my grandfather called it, is the maintenance of equilibrium. Balance. Homeostasis. That is why, he said, there are no and can be no supercivilizations in space. Because a supercivilization is a mind that is already overcoming entropy on a cosmic scale. And that is a threat to the equilibrium. And what is happening to us right now, my grandfather would say,” — for the first time, he raised his eyes to me, and they were absolutely mad and absolutely lucid — “is nothing less than a reaction. The Universe is defending itself. It is... editing us.”

As he spoke, I envisioned two old men in a smoke-filled Soviet kitchen, constructing grandiose, paranoid theories about the Universe because their own lives were too cramped and boring. My grandfather probably would have fit perfectly into their company.

Alexey, after a pause, erased his drawings with his foot.

“But I think they were both wrong,” he said quietly. “Both my grandfather and his Vecherovsky. They thought too highly of mankind. They saw us as a threat, a growing intellect. But we... we are too self-absorbed. We prefer to speak rather than listen. When we ask ‘how are you?’, it’s merely a formality, a prelude to talking about ourselves, our achievements, fears, feelings. We... each of us... is a closed system. We have forgotten how to observe the world; we observe only our own reflection.”

He smiled bitterly.

“And if that’s true, why would the Universe hinder us? Why defend itself against something that poses no threat? We aren’t a virus. We are simply... an unnecessary part of the system. An obsolete program, consuming resources but yielding no output.

And we don't need to be deleted as punishment. We just need to be archived. For being entirely superfluous."

And I didn't know what to answer him.

## November 7

In the morning, Natalya Sergeevna said that she and her husband were going to the gompa. She couldn't explain the reason for this decision, just as one cannot explain why a specific dream visits them. They simply felt they had to go. Perhaps it was the call of ritual, perhaps an attempt to find meaning in a vanishing world, or perhaps just the habit of following an itinerary when all itineraries had lost their meaning.

They wanted Padma to go with them. The girl stood by the window, her face as impenetrable as a mask. She flatly refused. She didn't cry, didn't argue; she simply stepped back and pressed herself against Alexey. The movement was unconscious, almost instinctive, like an animal choosing a shelter before a storm.

Polina observed this with surprise. *Why him, and not me?* she thought. The girl hadn't chosen her, a woman whose nature was defined by caregiving. She had chosen Alexey. A man who was himself turning into an abstraction, into a set of formulas and theories. Perhaps that was precisely the logic. The child sought protection not in warmth, which was fading, but in cold, lucid structure, in the last island of order, even if that order was the order of madness. Or, more likely, she instinctively felt what Polina did not yet grasp: Alexey, speaking of the obsolescence of humanity, was closer to the truth than those who were still trying to pray.

Dmitry Stanislavovich and Natalya Sergeevna left together. Their figures, receding along the trail toward the monastery, looked like two commas in a sentence that would never have a period.

## (Undated)

Natalya Sergeevna and Dmitry Stanislavovich did not return. Neither did Padma's parents.

We went to the gompa, just to make sure. It is still standing, but it is no longer a monastery. It is merely an outline. Its walls have bled into the color of the sky, which is now uniformly gray, day and night. It no longer smells of juniper and yak butter there. It smells of nothing. The sound of the drum, like a heartbeat, that we heard on the first day — is nothing but a memory. Now, it is quiet there. Absolutely.

We returned to our village, which has also become merely a sketch, a rough outline. We are no longer waiting.

It is snowing now. Not snow, really, just gray ash falling from a gray sky. Padma sits on the cold ground and catches these flakes on her tongue. Alexey sits beside her and holds her hand.

I imagine his hand is very warm.

And in that moment, I realized. In all of my grandfather's Triptych, in all its labyrinths of meaning, in all its complex structures and beautiful metaphors, there is not a single word about the warmth of a human hand. He described the world so painstakingly that he forgot to feel it. That was his greatest mistake. Our greatest mistake.

Perhaps that is why the world decided to take a rest from us? We thought too much and felt too little.

I am writing this, and the candlelight is trembling... Or perhaps it's my fingers that are trembling. But none of that matters anymore.

# Battle of Bun'ei

## Prologue

In the far north of Japan, where the mountains huddle close and the wind sings through the pines, there lies a small village, half-forgotten by the world.

Snow falls here for half the year, soft and endless, blanketing crooked roofs and narrow lanes, muffling the sounds of life until all that remains is a hush — a silence so deep it seems to hold the breath of time itself.

The houses are old, their timbers blackened by uncounted winters, their windows glowing faintly with the golden promise of warmth. Smoke rises from chimneys in thin, hopeful threads, curling into the pale sky. The people move quietly, wrapped in layers of patched clothing, their faces marked by the gentle resignation of those who have learned to expect little and endure much.

There is a sadness here, a melancholy as ancient as the peaks, as wide as the snowfields. It is not the sharp pain of loss, but the slow ache of longing — the sadness of all mankind, woven into the fabric of daily life. It lingers in the empty fields, in the silent shrines, in the laughter that never quite reaches the skies.

Yet in this quiet, in this poverty, there is a kind of peace. The village endures, as it always has, through storm and hunger and the slow passage of years. And when the snow falls at dusk, turning the world to silver and silence, it is almost beautiful — the sadness, the stillness, tiny lights that refused to surrender their courage to the dark.

...And into this gentle, aching stillness, a storm of mad bureaucracy and international misadventure was about to descend.

## Chapter One

In the remote, frostbitten village of Higashikuma, where the only thing colder than the winters was the welcome extended to outsiders, the municipal office was a monument to both architectural and moral decay. The linoleum curled at the edges like a dying leaf, the radiators hissed with the impotent rage of a thousand bureaucrats, and the only thing that ever ran on time was the clock, which was, of course, broken.

At the heart of this municipal mausoleum sat the new secretary, a woman so strikingly out of place that the villagers had taken to calling her “Miss Tokyo” behind her back, as if she were a refugee not from the metropolis, but from an isolation ward. She was tall, beautiful, and possessed the kind of poise that suggested she had once been accustomed to better things — like central heating, or shoes without holes. Her long, elegant legs perched with mathematical precision atop a stack of unfiled — and highly incriminating — municipal audits. Her name was Ayumi Sato, and she was currently reclining in her battered office chair, headphones clamped over her ears,

and a look of serene detachment on her face as she filed her toenails to the beat of Sparks' "Left Out in the Cold."

The only other sign of life in the office was a potted plant, which had long since given up hope, and the accountant's documents, who had never had any to begin with.

The fragile tranquility of this highly personal spa session was abruptly shattered, not by the usual drone of Mayor Katsuhiko's snoring from the inner sanctum, nor by the plaintive mewling of the municipality's resident, and perpetually underfed, cat, but by the cataclysmic entry of Mr. Hiroshi Tanaka, the municipality's accountant and, far more crucially, the Mayor's senile, perpetually befuddled, and utterly indispensable father-in-law. The door, long since deprived of its upper hinge and thus prone to a dramatic, almost operatic, swing, was flung inward with such force that it bounced off the adjacent wall with a sound like a distant artillery barrage, causing Miss Sato's carefully poised brush to momentarily hover mid-air, a delicate, pink-tipped suspension of disbelief. Mr. Tanaka, his face a contorted mask of panic and unwashed whiskers, resembled nothing so much as a frightened ferret that had somehow acquired a waistcoat of dubious vintage and a chronic case of the vapours.

"Where is the mayor?!" he bellowed, his voice cracking like a cheap ceramic plate. "Where is that useless... They're calling from Tokyo! Tokyo! It's urgent!" — Yeah, his useless — and, in Tanaka's eyes, thoroughly regrettable — son-in-law.

Ayumi, without so much as glancing up from her pedicure, increased the volume on her headphones. The accountant's voice, muffled by the music, became a distant, almost pleasant, like a bee trapped in a jar.

"Ayumi Sato! Miss Ayumi Sato!" Mr. Tanaka was now hopping from foot to foot, as if the urgency of the situation might be transmitted through the floorboards. "The governor's office! Tokyo! Rich tourists! Saudis! Where is the mayor?!"

Ayumi finally looked up, her expression one of mild curiosity, as if she had just discovered a new species of insect. She removed one earbud with the deliberate slowness of someone who has spent her entire life being interrupted by men with less intelligence than a houseplant.

"He went fishing," she said, her voice as calm and cool as the lake in December.

Mr. Tanaka stared at her, mouth agape, as if she had just announced that the mayor had eloped with a walrus. "Fishing? Now? With Tokyo on the line? With Saudis coming? With..."

Ayumi Sato shrugged, replaced her earbud, and started doing her pedicures again. "He said he needed to catch something big," she said, which, in the mayor's case, usually meant a hangover or a new mistress.

Mr. Tanaka let out a strangled cry, somewhere between a sob and a curse, and bolted from the office, — papers fluttering behind him like the wings of a very confused chicken.

Meanwhile, on the frozen shore of Lake Hachiman, the mayor Katsuhiko, a man whose moral compass spun like a roulette wheel — was indeed fishing.

Though the “legendary trout” he had so glibly described to his impossibly elegant secretary was, in fact, a particularly lukewarm can of cheap lager, and the “fishing” itself involved little more than a desultory line cast into a rather stagnant lake, while he, Katsuhiko, a man whose paunch preceded him like a particularly aggressive scouting party, sat with supreme indifference upon a folding chair, his rather unctuous hand discreetly placed upon the remarkably accommodating thigh of Mrs. Matsuda, the very same proprietress of the fermented cabbage establishment, whose ample bosoms provided a far more comforting vista than any impending bureaucratic apocalypse.

The only thing biting that morning was the wind, but the mayor didn’t mind. After all, he had already caught everything he needed: a government subsidy, a gullible accountant, and, if the rumors were true, a secretary who was far too clever for her own good.

But as the accountant’s frantic shouts echoed across the ice, even the mayor began to suspect that this year’s “The Battle of Bun’ei” might be more of a rout than a victory.

## Chapter Two

As we have already noted earlier, on the shore of lake, where the ice was thick enough to support a small car but not the weight of municipal responsibility, Mayor Katsuhiko sat with the air of a man who had never been troubled by either.

His fishing rod, a relic from a more honest age, dangled limply over a hole in the ice, while his other hand clutched a can of warm beer with the same devotion he reserved for public funds. Beside him, Mrs. Matsuda. Her cheeks were as red as her reputation, and her bosom, as always, threatened to eclipse the horizon.

She took a swig from her own can and eyed the mayor with a mixture of affection and suspicion. “So, Haruto, how’s your secretary? That Miss Tokyo. She’s a strange one, isn’t she?”

The mayor grunted, watching his fishing line with the intensity of a man who had never caught anything but excuses. “She sits on the phone all day, listening to music. I think she’s allergic to paperwork. Or villagers. Or both.”

Mrs. Matsuda snorted. “How does a woman like that end up here? If she’s hiding from her husband, wouldn’t it be easier to disappear in Tokyo? Nobody notices

anything in the city. Here, if you sneeze, the whole village knows what color your handkerchief is.”

Katsuhiro shrugged, his belly wobbling in agreement. “Maybe she likes the snow. Or the silence. Or maybe she’s just as mad as the rest of us.”

Before Mrs. Matsuda could reply, a figure came skidding across the ice, arms flailing, scarf trailing behind like a warning flag. It was Mr. Hiroshi Tanaka, the mayor’s father-in-law. Now, he resembled, more than anything, a strong distressed gnome who had just escaped a rather aggressive badger.

“Damn! Haruto! — I mean, Mayor Katsuhiro!” he gasped, words tumbling out like loose change. “They called! From the governor! And from Tokyo! They said — rich tourists! Saudis! They’re coming! For our traditional holiday! By helicopter!.. By helicopter!”

The mayor blinked, as if trying to process the idea of anything arriving in the village by air that wasn’t a snowstorm. “Calm down, Hiroshi. Saudis, you say? Well, we’ll meet them. Offer them a fine welcome. Some of Mrs. Matsuda’s sauerkraut or pickled radish, perhaps? And a nice, warm beer to cut through the winter chill?”

Mr. Tanaka’s eyes bulged. “Beer!? They’re Arabs! They don’t drink! And what will we show them? We haven’t had a holiday in ten years! We just send reports and photos!”

