

Gin'iro ~Silver~
Chapter 1 Edition.

Translated by, Randy "Agilis" Au

Email non-spam to: agi (point) projectmail (spiral) gmail (decimal) com

Links:

*Original Insani Narcissu work with torrents:

<http://narcissu.insani.org/>

*My tiny limited space for my Narcissu file:

<http://www.geocities.com/agilis25/index.html>

*And infinite thanks to Olf who kindly provides mirroring for my files at:

<http://narcissu.gwathyr.net/>

Chapter 1 Edition notes:

Just days/weeks before this, we saw the release of the original, and 3 different English translations of the dojin work "Narcissu" by Kataoka Tomo a director and scenario writer for NekoNekoSoft. Because of this, veterans of NekoNekoSoft games have noted the parallels that existed between the story of Narcissu and that of Gin'iro Chapter 1. However, many still say Gin'iro was more beautiful than Narcissu. What this file would like to do is allow people who haven't played Gin'iro to get a taste for these parallels and to appreciate the beauty at least in some small part.

This file is a straight excerpt from my rather ambitious Gin'iro Novelisation Project. I have read through this chapter a number of times for editing and by now this chapter is close to its eventual final state. As of this writing Aug, 26 2005, the GNP has been semi-stalled at the 45% completion mark due to life projects getting in the way, but I have every intention of finishing, eventually. Since I don't want to rush myself and sacrifice quality, I figured I should at least release this much to the world while interest is still around.

Sorry that there's no pretty sound, no pictures, no voice, but if it helps your imagination, the voice actors for the girls in Narcissu and Gin'iro is the same person. Enjoy!

Translation Preface

Gin'iro was a visual novel published by NekoNekoSoft originally in August 31, 2000. On the one year anniversary of that release, a "Complete" DVD edition was released with extra scenes, CG, voices, music and other goodies. This game is now out of print and obtaining a copy even in Japan is extremely difficult and expensive since its beautiful and tragic story has made it a very desirable item among fans of the genre.

This translation works from complete edition's script, with the latest correction patch, which fixed typos and the like, released. The story has very view choices for the user and there is only one true path for the story to flow, with a few 'bad endings' along the way. This makes the game an ideal subject for translation.

Finally, this translation is unofficial. Although I would love to receive official permission to translate this work and release it for free, I have no idea how to go about obtaining it. Help in this regard would be appreciated.

ALTHOUGH CARE HAS BEEN TAKEN TO MAINTAIN A CERTAIN LEVEL OF DIGNITY IN THE TRANSLATION, THE GAME WAS ORIGINALLY FOR ADULTS AND THE WORK CONTAINS ADULT THEMES. IF YOU TAKE OFFENSE AT THIS POSSIBILITY IT IS BETTER IF YOU READ NO FURTHER.

About the Gin'iro Novelisation Project

This project was started in an effort to bring the beautiful story of this game to someone unable to read the Japanese text. Even though the game has its own built in English mode. Any who have read that version of the script would know that the translation was riddled with spelling, grammatical, and even logical errors. Some have likened it to being run through a machine translation service such as Babelfish, except that Babelfish does a better job in many cases.

This translation is titled a "Novelisation Project" because it is not a direct script translation of the game. It is a retelling of the story, as true to the original as possible, without requiring access to the original game, an effort to create a novelized version.

Because of that, a certain liberties were taken that stray from a more literal translation:

- The story is predominantly told in the 3rd person instead of the 1st in the original script for readability reasons.
- Because the reader has no access to the art and the voice acting, when appropriate descriptions of those things have been worked into the text to the best of my ability to describe them succinctly.
- The H-scenes have been worked out of (I hope it is judged tastefully) the direct story telling. However, special care has been taken to make sure any and all important conversation, events, etc. that occurs in those scenes are expressed in the translation. All the steamy details and sound effects have been left to the reader's imagination, however.
- The primary goal is English readability, not getting the most literal translation. If some idioms are replaced, some lines aren't quite right, etc, 99% of the time it was on purpose.
- Finally, despite all my work on this project. I still recommend those who have the chance, to play the game, even if they must use this work as a translation guide. The voice acting and music immensely add to the atmosphere and story.

“This story had been handed down as a little bedside story.
And disappeared later on.
People, do they know the real color of silver?”
– Opening Quote, “Gin’iro”

Chapter 1, Outs no Tawa. – [The Pass of Outs]

0 [Namae wa nai] I have no name.

I have no name.
Because no one ever gave me one.
Instead, behind my right foot runs the deep scar of a cut.

A thin futon, a latticed door, a little light from a barred window tells me that it is now
day.
“If you stay here, you won’t have to starve or die in a war,” someone told me.

Swaying. Swaying.
My body is swayed back and forth.
I don’t think about anything.
I have stopped trying to think.
I just close my eyes, and wait for it to end.

I only look at a world of darkness,
A world with nothing, of only black, a world where no one can touch me.
Because when I open my eyes, a disgusting world surrounds me.
Hollow, painful, fragile, dim, sorrowful.
That’s why I like this dark world.

When the shaking ends,
I open my eyes to the dark room.
Along with the gloomy ceiling and latticed door,
I see the man that was swaying me up until now.
Who is it? I don’t know.
Even if he left the room, another man would only come in.
Not that I want to know anyone.

I don’t rebel on the thin futon, because if I just bear it, it is soon over.
Even if the wildly breathing man starts shaking my body again.
I just close my eyes.
I just stare at a point of black in the darkness,
Just gaze at the total darkness that surrounds me.
Yesterday, today, tomorrow,
Always, just watching the darkness as I am swayed.

Am I alive?

One night, the large moon hangs in the sky. I open the lattice door and slip outside. My legs bring me the feeling of the warming summer air and the cool ground. The leg that can't walk because of the severed tendon brings me those sensations. It's not that I wanted to run away. I just wanted to walk in a direction where I can see the moon. No one is able to call out and stop me... There's no name for them to call out... No one ever gave me one...

The moon that illuminates the Outsou Pass penetrates deep into the souls of men and raises to the surface the darkness that lurks in men's hearts. That night, on a mountain path, the shadow of man holding a raised sword falls upon two travelers. His blue colored clothing, pale and tattered, and his gleaming sword the only colors in the night.

"Please! This is all of it!" one desperately said to the silent attacker. "At least, even if only my daughter! At least her life! Plea--"

The swordsman swung, his hand telling him he has struck bone, as warmth burst from the wound.

"Father! Father!" cried the girl as the man swung again, this time, the blood flying into the night even higher.

Soon, the surrounding ground is dark, the dry sandy path becoming a deep red. In the middle of that dark pool, the traveler glares at the swordsman, and struggling to speak, though he can barely be heard.

"How dare...you...my daughter..."

"Silence" was all that the swordsman said as he swung a final time.

The swordsman quietly watched the earth darken. What is so wrong with killing? To cut, to kill, to rob, without mercy, without caring who he attacked. It's not like there was any meaning in it, if his stomach is hungry, he robs, the killing is only incidental. By stealing, and killing, he is alive now. He doesn't have anything against those that he kills, but he knows of no other way to live. Besides, he can't continue to do this forever. He knew that someday, someone else would kill him; it was just a matter of time.

The girl was walking towards the moon, but she has about reached her limit. She had been dragging the leg with the scar behind her while walking the whole night, but it seems that she can go no further. Little by little, the sky brightens, and as she looks around, she sees that she is on a path overlooking a mountain pass, in a place she's never seen before. Somewhere, the voices of waking birds can be heard and a large hazy moon hangs overhead.

Dawn is breaking, and as the pale moon floats above, the thin little girl lay down upon the grass there without saying a word. Even though the moon is so big now, with the morning light, it can't be seen anymore, she thought to herself. The girl closes her eyes peacefully; there is no one here to sway her body. In the dark, she thought about the world of darkness, the world of nothing but deep blackness, the world without anything, no knowledge, no thought, no understanding, nothing... the world she liked. She wanted to be always in this world, but even though she wanted to never wake again, even though she wanted to continue sleeping forever, she could not stay.

As the sky began to be stained a bluish purple and brighten, the man began to search through the two bodies. In the woven packages they carried, he found some nigiri^{*}, now dyed a dull red, and nothing else of use. The few pieces of money are a useless substitute for him, so taking only the food; he dragged the bodies to the ravine edge. With a grunt, he tossed them over the edge, and watched as they crash downward through the trees.

“The weak die, that’s all”, he said aloud, as the crashing ended in the darkness.

The man briefly glanced first at the valley where he threw the bodies, then at the nigiri he gathered from them. These cheap looking rice balls were the whole value of their lives – to him, they are worth three days of his life.

1 [Natsu, sono hi no koto] That summer day.

With the unbearable brightness of the day, the man opened his eyes. He could feel it was going to be a hot day as he rose from the bed of grass. Before him was the white sunbaked mountain path, and the resounding cries of cicadas filled the air. Looking around, he started in surprise, nearby lying on the grass was the form of a pale, thin little girl dressed only in a thin, dirty white kimono.

“Another outcast? I just had to see something bad in the morning. This makes me sick,” He spat the words out at the figure that lay before him.

He had thought that because he had grown so accustomed to killing he would be used to seeing the dead, but the sight of someone dying of their own accord before him made him sick anyway.

The 8th lunar month was already half passed, and it is really becoming hot. This was the time when disease runs through the villages. Every year, even here in the Outs Pass, the bodies of plague⁺ victims build up like mountains. Sometimes the living are also thrown into those piles, but that isn't a problem, they'll soon be dead anyway.

While the man was silently contemplating disease and looking at the tiny white girl, a little moan comes from her. Apparently still alive, the girl at his feet slowly began to get up, brushing the grass from her thin white clothing. Standing, her thin frame would

* Nigiri, from the word roughly meaning “to grasp/grip”, it is a pressed ball of rice, plain or garnished.

+ The characters used translate closer to ‘disease’ and at least in one place ‘smallpox’, but I interchange it with ‘plague’ in the same sense that ‘plague’ covered many deadly infectious diseases in western history.

barely come up to his chest. Her skin seemingly untouched by the sun, was so pale that her clothing seemed to be a part of her.

“Hey you” he called to her.

The girl sleepily turned to him, and though her face was so pale, it is calm and quiet, nothing like the face of the sick or suffering.

“What are you doing?” he asked.

She just stared at him evenly.

“Were you cast away?”

Silence.

“You don’t have a disease do you?”

By now, he was worried at how strange she was, and whether she really did have a disease, and so he maintains his distance from her as he continues to question.

“Hey, why don’t you speak?”

Still, silence. He fingered his sword, wondering if this dirty little girl really was a threat.

“I don’t know but...” the girl finally spoke in a small quiet voice.

“Oh, so you can talk?” the man said.

“I don’t think so,” she continued

“No? So you don’t have a disease?”

“Un,” came the reply.

“Then what are you doing in a place like this?” he asked. “This is the start the rough road up the mountain.”

Silence again. She wordlessly turned her eyes downward at the ground.

“What a strange girl,” the man muttered to himself quietly, muffled under the screeching of the cicadas.

“Well, anyway then, bye” he told her, turned around, and began to leave.

“Un.”

She was definitely a strange girl, but one he quickly decided he had nothing to do with it. As he walked, he turned around once more to look. The girl still standing there, unmoved, doing nothing, and he wondered again what in the world is she doing. Unable to stop himself, he walked back to once again ask, “What are you doing?”

“Nothing...” she replied quietly.

“If you stay here, you’ll be eaten by wild dogs you know,” he told her.

She only closed her eyes, whether from not wanting to speak, or unable to, he couldn’t tell. In the silence, he looked her over, and noticed her leg and that large scar on behind her right foot, the unmistakable mark of a cut tendon.

“So, you ran away from a brothel, didn’t you?” he said to her

“So it seems,” was her reply.

“Seems? It’s like you’re talking about a stranger. But it seems you did a good job of running away from the brothel.”

“Un,” she replied.

The girl was only emphasizing her strangeness. She’s unusually calm for a girl that escaped from a brothel. It’s generally known that girls who escape are killed in a bad way when recaptured. She is sure to know that, and yet here she is, standing with a calm expression, as if she didn’t care about her situation.

“Well, I don’t have any interest in anyone who doesn’t have food, so bye.” Once again, he turned to leave. If she didn’t care, why should he?

“Un.”

He walked away, but he couldn’t help but dwell on the strange girl, even when there was no point in worrying about her. By nightfall, she’ll be eaten by mountain dogs, or caught by men from the brothel. Either way it wasn’t his problem. These days, things are chaotic, especially on this mountain path. The ghosts of resentment and pain must haunt this place. Yes, facing those things alone is difficult. He thought to himself, “The weak die, the same as always.”

2 [Yoru Hikate ita hi no koto] The night that sparkled.

The sun finally set, the night air gently wrapping around the area. Night is when the mountain is colored by many fireflies, and is the time when the large moon rises over the Outsou Mountains. The man was sitting at the roots of a tree, eating the nigiri that he had recovered that day.

While eating and absent-mindedly watching the points of light of the fireflies, shining even though their light was almost drowned out by the bright moonlight, the cries of mountain dogs sound in the far distance. As he ate the rice, his thoughts returned to the girl from earlier today, wondering if she had been eaten already, or maybe men from the brothel had already caught her. She was fated to die a shameful death no matter what; but maybe being eaten by wild dogs was better than being caught.

Again wild dogs called in the distance. The weak die, that is the way of the world, and yet, the man felt unsettled. Finally, he slowly stood up and placed the remaining nigiri away. Not that he cared about her, he told himself. He just couldn’t stand the situation and wanted to confirm that she was indeed dead. So, with the moon and swarms of fireflies lighting his way, and the only sounds were of wild dogs, his footsteps, and cicadas, he made his way back to the place where he met the strange pale girl. But as he neared the place where they met earlier day, he sees that very strange girl, silently walking along the mountain path, slowly dragging her right foot behind her.

“So you didn’t get eaten by wild dogs eh?” he said to her.

“Un” came her weak reply. Walking even this distance must have been extremely difficult for her. She looked quite tired.

“So, where are you headed?” he asked.

She only looked at him quietly.

“You know with that leg you won’t be able to cross the mountains.”

As before, he was met with nothing but silence as she gazed at him. She didn’t even look like she was fleeing for her life.

Finally, a single word came from her mouth, “Water.”

“Water? You mean want a drink?”

“Un.”

“There’s water at the stream below,” he said to her.

“Stream?”

“Yeah, a stream, it runs just below that ravine there.” He told her, pointing towards the darkness where the stream ran. “Though with your leg I don’t think you can make it down there. You should just give up, there’s no way you can climb down that steep slope with that leg.”

“Un,” was all the girl said as she started moving towards the pitch-blackness where the man pointed, where a stream and a ravine waited. She moved slowly with her lame foot dragging behind but resolutely.

“Hey, you better not!” he called after her. “With that leg it’d be better to just give up!”

But she didn’t reply, the girl kept pushing onward, until a crashing sound interrupted his calls. The foolish girl must have fallen. He went towards the edge of the ravine. It was too dark, and there was too much foliage to see what happened to the girl, and so the man was left to wonder whether she had fallen to her death, or just lay unable to move.

Muttering to himself, he began climbing down the ravine. Not that he wanted to save her or anything, his throat was merely dry and he could use a drink for himself. If she’s dead, then she’s dead. He just wanted to see her fate with his own eyes. And so, he quickly made his way down the dark ravine, managing its steep rocks, many bushes, and slippery moss. Surely, for a kid like that, there’s no way to come down safely. However, as he reached the bottom, there she was, sitting on a pile of broken branches.

“Are you dead?” he asked her.

“U~un,” came her reply, looking like she had nothing but a few scrapes.

“You sure did a hell of a job getting down here safely,” he told her, looking back up towards where they had come from. “You’ve got good luck.”

She spoke quietly, “Water,” as if just remembering why she was there.

“Water? Isn’t there a stream right in front of you?” he said, pointing to the stream flowing nearby, brightly lit by the moon and swarms of fireflies.

“Un, I see,” she said, and started walking towards the water.

The stream that night was running quietly, the moon gently reflected on its wavy surface. The girl made her way into the stream, and started to drink deeply.

“Cold,” she said quietly.

“Yeah, this stream is cold even in the summer,” he replied as he also bent to drink with her at the bank. “What do you think? Delicious isn’t it?” he asked.

“Un,” she said, with the tiniest hint of what could have been happiness in her voice.

Surrounded by the sounds of that mountain stream, they stepped in and soaked their legs in the water, neither feeling any need to speak, just silently listening to the sounds of the stream, feeling the pleasant coldness of the water, watching the twinkling of the thousands of fireflies that bobbed along all over.

“What’s this?” she asked quietly, staring at the little winking point of light that had settled briefly upon her fingertip.

Looking over, he said, “What? That’s a firefly isn’t it?”

“Firefly?” she said, once again staring intently at the little creature on her finger.

“You haven’t heard of fireflies?” he asked in surprise, watching her stare so intently at the little thing. “Is it really that fascinating?” he asked, curious.

“Un.”

“What a strange thing to find fascinating,” he thought to himself. The little girl stared at the firefly on her finger a long moment, before suddenly closing her hand around the creature. The blinking light in her hand dissolved into darkness, leaving only the remains of an insect behind.

“...What...?” the girl turned to him and asked softly, confused.

“What do you mean, ‘what’?” the man replied, looking at her.

“The light disappeared,” she told him.

“That’s because you killed it.”

“It won’t light up again?” she asked, seemingly shocked.

“It can’t if it’s dead right?”

“... What ...what?” she spoke, still bewildered, and gazing intently at the remains of the insect in her hand with a strange expression on her face. As if she had never known about fireflies before.

“Hey, you,” he called to her, and before her eyes, caught another firefly “Look carefully,” he told her. Before the little firefly could escape, he crushed the unresisting insect. The bright light of the firefly faded away into darkness.

“See? It won’t light up if its dead.” He told her.

“...Un” she said, finally seeming to understand.

Standing in the cold mountain stream, with the large moon overhead, and thousands of blinking points of light all around, the girl spread both of her arms out, gathering fireflies as if sheltering them.

“Look,” she said to the man, “they’re shining.”

“So what?” he replied, not understanding what she is doing.

“So that means they’re alive?” she asked, “If they don’t shine, then they are dead?”

“Wha?” he said, totally confused.

“Because they are shining, they are alive?” she asked again..

“What are you saying?” he asked, unable to answer the questions this strange girl posed here at the riverbank, surrounded by that cool, refreshing sounds of the mountain stream in summer.

On that summer night with the uncountable numbers of fireflies.

The day of their first meeting.

Swaying. Swaying.

My body is once again being swayed.

Like always, when I close both my eyes, the world that is only mine spreads before me.

The world of darkness, the world with black nothingness as its only color.

Again today, I stare at that dark spot.

There is nothing, no knowledge, no thought, no understanding, nothing...

This is the world that I like, and even though I want to forever remain in this world...

“Hey,” called the man that had been swaying me until now, pulling me from my world. No, I don’t want go to that world. When I open my eyes, a horrible world spreads before me, a dark room, a tiny bit of sunlight through the latticed window, and I can see someone.

“Hey, what’s your name?” that nameless someone asks me, in the dark room, a disgusting smile upon his face. “I’ll come again, so what’s your name?”

I say nothing to him.

“Come on, just say it.” He insisted.

I couldn’t say anything to him, and so he left, unsatisfied.

‘Name’, it seems that this is something that everyone carries. Something that is given by others. For a long time, I had thought that my name was “Hey,” or “You.”

3 [Sora wo miageta hi no koto] The day we looked at the sky.

The sun was shining, and the man woke up at the riverbank, stretching at the heat. The sound of the mountain stream fills the air along with the loud cicadas. There was a sound behind him, and he turned around to see the strange girl from yesterday waking and standing up, though it seems that she definitely meant to go someplace.

“Oh, it’s you,” he said, “You’re still here?”

“Un.”

“Why don’t you hurry and leave?” he said to her roughly.

“Un.” she said, but didn’t move to leave and just stood there, looking blankly at her leg making no move to begin climbing up that steep ravine.

“Well, with your leg, maybe that might be too much to climb back up to the top.” He told her as she stood in silence. He was silently annoyed at how closed-mouthed she was; did she even think to ask for help?

“Well, do as you please.” he said, “Bye.” and with that turned his back to the stream. That strange white-faced girl isn’t anything to worry about he told himself as he began climbing. She’d soon die by the roadside anyway. The weak die, that’s how it always is.

On this hot day, up on the top of the ravine, back on the mountain path, a shimmering haze hangs over the footprints on the path.

“Please, I’ll leave my money and everything I have!” pleaded another traveler, placing all his belongings before the lone swordsman. “Please just leave me my life!”

“Is this all of it?” the man asked.

“Y-yes! Please just save me my life!” the traveler begged.

“This here, is your value,” the swordsman told the traveler.

“Value?” quaked the traveler.

“Yes.” And with that, the swordsman struck, cutting through flesh until his hand felt bone stop the blade. Red flowed onto the ground, staining it dark in an ever-widening pool. “This is the value of your life.”

The swordsman gathered up the useful belongings of the traveler, some nigiri, and some cheap goods from a local inn. This was the entire value of this traveler's life, and yet another few days of life for the swordsman. When that was done, he dragged the body to the ravine and threw it over with a grunt as he always did. The weak die, that's all there is to it, he told himself.

4 [Tomotta hi no koto] The day that was illuminated.

Darkness fell, and the soft light of the large moon once again illuminated the mountains while swarms of fireflies once again filled the air. Sitting in the darkness under a tree by the mountain path, the swordsman sat eating some of the nigiri he had collected that day, tasting a bit of salty blood mixed in with the rice. During these times, the taste didn't matter; to be able to eat today was more than enough. To be able to swoop down, strike, and steal what he could; that was all he knew how to do, and will continue to do so as long as he can.