Katsuhiro’s face, usually as unreadable as a tax return, went pale. “Good, fermented God... We’ll have to organize something. We’ll need samurai costumes, musicians, katanas, banners... We’ll have to go to the city.”

“And that costs money!” the accountant wailed. “And who in the village is going to swim in a frozen lake? Last time, Mrs. Nakamura nearly lost a toe just posing for the photo! And not a single, shivering villager has plunged into this infernal lake since old Man Sato’s ill-fated attempt to retrieve his dentures in ninety-three!”

Mrs. Matsuda, who had observed this escalating male hysteria with the detached calm of someone who had seen it all before (usually after the consumption of several bottles of her rather potent rice wine), finally intervened. She rose with a graceful, if slightly wobbly, dignity, her ample form casting a comforting shadow over the men’s rapidly dissipating courage.

“Oh, for heaven’s sake, boys,” she tutted, reaching for the remaining beer cans. “Such dramatics. Let’s finish these, shall we? And then we can go to my tavern. A good, strong drink will put things in perspective. You’re the Mayor, Katsuhiro, you’re a clever man. You’ll go to the city, buy some costumes, hire a few musicians, and bribe whoever needs bribing. It’s what you do best.”

The mayor finished his beer in one long, mournful gulp, as if hoping to drown his problems before they learned to swim. The three of them trudged back toward the

village, snow swirling around them like confetti at a funeral, already plotting the most ambitious act of municipal theatre since the last time they'd lied to the government.

Behind them, the fishing rod bobbed in the icy water, forgotten and alone—much like the truth on a film set at Toei Uzumasa Eigamura on a day when the tourists are barred from the gates.

### Chapter Three

How fucking tired I am of it all. Saudis, Saudis, Saudis, why in the name of all that's fermented do they want to come here, to this frozen arse-end of nowhere, for New Year's?

Couldn't they have gone to Sapporo, or stayed in Tokyo, or just bought a postcard and called it a day? No, they want authenticity, snow, samurai, women in the lake, the whole bloody kabuki. If only they'd come in the summer, I'd have shown them the photos, the ones from last year, and the year before, and the year before that, all the same, all nature, all perfect. Samurai fighting in the snow, women shrieking in the water, old Nakamura's wig floating away...

Miss Tokyo, Ayumi Sato, what a sight she'd be, stark bollock naked in the snow, all legs and hair and that look in her eye, the one that says she's seen better men than me and left them all behind. If only I were her husband, but no, I got stuck with Eikichi and her father, the old fool, Hiroshi, who can't tell a crypto wallet from a cabbage. Why did I ever let him near the accounts? He can't even count his own teeth, and now everyone wants money, money, money. The theater wants cash for costumes, the musicians want cash for music, the military wants cash for heated tents—heated tents! In my day, we froze, and we liked it, but now, no, everyone wants to be warm, and everyone wants to be paid.

And the villagers, my country's bumpkins, how am I supposed to get them to dive into a frozen lake? They'll die, they'll freeze, they'll sue, and then what? No more subsidies, no more sauerkraut, no more beer. I'll have to buy a mountain of booze just to get them to take off their boots, let alone their clothes. Maybe if Ayumi gets drunk enough, she'll forget she's from Tokyo, forget she's too good for this place, forget she's not supposed to be naked in front of the mayor. Maybe I'll forget I'm tired of Mina and her endless sauerkraut, her endless bosom, her endless complaints about the cold, the tourists, the Saudis, the snow.

Snow, snow, snow, that's what they want, the damned Arabs, as if they don't have enough sand and oil and money. Try living here without financial assistance, try living here with nothing but cabbage and regret. If only the old geezer could figure out the crypto, cash it out, make it disappear, make it reappear in my pocket, in my mistress's bar, in the hands of the musicians, the actors, the soldiers.

Tomorrow, I have to meet with the villagers, persuade them to jump into the water, to fight with swords, to pretend they're samurai and not just freezing farmers.

One sake won't be enough, not for this, not for them, not for me. I'll need whiskey, lots of whiskey, and maybe a miracle. Don't forget the whiskey, don't forget the bribes, don't forget the Saudis, don't forget to smile, don't forget to lie, don't forget to survive.

And if all else fails, there's always next year. Or the year after. Or the year after that...

## Chapter Four

The village hall, a structure that looked as if it had been designed by a committee of drunken carpenters, only to be abandoned midway through, was packed to the rafters with the entire population of Bun'ei — forty-seven souls, not counting the mayor's mistress, who was technically present in spirit, having sent a small barrel of pickled radish in her stead.

Mayor Katsuhiko stood at the front, his belly straining against his sash, his face set in the expression of a man who had just discovered a new and particularly virulent strain of bureaucracy. Beside him, Ayumi Sato — Miss Tokyo herself — stood with the poise of a woman who had once attended meetings where the attendees were both shod and possessed of an aroma that didn't involve fermented radishes.

“My dear friends, my noble villagers!” he boomed, his voice echoing off the peeling plaster. “We gather today on the cusp of an unprecedented opportunity! A chance for Higashikuma to shine, to rise like the glorious phoenix from its own perpetual ashes!”

He paused for dramatic effect, but only received a collective snuffle.

“This year, our humble village will host a truly historic event! Rich tourists from Saudi Arabia — yes, Saudi Arabia! — will be flying in by helicopter to witness our glorious national holiday, the Battle of Bun'ei!” the mayor bellowed, waving his arms with the enthusiasm like an auctioneer trying to unload a cursed pagoda.

A murmur ran through the crowd, equal parts confusion and suspicion. Old Mrs. Nakamura, who had not left her house since the Kakuei Tanaka administration, squinted at the mayor as if he were a particularly untrustworthy turnip. “Why would Saudis come here in the middle of winter? Don't they have deserts and camels and all that?”

The mayor pressed on, undeterred. “They want to see real samurai spirit! They want to witness our proud tradition! That's why I have arranged for samurai costumes, swords, army tents with heating — yes, heating! — to be brought from the city. Musicians will come, banners will fly, and all you have to do is put on the costumes and act out the great battle of samurai versus Mongols on the lake!”

A hand shot up from the back. “And why us? We're farmers, not actors! Why didn't you bring real actors with real costumes? We'll look like clowns, Mayor! Costumed fools!”

Katsuhiro's smile wavered only slightly. "Clowns?! Because, my friends, only you can show the true samurai pride of Bun'ei! Actors from Tokyo. Here, we have authenticity! And after the battle, there will be a grand holiday with music, snacks, and" — he paused for effect, — "and free drinks!"

The villagers exchanged glances of profound fiscal interest. Authenticity was all well and good, but most of them had trouble acting out their own birthdays, let alone a historical battle. Still, the mention of free drinks had a noticeable effect.

"And now," the mayor continued, "the most important part! After the battle, we will all swim in our icy lake. This is real samurai valor! The Saudis will be amazed!"

A stunned silence fell. Then, as one, the villagers recoiled.

"Swim in the lake? In this weather? Mayor, you go jump in the lake yourself!" shouted Mr. Sato, who had not voluntarily bathed since the last typhoon.

"My grandmother died from a cold bath! It wasn't good, it was hypothermia! That wasn't 'spirit,' that was hypothermia!" Wailed a woman, brandishing a trembling fist.

The mayor raised his hands in a gesture of peace, or possibly surrender. "Wait, wait! In exchange, I promise a feast! Roast duck, pork, stewed sauerkraut, and as much sake and whiskey as you can drink!"

This, at last, was a language the villagers understood. The mood shifted palpably.

"Well, if there's pork and stewed sauerkraut, I'll dive in," grumbled old Nakamura, eyeing the mayor as if daring him to renege.

"With whiskey and sake, the sea is knee-deep for me — I'll swim!" declared Mr. Yamada, who had once tried to row to Hokkaido after three bottles of plum wine.

"OK," grumbled the woman who'd cursed her grandmother's bath, her gaze fixed on a distant, imaginary pig, "if there's proper pork, and plenty of that stewed sauerkraut to warm the belly, I suppose... I'll dive in. Just for the pork."

Ayumi, watching from the sidelines, wondered if this was what her mother had meant by "broadening your horizons." She made a mental note to order extra towels and a defibrillator.

The mayor, sensing victory, beamed. "That's the spirit! Bun'ei will show the world what true samurai are made of — mostly pork, cabbage, and alcohol!"

And as the villagers shuffled out, already arguing over who would get the first slice of duck, the mayor allowed himself a rare moment of optimism. What could possibly go wrong?

## Chapter Five

The day of the Great Bun’ei Extravaganza dawned with the meteorological malevolence of a particularly disgruntled deity.

Not content with mere snow, the heavens pelted Higashikuma with hailstones the size of frozen peas, driven by a wind that could strip paint from a battleship, as if the gods themselves were pelting the village for its sins against both history and meteorology.

The villagers, swaddled in layers of thermal underwear and existential dread, shuffled about the lakeshore in their ill-fitting samurai costumes. The swords, made of plastic and optimism, drooped in the cold. The only thing invincible about the warriors of Bun’ei was their collective hangover.

The Saudi delegation arrived in a helicopter that looked far too expensive to be anywhere near Bun’ei. Out stepped five men in flowing robes, their faces a study in polite horror, and behind them, Ayumi Sato — Miss Tokyo herself — now pressed into service as their guide, interpreter, and, judging by her expression, emotional support animal. She moved with the effortless grace of someone who understood that the true art of observation lay in maintaining a healthy distance from the grotesque. She was, to the Saudis, an inexplicable but undeniably elegant guide through this baffling tableau of rural Japanese insanity.

Mayor Katsuhiro, sweating in his armor (which was actually a lacquered rice cooker and a pair of shin guards), bounded up to the villagers, clapping his hands and bellowing, “Come on! Show them the spirit of Bun’ei! Fight! Fight like real samurai! And then — into the lake! Show them our valor!”

The villagers looked at him as if he’d just suggested they eat the plastic swords. Even the sake, which had been flowing since breakfast, was no match for the hail and the prospect of hypothermia. Old Mrs. Nakamura, who had been conscripted as a Mongol, was now using her shield as an umbrella and muttering curses in three dialects.

The Saudis, meanwhile, huddled under a tent, their faces frozen in a rictus of polite confusion. One of them tried to take a photo, but his phone froze and died, much like his enthusiasm for cultural exchange.

Ayumi, ever the professional, attempted to narrate the “battle” in three languages (English, Japanese, and a confident smattering of Farsi — which she optimistically mistook for Arabic), but her voice was lost in the wind and the villagers’ half-hearted grunts. The musicians, imported at great expense from the city, played a medley of traditional war songs and “Let It Go” from “Frozen”, which seemed more appropriate by the minute.

Mrs. Mina Matsuda, whose bold and slightly drunken gaze defied the very concept of cold, had clearly reached a state of inebriation where logic and temperature had ceased to be relevant. Her cheeks were flushed the colour of a particularly robust pickled radish, and her eyes held the wild glint of a woman on the verge of either enlightenment or a public indecency charge. “To hell with it!” she roared, her voice echoing across the lake. “I don’t care about the cold, I don’t care about the snow, and I don’t care about your tourists! This is our Holiday!”

With a heroic wobble, she hurled herself into the icy water, sending up a geyser of slush and cabbage-scented bravado. For a moment, there was silence. “Mina-san’s in! I’m in!” bellowed a farmer, his fake samurai helmet askew, and promptly plunged after her, followed by a surging crowd. Then, as if released from a spell, the rest of the villagers — emboldened by alcohol, peer pressure, and the promise of roast pork — charged after her, plunging into the lake with a cacophony of shrieks, splashes, and creative profanity.

The mayor, not to be outdone (and sensing a photo opportunity), threw off his rice cooker and dove in, emerging moments later with a triumphant bellow. The musicians, who had long since lost feeling in their fingers, shrugged, put down their instruments, and leapt in after them, their city-bought wigs floating like drowned chinchillas.

Spluttering and shivering, the mayor turned to the musicians, his teeth chattering in time with the hail. “Well, now let the Saudis dive too! Show them real samurai valor!”

The lead musician, who had once played for the Emperor’s cousin’s dog’s birthday, shook his head. “They’ve already flown away. They froze, they got bored, and they flew away.”

The mayor blinked, then shrugged, water streaming from his ears. “Who cares! This is our holiday! Today, we are samurai! Today, we are kamikaze! Banzai!”

A ragged, drunken chorus of “Banzai!” echoed across the frozen lake, the sound a testament not to the bushidō of old, but to the indomitable alliance of misplaced zeal and industrial quantities of cheap booze.

Thus, the Battle of Bun’ei was, for the first time in a decade, a genuine success—at least by the standards of Bun’ei, where the only thing more enduring than tradition was the hangover that followed.

## Chapter Six

Why did we come here, to this village with a name that sounds like a localized stroke: Sigashekuma, Shigashakuma, Hagishakuma, who knows, who cares, the helicopter pilot didn’t know either, just pointed at the snow and shrugged, as if to say, “Here, this is where dreams go to die.”

Cold, so cold, colder than my uncle's gaze when I suggested a second Lamborghini was a basic human right, colder than the look my wife gave me when I said I was going to Japan for "business."

And what business is this, watching villagers in bathrobes and plastic swords shuffle around like extras in a bad samurai movie, not even a Netflix tax-write-off, but a grainy YouTube upload with three views, two of which were accidental clicks. Even the monkeys in Nagano were more cheerful, at least the monkeys have the grooming habits and common sense to stick to the hot springs, not this frozen hell.

What are they doing here, these people? Why would one live like this?

Tea, only tea, not even coffee, not even a whiff of cardamom, just hot water and leaves, and the mayor kept bowing and smiling, his teeth chattering, his belly wobbling, like a sumo wrestler who lost his way. I asked for coffee — strong, dark, spiced with the soul of a desert — and the Mayor, bowing with the rhythmic chattering of a wind-up toy, offered me more leaf-water in a cup that had survived a domestic dispute... Just weak, watery tea in chipped cups. Is this hospitality? Is this culture? Is this a national festival? The sheikh would laugh. He'll laugh. I asked for dates, mayor offered me radish with wasabi. I asked for warmth, he offered me a tent with a hole in the roof.

But Miss Ayumi, ah, Miss Ayumi, A rose among thorns, a diamond in a frozen cabbage patch... narrating this charade in a confident, if entirely misplaced, Farsi instead of Arabic. Tall and elegant, her laughter like music, her stories about the village so funny, so strange, how did she end up here, what did she do to deserve this exile, this punishment, this place cursed by Allah and all the prophets. She should be in Tokyo, in Paris, in Riyadh, not here, not with these people who think a festival is standing in the snow and pretending to fight Mongols.

And the "samurais," what samurais, more like sleepwalkers, shuffling, yawning, one of them sneezed so hard his wig fell off, another tried to draw his sword and dropped it in the snow, and the mayor shouted, "Valor! Honor!" and the villagers just looked at him like he was mad, which he probably is.

No, the monkeys are definitely more cheerful than these "samurais." At least the monkeys know how to enjoy a hot bath. At least the monkeys don't try to make you drink cabbage juice. At least the monkeys don't pretend to be something they're not.

They would put on a better show. Their natural antics. More thrilling. More authentic. Than these "samurais" with their chattering teeth and their pathetic bamboo sticks. Is this the great spectacle? To watch a few shivering fools, pretend to fight, then jump into what looks like a giant bowl of ice cubes? And then the woman, Mina... Masuzu? - Misudzu?.. the mayor's mistress? She just jumps in. Madness.

Utter madness. Sub-zero. For what? Some drunken villagers. No, no. This is not for me. Better to fly. Now. Before the frostbite settles in. What an absurdity.

Next year, I'm going to Switzerland. Or maybe just stay home. At least there, the coffee is good.

## Chapter Seven

The mayor was awakened by a knock so violent it seemed to threaten the structural integrity of his house, his dignity, and possibly the entire village.

It was the kind of knock that suggested either a police raid or a visit from his mother-in-law — either way, disaster. The sound ricocheted through his skull, which was already throbbing from last night's heroic attempts to drown his problems in sake.

"Who in the name of all that's pickled..." he croaked, his voice thick with the residue of too much sake and too much desperate revelry.

He staggered upright, tripped over a futon, and reached for the nearest open bottle of sake. The world steadied, slightly. The knocking continued, now accompanied by a chorus of voices that sounded suspiciously cheerful for this hour of the morning. Musicians. Of course. Only musicians could be so chipper after a night of drinking, freezing, and public humiliation.

He opened the door to find them grinning, scarves askew, eyes bloodshot but spirits unbroken. "Mr. Katsuhiko! Good morning! We've come for our payment!" one of them chirped, as if this were a perfectly reasonable thing to do at the crack of dawn in a snowstorm.

The mayor's head throbbed in protest. "Didn't you call the accountant?" he grumbled, clutching his sake like a life preserver.

"We did! He didn't answer. We thought maybe he'd frozen to death, but then we remembered he's too cheap to die before payday."

Gritting his teeth, the mayor wrapped himself in a coat and led the musicians through the empty, snow-choked streets. The village looked like the aftermath of a particularly unsuccessful military campaign — banners drooping, plastic swords abandoned, a lone wig stuck to a lamppost.

Inside, the sole sentient being was Kayamo Matsumoto, the elderly cleaning lady, who moved with the deliberate, unhurried pace of someone for whom time had long ceased to be a relevant concept. She was mopping the floor with the grim determination of someone who had seen too much and cleaned up after all of it.

"Where's Miss Tokyo?" the mayor demanded, his voice echoing off the linoleum.

Kayamo didn't even look up. "Last I saw, she was with the Saudis. Said she was going to see them off. Looked happy, too. Not like you lot."

The mayor cursed, a string of words that would have made a sumo wrestler blush, and stomped to the safe. He spun the dial, yanked the handle, and stared into the void. The safe was empty. Not a yen, not a Ledger, not even a moth.

He shook so violently the musicians took a step back, exchanging glances. “Is he having a seizure?” one whispered. “Or is this just how he negotiates?”

“Call the accountant, old woman!” the mayor hissed, his voice rising to a squeak.

But there was no need. As if summoned by the sheer, unadulterated panic radiating from his father-in-law, Mr. Hiroshi Tanaka, the accountant, shuffled timidly into the doorway, his ancient face etched with the familiar expression of a man who had just misplaced his own brain. From his belt, where others might carry a mobile phone or a handkerchief, he produced a can of beer, already open, and took a tentative sip.

“Where is the money?” the mayor roared, advancing on his father-in-law with the energy of a man who had just realized his entire life was a Ponzi scheme.

“Where is the money, old fool? Where is Ledger?”

“Ledger?” the accountant squeaked, eyes darting. “What ledger... balancing the books?”

“Crypto wallet!” the mayor bellowed, veins bulging.

Hiroshi’s eyes widened, a flicker of dim comprehension passing across his ancient features.

“I don’t know! I asked the secretary to help me transfer your crypto, you know I’m not on good terms with your gadgets. She said she’d take care of it. She’s good with computers, you know.”

The mayor’s world spun. The room seemed to tilt, the walls closing in, the musicians’ faces blurring into a single, mocking grin. He saw it all: the subsidies, the fake festivals, the roast pork, the whiskey, the Saudis, the empty safe, the beautiful secretary vanishing into the snow with a suitcase full of digital cash.

Everything — his career, his schemes, his dreams of early retirement in Okinawa — had flown away, or drowned, or both.

He slumped to the floor, the musicians peering down at him with the professional curiosity of men who had seen many a man fall, but never quite so spectacularly.

“Should we play something?” one asked.

“Maybe a requiem,” another suggested.

But the mayor heard nothing. Only the sound of his own defeat, echoing through the empty streets of the village.

## Chapter Eight

In the gleaming, glass-and-steel hive of the Tokyo Metropolitan Police, the Fraud and Cybercrime Department was already buzzing before the head of the division, Inspector Sakamoto, had even finished his first cup of coffee.

He stepped out of the elevator, bracing himself for the usual morning routine of paperwork, complaints, and the occasional junior officer who still thought “phishing” involved a rod and a river.

But today, the usual hum was replaced by a cacophony of laughter and shouts. A knot of detectives was crowded around a computer screen, jostling for a better view, some doubled over, others wiping tears from their eyes.

Sakamoto frowned. “What kind of circus do you have here? This is a police station, not a comedy club!”

One of the younger officers, still giggling, turned and saluted. “Sir, the circus isn’t here — it’s in the village of Higashikuma!”

“Higashikuma?” Sakamoto repeated, already regretting it.

“Yes, sir! You have to see this!” The officer clicked play on a video, and the screen filled with images of shivering villagers in plastic armor, waving fake swords, slipping on the ice, and occasionally falling into a lake with the grace of a dropped sack of potatoes. In the background, a rotund man in a rice cooker helmet — presumably the mayor — bellowed about samurai valor while a group of musicians played what sounded suspiciously like the upbeat, 8-bit chirping of the Super Mario Bros. theme.

The room erupted in fresh laughter.

Sakamoto pinched the bridge of his nose. “And what, exactly, does this have to do with cybercrime?”

Another detective, barely containing his mirth, explained, “Sir, the mayor of Higashikuma has been stealing government subsidies for years, faking reports about their New Year’s festival. But when he found out that Saudi tourists were coming, he actually tried to hold the festival for real. Paid for everything with the money he’d stolen. The villagers got drunk, pretended to be samurai and Mongols, and then — get this — jumped into a frozen lake.”

“Drunk farmers dressed as samurai and Mongols! Half of them fell into the lake before the fake battle even started!” His subordinates started telling him non-stop. “The mayor’s mistress, she just crashed in first! Totally drunk!”

Sakamoto stared at them. “You’re telling me the mayor spent his own stolen money to cover up his own fraud?”

“Yes, sir! But that’s not the best part.” The detective clicked to the next video: grainy security footage of the mayor, wild-eyed, discovering his safe was empty, and then collapsing in a heap while a group of musicians looked on, baffled.

“In the morning, it turned out all the mayor’s money — his crypto wallet, the municipality’s funds — had vanished. All his money is gone! Gone... A digital vanishing act... Poof.”

Sakamoto’s eyes narrowed. “And who did this? And who, pray tell, perpetrated this remarkably efficient act of poetic justice?”

The room fell silent for a moment.

Another officer, pointing at the screen, offered, “Probably the secretary, Chief. Miss Ayumi Sato. She was a non-local, only been there a few months. Very beautiful, apparently. And she disappeared with the Saudis this morning. Saw them off at the helicopter pad herself.”

“A secretary, you say?” Sakamoto strode over, a flicker of professional interest finally sparking in his weary brain. “Show me a photo. Or video. Anything.”

The officer clicked, and a crisp image of Ayumi Sato, elegant and poised even in the grainy CCTV footage, appeared on the large monitor. Sakamoto stared. His eyes, usually impassive, widened. A low, strangled gasp escaped his lips. He clutched his head, the sudden onset of a migraine hit him like a grand piano threatening to split his skull clean in two.

“You... you imbeciles!” he roared, his voice laced with a raw despair that silenced the entire division. “What idiots you are! This is not some provincial secretary who ran off with a few stolen yen! This is Miyako Ikeda! We’ve been looking for her for two years now! After she robbed the BytNext crypto exchange for billions and then vanished after hitting a couple of high-value hedge funds in Minato! She’s been right under your collective, incompetent noses, playing house in a mountain village, masquerading as a village secretary, only to pull off another heist by walking straight out the front door!”

The Cybercrime and Fraud Division stared at the screen, then at their incandescent chief, then back at the image of the beautiful, serene woman who had so effortlessly bamboozled not only a crooked mayor but also an entire, seemingly sophisticated police force. The silence that followed was so profound, one could almost hear the sound of a billion yen vanishing into thin air.

“Get me a car,” he muttered. “And someone bring me a strong coffee. We’re going to Higashikuma.”

## Epilogue

There is a stretch of wild, windswept coast on the edge of the Arabian Peninsula, where the shifting dunes finally surrender to the restless azure of the sea.

The waves roll in, ancient and tireless, and the sun descends in a furnace of gold and crimson, painting the sand with a fleeting, dying fire. And there, every evening, a solitary figure walks the shore. She is tall, graceful, and manifestly a stranger to these sands — her hair as dark as a moonless midnight, her gaze as distant as the horizon, her steps so light she seems unburdened by the world itself. She never speaks, never lingers, and never joins the laughter of the fishermen or the games of the children. She remains a phantom, a shadow drifting between the tides and the twilight.