Just as he was finishing the first nigiri and was about to start on the second, a sound in the bushes nearby startles him. From his seat, he reaches for his sword and looks toward the sound, only to see in the dark moonlit night filled with fireflies, a white shadow.

"Hey," he said to the shadow, "you did a good job of climbing didn't you?"

"Un" came the reply from the pale-faced little girl.

Looking at her, he saw that she had picked up many scrapes on her way up. It was obvious that she managed to climb her way up by her own power. With a leg like that, he wondered if she ever thought that she could die if she slipped during her climb. While he was examining her, he saw that she, too, was staring at him.

"What? You want this?" he asked her, holding up the nigiri.

She closed her eyes and stood in silence.

"What, aren't you hungry?" he asked again.

Slowly, she opened her eyes, and said "Un."

"You want this nigiri?" he insisted.

No response.

"If you don't say anything, I can't understand you," he said to her. "Do you want to eat this?" he asked, holding the rice ball in front of her.

"Yes." She said.

"Oh, so you want it, eh?" he said, placing it on the ground and picking up his sword. "Then why don't you come take it?"

She looked at him in askance.

"If you want this, then come and take it from me." He told her, raising his sword high.

With his sword raised high, gleaming in the moonlight, and fireflies dancing all around them, all that the girl said was, "Un, I understand."

She started towards the man and the rice lying on the ground. With fireflies swirling around them, and with her right leg dragging softly behind her each step, she moved towards him unwaveringly.

"I'm going to kill you, you know," he warned her.

She said nothing, still moving quietly toward her goal.

“I’m really going to kill you,” he warned once more.

Still, silent as before, she continued walking towards him, maybe she doesn’t understand him? And as she began to reach for the ball of rice that he had placed near his foot, with a cry of what might have been warning, he swung down.

Fireflies danced as the blade moved to strike. In the pale blue night sky, a scarlet spray rises high...

“I got it,” came the quiet voice of the girl beyond his closed eyes. “Is this all?”

The swordsman stood there in silence, his blade stopped in midair from reaching her. He had closed his eyes upon striking; but some fleeting thing in what he saw when she kneeled to pick up the nigiri, had stopped him.

“Can I eat this?” the little girl under him asked, as he wordlessly stood there asking himself why he stopped his sword.

“What’s wrong?” she asked him, sounding slightly concerned.

For once, he was the one that had nothing to say.

“Can I eat this?” she asked again.

“Ah,” was all he managed, and the girl in front of him began to eat the dull red nigiri as if it was a feast. He could only watch as this white-faced girl ate while illuminated by the tiny points of light of fireflies. On the day those same points of light illuminated the sword that stopped.

Swaying. Swaying.

My body was always being swayed.

“Play nice with each other,” someone said as he brought over the girl from next door that I had never seen before; the girl that I had only heard the crying voice of. When I saw her at the lattice door, her foot also dragged; she carried on her right leg the scar from a cut tendon; the same as me.

I stayed in that dark room, with the girl that only continued to cry; a scene that I had seen many times. That’s why today I also just leave my body to the swaying. I just close my eyes, and stare at the darkness, only at that single point of darkness.

5 [Yureta hi no koto] Day of swaying

Again, the sun beat down strongly upon the dirt path, the heat of the day making the ground shimmer. In this brightness and heat, the man wakes. Nearby the pale little girl was lying where she had rested since last night.

“Hey,” the man while still lying down spoke to the sleeping form of the girl, “You awake?”

She stirred, opening her eyes slowly before replying with a small “Un.”

“Why are you still here?” he asked her, “I don’t have any more nigiri, so don’t follow me.”

A moment of silence, and then, “Un.”

The man stood up, dusting grass off his body. As soon as he starts, the girl does the same. When he moves to the shade of a large tree by the roadside that provided blessed shelter from the unforgiving sun, she trails along behind.

“What are you doing?” he asked her then. “I already said that I don’t have any more food.”

After a period of her usual quiet, she responds, “Because it’s hot.”

Sitting in the shade, the girl stared into the distance, with an expression as if she was thinking deeply of something he couldn’t begin to understand.

He shrugged at her, and said, “Do as you please.”

Under that shade of the large tree by the path, with a warm breeze blowing now and then, and the sound of cicadas all around, and the sound of the mountain stream in the far distance, the two rested, waiting for the oppressive heat and sun to abate.

6 [Natsu no yoru no koto] Summer nights

Night fell and the man woke. “Hey, wake up,” he told the girl sleeping nearby.

Slowly she stirred and mumbling a sleepy “Un.”

“You sleep soundly don’t you?” he noted.

“Un,” she replied, still sounding half asleep.

“Are you hungry?” he asked her

She closed her eyes in silence.

”Well?” he pressed.

She opened her eyes and said, “... hungry.”

“Alright,” he said then, “look over there.” He pointed towards the mountain path, where a traveler could be seen, a traveler who had decided to avoid the heat of the day and used the evening to cross the mountains. Attractive prey.

“You want to eat nigiri?” he asked the girl.

“Un.”

“Then go and steal them,” he told her, pointing to the figure in the distance. At this, she only closed her eyes in silence.

“If you want them, then you have to steal them.” The man said before he headed off towards the traveler.

On the mountain path, the moon was very large. Thousands of fireflies danced in the air, their weak and tiny points of light swirling around. The man rushed through the trees, and appeared before the traveler, his sword gleaming in all the light.

“Whoa!” shouted the traveler, “Someone help!”

Before he could say any more, the man struck with his sword. Blood flew from the body and began to pool, a scene the swordsman had seen many a time. As usual, the swordsman kept what he could use, and threw the rest and the body over the ravine,

watching it crash down into the dark trees below. All while the pale little girl watched. She said nothing, and only followed him with her eyes.

“What?” he turned to her, irritated at her stare. “You have a problem?”

No response.

“Those who are weak die, is there something wrong with that?” he demanded of her. Yes, the weak die, and only the strong can live; those were the words that he said to himself many times before. All the while, fireflies danced before him, some even landed on him. Feeling irritated, he took out some of the red-stained nigiri he had collected from the traveler and felt the girl’s eyes on him.

“What?” he asked.

As usual, the question was met with silence.

“You want this?” he demanded, raising the ball of rice.

“Un.”

“Then steal it from me,” he told her, placing the ball of rice in front of him, and raising his sword. “If you want this, you’ll have to come and take it.”

“Un, I understand,” she said, as once again she started to walk towards him.

“I’m going to kill you,” he warned her once more as she moved closer.

“Hey. Do you understand?” he shouted at her.

“Un,” she said in her small little voice, while still moving slowly towards the nigiri.

“Hey! I’m really going to kill you!” he shouted, and again, as she bent to reach for the nigiri.

He swung.

“I got it,” came her calm voice, through his closed eyelids. “Can I eat it?”

Yet again, he was unable to kill her; the blade hung in the air, shining in the moonlight, casting a shadow over both the rice ball and the girl and yet did not move further.

As the girl sat down to eat her ball of rice, he turned to her and said, “Hey, do you understand what that is?”

She turned to him.

“That is the value of the man I just killed earlier,” he told her. He saw that she still did not understand, “The ball of rice in your hands,” he repeated.

“I don’t understand all that well,” she admitted sitting there with a red-stained nigiri in her hands and a mysterious expression on her face.

“I’m the one that doesn’t understand well,” the man muttered, unable to figure out why he couldn’t kill this girl. Weak things die – that is why he is alive. And yet, how is this girl also alive? Why is this pale little girl still surviving? As the girl carefully ate all of the rice, the man couldn’t take his eyes off her.

Once she had finished, he spoke to her again, “Hey, aren’t you afraid?”

She looked at him, uncomprehending.

“Or perhaps,” he asked finally, “you want to die?”

She closed her eyes in silence again.

“Well, which is it?” he asked.

Finally, the girl opened her eyes and quietly said, “I don’t know.”

That one simple phrase gave the man a very empty and sorrowful feeling as all around them, points of light flowed as many fireflies swayed back and forth in the summer night.

Swaying. Swaying,
My body was being swayed.

“Say,” said the girl that was always crying in the room. For some reason, she spoke to me often.

“The moon is beautiful tonight,” the girl said.

“Un?”

“Come look,” the girl said to me.

The night shrouded everything outside with darkness, and the two of us gazed at the moon, in that dark room, through a gap in the latticework. From that place, the only thing we could see in that world was the moon, brightly shining.

“Isn’t it beautiful?” the girl said.

“Un.”

The moon, seen through the lattice in the window, and the tiny lights around the moon, shined and illuminated the dark and gloomy room.

“They’re just like fireflies aren’t they?” the girl said pointing at the night sky with her finger “you know, the stars around the moon.”

“Un?”

Those stars shined brightly, as if not wanting to lose to the moon.

“You know,” the girl gave a light little laugh, “that’s what I’m called, ‘Hotaru’*.”

“Hotaru?”

“Un, I was born in the summer you see, so Hotaru. My father told me this once.”

“Un?”

So this is this person’s name? “Hotaru.”

“Around the time when I was born you see,” Hotaru explained, “there were a lot in front of the house.” Hotaru laughed lightly, “A simple reason isn’t it?”

The girl that was always crying, in the dark and gloomy room, with the large moon and the tiny shining stars, for the first time, showed me her smile that night as the girl called Hotaru and I watched the moon.

7 [Yakusoku shita hi no koto] The day a promise was made.

The sun was shining strongly again, large white clouds drifted in the sky, and it seemed that today will also be a hot. Resting in the shade of a tree, the man looked at the little girl lying next to him, her eyes half-open in the oppressive heat and brightness of the day. He wondered, how many days has it been since they first met?

* ‘Hotaru’ means ‘Firefly’

“Hey,” he said to her, as she sat there in thought. “Why are you still in a place like this?”

The girl just sat there in silence, staring off into the distance. He could not understand what was going through her mind. All that’s she would ever find here is a shameful death by the road, sooner or later.

“All you’ll find here if you stay is the summer heat,” he told her. “You’d be better off if you went someplace else.”

Still, he was met with silence, she just sat there quietly, thinking, doing nothing but occasionally wiping sweat from her cheek.

“Fine, do as you please,” he told her, irritated.

The man closed his eyes from the heat to sleep. It will be cooler at night when he woke up. As he rested in the silence, he felt a sudden pain in his right leg and sat up with a shout, to find that a large snake had buried its fangs his leg. In pain, he quickly tore the snake off him, dashed it into the ground, and stood up to protect himself. He wasn’t about to be done in by a mere snake. But as he did so, pain shot up his leg like lightning. The girl just sat there, watching the whole scene without a word as the man dealt with both the snake and his wound.

“You’d better watch yourself too,” he told her as he cast his eyes around the area, “If you don’t want to die from snakes, you should get out of here.” The wound did not stop bleeding, and the pain from it was only increasing. He could feel what remained of his strength weakening; they had not eaten very well recently. He hobbled around, checking the grass with his sword.