The men watch her from afar, their conversations faltering into silence as she passes. Fishermen mending their nets, merchants haggling over spices, even the ancient, weathered camel drivers — their eyes follow her with a flicker of bewildered wonder. Who is she, this silent, beautiful specter? Where do her thoughts wander? What stories lie entombed behind those placid, unreadable eyes? Some say she is a lost princess; others, a spirit of the sea. No one knows her name, and no one dares to ask.

But sometimes, when the wind is just right and the moon hangs heavy in the sky, the old men swear they hear her humming a haunting melody — something foreign, something profoundly sad. It is a tune that speaks of falling snow and jagged, distant mountains; of battles fought in the mud and fortunes lost in the cold; of secrets carried ten thousand miles from home.

And so she walks, night after night, a lingering mirage in a land of sand and silence...

## Glossary

**The Battle of Bun'ei** (文永) - 1274 (the 19th year of the Bun'ei era in the Japanese calendar).

Also known as the First Battle of Hakata Bay, it was the first attempt by the Mongol Yuan Dynasty of China to invade Japan. After conquering the Japanese settlements on the islands of Tsushima and Iki, Kublai Khan's fleet marched to Japan and landed at Hakata Bay, a short distance from the Kyushu administrative capital of Dazaifu. Despite the Yuan forces' superior weapons and tactics, those who landed at Hakata Bay were outnumbered by the samurai; the Japanese had been preparing, gathering warriors, and strengthening their defenses ever since they learned of their defeat at Tsushima and Iki. The Japanese defenders were aided by powerful storms that sank much of the Mongol fleet. Ultimately, the invasion attempt was finally defeated shortly after the initial landing. The Mongol forces retreated and took refuge

on their ships after only one day of fighting. The following night, a typhoon, said to be a divine wind, threatened their ships, forcing them to return to Korea. Many of the returning ships sank that night due to the storm.

**Toei Uzumasa Eigamura** is a theme park and film set modeled after the Edo period in Kyoto, Japan, that opened in 1975. It is located in Toei's Kyoto Studios, where classic samurai films were filmed, among other places.

**Hirokazu Matsuno** (松野 博) is a Japanese politician who served as Chief Cabinet Secretary from October 2021 to December 2023. In November 2023, Japanese prosecutors began voluntarily questioning members of several LDP factions, including the largest faction of which Matsuno was a member, on suspicion of receiving bribe money in the form of party fundraising revenues totaling over ¥100 million that were not reported in political party funding reports. Matsuno resigned from the cabinet on December 14, 2023, along with several other LDP officials.

**Kakuei Tanaka** (田中 角榮) was a politician who served as Prime Minister of Japan from July 7, 1972 to December 9, 1974. One of the most controversial Japanese prime ministers of the post-war era. As the leader of the dominant faction in the ruling Liberal Democratic Party, Tanaka dominated Japanese politics throughout the 1970s and 1980s, earning him the nickname “Shadow Shogun” in the press. Tanaka's entire political career was marked by high-profile corruption scandals, which nevertheless did not prevent him from winning first place in elections.

**Kamikaze (typhoon):** In Japanese tradition, this storm was perceived as a “heavenly sign” - a divine wind (神風, kamikaze, kami – “deity”, kaze – “wind”) sent by the gods to protect Japan.

**Ledger** is a cold hardware non-custodial cryptocurrency wallet. It is a physical device that does not have a permanent connection to the network.

**leger (English)** - an accounting book.

## Code\Coda

### Prologue

She came by a road that was no longer there, descending from a mountain pass that had merged with the extinguished sky. On the soles of her boots was a residue of moisture, like the spray from a stream that had once flowed near the village. Now, there was no water — only parched stones and ribbons of dust. Yet, with every step she took upon the ash-gray snow, droplets fell. They were not water. They were droplets of sound.

I knew: once they dried, the final silence would devour everything. So I knelt, touched a dark spot with my finger, and pressed it into the fabric of the earth, much as we once rubbed oil into flatbread.

“You know how to notice,” the stranger said.

Her voice was like tea: neither sweet nor bitter, simply warm, like a hand you’ve forgotten to let go of. It was a voice without an echo, for there was nothing left for it to reflect upon.

I looked at her, finding it hard to believe she was real. She seemed drawn — like the images that bloom on the back of your eyelids if you stare at the light too long. She was like a sketch pretending to be a human being. Her outlines were too sharp, her colors too flat, as if someone had forgotten to add the shadows. It felt as though, if I were to blink, she would vanish. But she remained.

She placed a small gray stone beside me. A violet eye flickered upon its surface, then squinted immediately, as if frightened by the light.

“It is memory,” she said. “Inside is an entire world, and the warmth of a single hand. It will not last long. Things fade quickly here.”

“My name is Padma,” I said.

“And I have been called by so many different names that it is difficult to choose,” she replied. “Let it be Ayu. Today, I am Ayu.”

She surveyed the hollow outlines of the houses, barely visible through the gray haze.

“Are you alone here?”

“Yes,” I answered.

We sat, and the silence listened to us, licking its lips. Beside me lay the Book. Its pages were smooth and as empty as the sky. But the moment I cracked it open, symbols flooded from beneath the cover — flocks of ink-birds that remembered, for a fleeting second, that they possessed wings.

“Close it, and they vanish,” I said, without looking at her. “Open it to the end, and you vanish yourself.”

Ayu looked at the Book in silence.

I thought: If the one who reads vanishes... what becomes of the hand that holds the Book?

# Part One

## Chapter One

In Dubai, even the dawn smells like money. Not freshness, not the sea, not hope — just money: as sterile as surgical gloves and every bit as cold. The sun in the Emirates is not a star. It is a verdict. Ruthless, final, handed down from the heights of a bleached, bloodless sky. It incinerates shadows, evaporates colors, and turns the air outside the window into a shimmering haze — a lens through which the world appears as a perpetual, molten error.

Inside, on the forty-seventh floor of a tower resembling a crystalline syringe plunged into the vein of the desert, what reigns is a cold. Not the natural, living chill of Tibetan snow, but the sterile, mineral cold of air conditioning. It hums steadily and tirelessly, like the heart of a god fashioned from circuit boards and freon. This hum is the only soundtrack to her new life.

Ayame Yoshikawa. The name she wears now feels like an expensive but borrowed dress. It fits perfectly, yet the seams dig into her skin, a constant reminder that this is merely a masquerade costume. Within the internal, ancestral calendar of her soul — where centuries are compressed into a single, viscous moment — this name is but another marginal note in a book that no longer exists. The last time, she went by Ayumi Sato; the Tokyo police are still looking for Miyako Ikeda. She is a woman with a collection of names like some have a collection of handbags: none truly hers, yet all of them costly.

She has lived in the UAE for two years now. It is easy to be nobody here. Everyone is someone else. Here, you can be a Russian pretending to be English, an Indian playing an American, or a Japanese woman who has forgotten the sound of her native tongue. Here, one can even be a woman who no longer hacks, simply because there is enough money, and boredom is the only thing that remains untaxed.

To her, money is not a sum. It is an abstraction, a mathematical concept of infinity, enough to buy this tower, this city, this country, with enough left over for a few neighbors. But money does not cancel out boredom. It only makes it more expensive.

She sits in her chair and looks out at the city. A mirage-city, built on petrodollars and the desperation of thousands of expats — those eternal nomads in business suits who traded their roots for a tax-free paradise and the illusion of success. She watches them in hotel lobbies and malls — those crystal cathedrals erected in honor of Mammon. Blondes with the smooth, manufactured finish of Fabergé eggs discuss the cost of schooling for children who are taught everything except how to be happy. Men in blindingly white dishdashas, like priests of some hygienic cult, strike deals, moving invisible digits from one void to another. It is a grand, nauseatingly polished farce,

devoid even of the honest, drunken madness of her past life. There, people were truly miserable. Here, they are unhappy by catalog.

Sometimes she enters a café, just to hear a human voice undistorted by a phone speaker.

“More water, Madame?” asks the waiter, his smile part of the uniform.

“A glass is enough,” she replies.

“A glass exists to be filled,” he says.”

“And some things,” Ayame says, watching his reflection in the polished marble of the table, “exist to remain empty.”

The waiter nods, understanding nothing, and vanishes. The dialogues here are like the architecture — perfect in form and absolutely hollow inside.

And so she walks. In the early morning, during that pre-dawn hour of pearl and ink, before the heat delivers its sentence, she walks along the edge of the Persian Gulf. The water, as warm as freshly drawn milk, lazily licks the sand — white and fine as cocaine. She walks alone. Always alone. In this world, a beautiful, unattainable woman is not an object of desire, but rather an object of cultural heritage: to be looked at, to be admired, but not to be touched. Men fear her as they fear overly complex equations. They look at her as they would a jewelry display: they want to reach out, but fear the alarm will sound. Women watch her with suspicion, as if she might steal their husbands, their children, or even their reflections in the mirror.

As she walks, salt moisture settles on her skin, and in that moment, beneath the sterility of the Emirates, an ancient, mysterious world emerges — a world of scents and sensations, where every detail is an event. Where the sand beneath her bare feet is not just sand, but a myriad of vanished lives. Where a distant tanker on the horizon is not a ship, but a period at the end of a sentence she can never finish reading. She is the Observer in the world’s most expensive golden cage.

And inside, in the place where her dead names reside, a feeling stirs. A sense of fate, familiar since childhood. A feeling that the world is not merely chaos, but a complex mechanism that, sooner or later, will glitch. She does not know when it will happen. But she waits. She is always waiting. Because for her, silence and order are merely a pause between two errors in the code.

## Chapter Two

The hotel lobby, where Ayame occasionally sipped her profoundly tedious coffee, had been designed with such aggressive, sterile luxury that it seemed it might achieve self-awareness at any moment and immediately commit suicide out of existential dread. The marble was polished to a mirror sheen, reflecting nothing but the ghosts of ambition.

It was into this hermetic void that they intruded — like two viruses entering a pristine operating system.

They materialized at her table with the clumsy grace of bears attempting to play chess. One was a silent wardrobe of muscle, stuffed into a suit clearly purchased in a moment of panic at an airport duty-free; now, the garment was seeking its revenge by strangling its owner's circulation at the neck. The second, shorter and stouter, was the face and mouth of the operation. His suit was more expensive but fit just as poorly, and he emitted a scent of cologne that could be classified as a chemical weapon based on pine needles and despair. Russians. Or some derivative thereof. It was evident in the heavy-handed, utterly unironic seriousness with which they tried to look casual.

“Good evening,” the smaller one said, with an accent that with an accent that could cut glass. He attempted a smile, but his facial muscles had clearly not received the appropriate programming.

“Excuse me, is this seat taken?”

“Apparently, it is now,” Ayame replied, not taking her eyes off her cup. “But if you are looking for company, I can recommend each of you to the other.”

“We just wanted to introduce ourselves,” his partner joined in. “There are so few interesting people in this city.”

“And you must be from the ‘Anonymous Sociopaths’ club?” Ayame quipped. “Or did you just decide that today was your day for suicide?”

“No, we just see that you are bored. We are bored, too. Perhaps we could be bored together?”

Ayame slowly raised her eyes. Her gaze was that of a pathologist examining a particularly uncomplicated cause of death.

“I am not bored,” she replied, her voice as flat and cold as the marble beneath her cup. “I am observing. Those are different processes.”

“Observing?” he repeated, clearly caught off guard. “Observing what?”

“Entropy,” Ayame said, taking a sip of her coffee. “It is particularly vivid here.”

His muscle-bound partner made a sound like grinding gravel. The smaller one cleared his throat, decided to change tactics, and attempted a flank through cultural exchange.

“You are Japanese? Beautiful. Your eyes... like two expensive satellites.”

“Satellites observe, too. Even the expensive ones,” she parried, her tone unchanged. “They do not engage in dialogue. Now, if you don't mind, I would like to finish my observation experiment in silence.”

“We do mind,” he said suddenly, and the clumsy politeness fell away like cheap gilding. The smile vanished. All that remained was the face of a man accustomed to solving problems with a crowbar. “We mind very much, Miyako Ikeda.”