“I’d better find some antidote herbs quickly,” he muttered to himself, looking about for something to help with the bleeding.

His leg was feeling heavy by now, as if it wasn’t his own. Panting, he rested on a log, binding his wound with some strips torn from his worn clothes, while still searching the grasses for herbs with his eyes. He wasn’t sure whether he was sweating from the heat, the pain, or the poison. Unable to find any of the plants he needed, he cast about, finally meeting the eyes of that strange little girl who was watching him, silent and unmoved.

“Hey,” he asked her, “you don’t feel like helping me?”

Silence.

“Antidote herbs, you won’t help me look for them?”

Nothing.

He sighed and said, “Well, I guess you wouldn’t know of those kinds of things.” After all, if the girl didn’t know about fireflies, how could she possibly know about herbs?

“I know them,” came a quiet answer.

“Oh?” he said, unbelieving.

“Herbs for combating poison, I saw them in the town before,” she told him.

“Then go get those for me,” he commanded.

At that, she closed her eyes again in silence.

“I gave you food didn’t I?”

“...Un,” she replied, before she slowly stood up and started to search among the grasses.

“I already searched there,” he told her after a moment.

She only glanced back at him, said "...Un" before slowly continuing off someplace.

Watching her go, he could only mutter to himself, "Why did I get my hopes up? This won't work." By now, the pain had numbed the whole of his right leg, his head was feeling dizzy, and a cold sweat was beginning to break out. Even his heart had started beating faster.

"Looks like I'm going to die here," he said to himself. His eyes were drooping and the pain in his leg had all but stopped, soon he'd be unconscious. Not that he was afraid of dying; he knew it was coming someday anyway. Just before he lost consciousness, his last words to the cicadas around him were, "Maybe I'll find happiness like this."

"Nii-chan! Hurry up!"

"Come quick!"

My younger siblings were calling, causing a stir in the village. They were playing happily, while I was sitting in the sun, tired. The village was not a very big or beautiful village. It was just a farming village where running to the neighbors left you out of breath. There wasn't anything special about the food there either. It was just a poor sleepy little village. But it certainly was fun. We had passed our days laughing.

On the day that the leaves on the trees began to turn red, on the day that the wind first brought the chill of winter, I was running and playing with my younger brother and sister until I was too tired to play. I ran back into the house, as if fleeing from them.

Before me, lying on the ground, I saw both my parents, lying on the floor of the house. Without taking my shoes off, I ran over to them; and when I held them, I saw their painful expressions. They were sweating profusely, and sometimes let out a cry of pain as I moved them to the bed. It only took a glance to see that they had contracted something horrible.

My blood ran cold. Plague. I ran outside at full speed.

"Nii-chan!" my sister called out.

"What are you doing? Come and play!" called my youngest brother.

On hearing the voices of my playing siblings, I stopped.

Between gasps for air, I told them seriously. "Listen to your brother carefully." They came to me, looking confused.

"Until I come back, neither of you must step inside the house. You hear me? You absolutely can't go inside," I told them.

"Uuun," they replied with very confused eyes, not understanding but agreeing.

With that, I patted the elder sister on the head and ran. The sky was darkening with rain clouds, and they only increased my worry. I just ran to the house of someone I knew, if only I managed to get to his house, I could do something. I ran as hard as I could. Even as the sky threatened to storm, I ran on.

The house I was running to stood outside the village, a lone mansion, a huge house owned by the richer class. It was also the family house of my best and most trusted

friend. I ran to the back of the house, and once I saw my friend, shouted to him, and then told him. "My family has a disease. It seems that the symptoms are still minor, please, give me medicine."

My friend listened and turned pale, his eyes turned very serious. He moved us to a quiet part of the building, so no one could hear. There, I told him the symptoms in detail. He also promised that he'd never tell anyone else. He was never the type to break promises; we had many secrets between us. He promised to bring many herbs, and that he'd send them, so I should go back to care for the sick. His eyes were very serious, and because of that, I felt a little at ease. I ran back home, and thought that I wasn't too late. As I ran back, my breath began to make white clouds in the air, and the sky that was threatening to rain opened up. Snow, carried on by the cold winter wind, fell.

Those herbs never did come. Those following days, I never saw my friend, even once. On the floor in a corner, my brother and sister were crying. The sound of their crying unsettled me. Every day I wanted to go to that mansion, to try to find my friend, but every day, my parents suffered more from their disease and made it impossible to leave. The house had been slowly decaying since no one could repair things, and snow could be seen through various holes in the roof and mud walls.

Suddenly, a voice could be heard shouting outside the house. "Plague!" the voice screamed, and my blood froze. Peeking outside a crack at the wood door, my face paled. A number of adults were heading straight for the house, and surrounded by those adults, I saw him hiding his face from the snow, the only other one who knew this secret. He had talked, he had told those adults everything. Despite saying he'd not to tell anyone. Despite promising...

The man slowly returned to consciousness, opening his eyes to the cool night air. Questions ran through his mind, where was he, what happened? His body felt heavy, his throat dry, and his head was in pain. Slowly he began to sit up, and was met by the little girl who upon hearing him move had turned toward him. It was an empty little glance, but one that he knew. He knew those sad eyes.

"You?" he asked. Was all that just a dream?

As always, all the girl did was sit there, unmoving, watching him, always watching him with those deep eyes.

"What do you want?" he asked her, "what are you looking at?"

Silence.

"Didn't I tell you to leave?" he said.

Still, silence.

"Why are you here!" he cried without thinking, unable to stand that quiet stare. "Say something!"

"...Antidote herbs," she said quietly after a long pause.

"Wha?" he blurted, unable to understand her short answer.

"You told me to bring them to you," she said.

He vaguely remembered that he did tell her that. Looking at his leg, he noticed that his wound had been dressed with a large mass of herbs. It certainly couldn't have

been easy to gather so many. And somehow, she had managed to use the herbs with a small degree of skill.

“You did this?” he asked her.

Again, she closed her eyes in silence.

“You did some unnecessary things didn’t you?” he told her, slowly standing up. “Even if you were betraying me just before.”

Her eyes opened, not understanding.

Silently, the man was thinking of the past, of outcasts and broken promises of secrecy.

“Don’t think I’ll thank you,” he told the girl as he stood and slowly began to limp off.

“...Un?” she said, also standing, and following along.

That night, the man continued to walk, limping and dragging his right leg along. He had nowhere to go and nothing to do. He just couldn’t stop his legs.

8 [Yakedo no koto] Burns.

The sun was bright, the air warm and humid, the cicadas screeched at a deafening pitch. The man stirred from his sleep and looked around in the hot sun, finally resting his eyes on the little girl sleeping nearby. As always, she was a sound sleeper, and he wondered why she never was bothered with sleeping in the heat and noise.

“Hey, wake up,” he told her. “It’s only going to get hotter around here.”

“Un” came her sleepy reply as she slowly woke up.

“Since it’s hot, let’s go to the stream,” he suggested.

At this, she was silent, but her expression sagged a little. Nevertheless the man got up and started walking, and the girl followed after. They made their way off the path until they came to the edge of the ravine, where they could see the stream in the distance.

“You’re thirsty too aren’t you?” he asked her.

“Un.”

“Okay then, here we go,” he said, and made ready to climb down.

She gave him a brief questioning look, and he glanced at her and her right leg. He remembered that she was unable to use her right leg to climb. He sniffed, and thought about what he could do.

“Because I owe you okay?” he said to her suddenly, startling her. She could only look at him with a mysterious expression, as he crouched down with his back facing her. Still she stood there, unmoving, looking small.

“I said, I’ll carry you,” he told her. “Now hurry up.”

Slowly, she said, “Un,” and climbed onto his back.

“Hold on tight, okay?” he told her, as he moved to the ravine, testing her weight, careful not to let her fall.

“Un.”

“You’re a light one,” he said. “I can barely feel you on my back.”

“Un.”

“Don’t let go now,” he told her as he slowly made his way down the ravine.
“Un. I understand,” she said, holding onto him tightly. He could feel her transparently white hands holding on.

“Here we are,” he said when they reached the bottom. He let her off his back, and they both moved towards the stream. The sun was shining strongly. The cicadas filled the air with their sounds, and through it all, the sound of the sparkling and cold stream called to them.

“This place feels good doesn’t it?” he said to her.

“Un. It does,” she answered.

The man dived into the water fully clothed, feeling the shock of the cold water against his heated skin. “You come in too!” he called, “The cold water feels good.”

“Un,” she finally answered, slowly making her way into the water, also fully clothed. The man saw her slowly enter the strong current of the river, and saw her enjoy the feeling of cool water.

“I told you it feels good.”

“Un.”

“Why don’t you wash your clothes and face while you’re in here?” he asked.

“Un,” she replied and began to wash.

“I’m done washing,” she said to him after awhile, and he looked at her, she had even washed her hair.

“Feeling a bit cleaner eh?” he remarked.

“Un.” She said, this time she sounded almost happy.

They set their clothes out to dry in the hot sun, and rested along the stream. Illuminated by the bright sunlight, the girl’s skin seemed even whiter now after a wash. However, the girl was busy looking at the man with a mysterious expression.

“What?” he asked.

“This,” she said, pointing at his back, where large old scars covered most of the man’s back.

“Oh this?” he asked.

“Un.”

“Is there anything special about burn scars?” he said.

“...U~un... Does it hurt?” she asked seemingly curious, gently tracing the scars.

“No not really,” he shrugged.

“Oh, so it doesn’t hurt,” she said.

“Yeah, they’re injuries from when I was a kid after all,” he told her.

With that, he looked off at the stream, lost in thought. The girl watching him also lay down to rest on the day large clouds drifted across the sky, the day that the two of them went into the stream.

“Plague!” came the cry from the men outside the little broken down home.

“If you get too close you’ll catch it!” came another shout.

Inside, we were crouched, waiting near our parents who couldn't move.

"Quickly find a place to bury them!" said the men who came into the house said to us while pointing at the parents.

So, in the freezing wind, we dug a large hole in front of our house, and dragged our parent's heavy bodies into it. We didn't know what to do; all we did was just follow the orders of the men.

"Quickly, bury them!" they shouted as we finally managed to drag our mother outside. Then we had to drag our father.

"Quickly!" the men shouted, only giving orders, leaving us children to do everything.

We dragged our unmoving father to the hole where we had placed mother's body. She lay there unmoving, as the snow slowly built upon her, covering her in white. And our father, who I thought was already dead, looked at me, his eyes clinging to me, making a weak sound in his throat. His dried lips were moving frantically, trying to tell me something. "Gisuke," my name. The sound of the wind almost drowned out his tiny voice. "...save me, Gisuke."

In the falling snow and freezing wind, the tiny murmur of those dried lips struck me. Filled with those desperate eyes that clung to me, along with uncertainty, fear, cold, pain, grief, and tears, I was unable to do anything.

"Hurry it up!" shouted the overseeing adult.

My father rolled down the hole, unmoving, unresisting.

"They'll be dead soon anyway! Hurry up and bury them" the men ordered, and so we buried the parents who were unable to move, on that day that the freezing wind blew, and the snow covered everything in white.

In the cool of evening, and the sounds of the stream, the man slowly woke up to see the last rays of the sun through the trees. He had fallen asleep sometime. The girl, as always, was watching him quietly, as if her eyes were seeing something far away. The man stood up, and once again crouched with his back towards him.

"Hurry up and get on," he told her.

"Un," She said before she climbed onto his back.

"Hold on tightly now," the man said as he began to slowly climb his way up the ravine silently, concentrating on getting up safely. On the way up, he wondered whether this girl also dreamed, and what about. He wondered about this girl on his back that was lighter than a feather.

9 [Utsuro no hi no koto] Empty days.

Once they made their way back to the top of the ravine, they could once again see the large moon from the mountain path. Tiny points of light, the tiny stars, the swarms of fireflies were all washed out by the brightness of the moon, but still struggled in their own way. In the distance, the howls of wild dogs could be heard.

“Hey,” the man said, listening in the distance at what seemed to be footsteps. “You hear that? Someone’s coming.”

“Un.”

In the distance, three travelers could be seen. The man slipped towards them, drew his sword, and appeared in the dark.

“Who are you?” shouted one traveler.

“A bandit, eh?” said another.

“You’ve got some guts,” said the third. With three to one odds, those men must have been confident.

“By the way, did you happen to see a gir-“ before the man finished his sentence, the swordsman struck. Before the others could react, he pounced upon a second man, striking at the legs, tumbling him down. He crashed downwards, crying in pain. Finally, the third traveler quaked “Y-y-you did it now!” The swordsman only slowly advanced upon him, sword held high.

“W-wait!” the man cried, “We’re only after someone!”

“Oh really? Who?”

“A g-girl that had run away, we just came to get her,” the man said, “S-so please, help!”

The swordsman was silent as he advanced upon this last man and swung. Again, blood sprayed from the wound as the sword hit bone. Again, countless fireflies danced in the air on the mountain path, as if three men had not just been killed. The man struck in the legs gave out a weak groan as he lay on the ground. At the sound, the swordsman turned to the girl that always followed him.

“Hey, do you know this guy?” he asked.

She closed her eyes in silence.

“Were they coming to catch you?” he asked.

“Probably,” she replied.

“Ah, so I see,” he said. The girl was watching the fallen man with those distant eyes, when Gisuke handed her his sword. She looked at him, unsure of what to do; she brought the blade with blood running down its length before her and stared at it oddly.

“Kill him,” he told her. “Kill him yourself.”

Still, she did nothing but stare at the blade and the man.

“If you want to live, kill,” he said those words that he had always told himself. The weak die, they can do nothing else but die; only the strong can live, and yet, why is it that this girl keeps living? So weak that she seems ready to collapse before his very eyes and yet she still lives. That is why she had to kill him. She must.

When the girl heard those words, she also fell into thought; she closed her eyes and stood there. Even as he continued to tell her to kill the man, she simply stood there in silence. Finally, seeing that she would not move no matter what he said, he snatched the sword back and finished the man off himself, the man’s final gasps breaking through the silence.

“Why didn’t you kill him?” he demanded of her. “He came to get you didn’t he?”

“Probably,” she replied quietly.

“Probably, huh?” he said, watching her stare at the fireflies with those eyes of hers. “What are you thinking?”

She only stood there with her eyes closed.

Finally, he broke the silence. "Or is it that you want to die?"

On the night the girl gazed up at the moon, the night that thousands of fireflies winked in the summer air, came her reply, the same reply as before.

"I don't know."

Swaying. Swaying. Swaying.

"Hey, the moon is beautiful tonight too." Hotaru said to me one night.

Through the lattice window, tonight, a large moon hung in the sky, and in the black night sky, the tiny points of stars, shining brightly, as if to not lose to the moon.

"I like the moon..." Hotaru said.

"Unn?"

"You see, no matter where we are, isn't the moon the same?" she said. "That's why I like the moon." Hotaru once again turned her smiling face towards me. Different from the sad face she always wore, she looked at me with such a bright smile.

"Say, what do you think?" Hotaru asked.

"Me?"

"Yes, do you like the moon?" Hotaru asked, in that dark and gloomy room.

Swaying. Swaying.

Hotaru's voice also swayed in the moonlight. She asked me, one who had always looked at the world behind closed eyes, one who had only wanted to look at the darkness, so I didn't know how to answer.

10 [Ayame wo shite ita hi no koto] Learning about Irises.

The summer continued as it always did, the sun beating down with unbearable heat, the cicadas filling the air with their calls. The swordsman and the girl were both lying near the stream, resting from the heat, not wanting to move or do anything. The girl was idly looking around when she noticed something near the edge of the water, and moved over to look closely. Seeing her get up, the man also stood to see what she was doing.

"Something wrong?" he asked when he came up, finding her crouched near a little flower growing in the bank.

"What's this?" she asked him, pointing at the flower, and the many others of the same kind growing in this area.

"This flower?" he blinked.

"Un."

"That's an Iris."

"Iris?" she asked, strangely interested.

“Yeah, not that they’re anything special,” he told her, shrugging at the small pale-purple thing quietly blooming there.

“It’s pretty isn’t it?” she asked him, staring intently at the flower.

“What, you like it?”

“Un,” she said turning her small smiling face towards him. A face so different from the expressionless pale face that she had always worn, the first truly happy smile that he ever saw on her face; the man was actually shocked. He had thought that she didn’t have the ability to smile or show happiness, so even this small smile stunned him. He felt oddly happy to have seen this smile, on the day that many light-purple flowers bloomed on the water’s edge.

Once again, the cicadas are screeching and the heat oppressive, it seemed that the summer had no intention of ending just yet. Today, in that sunlight, the swordsman once again raised his sword, while a merchant begs for his life.

“Someone help!” the merchant cried. “Please spare my life!” he begged the silent swordsman, offering all his belongings. “These are very precious things, you can have them, just please, leave me my life.”

It was all to no avail, and soon, another pool of blood built up on that road, another body soon will be thrown down the ravine. The swordsman went through the traveler’s belongings, finding little of use except for some food. The pale little girl however, had come over and picked up something from the traveler.

“What did you find?” he asked her.

She turned and in her hands was a brightly dyed red string.

“A red string?” he asked.

“I just found it now,” she replied quietly.

“You find strange things to pick up don’t you?” he asked.

“Un.” The girl began to stare intently at the red string in her hands. After a closer hook, the man felt it was less of a string, and more of a very fine thread.

“What a beautiful crimson,” he remarked to her.

“Un.”

While gazing at that shining thread, fine and delicate like hair, a thought occurred to the swordsman. Despite that cheap and dirty clothing and the unkempt hair, somehow this girl seemed very much like that thread to him.

“Hey, turn around,” he told her.

She gave him a questioning look.

“Just turn around, okay?” he said, turning her around.

“Un?”

The man gathered up the girl’s hair in one hand, and with the scarlet thread in her hands, tied her hair back. The girl only had that bright scarlet thread as a hair decoration, and only wore those shabby white clothes, and yet, the man thought that she was pretty “It suits you,” he told her.

That day among the trees, under the hot sun, and the sounds of summer in the air, the man thought he saw for the briefest of instants that the little girl with the white face had a stain of color to her cheeks, as her tiny little mouth said the words, “Thank you.”

11 [Namae no koto] Names

Nightfall. The moon was climbing up above the Otsu mountains, fireflies and stars winked in the dark. And at the bottom of the ravine, the mountain stream called to the man and the girl to rest after the heat of the day.

“Here, I’ll carry you,” the man said, crouching.

“Un,” came the reply as she climbed onto his proffered back.

“Hang on tight now,” was all he said as he began the climb down the ravine again. As he worked his way carefully down with the light little girl on his back, he quietly wondered to himself, when was it that his disgust at having this strange, thin girl around faded away?

“We’re here,” he reported, letting her slide off his back before they made their way to the water’s edge where the little lights of the fireflies and stars flowed upon the moving current of the water.

“Hey,” the man said, thinking that he had known this little girl for a number of days now, and there was one thing that he never learned about her. A small little thing that wasn’t important. Something that didn’t matter whether he knew it or not, a thing that held little meaning.

“What,” he asked, “are you called?”

At that, the girl closed her eyes in silence, the question had just occurred to him, and he only wanted to see if she would answer.

“You don’t have to say if you don’t want to,” he told her.

“No, it’s not that,” she quickly replied.

“No?” he asked, confused.

“Un.”

“What do you mean?”

“I don’t have one,” she said.

“What do you mean, ‘you don’t have one’?” he said, unbelieving.

She closed her eyes at that and stood quietly.

“Did you forget it?” he pressed.

“U-un,” she said, shaking her head a bit, and her mouth slowly said, “It’s because no one ever gave me one.”

The man stared blankly at what she just said. No one? How could that be?

“What about your parents?” he asked.

“I don’t know.” The girl replied in an indifferent murmur, almost covered by the sounds of the stream. With those simple words, the man felt that he understood the little girl just a little. She may have come from a different walk of life, but perhaps she also carried a troubled past with her.

“Say,” she said quietly.

“Mm?” he replied, looking at her.

“And your name is?” she asked him.

“My name... huh?” he said quietly, looking up at the moon.

“Un.”

“I forgot it,” he told her finally, and got a questioning look.

“Even I don’t remember what my name is,” he said softly. Yes, he had forgotten his name. No more will he be called by that name.

That night, under the large moon, and the sounds of the stream and the night, with the stars, fireflies and the bright scarlet thread in the girl’s hair swaying in the dark, the pale little girl who never was named, and the man who had forgotten his name rested.

The men who came and shouted “Plague!” now started ordering that the hole be filled. They demanded that my father who still had a bit of breath in him to be buried; the father who had called my name and with all his might, stretched his right hand forward, only to meet cold, snowy earth.

“Next, you kids go into the house,” the men continued to order us after we had finished in the freezing cold wind and snow. We went into the poor little mud house.

“Stay there,” they ordered us from outside the door. The strong winds coming from the cracks in the home only made us more worried.

“Nii-chan...” my sister asked, “What will happen to us?”

“What will happen to us? Our father’s dead. What will happen to us?” she continued to ask me in tears.

“Don’t worry,” I told her.

“Really?” she said.

“Yeah, we’ll be all right,” I told her, with no reason to say so. I just wanted to comfort them as I stared at the door. The men outside were talking amongst themselves there.

“Eh? I smell something strange” my brother said.

“Yeah, what is it, Nii-chan?” asked my sister.

I looked at the ground, saw smoke, and had a horrible premonition. Quickly, I ran to open the door, but it wouldn’t move. With all my might, I heaved on the door but it wouldn’t move.