The name. There it was.

The sense of fate that had been dozing in the depths of her soul lazily opened one eye. It wasn't fear. No. It was the cold, familiar click of a lock snapping into place. A chapter of a book she thought closed had suddenly been had suddenly been wrenched open again.

“We are not criminals, Miss Ikeda,” he continued, shifting to a tone just as cold and businesslike. “We are optimizers. We optimize financial flows.”

“That sounds like a euphemism for theft,” she noted.

“Everything in this world is a euphemism for something else. We are offering you a partnership. We have associates, including some in Japan. But occasionally, their assets are not sufficiently liquid. We want you to create for us... a tool for liquidity enhancement. Small, almost invisible transactions. Dust. Gold dust.”

He leaned closer, and the scent of his cologne intensified to a tactical concentration.

“A name is a key, Miss Ikeda. It can open doors. It can also lock them. Forever. Your current key, ‘Ayame Yoshikawa,’ is rather fragile. We can reinforce it. Or we can break it. Or destroy it. The choice is yours.”

“And if I refuse?” Ayame asked, her voice sounding as if she already knew the answer.

“Then you will vanish. Not as a character, but as a bug that no one will bother to fix.”

She remained silent, looking not at him, but at a sugar crystal on her saucer. It lay alone, perfectly formed, its facets reflecting this entire sterile, fraudulent world. One tiny, ordered crystal in the midst of chaos. In her mind, it wasn't thoughts that raced, but lines of code — elegant, lethal algorithms.

Run? Right now? Impossible. New documents, a new legend—that takes time. Refuse? Foolish. These people do not accept “no.”

Agree?

The boredom — that sticky, viscous disease of the wealthy — began to recede. For the first time in two years, she felt something akin to interest. Not in the money. Money was vulgar, boring matter. But the task itself... the game...

To create a program for these savages that would do more than just steal? To create something that would call into question the very idea of their digital empires?

To craft an elegant virus, a poem of code that would devour their world from within while they rejoiced at the arrival of their “dust”?

She slowly looked up and met their gaze. Truly met it. And for the first time that evening, she allowed herself a slight, barely perceptible smile — like a crack in the ice. In her internal world, where it had been raining for centuries, the sun peeked out for a fleeting second.

A sun. Black as petroleum.

“Where can we speak in a more ‘intimate’ setting?” she asked.

### Chapter Three

Taxis in Dubai are always a lottery. You might end up with a philosopher from Kerala who spends the entire journey discussing the meaning of life and discounts on mangoes, or you might get a silent Pakistani who glares at the road as if it had personally betrayed him. Today, Ayame drew the latter. The driver ferried her through a labyrinth of identical streets where even the palm trees looked as if they had been grown in test tubes. Outside the window was a city built by people who had likely never read Borges, yet managed to construct the perfect labyrinth nonetheless. The Pakistani, with the eyes of a martyr, listened to Bollywood pop at a low volume — a kaleidoscope of screeching synthesizers and ecstatic wails that sounded like the soundtrack to a cheerful, Technicolor apocalypse.

Ayame stared out at the passing skyscrapers — those glass headstones — and thought that, in essence, the soundtrack was a perfect fit.

They met her at a villa that was so provocatively modest that its anonymity screamed louder than any neon sign. It featured artificial turf the color of a sick parrot. Beige walls. Catalog furniture devoid of any sign of life, taste, or simple human presence. This was not a residence. It was a safe house, furnished with the indifference of a man prepared to burn his bridges — and the house itself — at a moment’s notice.

Her guests from the previous evening were waiting on the sofa. The brute, who introduced himself as Vasily (“But you call me Vasya”), and his more loquacious companion, Alexey (“And I’m Lyosha”). Both wore gold chains around their necks thick enough to moor a small yacht. On their wrists sparkled watches whose cost could have covered the foreign debt of a small African nation or bought the house along with its owners and their descendants unto the seventh generation.

“Why here?” Ayame asked, surveying the sterile living room. “I thought your kind preferred penthouses with views of their own egos.”

“We’re here to work, not to play,” Lyosha replied with a stone face. “The playing comes later.”

Ayame allowed a ghost of a smile to touch her lips. It was so Russian. Even their modesty was a form of aggression. She sat in the armchair opposite them.

“Can I pour you something?” Lyosha asked, gesturing toward a bar stocked with bottles bearing recognizable labels.

“Vodka?” Ayame inquired with light irony.

“Well, yeah.”

“No, thank you. It’s too hot.”

“Well, if you change your mind... we have everything here except the meaning of life.”

“I’ve already tried the meaning of life,” Ayame replied, her tone level. “I wasn’t impressed.”

“So, the work,” she said. “You wanted to discuss a tool for liquidity enhancement.”

“The tool, yes,” Lyosha nodded, while in the background, Vasya opened a can of energy drink with a thunderous *pssh* that echoed in the silence like a gunshot. “We need a program. A virus. It needs to penetrate the accounts of our... partners. And bit by bit, very discreetly, transfer funds to us. Like...” he snapped his fingers, searching for a metaphor, “like moisture evaporating from a carpet. So that no one notices anything until it’s too late.”

“And most importantly,” he added, his voice dropping to a conspiratorial whisper, “no traces. No entries in the blockchain that can be tracked. The transactions must be... ghosts.”

Ayame remained silent, letting the absurdity of the moment fully unfold.

“So,” she said slowly, with deliberate emphasis, “you want me to violate the fundamental laws of cryptography, break the immutable nature of the distributed ledger, and, essentially, cancel mathematics. Just like that. On a Tuesday... It *is* Tuesday, isn’t it?”

“Yes. And you’ll have to try your best,” Lyosha said grimly, his gaze growing heavy.

“You’re asking for the impossible,” Ayame replied sarcastically. “Perhaps you’d also like the money to arrive by itself in a suitcase while the police bring you coffee?”

“Just do your best,” Lyosha repeated. “You know why.”

Ayame’s internal world — that quiet, perpetually rain-drenched backwater — froze for a second. She looked at them — these barbarians in expensive suits, these children playing with matches in a powder keg — and her sense of fate was replaced by a feeling of intoxicating, almost artistic contempt. They didn’t understand what

they were asking for. They weren't asking to pick a lock. They were asking for a key that would abolish the very concept of locks.

And what is in it for me?" she asked, returning to their primitive game.

"You can write yourself in for five percent. We're not stingy," Lyosha allowed magnanimously. "But that's not the main thing. The main thing is we solve your problem. Miyako Ikeda, Ayame Yoshikawa... all your old names will 'die.' They'll vanish from every database. To every police force in the world, you will cease to exist."

"Well, one of them has to remain," she drawled with a slight smirk. "And if I refuse?"

Vasya stopped drinking his energy drink and looked at her. In his eyes, there was nothing but boredom and the physical capacity to end her existence. No — it was more as if he were calculating exactly how long her disappearance would take.

"Then you die for real," Lyosha said.

Ayame stood up. The deal was struck. Not with them, but with herself. She would build their tool. But it would be more than just a virus. It would be a work of art. A poem written in Assembly. A requiem for their greed.

She called a taxi and, standing in the doorway, turned back.

"Your English is quite good. What other languages do you know?"

Lyosha gave a self-satisfied grin.

"Russian. For everything else, there are online translators."

Ayame nodded, as if she had heard something of vital importance.

"कथायाः आरम्भः, मध्यः, अन्तः च भवेत् । किन्तु तस्मिन् क्रमेण न अवश्यम्."

They stared at her like two rams at a new gate.

"What's that, Thai?" Lyosha finally asked.

"No," Ayame replied, and her voice carried the kind of warmth lava has before an eruption. "It is Sanskrit. It means: 'A story should have a beginning, a middle, and an end. But not necessarily in that order.' I'm going to work. Now you can go and play."

She walked out, leaving them bewildered, trying to digest a phrase that was not just an answer, but an epigraph for their own obituary.

## Chapter Four

On the way back in the taxi, Ayame felt a cold, ancient hunger stirring within her. Not a hunger for money — money was merely a tedious byproduct. It was the hunger of an artist for a blank canvas, the hunger of a god for unformed clay. Those two barbarians in their tasteless suits had, without knowing it, just commissioned her

to paint *Guernica*. Only instead of a canvas, she would use the global financial system, and instead of paints, she would use their own greed.

It was there, at the Russians' villa, amidst the hiss of an opening energy drink, that she remembered. She remembered the thing that would solve their problem. Solve it once and for all.

The memory surfaced not as a clear image, but as a forgotten taste, like the ghost of a scent from a distant past. *Meihua*. An old, abandoned cryptographic library she had stumbled upon years ago in the farthest, cobweb-choked corners of the darknet. It had caught her eye because of its name — delicate, poetic, and utterly out of place in a world where everything was named something like “Hydra” or “Chaos Toolkit.”

The library was strange. Written in several long-extinct programming languages, it resembled the manuscript of an alchemist attempting to turn lead into gold using punch cards. Its primary — and essentially only — function was absolutely useless and yet mesmerizing: it allowed any data — be it an executable, a text document, or an image — to be transcoded into elegant, calligraphically precise strings of Sanskrit using the nearly defunct Siddham script. Ayame had thought then that it was the creation of some brilliant programmer-hippie from the 70s who had lost his mind to Eastern philosophy.

The main flaw that rendered the library impractical was its weight. Attached to it was a colossal text file, also titled *Meihua*. Likely some sentimental novel or a collection of poems the author had used either as an encryption sample or as an attempt to write a “novel in code.” Amateurish. Touching in its naivety.

But now, in the sweltering box of the taxi, Ayame realized: this useless, elegant oddity was exactly what she needed. The perfect tool for a poetic murder.

Back in her apartment, she transformed the living room into an operations center. The curtains were drawn, creating an artificial night. On the giant screen that usually displayed fake fireplaces or aquariums, only terminal lines now glowed. The cursor blinked steadily, like the heart of a surgeon before a critical operation.

Finding *Meihua* was like searching for a specific grain of sand on a beach. But she knew where to look. After several hours of diving into digital catacombs, she found it. The library sat in an encrypted archive on a derelict server that appeared to be physically located somewhere in Iceland, powered by a geothermal spring.

She unpacked the archive. Again, she smirked at the amateurism. The file `meihua_library.so/.dll/.wasm` weighed a few kilobytes. But the file `meihua_narrative_backup.txt.gz` was tens of megabytes. “*Useless bloat*,” she thought with professional contempt. “*It’s dragging down the whole system.*” She didn’t even open it. Why bother? To read someone else’s hack-work novel? With the ruthless elegance of a surgeon removing a benign but ugly tumor, she hit “Delete.” The system

hesitated for a second, issuing a warning: *“This component is an integral part of the architecture. Deletion may lead to unpredictable module operation.”*

“Unpredictability is exactly what I need,” Ayame thought, and clicked “Confirm.”

Now, the canvas was clean. And she began to create.

It didn't feel like programming. It was an act of pure art. She wasn't writing code — she was weaving it. Every line was a thread in a tapestry of logic. She was crafting a virus that was simultaneously a predator and a ghost. It didn't enter the system like a thief, but like an idea — a thought that couldn't be shaken. It didn't break through defenses; it convinced them it was part of the system.

Her fingers flew across the keys. She wrote recursions that devoured themselves, creating black holes in security protocols. She designed “ghost transactions” that existed and didn't exist simultaneously, obeying not the laws of mathematics, but the laws of quantum uncertainty. They took money from Point A, but never arrived at Point B. They simply... dissolved in transit, leaving behind nothing but an elegant void.

And into the very heart of this masterpiece, she wove the lightweight, optimized *Meihua* module. Now, every annihilated transaction, every stolen dollar, every bit of financial entropy wouldn't just vanish. It would be transformed into a string of Sanskrit. Into poetry in a language that existed before money. Into a *Shloka*.

She named her creation **ŚLOKA**.

When everything was finished, she leaned back in her chair. On the screen lay a tiny executable file, weighing only a few kilobytes. Perfect. Lethal. Poetic. It wasn't a virus. It was a requiem. A requiem for a world built on greed, written in the language of the gods.