“What’s wrong, Nii-chan?” they both asked me.

Then, from outside, someone called out. “Don’t blame us,” came the painful words. Words brought in by the freezing cold wind, on that day snow that had covered everything in white.

The door had been barred from the outside and a child like me didn’t have the power to break through.

12 [Ginshi no koto] Silver Thread.

Morning, when the heat started to build again, and the cicadas cried. As always, the man awoke first, and called to the girl sleeping on a bed of grass near him. As she slowly moved herself awake, he stood up and stretched, brushing the grass from his clothing.

“Let’s go to the stream today,” he said to her.

“Un.” Again, she climbed onto his back, and they made their way down to the stream.

As they made ready to go into the cool water again, he called her over “Wait a minute.”

“Un?”

As she looked at him questioningly, he went and unwound the thread from her hair.

“It’d get lost when you’re washing,” he told her. “I’ll tie your hair again after.”

“Un,” she agreed, going into the water.

They enjoyed washing themselves in the cool water, and then went to dry off in the sun. At that time, the girl took out her scarlet thread, and stared at it shining in the sun, in that light it shone almost as if it was made of metal.

“What a beautiful thread,” he commented, “almost like a thread of silver. Do you know of it?” he asked her, remembering the story.

She looked at him.

“The story of the silver thread.”

“U-un.” She replied. It was a sudden topic, and she once again had a mysterious expression on her face.

“Anything...” he said.

“Un?” she asked, uncomprehending.

“They said that if you had it, any wish you make could come true.”

She sat there quietly at the story.

“Isn’t it amazing?” he asked her.

“...Un... Any wish?” she asked.

“Yeah, I think so,” he replied. He wasn’t too sure himself of the details; it was only just a fairy tale he had overheard.

“It can’t be this thread?” she asked him, holding her scarlet thread.

“I don’t think so,” he told her, “it probably has to be made of silver.”

“Un,” she said, sounding slightly disappointed.

“Well, it’s only a fairy tale,” he told her, picking up the scarlet thread and once again tying her hair back.

That day, they slept there on the bank of the stream, while the cicadas filled the air with their sound, and Irises bloomed all around them.

13 [Waratta hi no koto] A day of laughter.

When night fell, and the moon once again rose over the Outsu mountains and the fireflies filled the air, the man and the girl stirred.

“You hungry?” the man asked the girl as he turned to let her climb on him.

“...Un,” she replied, holding on tightly as she always did.

Up there they found that yet another traveler had started to make their way across the mountains in the night. Quietly the man slipped into the trees and made his way towards the traveler as he always did, and suddenly jumped before the man, raising his sword high without a word.

“H-help me!” the traveler cried, “at least spare me my life.” He pulled off his belongings and set them on the ground. “Please! Just don’t kill me,” he begged.

The swordsman quietly contemplated the situation, the little things the traveler left didn’t seem satisfying, and this little man begging for his life was a scene the swordsman has seen many times. Everyone always continued to beg for their lives. But, the weak die, and the strong continue to live. Yes, dying, that is all that the weak can do.

And yet, the man continued to beg for his life.

Under the silence of the moon, the swordsman muttered a single phrase. “Get out of here.”

“Eh?”

“Hurry and get out of here” the swordsman growled.

“Y-yes!” and the traveler ran off into the night. The man’s sword still hung in the air as the traveler disappeared to some other place. The twinkling lights of the fireflies lit both the blade, and the things the traveler left behind.

“Hey,” he called to the girl that was always behind him, watching. “You want to eat nigiri?”

“Un.”

They sat down to eat their rice on top of a small little hill, covered equally with grass and moonlight.

“Today’s isn’t red,” the little girl said to him, holding a white rice ball in her hands while speaking.

“Yeah,” was all the man could say.

“Isn’t it delicious?” she asked him.

“Yeah it is.”

That night, with a bright little smile on her face, the little girl with the scarlet hair decoration looked at him under the moon, and said. “The ones that aren’t red, taste better, don’t they?”

14 [Hana ga yurareta hi no koto] The day the flowers swayed.

“You hungry?” the man asked the girl.

“Un.” The girl said quietly, all while still watching the flower by the water’s edge intently.

“You want to eat nigiri?” he asked again, for no reason.

“Un.”

“Yeah, I do too,” he said looking off in silence.

There hadn’t been any travelers in the Outsu Pass. As a result, the both of them went hungry today. Perhaps it was the man he had let go that night. Usually someone should have come through by now. Maybe he had told the village, and now no one will come through this path again.

“Isn’t it pretty?” the little girl said, still staring intently at the iris.

“You really like that flower don’t you?” he asked her.

“Un.”

Once again, as the man watched the girl, the wind touched the scarlet thread that bound her hair, and in the bright sunlight, the thread seemed to give off a metallic shine.

“If that wasn’t red but silver...” The man mused, thinking about the silver thread that could grant any wish. If only such a fairy tale were real.

“Un?” came her questioning look.

“If...” he started to ask her, “if that were true, what would you wish for?”

She looked at him.

”How about it? It could grant any wish.”

At that, she quietly closed her eyes in thought. They were living on the edge of life and death, never knowing what the next day will bring. That was why he asked. The sad, closed eyes of girl seemed to be looking far, far away.

“Well?” he pressed.

Her eyes opened once more, but still didn’t reply.

“You don’t know do you?” he said with a sigh.

“Un.”

That day, while the wind shook the irises on the water’s edge, while the wind shook also the thread in the girl’s hair, the man sat there, looking at her, wondering if only that scarlet thread was silver, what he would wish for. And if the thread could truly grant any wish, what this girl would wish for.

Swaying. Swaying. Swaying.

I was staring at the world of darkness, gazing at a single point of black. If I open my eyes, a terrible world lies before me. That is why I am fine here.

But, I loved to look at the moon. Whenever I look at the large moon, it seemed that I liked it even more than my world of darkness. The sun was too bright and strong, but the moon, I had thought it shined for me. Even for someone like me it shined. I thought it shined for me in the same way that it shined on everyone else.

15 [Aki no hi no koto] Autumn days

There were no more cicadas around to fill the night with their calls, and the leaves have turned the bright colors of autumn now. Resting near the road, the man and the girl watched as the day slowly go by.

“I’m hungry,” the man said to the girl.

“Un.”

With the coming of winter, the beautiful irises that the girl loved so much were nowhere to be found. Even that bright mountain stream was starting to cold and desolate. Above all, they had not eaten in three days.

“Say,” he continued, “why don’t we go someplace else? No one is coming through here anymore.”

Listening to his words, the girl just sat there quietly with a gloomy look. She gave her leg, the leg with the cut tendon, a brief glance and said nothing.

“Don’t worry about it,” he told her.

She quietly looked at him.

“I’ll carry you,” he told her.

“Un.”

The man looked up to the top of the mountain. On foot, crossing the mountain would take quite a bit of time, and if he kept near the path, he might be able to pass some people. Quietly offering her his back, he prepared to climb.

“Hold on tightly,” he told her as he always did.

“Un.”

As he started to walk, he felt the tiny weight of the girl on his back. He couldn’t help but think that this weight was the whole of her existence, something barely heavier than a feather, was all.

“You tired?” the man asked the girl occasionally, who had been quietly riding his back.

“...Un.” She replied after a while.

Still, he kept walking up the mountain as the sun slowly began to set; its red-gold light setting the autumn leaves ablaze with color. The cicadas were no more, but were replaced by the sounds of autumn insects; once in awhile, a chilly evening breeze blew, rustling the bright leaves.

“I like irises better.” The girl said softly to herself in the silence.

“What was that?” the man asked.

“I like irises better.” She repeated, still watching the bright red leaves on the trees.

“You don’t like the red leaves?” he asked.

“Un.”

It was a silly little conversation, but the man was happy anyway. The girl expressed her emotions very rarely. So she likes the little iris at the stream where no one knew it bloomed, to these bright autumn leaves. He felt that was just the kind of thing she’d like. That night, they finally reached the top of the mountain without meeting a single soul. They both rested on the grass as the moon, larger than usual, welcomed them from the sky.

“Wake up!” the man shook the girl with a hiss. “Quickly!”

The girl slowly woke up, turning towards him.

Under the bright moonlight, the man could see a number of people nearing them.

“Someone’s coming,” he told her.

Her eyes popped fully open in a look of surprise.

“You go hide.” He told her.

“Un.” She said quietly, moving to hide among some rocks.

The man quietly moved, drawing his weapon. The people were still a ways off yet, but they didn’t seem to be normal travelers. They had long swords at their hip, and weren’t carrying much with them. Maybe they were men from the brothel out to find the girl, or men out to look for the bandit who killed so many around here. Either way, it was too dangerous to let them just go by, so the man was prepared to kill. He held his breath

among the rocks waiting until the men were close to him, and suddenly he sprung before them.

Even as the first shout of surprise rang out, the swordsman leapt forward and struck down the man in front. The group of men dissolved into confusion as blood flew into the night air.

“Who are you!?” one of the men shouted, shakily holding his sword in the darkness, slowly backing away, in another leap forward the tall one also fell, staining the ground with his blood. That left only one more, and when he felt something move behind him, he spun. There he was met with a pale expressionless face with a long knife held to her throat.

“D-Don’t come any closer, or I’ll kill this girl,” the man threatened.

The swordsman stood there for but a moment with his sword raised, and the girl looked at him, as she always did, with those deep quiet eyes. Then he continued to advance on the attacker. There was no way he could let that man live.

Seeing his advance, the attacker shakily threatened, “I’ll really kill her.”

“Silence.”

“T-throw down your weapon!” the man shouted.

“Whatever you do, you’re going to die.” The swordsman told him, still advancing grimly.

The attacker made a panicked noise as the swordsman drew even closer, and just as the attacker began to move to kill the girl, the arm holding that threatening blade flew into the air. Soon after, its owner, too, fell.

“Making me do such unnecessary things.” The swordsman spat, surveying the scene around him. His eyes rested upon the girl, who was thrown aside in the commotion.

“You alright?” he called to her.

She didn’t answer, nor stand up from where she had fallen. All she did was huddle in the spot she fell, quivering.

“What’s wrong?” he said, moving towards her. As he neared, he saw that the back of the girl’s dirty clothes was soaked in blood, and the girl was shaking as if she were in pain.

“When did they?” he asked her, he looked around, and saw the arm of the man he had last killed. Even though it was severed, it had held firmly to the blade and had managed to injure her. The man angrily kicked the limb aside before going to examine the girl’s back.

“It’s bleeding, but it’s not too bad a wound.” He told her, examining the long cut that went diagonally across her back.

“Un,” she replied in a tiny, pained voice.

“Does it hurt?” he asked.

“A little.”

As the man ripped some of his clothing to bind the wound, he looked around at their surroundings, there’s nothing to provide cover. “At any rate, it’s too dangerous to stay here.” he told her. “Can you move?”

“...Un.” the girl replied, as if holding back tears, but as she got up, she grimaced at the pain.