If Ayame Yoshikawa was destined to disappear, to dissolve into the world along with Miyako Ikeda, what would remain in their place? She had grown too accustomed to her new name... and so she added a key, a seed phrase for the virus: *“Ayame Yoshikawa.”*

Thus, she became Ayumi Sato once more. All that remained was to wait for the call from her new “partners.”

The show was about to begin.

## Part Two

### Chapter One

The launch of **ŚLOKA** was accompanied by neither thunder nor lightning. It was as silent as sin. A single click. A single stroke, as elegant as a flourish of a pen beneath a death warrant.

And the virus began to flow.

It moved through the fiber-optic veins of the financial system not as a program, but as a rumor. Like a whisper passed from server to server, from wallet to wallet. It didn't breach defenses; it insidiously convinced them that it was the very essence of the protocol. It didn't infiltrate mining farms; it colonized them, becoming indistinguishable from the hum of the thousands of fans cooling the machine's heart.

The first results arrived a few hours later. Lyosha's call was saturated with a delight so poorly concealed the receiver seemed ready to choke on his happiness.

"It's... it's poetry!" he nearly shouted. "It works! The money just... appears! Like morning dew!"

He invited her to celebrate. Immediately.

The yacht was a monument to the idea that if you hurl enough money at tackiness for long enough, it will eventually surrender and pass for luxury. As bone-white as a dentist's smile, it swayed at a private pier, while on board, champagne already bubbled in buckets the size of small barrels. Lyosha and Vasya met her on the deck, beaming like two brand-new rubles. They had traded their tracksuits for silk shirts with prints so violent they might have induced an epileptic seizure in a chameleon.

"To liquidity!" Lyosha proclaimed, handing Ayame a glass. "Tonight we play! Tonight — we live!"

She took a sip. The champagne was expensive, cold, and utterly soulless. Like everything else in this city.

"By the way," Lyosha said, lowering his voice and fishing a phone from his pocket. "You can check for yourself. Miyako Ikeda no longer exists. Ayame Yoshikawa is listed as missing following a recent 'accident' at sea. You are now as clean as a newborn's tear."

"Newborns cry often," Ayame remarked.

"Details, details," he waved her off. "What do you call your program, anyway? Your... tool?"

"ŚLOKA."

"Shloka?" Vasya chimed in; he had been silently attempting to smear black caviar onto a slice of pineapple. "What kind of crap is that? Sounds like some kind of ailment."

"You may call it **Kali Yuga**," Ayame said with a faint smile. "You might find that easier to understand."

"Kali Yuga... sounds solid," Lyosha approved. "And what do we call you now?"

“Ayumi.”

“To Ayumi! To Kali Yuga!” He raised his glass. “And to your five percent!”

They drank. Champagne gave way to ice-cold vodka, and vodka back to champagne. Vasya told an unimaginably tedious story about a real estate deal, Lyosha laughed, and Ayame observed. She felt the alcohol pleasantly blurring the contours of this absurd world, making it almost tolerable.

At one point Lyosha, already quite intoxicated, pulled her toward a large mirror in a gilded frame in the main cabin.

“Look!” he said, throwing an arm around her shoulders. “What a fine pair we make! I’m the beauty, you’re the brains. A perfect partnership.”

And then she saw it. For one fleeting fraction of a second, for a single heartbeat, his reflection in the mirror froze. It stalled. His smile turned into a motionless mask while he himself continued to speak. It was like a brief “lag” in a video game, a hanging frame.

She blinked, and the hallucination passed. The reflection became obedient once more, mimicking his every move. “*The champagne,*” she thought. “*Too much champagne.*”

“No,” she said, gently disengaging from his embrace. “You’re looking a bit... frozen.”

Lyosha roared with laughter. “Well, I’m from Siberia! We’re all a bit ‘frozen’ up there!”

He announced that he and Vasya were flying out tomorrow. Some business in Europe.

“But we’ll stay in touch,” he assured her. “You’ve done a wonderful job. Very... efficient. I think we’ll have more use for you yet.”

She nodded. But she knew something they did not. She knew they would never meet again. Not in this world. She watched these two successful, self-satisfied predators celebrate their victory and felt nothing but the cold detachment of an artist looking at a finished canvas.

They didn't realize they weren't celebrating the dawn of their triumph. They were celebrating the first day of their own funeral rite.

And she was no longer Ayame.

## Chapter Two

It all began, just as Ayumi had anticipated, in the darkest and most paranoid corners of the internet. The first reports emerged on forums where users with Anonymous and anime character avatars parsed conspiracy theories and debated

the future of crypto-anarchism. They read like dispatches from an expedition that had run headlong into the impossible.

DarkNet Forum “Digital Leviathan”:

**User:** Satoshi\_Lives\_69

**Subject:** Missing transaction. Not a rollback, not an error. Just gone.

Guys, has anyone encountered this? Sent 0.15 BTC to a cold wallet. Transaction confirmed, 6 blocks deep. But there's no money in the wallet. And in the explorer... there's some total gibberish in the transaction hash field. Looks like Arabic script or something. Anyone know what the hell this is?

**User:** CodelsLaw

Satoshi\_Lives\_69 Show the hash.

**User:** Satoshi\_Lives\_69

*CodelsLaw* Here: अयं निजः परो वेति गणना लघुचेतसाम्

What the f\*\*k is this?

**User:** GnosisSeeker

*Satoshi\_Lives\_69* That's not Arabic. It's Sanskrit. Devanagari script. “This is mine, and that is a stranger's’ — so think the narrow-minded.” It's a quote from the Maha Upanishad.

**User:** CodelsLaw

*Satoshi\_Lives\_69* Your bitcoins are f\*\*ked, dude. They turned them into philosophy. ))

At first, it was perceived as an isolated, sophisticated exploit. But within a few days, such messages began appearing by the dozens. Then by the hundreds. The pattern was identical. The money wasn't being transferred. It wasn't being stolen. It was being annihilated. And in its place, within the immutable granite of the blockchain, remained a Sanskrit shloka. A poetic obituary on the grave of a transaction.

Users argued over who was to blame: the Indians, the Chinese, the CIA, Freemasons, or perhaps Satoshi Nakamoto himself deciding to play a cosmic prank. To Ayumi, it was the ultimate compliment.

She left Dubai the day after the yacht party, leaving behind nothing but paid bills and the faint scent of expensive perfume in the elevator. Her Russian “partners” tried to contact her — first ecstatically, then anxiously, then hysterically. Their messages and calls drowned in the digital void. She was already far away.

She spent the summer in Ireland. In a tiny fishing village on the coast of County Cork, where fog was the world's primary state of matter, and the main topic of

conversation was the difference between a light rain and a drizzle. She rented a small cottage overlooking the Atlantic grayness and savored the silence.

In the local pub, which smelled of wet wool, sour beer, and eternal melancholy, she became something of a local celebrity.

“Are you from Tokyo?” the bartender asked, wiping a glass as if trying to scrape away the memory of its past life.

“Close enough,” Ayumi replied.

“And what are you doing here?”

“Watching money disappear.”

“Pick a comfortable seat then. That’s a favorite spectacle around here,” the bartender laughed, completely missing the fact that it wasn’t a joke.

The locals, of course, whispered. *GossipNet* worked more reliably here than any 5G network, transmitting data at the speed of light on a fuel mix of strong tea and righteous judgment. Who was she, this young, beautiful, silent Japanese woman? The runaway wife of an oligarch? An intelligence agent? Just crazy? Old Seamus the fisherman, whose philosophy boiled down to the fact that there were fewer fish in the sea than idiots on dry land, declared authoritatively in the pub: “She’s waiting. I don’t know for what. But when a woman looks at the ocean like that, she’s always waiting for something.”

Ayumi was indeed waiting. She read the news on her tablet, scrolling through headlines about the chaos in the crypto markets, feeling like an artist at the opening of her own exhibition, observing the crowd’s reaction from behind a column. Her **ŚLOKA**, her “Kali Yuga,” was performing flawlessly. It was turning the vulgar, meaningless bustle of money into pure, high art. She was pleased. It was the most elegant joke in human history. And it wasn’t a bug. It was her signature, her tiny revolution in a world where even crypto had grown dull.

On one particularly raw, bone-chilling evening, she noticed an unusual commotion outside the village’s only pub, The Golden Anchor. Usually at this hour, only the sounds of a football broadcast and occasional drunken shouts drifted from within. Tonight, however, a thick, tense silence hung over the place. “*Must be a penalty,*” she thought lazily, deciding to step inside for a bottle of whiskey.

But inside, no one was watching football. Twenty or so people — fishermen, farmers, a couple of tourists — were huddled around an old television mounted near the ceiling. The screen didn’t show the green grass of a stadium, but the austere interior of a news studio. The ticker read: **“LIQUIDITY CRISIS: BANK OF IRELAND LIMITS CASH WITHDRAWALS.”**

Ayumi froze at the entrance.

“...experts are unable to explain the nature of the anomalies,” the anchor said, his face like that of a man announcing the end of the world with a polite smile. “Millions of euros are simply vanishing from accounts without leaving a digital footprint. This morning, a small regional bank, Claddagh Trust in Galway, declared total bankruptcy after losing nearly ninety percent of its assets overnight.”

On the screen appeared the tearful face of an elderly man in a tweed jacket — the manager of that very bank. He babbled something about “digital evaporation.”

Ayumi watched the screen, and the ironic smile slowly slid from her face. Galway. It was right here. Nearby. This wasn't abstract chaos on the other side of the world. This was a wildfire that had jumped from a distant forest right onto the neighbor's roof.

Her elegant joke, her artistic gesture, her poetic requiem for greed had just knocked on the door of a small Irish pub.

And she suddenly realized, with cold, mathematical clarity, that this knock was addressed personally to her. And for the first time in a long while, she felt truly cold.

### Chapter Three

Chaos didn't arrive with a bang — it leaked. First by the drop, then in streams, and finally as an all-consuming torrent. Newspapers that just yesterday had droned on about mergers and acquisitions now read like frontline dispatches from an invisible war.

#### BLACK TUESDAY? EXPERTS WARN OF “DIGITAL HEMORRHAGE”

The Financial Oracle, 09:22 EST

**LONDON, NEW YORK, TOKYO** — Global financial markets have been seized by unprecedented panic. What began as a series of anomalies in cryptocurrency networks has spilled over into the traditional banking system. Billions of dollars, euros, and yen are vanishing from corporate and private accounts, leaving behind nothing but what IBM experts have termed “poetic debris” — lines of ancient Sanskrit. Hedge funds are reporting “phantom assets,” while bankers speak of an “algorithmic poltergeist.”

“We are not dealing with a hack,” the head of the ECB stated at an emergency press conference, looking like a man who had just seen a ghost. “We are witnessing a breach of the laws of mathematical nature. Money is not being stolen. It is ceasing to exist. It is as if the water in a glass suddenly decided it was no longer subject to the laws of physics, and simply vanished.”

#### FINANCIAL MARKETS IN PANIC: GLOBAL EXCHANGES RECORD ANOMALOUS DISAPPEARANCE OF FUNDS

The Business Time, 14:07 GMT

This morning, world markets were rocked by a series of unprecedented events as dozens of major banks and crypto exchanges reported massive failures in their accounting systems. According to London Stock Exchange officials, billions of dollars have vanished from corporate accounts without leaving a single digital footprint.

In transaction logs, the usual records have been replaced by lines of Sanskrit that experts are currently unable to decode.

“This bears no resemblance to any known exploit,” a European Central Bank spokesperson declared. “The money hasn't been stolen; it has simply... disappeared. As if it never existed.”

Amidst the panic, Bitcoin shed 30% of its value in an hour, while the Dow Jones Industrial Average plummeted by 1,200 points. On social media, memes have already gone viral: **“Your money has become SLAG.”**

Experts are urging calm, but admit that no one understands what is happening.

...

Ayumi read this sitting in her Irish cottage. Outside the window, the rain wept relentlessly, and its tapping against the glass was no longer just the sound of water; it was the sound of her own code executing somewhere out there, in the cold, invisible heart of the world. She felt no remorse. What did it matter what was being annihilated — bitcoins, euros, or dollars? They were all just numbers. Simulacra. Elegant zeros in an infinite game that humanity, for some reason, called a post-industrial economy. She hadn't created a virus. She had created a hunger. A philosophical hunger devouring digital fictions.