“There’s no helping it,” he said to her touching her shoulder before picking her up. “Just bear it for a bit,” he told her.

That autumn night, while the moon shined upon the two of them, that autumn night, where their shadows stretched far, far into the night, the man held onto the pale little girl tightly as he left the top of the path in search of a safe place for the girl to recover from her wounds.

16 [Shiroi ni someta hi no koto] The day that was dyed white.

“We must protect the village from plague,” the men outside said.

“My eyes hurt,” my sister said behind me. The smoke was definitely getting stronger. Here and there, flames could be seen, and soon the smoke began to turn black.

“Why?” I asked myself. Why seal us inside and set our home on fire? But I knew the answer. The homes of plague victims were burned. If they weren’t, the disease would run through the village, so the house, and all its members, must be burned.

The smoke was rapidly filling up the room now, so much that you can barely open your eyes. As the flames began to envelop the run down little house, I could hear the voices of the men outside the barred door. The heat was becoming unbearable.

“Nii-chan!” my brother cried, coughing in the smoke.

“My eyes hurt,” cried my sister holding on to my brother, their suffering voices coming to me through the black smoke.

“Are you okay?” I called to them as I ran through the cramped little house, unable to open my eyes in the smoke. “Come here!” I shouted. I had run to a section of the floor where the wood had been weakening, and began smashing at the boards.

“Where are you?” my sister shouted back.

“My eyes hurt,” my brother cried.

“Hurry! Over here!” I called to them, striking at the wood.

“Nii-chan!” they cried to me as they neared. “It’s hot!”

“It’s okay. It’s okay. I’ll definitely save them.” I told myself as I worked. I just kept telling myself those empty words, “It’s okay” as if to convince myself. Once I broke through the boards, I quickly pushed them into the hole, and then I placed myself on top of them, doing my best to cover them.

“It’s okay. It’ll be all right. It’s okay.” I just kept repeating as the heat and smoke intensified.

As I lay there, losing consciousness, I could hear the shouting voices of my siblings, “Nii-chan! Gisuke!”

On that day of freezing winter day where the wind and snow turned everything white, the day I received the burn on my back, my siblings called my name, it was the last time I ever heard their voices; the last time anyone ever called my name.

“How are you feeling?” The man asked the girl.

He had taken her to a small cave, hardly more than a hole in the mountain. It was a cave only lit with firelight, but there wasn’t any other place for an injured person who

couldn't move to rest. Thankfully, the bleeding from the cut down her back has slowed to a stop, but a sword injury isn't going to be easy to heal with little amounts of fish and wild plants that he can gather in the mountains. Healing will require a lot of strength, and it was clear that this is going to be a strain on her body.

"I'll make something for you to eat," he told her, "so just stay still."

The two of them were worn out. At this rate they'll both die, but it's not like they can easily get rice. They had no other way of obtaining it except from stealing. Stealing from anyone would do. If he struck at the village, he'd be able to get rice.

"I'll be back soon," he told the girl, standing up.

"Un." The girl said quietly.

As the man left the girl alone in the cave, he could think of nothing else but making this weak little girl well again, even if he had to attack someone else. And so, he left, hoping to run into anyone.

17 [Mura no koto] Town.

The man made his way down the mountain with its red-stained trees hoping to run into someone. From morning until twilight, not a single person had come from along. No one is using the path anymore. The man gave up and began to head towards the village, accepting the dangers involved in doing so.

As he finally left the mountains, the sight of the peaceful village greeted him. With its few trees, leafless in the winter, the town felt almost lonely. There were only a few people out doing farm work with winter soon coming. The man made his way into that lonely village, searching for a building used for storing rice. As he searched, he came to the back of a rich-looking house. There ought to be plenty of food in a place like this, they wouldn't notice if I took a bit of it. With that thought, he went towards the storehouse.

It was a large storehouse with a small window near the roof. If he climbed through there, it'd be hard to notice him. Upon quietly sneaking into the dark storehouse, the man noticed all sorts of large bottles and strange things he didn't understand were stored in this place, but most importantly, he found the rice that he needed, and there was no reason to stay any longer than absolutely necessary. Quietly, he cut a large sack of rice, and filled a bag with it. Even though the bag was tiny compared to the huge sacks, it was certainly heavy enough, and would probably be enough that they wouldn't have to worry about food for a while. Tying the bag up, the man quietly began to leave the storehouse.

"Who's there?" came a voice.

The man spun around, drawing his sword, to find a girl, about the same age as the pale little girl he was here for.

"S-somebody help," she the girl squeaked, so terrified at the sword suddenly drawn before her that she fell on her behind, her mouth working soundlessly. Upon seeing this girl, the man's thoughts immediately jumped back to the girl in the cave.

"Quiet," he told her, "If you shout, I'll kill you."

At that the blood drained from the girl's face and tears formed in her eyes.

“You’re from this house?” he asked the girl.

“...Y-yes,” she said.

“I’ll be taking some food,” he told her.

“...Y-yes.” She squeaked.

“Remember, if you make trouble, I’ll kill you,” he told her quietly.

“Y-y-y-yes”

Without further words, the man left the storehouse. While listening to the sound of the rice in the bag he carried on the way back up the mountain, he wondered to himself. Why didn’t he kill that girl back there? If she shouted there would’ve been a lot of trouble. He was supposed to have killed that girl. It was supposed to be that simple, he thought. With a shake of his head, he quickly made his way back up the mountain, back to the girl that was waiting.

“Hey, I brought rice,” he said as he got back into the cave. Upon hearing his voice, the girl slowly opened her eyes. After dropping the rough bag, he helped the girl sit up.

“With this much, we probably don’t have to worry about food,” he told her.

She closed her eyes again, not saying anything.

“If you eat, your wound will heal,” he said.

“Un,” the girl said, touching the scarlet thread in her hair. Perhaps it was a trick of the dim light in the cave, but the thread seemed almost to shine.

18 [Giniro no koto] Silver.

The leaves that were once green, then bright red, were all falling from the trees. Outside, a cold wind was sweeping the remaining leaves off. Very soon, winter will seize the land. And in that little cave, the girl was lying down, raising her small white face to the light of a tiny fire.

“How are you feeling?” the man asked her. “You okay?”

“...Un,” she answered.

Despite her reply, he himself didn’t feel as if it was an “okay” situation. The wound that was supposed to be healing now seemed worse to him. He worried that if she didn’t receive medical help there might be trouble, but it was too dangerous to just take her into the village.

“Don’t push yourself,” he told her.

“...Un,” she answered, once again fingering that thread in her hair, that bright shining thread among her dirty clothes.

“If only that was silver,” the man said, thinking again about the magical wish-granting thread from that little fairy tale that he had heard, a thing that could not possibly exist.

“Why?” she asked him.

“Why? Well...”

“Do you have something that you wish for?”

“Ah, of course I do.”

“What is it?” she asked in surprise, looking him with that mysterious expression of hers like she always did.

“Well, lots of things,” he explained. “It could grant any wish, after all.”

“Un,” she said, again closing her eyes.

“Say,” he asked her.

“Un?”

“If it was you, what would you wish for?” he had asked her this question once before.

Again, she looked at him in silence.

“Well?” he pressed.

Nothing.

“Of course, you want to get better right?” he said.

Her eyes widened, but she her head hung, her eyes looking far away.

The small fire in the cave flickered and crackled; casting shadows on the wall, making them sway back and forth. The man thought about what would having a wish granted do for this girl, or for that matter, what wish did he want to have granted.

“Well?” he asked again after awhile.

Still the girl said nothing.

“So,” he said to her, “you still don’t know, do you?”

She opened her eyes again, and with a little nod, quietly replied, “Un.” Once more, she began to finger the thread in her hair, swaying it, like the shadows cast upon the walls.

On that day, the relentless winter arrived, and outside, a fierce, cold wind began to howl. On that day, tiny flecks of white began to dance in the air.

Swaying. Swaying. Swaying.

A low ceiling, a tiny bit of light coming through the lattice.

In that dark and gloomy room, I could hear Hotaru crying.

“I can’t anymore,” she sobbed. “I can’t stay here any longer. There’s nothing we can do is there?” Hotaru dragged her leg as she cried, that leg unable to run from the cut. The same wound that I carry.

“Say,” Hotaru said quietly as she slowly wrapped a twisted blanket around a ceiling beam. “I’m sorry,” she said in a very sad and tired voice, “but it looks like I can’t go any further.”

“...Un?” was all I could say as I watched her. The large moon shined through the lattice behind her in that dark room, that moon which shined on us from the dark blue night sky.

“We can’t help but live.” Hotaru said sadly.

I continued to watch her in silence.

“Say, ” she said softly, “do you want to die together?”

I closed my eyes at the question. Die? Me? Together with her?

Then, up until now, while staring at that dark world behind my closed eyes, living in that pitch-black world where no one can bother me, gazing at that world that I always longed for... I was alive?

“I’m sorry,” Hotaru laughed softly, “for asking you something strange.”

I opened my eyes once more, and saw Hotaru standing there, with her face framed by the cloth hanging from the ceiling, the moon shining behind her through the lattice window, her smiling face, gently shining upon me. The Hotaru that had said she loved to watch the moon was smiling.

“Bye,” she simply said, with a sad little smile.

That beautiful unchanging moon hanging in the world where two watched through the latticework, once again, became only watched by one.

19 [Naita hi no koto] The day of tears

It was a freezing night, so cold that it seemed like your breath would freeze in midair. Even with a fire, the cold could be felt in that little cave. There, the man was cooking as the girl continued to lie down.

“It’s finished” the man said, offering the girl some food. “It’s still warm.”

The girl didn’t say anything.

“Come now, doesn’t it look good?” he insisted.

“...Un,” the girl said as she took the offered food but didn’t begin eating.

“You wont get better if you don’t eat.”

“... Un.”

“Come on, I’ll even give you my share, just eat,” he told her.

She just looked at him quietly before turning her eyes away. Nothing had changed since the day they first met; those vacant eyes seemed to look someplace far away. He wondered if she was looking at something very sad, or whether there was something locked away in her heart.

“You don’t want it?” he asked her.

She didn’t answer him.

“If you keep this up, you’re going to die.” he told her.

She only looked at him with a mysterious expression.

“Or is it,” he asked, “that you want to die?” He had asked that painful question once before, and had never heard the answer.

“Well?” he asked.

She continued to lie there, seemingly lost in thought.

“So, you still don’t know?” he half shouted, his voice becoming angry before he caught himself and hung his head. Those eyes that were just as mysterious now as they were when they met, how he wondered what was playing before them. Outside, only the cold winter wind broke the silence.

“I want to see the moon,” the girl said suddenly, turning to face the mouth of the cave.

“The moon?” he asked, puzzled. “You want to see the moon?”

“Un,” said the girl who had been lying down for so long, her eyes staring at the mouth of the cave.

“Okay, gotcha,” the man said, carefully picking her tiny body up and slowly walking out of the cave, and into the night air.