Yet even the most detached god has a limit to their cynicism. She looked at the flight tracker map — dozens of canceled flights, closed airspaces. Ireland, this lovely, perpetually damp island, was rapidly turning into a trap. It was time to leave.

In the evening, she stepped into *The Golden Anchor* one last time. The pub hummed with anxiety. People spoke in hushed tones and drank faster.

“Well now, Miss Sato, is the end of the world finally here?” Liam the bartender asked, pouring her a pint of Guinness.

“For someone, the world ends every day,” she replied.

“True enough,” Liam smirked. “But usually not for the bloody bankers. Funny, isn't it? All those big shots in Dublin and London are tearing their hair out, but down here... everything's grand. Our cash register runs like clockwork. Not a soul has lost a single cent.”

Ayumi nodded, pretending to listen. She discreetly opened her own wallet on her phone. The numbers on the screen hadn't just remained intact; they were growing. Her five percent dripped faithfully, like the rain outside, gathering from a world being

eaten alive by **ŚLOKA**. The virus recognized its creator. Its queen. It was protecting her hive.

“Strange business, all of it,” Liam continued, sliding the pint toward her. The head was thick, creamy, perfect. “Like some kind of plague. But it leaves us be for some reason.”

And in that exact moment, Ayumi saw it.

The foam on her beer. It wasn't settling. It had frozen.

Not into a solid mass, but like a freeze-frame. Every tiny pore, every bubble of air hung in an absolute, impossible stillness, defying all known laws of surface tension and gravity. Tiny droplets from a ruptured bubble seemed to just hover in mid-air. It lasted a second. Maybe two. Maybe three. It was no illusion. It was an error in physics.

She stared at this frozen, impossible sculpture of bubbles, and the chill she had felt a few days ago returned — no longer as a premonition, but as an established fact.

Her code was no longer just erasing money. It had begun to edit reality itself.

And she, its author, sat at the very epicenter of this quiet, anomalous zone — in the eye of the storm she had created.

## Chapter Four

She landed in Istanbul, a city that had always balanced on the knife-edge between worlds, and now seemed ready to plunge definitively into the abyss. The air was thick and humid, but something was missing from it. The familiar clamor of the Grand Bazaar drifted from afar not as a roar of life, but as a faint, dying echo. The call to prayer from the minarets of the Blue Mosque was thin and distorted, as if passed through a blown speaker. The world was losing its volume.

Most of the shops on Istiklal Avenue were shuttered. Handwritten signs hung in the windows: “*Closed for technical reasons.*” The entire planet now had technical reasons. The authorities recommended not going outside unless absolutely necessary, and the city had transformed into a labyrinth of empty corridors, where the only living creatures left seemed to be the cats. They stared at Ayumi as if she were a recurring dream they had already grown tired of seeing.

She needed hardware. Her laptop was a work of art, but cracking open the skull of a god she had created herself required a full neurosurgical operating suite.

In this city, even the apocalypse begins at a market. It still smelled of spices, roasted meat, and human exhaustion, but the scents had grown duller, as if someone had diluted them with water. Yet it kept working. Or rather, it pretended to work.

Vendors sat by their mounds of spices — turmeric, saffron, sumac — but their colors were bleak, dusted with a layer of invisible ash.

She found what she was looking for: a hard drive, cables, a few auxiliary components. They no longer felt like objects to her, but like relics from a past that would never return. The merchant looked at her like a man looking at someone buying tickets for a train that had departed decades ago.

“Is everything alright?” he asked, his voice bearing neither fear nor hope.

“Everything is perfect,” Ayumi replied.

It was right there, by the computer hardware stall, that she heard it. A conversation between two women whose whisper was louder than any air-raid siren.

“...just gone. I came in this morning, and my mother wasn't there. The police just shrug their shoulders.”

“Maybe she wandered off to the neighbors?”

“She’s paralyzed! She hasn't gotten out of bed for ten years! She couldn't have left on her own!”

Having bought everything she needed, Ayumi walked past them, but her internal world — her rational, structured sanctuary — turned into a tempest. The sense of doom, which until now had been mere background music, was now deafening. The world wasn't just malfunctioning. It was coming apart at the seams. Walking through the ancient streets, she felt as if she could see its underside — the gray threads from which all this physical splendor was woven, and those threads were snapping one by one. It wasn't fear. It was the existential horror of a witness watching the agony of something vast and alive.

At night, in a hotel room that looked like a set for a movie about the end of days, she built her altar. Her laptop and several hastily assembled motherboards, clustered into a single array, hummed like a choir of doomed monks. On the screen, log lines from all over the world raced by in a blur. It felt like a digital seance.

She submerged herself into the code. Into the architecture of her masterpiece.

At first, everything looked ideal. Elegant. Flawless. Her recursions, her “ghost transactions” — everything worked like a Swiss watch ticking down the seconds to Armageddon. But she wasn't looking for success. She was looking for the anomaly. The source of the leak that had jumped from digits to physics.

And she found it. In the very heart of the *Meihua* module.

She had always assumed that the function responsible for generating the Sanskrit text was just a simple `render_text()` utility. A graceful signature. But now, staring deep into the compiled binaries, she saw what she had missed before. It

wasn't just text generation. The Sanskrit lines, the shlokas, were not passive data. They were executable commands. Subroutines.

One command was responsible for the property of “color.” Another for “sound.” A third for the “density of matter.” Her virus wasn't just turning money into poetry. It was using money as *fuel* to execute these poems, which, in turn, were actively rewriting the fundamental constants of reality.

She traced the calls of these subroutines. They all referenced a single source. A library they were supposed to use as a dictionary, a template. A component that was meant to contain all the core rules and all the logic.

Her fingers flew across the keyboard, sending a request to verify the module's structural integrity. And the system returned an answer. Cold. Ruthless. Final.

ERROR 404: DEPENDENCY 'meihua\_narrative\_backup.txt.gz' FILE NOT FOUND.

She stared at that line, and the world around her lost its meaning entirely.

The program hadn't gone mad. It was working perfectly. It was trying to construct a world according to a blueprint that no longer existed. It was trying to restore reality from a backup file that *she*, in her arrogance, in her desperate drive for “optimization,” had cast into the digital furnace.

It wasn't a virus. It was an orphan, desperately crying out to a book she had burned. And now that the book was gone, **ŚLOKA** wasn't just deleting money. It was stripping properties from reality itself. Colors, sounds, people.

And suddenly, with ice-cold clarity, comprehension struck: it was her former name, the very one she had so casually discarded — *Ayame Yoshikawa* — that had become the key, the seed phrase, the emergency override command that launched the shlokas as a disaster recovery function.

She herself had opened the door behind which lay nothing but the void.

## Part Three

### Chapter One

First, she tried to go back. Back to that dark, derelict corner of the darknet where she had first discovered the *Meihua* library. But it was gone. It wasn't merely a dead link; the entire directory, the whole server, seemed to have been excised from the fabric of digital existence, leaving behind nothing but a smooth, seamless void. It was as if someone had edited not just the present, but the past as well.

Panic was a luxury she couldn't afford. She began to search differently. Not for the code. Not for the library. She began to search for the word: *Meihua*.

And the world answered. Not with code. With reader responses.

On old, abandoned literary forums, in search engine caches, in the archives of decade-old blogs, she found mentions. “*Meihua: The Triptych*.” An astonishing, strange book. The author was a certain Vladimir Antipov, from Russia. But the text itself was nowhere to be found. Only its echo remained — the ghostly praise of readers who had long since vanished.

She dug deeper, plunging into the Russian-speaking segment of the web — a digital labyrinth constructed from memes, pirated software, and existential dread. And there, on an old hacker forum, she found him. Username: *StDime79*. In a thread dedicated to cryptography and esotericism, he claimed not only to have read the book but to have seen fragments of code associated with it.

Ayumi tracked down his contact info. The video call connected almost instantly. On the screen appeared the face of a man in his early fifties, covered in stubble, sitting against a wall plastered with posters of various metal bands. *StDime79*, or simply Dima, looked like a man who had stared into the abyss for far too long, and the abyss, in return, had shown him a couple of funny GIFs.

“Miyako Ikeda,” he said without preamble, his voice coming through the speakers like a scratched vinyl record. “I thought you were a myth. A legend.”

“Legends don't make video calls,” Ayumi replied. “I need the book. *Meihua: The Triptych*.”

“Ah, *Meihua*...” he smirked. The image on the screen drained of color for a second, turning black and white. “The book... yeah. The author, Antipov — they say he lived in Balashikha. Worked at some NII, you know, one of those research institutes where geniuses and madmen are distilled into a single bottle. And the whole story — China, Japan, the Forbidden City... In it...” the audio cut out, replaced by hissing static, “...there are too many details. A glossary ten pages long. Symbols, rituals... it's not just...”

The connection warped. Dima's face fractured into pixels, his voice drowning in digital noise. Ayumi strained at the screen, trying to piece a whole together from these fragments, like an archaeologist gluing an ancient vase back together.

Right then, there was a loud, insistent knock at her hotel room door. She glanced at the screen, where Dima's face had deteriorated into an abstract painting, and went to answer it.

Two police officers stood on the threshold. Their uniforms were immaculate, but their eyes were incredibly weary.

“Madame,” the senior officer said, his voice as washed-out as the world outside the window. “A curfew is being implemented in Constantinople — from 8 PM to 6 AM.”

Ayumi froze. Not Istanbul. *Constantinople*.

He said it so casually, so naturally, as if the name had never changed at all.

Have I lost my mind? Or did the city lose its mind first? Ayumi thought. A glitch? A malfunction in the historical memory of an entire city?

“We recommend that you do not leave the hotel unless absolutely necessary,” the second officer added. “And a word of advice... stock up on cash. The electronics... they're acting up.”

They left, leaving her in the silence of the corridor. She shut the door and walked slowly back to her altar of motherboards.

Nothing remained on the screen. Only gray, hissing snow. Like an old television with its antenna ripped out. Like a world stripped of its signal source.

She tried to call back. *The number does not exist. Forum not found.* StDime79, Dima, her only lead, had dissolved into the void.

She sat down and opened a secure messenger. She found the contact for “Lyosha.” Her fingers flew over the keyboard, typing without a shred of emotion, with the cold precision of a surgeon pronouncing a time of death.

“The money doesn’t matter now. The world is on the brink of disappearing. It’s tied to our code. I need to get to Russia. I need to find the relatives of Vladimir Antipov in Balashikha, near Moscow. They might know something.”

She hit “Send.”

Now, all that was left to do was wait and see if the Russia she needed to fly to still existed. And if there were still Russians left to read her message.

## Chapter Two

The private jet the Russians had sent was a silver ghost, a scalpel slicing through the sick, faded sky. Inside, a sterile silence reigned, broken only by the steady drone of the engines — the final lullaby of a dying technology. Ayumi stared out the window at the Istanbul they were leaving below.

The city was drowning in twilight. But this was no ordinary dusk. The lights that should have been scattered across the hills like precious gems failed to ignite. They were... burning out, one after another, as if someone were switching them off manually, weary of the endless hustle. Like embers in a dying bonfire. Occasionally, they would flare up for a moment with an unnaturally bright, feverish intensity, only to extinguish, leaving black, dead voids across the body of the city. She watched the metropolis's agony the way a physician monitors the encephalogram of a dying brain, where bursts of activity grow increasingly rare until they are replaced by a flat line.

The curious miracle of a decaying world was that its systems died first. At the airport, no one asked questions. The border guard looked at her passport, but not *at* it. His eyes were vacant. He stamped it with a mechanical, rehearsed motion — an

automaton still executing its program, oblivious to the fact that the factory had long since closed. Bureaucracy, that great ritual of order, had dissolved into a meaningless dance of shadows.

Zhukovsky Airport greeted her with silence, like a hollow , echoing concrete mausoleum devoid of announcements, bustle, or people. There was only her, and a single figure standing by the exit. Lyosha.

He looked older. Not by days, but by centuries. His face bore the same frozen, gray fatigue that now masked the entire world.

“You made it,” he said, and it sounded less like a statement of fact and more like astonishment that physical transit through space was still possible.

They walked to the car in silence. The quiet between them hung as dense as that Irish fog. Once inside the cabin, Ayumi broke it. She had to say it — not to justify herself, but to establish the baseline parameters.

“You wanted simple code,” she said, staring straight ahead. Her voice was as flat as a system error log. “I optimized it. I deleted a bulky, redundant module that I deemed to be junk. It appears there was a miscalculation.”

Lyosha slowly turned his head toward her. There was neither anger nor reproach in his eyes. Only a bottomless void.

“Forget it,” he said. “Guilt is a currency that has lost all value. It doesn’t matter now. For the past three days, you are the only person outside of this city I’ve managed to reach.”

“And Vasya?”

“He went north. To his parents in Arkhangelsk. Said if the world is ending, he wants to see white snow. The real stuff. His signal cut out two days ago.”

He stared out the window at the bleak, featureless landscape of the Moscow suburbs, like an old theatrical set someone had forgotten to dismantle after the final curtain.

“Martial law has been declared in Moscow. It's useless. Soldiers vanish right from the checkpoints, leaving nothing behind but their rifles propped against the barriers. People step out to buy bread and never come back. This isn’t even chaos. Chaos implies things are happening. Here... here things just cease to be.”

He reached into his inside pocket and pulled out a sheet of paper folded into quarters.

“I found him. The ex-husband of Polina Antipova — your author’s granddaughter. Here’s the address. My driver will take you there.”

Ayumi took the paper. It felt real. Rough. Material. A final artifact from a world that could still be touched.

“And you?” she asked.

Lyosha gave a wry smirk. The smile didn't reach his eyes.

“Don't worry about me. I'm just... closing out accounts.”

He stepped out of the car without saying goodbye, his figure dissolving into the gray morning haze as though he had never existed at all. Ayumi was left alone in the silence of the luxury vehicle as it carried her into the heart of the labyrinth — to Balashikha, toward the last ghost of a bygone era.

### Chapter Three

The drive through the Moscow suburbs was a journey through a painting from which life was being slowly scraped away. There were no ruins here, no fires, no overt signs of panic. Instead, there was only the quiet, viscous horror of a normalcy stripped of its substance. Identical prefab panel blocks stood in endless rows, like lines in a code that had ceased to execute. People moved along the streets, but their motions were mechanical, purposeless — like clockwork toys whose springs were winding down. From the car window, Ayumi watched a playground swing slowly swaying in an empty lot, though there was neither a child nor a gust of wind to move it. It was a memory-world, a world of afterimages that had not yet realized it was already over.

Polina's ex-husband, Alexander, lived in one of these panel boxes in Balashikha. He was a thin, exhausted man with eyes from which all light had long since vanished. He greeted Ayumi without surprise, as if he had been waiting for her his entire life or, conversely, was no longer waiting for anything at all.

The apartment was small, nearly empty. He offered her tea. The tea was warm but entirely devoid of flavor. Just warm water with a faint hint of rust, lacking even the familiar tang of tap chlorine.

“Polina flew to Tibet,” he said, his gaze fixed not on her, but on the dust motes dancing in a weak shaft of light from the window. “With a small group. She wanted to find some mountain village she'd read about somewhere on the internet. Her parents said there's been no word from her for weeks.”

At the word “Tibet,” an image flashed in Ayumi's mind. Unbidden, like a system glitch. A little girl in brightly colored clothes standing in the middle of a snow-covered yard, catching falling snowflakes on her tongue. But within this perfect, almost pastoral scene lay a flaw that twisted it into a nightmare: the snowflakes were as gray as ash.

“Do you have his book?” Ayumi asked, driving the vision away.

“No. Only some old notebooks. Notes, rough drafts. You can take a look.” He nodded toward a dusty stack on a shelf. “Polina said her grandfather kept rewriting his triptych until the day he died. Changing things, adding pieces. And he was

constantly messing around with some program on his old computer. He said he was writing a 'dictionary for the world!'"

Ayumi picked up the topmost notebook. Yellowed, crumbling pages. Faded ink. It was a diary. The early 1980s.

October 12, 1983. Institute No. 26.

*Argued with the guys about the Project again. The idea is insane, of course, purely theoretical. To build a Deus ex machina. A digital system that, in the event of a global collapse — a nuclear war, for instance — could restore civilization. Not the infrastructure, no. Restore the essence. Culture, humanity, memory. We took the Hindu cyclicity as a baseline, the four yugas. Each era has its own cycle, its own rules. Hence the shlokas in the core. They must become more than just data; they must be the axioms of the new world.*

November 2, 1983. Institute No. 26.

*All of this is nonsense, of course. Spoke with Misha today. We simply don't have the computing power. We wouldn't have enough punch cards in the entire institute to describe a single library. All the institute's computers linked together couldn't process even the prologue. But the idea itself... it's beautiful. I've named our protocol Meihua. I've just started writing my novel, so I'm trying out compression algorithms on its text. I will turn prose into pure structure. Into pure digital code. Into a backup copy of the world.*

Ayumi closed the notebook. The puzzle clicked into place. Cold, monstrous, perfect. This hadn't been the delusion of a crazed programmer-hippie. This was an abandoned but fully armed project conceived by Soviet geniuses, biding its time, waiting for the world to grow into the processing power required to trigger it.

She finished her flavorless tea.

"Alexander," she asked, keeping her voice as steady as possible. "In your ex-wife's grandfather-in-law's book... was there a character named Ayame Yoshikawa?"

He looked at her, showing something resembling interest for the very first time.

"Yes. The daughter of the protagonist from the third part, *The River*. She died. Burned alive during the American firebombing of Tokyo in March of forty-five."

Ayumi stood up. The sense of doom that had stalked her entire life had finally taken shape. She bore the name of a dead child from an unread book, and that name had become the key that unlocked the door to nothingness.

She had to fly to Tibet. The girl catching gray snow on her tongue wasn't just a vision. It was the sole remaining singularity point, the last path left in a dying world. The only node still holding together the fraying fabric of a dissolving reality.

## Chapter Four

Lyosha's plane waited at Zhukovsky like a silver coffin, promising a flight into nowhere. The pilot merely nodded. "He called. Said to take you wherever you say." These were the last words Ayumi heard from a representative of the old world.

The flight was a journey through the void. Below, beneath the wings, the earth was no longer a map of cities and fields. It was a washed-out gray watercolor, stripped of all detail. The sky outside the porthole was neither blue nor gray — it was colorless, like water in which paintbrushes had been rinsed for far too long.

They landed in Lhasa. Or rather, in a place that had once been Lhasa. Ayumi remembered the photographs: a vibrant city screaming with color, the Potala Palace burning gold in the sun. What she saw now was a faded photograph of itself. The palace was a mere gray silhouette against a gray sky. The streets were silent. The few people moving through them were not people at all, but blurred shapes — shadows burned onto the retina of the world.

She managed to find an old, rusty pickup truck with a nearly full tank. The keys were left in the ignition. Evidently, the concept of "theft" had vanished along with the concept of "property."

The road into the mountains was a long meditation on the end. The truck rattled, and this monotonous clatter was the sole proof that movement was still possible. Ayumi drove, the thoughts in her mind — cold and clear as ice — shaping themselves into a final verdict.

*Blockchains turned out to be nothing more than a late, clumsy imitation of how the world was once written down on paper. We created ledgers devoid of meaning, filling them with hollow numbers and empty transactions. And the world answered with a void. And I... I deleted the module, thinking it was garbage. It turned out to be the very root that the world clung to.*

The village was dead. Not abandoned. Explicitly dead. The houses stood like empty eye sockets. Not even the wind stirred the faded prayer flags. Silence here was not the absence of sound, but its utter annihilation.

And in the midst of this absolute void sat she. Padma. She was the only entity that still possessed color. Her clothes, though muted, still remembered that they had once been vibrant red and blue. She sat on the ground, tracing complex, symmetrical patterns in the dust with her finger.

Beside her, on a large flat stone, lay the Book. Open. Padma raised her eyes to her. They were not the eyes of a child. They were the eyes of a galaxy witnessing the death of its last star.

"To read is to hold on," she said, her voice the only sound left in the world. "To close is to let go. To write is to share the responsibility of existence."

Ayumi stepped closer. She looked down at the open pages. The symbols upon them were not printed; they were alive. They shimmered like distant constellations, drifting slowly and shifting their forms. And she understood.

The world exists only as long as this book remains open. As long as there is an Observer — Padma. Close it, and the final thread tethering reality will snap. The universe will collapse into a singularity of non-being. To keep reading, to submerge herself in this text, meant becoming a part of it. Dissolving into the fading world. Turning into just another shimmering symbol, another line in someone else's story.

Her mind, long accustomed to binary logic, to *if* and *else*, collided with an irreconcilable paradox. Both branches led to a termination point.

And then, within the deafening silence on the roof of the world, a third solution was born. Illogical. Impossible. Yet the only correct one.

Neither to read nor to close. To continue writing. To cease being an observer or a character, and to become the Creator. Not to patch her old, broken code, but to compile herself as a new script into a fresh chapter. To create a quine — a self-replicating program that might reboot the world, might arrest its decay, or might simply wipe the slate clean once and for all. But it would happen on her terms. Guided by the laws of art, not an execution error.

She looked at Padma, at this ancient soul trapped in the body of a child. What would become of them? Would they emerge as the new gods of this realm? Or would they simply dissolve into the act of creation, like a drop of pigment in water? Would this gray, dying world vanish, or would it flush with a vibrant, unheralded color?

She did not know...

But she knew exactly what she had to do.

## Epilogue

As Ayu brought her hand close to the Book, the pages began to whisper.

They were not words. They were the voices of everyone who had ever read it — and not just it. The voices of all those who had held this world together with their attention. They spoke a language that possessed no single alphabet, yet shared a solitary rhythm: the rhythm of a heart beating for the very last time to give life to a new heart.

“Do you know what will happen if you begin to write?” I asked.

“Yes,” Ayu said, and her drawn contours became almost solid for a fleeting moment. “I will cease to be human.”

“And if you don't?”

“The world will cease to be.”

“But you don't know what will happen if you do write.”

“No one knows what will happen when you begin to write,” she replied, her voice echoing the voices of everyone who had ever stood before a blank page. “But if you don't begin, there will be nothing at all.”

Ayu raised her hand. Her fingers trembled like a shadow upon water.

Would what she wrote bring life or death? What would become of her, what would become of me, what would become of the Book, what would become of the voices of those who once lived within its pages?

But Ayu already knew: if she didn't try, everything would vanish. Even the world that was already dead.

I watched her hand — pale, thin, suspended in the air like a moth deciding whether to take flight or to fall. And then, I did the only thing that still made sense in this vanishing world.

I extended my own hand to her.

## Glossary

**Darknet** — A hidden, anonymous segment of the internet that is inaccessible through standard web browsers.

**Blockchain** — A distributed ledger technology that forms the foundation of cryptocurrencies. Its defining characteristic is the immutability of its records. Once a transaction is written, it remains in the system forever.

**Cryptography** — The science of methods used to ensure data confidentiality and integrity. The entire modern digital economy is built upon cryptographic principles.

**Seed Phrase** — In the cryptocurrency world, a master key consisting of a specific sequence of words that grants full access to a digital wallet.

**GossipNet** — Derived from *gossip* and *net*, this refers to a communication protocol that efficiently disseminates information across a computer network, mirroring the way rumors spread through human social circles.

**Quine** — A real-world type of computer program that takes no input and produces a copy of its own source code as its only output.

**Sanskrit** — An ancient literary language of India and the sacred language of Hindu texts.

**Shloka (Śloka)** — A poetic meter or couplet used in Sanskrit literature.

**Kali Yuga** — In Hindu cosmology, the last of the four world ages (yugas); the "Iron Age"—an epoch of darkness, spiritual decay, and strife, which is ultimately followed by the cosmic renewal of the world.

**Maha Upanishad** — One of the ancient philosophical texts of Hinduism.

**Guernica** — A monumental painting by Pablo Picasso that has become a universal symbol of the horrors, tragedies, and suffering of war.

**“A story should have a beginning, a middle and an end, but not necessarily in that order.”** — A famous quote by the influential French New Wave film director and screenwriter Jean-Luc Godard.

**Constantinople** — The historical name of Istanbul prior to its fall in 1453.