The sky was lightly filled with tiny falling snowflakes, and the large moon hung overhead shining through the clouds. The tiny flecks of snow melted as soon as they touched the ground, but somehow for that very brief transient moment, they seemed almost sad.

“It’s beautiful isn’t it?” the girl said into the man’s chest as she looked up.

“I always thought the moon shined for me,” the girl said softly, surprising the man. This was the first time she had spoken like this.

“Because the sunlight is too strong, but the light of the moon was gentle,” she continued. “Even for someone like me, you see? That’s why I had thought that the moon shined for me. In the same way that it shined for everyone else.” Her voice began to fill with emotion. “I thought that it shined for me...”

“Hey...” the man said to her.

“I...” she continued breathlessly, “like this world.”

“What are you...?”

“That gloomy dark world...” she continued, seemingly unable to stop, “even though I don’t want to go back there any more...” her voice finally broke into sobs.

For the first time, the man saw this little girl cry. One by one, tiny little sobs escaped her. Hugging her to him tightly, he felt the girl tremble as she cried. Felt her many tears soak his chest. Though the two of them were on the edge of survival, this girl must have been enduring something for a very long time. The tears that were pressed between her cheeks and his chest, standing here in the middle of the winter wind, they were the only things that were warm on the day where lightly scattered snow blew in the cold north wind, the day of watching the large moon in the sky. The day the girl first cried.

20 [Chigau keshiki ga mieta hi no koto] The day a different scene was seen.

“Hey, hang in there!” the man shouted to the girl. He had woken up to find her breathing hard next to him. It was clear that she was suffering.

“You okay?” he asked, worried.

“U-un.” she managed as he reached to touch her, finding that she had a fever.

“If only we had some medicine,” he said, watching the girl pant as beads of sweat built on her brow. He could see from her painful expression that it was becoming unbearable, but in middle of winter, with snow everywhere, there was no chance that there would be any herbs for him to find out there. The only place with medicine is the village.

“Hey, I’m going to go get medicine,” he told her.

She looked at him with wide, pained eyes, but didn't say anything.
There wasn't a moment to spare; he had to slip into that village.
"Alright?" he told her, "Just hold on until I get back."
The girl silently closed her eyes, as the man dashed off into the snow.

The path down the mountain was covered with snow, in some places as deep as the man's knees and made the descent quiet difficult despite his determination to get the medicine as quick as possible. The cold of the winter and snow numbed his hands, the wind, cold as ice, mercilessly sapped the strength from his body. He made his way through the drifts, his body almost totally covered in white, and eventually made it into the village. Without a pause, he headed straight back towards the large house he had visited before.

As before, the inside of the storehouse was dark as he slipped inside. He quickly started searching in places that looked like they stored medicine. This time, he had to make sure he wasn't found, if something happened, there would be no way to recover from it. He opened many containers, finally finding one that contained a large amount of dried herbs. With these, he should be able to do what he needed. He happily tucked some behind his belt, and made haste to get out of there. Just as he was making his way out, someone made a squeaking noise behind him, and he whirled around drawing his sword saying, "Don't make a fuss." It was the same girl that he had seen last time.

"Okay?" he told her, "If you don't want to die, don't make a fuss."

"Y-yes," she quavered. "I-I promise."

The man blinked at those words. Promise. "A promise, eh?" he said to her.

"Y-yes, I promise, I won't say anything," the girl stammered.

"... You're going to keep that promise?" he asked her suspiciously.

"Y-yes, I won't lie." she said desperately.

"Alright," he said, "It's a promise."

"Y-yes"

With that, the man put his sword away and quickly left the storehouse. Cutting through the fields, the man ran as fast as he could through the snow, and over a few causeways, while behind him in the village, a big ruckus was being raised. It must have been that kid. "Promises" he spat. Why didn't he kill the girl when he had the chance even though he knew this would happen? After turning many corners, he ran into a group of men, but since he didn't have the time to deal with them, he turned and ran instead.

As he ran from them, he felt them getting closer. It was only a matter of time before they caught up. "We won't let you get away!" shouted the one man right behind him. Even though he tried to draw his sword, it was too late and was struck. Pain bloomed in his left leg and he fell into the snow, his red blood staining the white landscape. That townsman came near, with his sword raised high. The scene that was so familiar to him, one he had participated in so many times, was suddenly different.

Swaying. Swaying.
Swaying. Swaying.

I was gazing at the world of darkness. The world of nothing but black, the world where no one could bother me, a world of only loneliness, fragility, sadness, transience, vagueness, and nothingness. Soon I'll be able to go to that place I had waited to go to for so long, but why is it that I'm so sad?

As the swordsman turned in the snow and looked at the townsman advancing upon him with the sword, he suddenly threw snow at the attacker, and in that moment of confusion, started running again. His left leg pained him with each step, and the snow made it difficult to run, but nevertheless, he continued to run with all he had, even as he stopped feeling the coldness of the snow, even as his leg stained the snow with blood, he fervently ran on.

“I not allowed,” he told himself, “to die here.”

21 [Hotaru no koto] Fireflies.

The fire had burned out.

As I return to the darkness, no one is there.

That man that was always by my side, the man that for some reason was kind to me...

He had said he was going to get medicine for me.

But what I really wanted was for him to be here.

It seems that it's time to say farewell to this world.

Have I been living up until now?

Summer, the fireflies that we saw by the stream were beautiful.

They shined with all their might.

“They can't shine if they're dead,” that man said.

Oh really?

“Of course!” he said.

Un. If they're dead, they don't shine anymore do they?

That's why they shined in the night, isn't it?

To prove to the night that they were alive.

“It suits you” that man once said as he tied the thread. He had tied my hair back with that thread.

“If that was silver,” he had said then.

Un. Yes, if only it was.

“What would you wish for?” he asked.

U~un...*

“It could grant any wish you know,” he had told me.

U~un...U~un...

“So you don't know?” he said.

* A thinking noise, like 'ummm'.

Un.

That story that he told me one day, that strange story about the Silver Thread.

He had spoken with such a sad face.

He had tied my hair back with such a lonely face.

I softly touched my hair, touched the scarlet thread that that man tied there for me, taking it down.

“What would you wish for?” he had asked once more.

I looked at the thread lying in my hand, shining faintly in the dim light, bathed in dim moonlight, the thread seemed to glow softly.

“A red one won’t work probably,” he had said to me before.

Dead fireflies don’t shine.

And yet, they live with all their might, shining as weakly as they do.

Even in such a horrible world, they shine with all they have.

“It can grant any wish,” he had said of that silver thread.

Did I shine?

“If that was silver that is...”

Did I live? I asked myself while holding the thread. In the soft moonlight that shone through the entrance, it seemed almost like silver to me.

“What would you wish for?”

I...

Tears and memories welled up before my eyes, blurring my sight, the thread seemed to glow powerfully.

“What do you wish?”

I... I...

“If I could have anything...”

“What is your wish?”

I want proof that I lived.

It’s okay if no one notices...

Even if only faintly, I had shined...

Even someone like me...

Without question, I had definitely lived...

22 [Yuki ga Futta hi no koto] The day snow fell

With medicine in hand, the man his leg was black with blood, finally made his way back to the cave. “Hey, I brought the medicine!” he called as he limped in. The little fire that had burned when he left had burned out, and in the shadows laid the form of the girl.

“With this you’ll be better soon,” he told her. “I’ll have it ready soon so just wait.”

“Hey,” he said to her, but there was no reply, her eyes stayed closed, she stayed unmoving.

“Hey, wake up,” he told her, shaking her slightly.

But those eyes stayed closed. Even by shaking harder, calling near her ear, lightly slapping her white cheek, those eyes never opened. The man stared at the girl. “Why?” he muttered... just as he managed to get medicine. He had even told her to hold on until he came back. It seemed like all the strength had left his body, he didn’t have the strength to even stand as he looked at that pale face, white as snow.

He touched that tiny hand, colder than ice. Bitterly, he laughed, isn’t this like it always was? The weak die, just like it always happened. Those words that he had told himself all these years. Certainly, she was not strong, in fact, so weak as if she would collapse at any moment. Wasn’t he prepared for this someplace deep within his heart? He knew that one day, it would end like this. Yes, this was bound to happen, he told himself. The man pulled her cold unmoving body close, as tears began to roll down his face and land on her. “The weak die,” he said softly “but then, why am I so sad?”

That day, the Outsu Mountains were covered in snow; a very sad, very cold winter snow blanketed that everything.

-- [Sonna hi no koto] Those days.

“Hold on tightly” the man spoke as he once again set the girl on his back.

He wondered why was it that he couldn’t feel her weight on him, why he couldn’t feel the least bit of warmth from her. He wondered those things as he moved through the winter with her on his back, slowly dragging his injured left leg. He turned towards the ravine that they had spent so much of their time at during the summer. The place that was full of the sound of cicadas that enveloped the mountain, the bright sun that burned the skin, the place where the moonlight cut through and shined upon everything, where the weak little fireflies filled the night air, where the sky was filled with twinkling stars, the place that she had loved. Everything was at that stream.

All the snow and ice made the trip difficult. But even in the cold and snow, that stream was unchanging, the water still running by. “Here we are,” he said like he always did, knowing full well that there would be no answer, but he still spoke. “Things haven’t changed much here,” he said looking around. Most probably, they were the last people to have been in this place.

Gently, he placed the girl’s body upon the snow, and began digging a hole in the riverbank. “I’ll bury you here,” he told her as he was digging a hole to bury this tiny, snow-like girl. His hands ignoring the cold of the snow, he continued to dig a tiny hole, continued digging with all his heart, even as he lost all feeling in his fingers.

“Hey,” he suddenly paused remembering something with tears in his eyes, “What should I do?” he asked as he went back to her body, holding her, as tears overcame him again, tears he thought he had run out of. “Even if I make a grave for you,” he sobbed unable to stop those painful tears, “You don’t even have a name.” The wind and snow

picked up, blowing strongly, enveloping the two of them, as if eagerly trying to erase the two of them, as if they had never existed.

In the strong wind, the man noticed something strange nearby. “An iris” he said to the girl, “Hey look, even in this winter it’s blooming.” The man stared at this one singular blooming flower before him, a single flower, standing up against the cold of winter. All around the snow had blanketed everything in the purest white, everything but this one beautiful flower of pale purple.

“Isn’t it wonderful?” he asked, “to be able to see it again.”

That tiny weak little flower was just like the two of them, brightly blooming, while all around the wide uncaring world was bound in white snow. So small that no one would notice it, a tiny bit of color where everything else was white. And yet, it eagerly, brightly, continued to shine. Nevertheless, it proudly continued to live.

The man remembered that one summer day, seemingly so long ago, when he and the girl rested along the riverbank here, speaking of names. In his mind, as the cold sank deep into him, the man could hear the girl’s voice.

“Say,” he said to her.

“Un?”

“From now on...”

“Un?”

“You can call me ‘Gisuke.’”

“Un. Alright.”

“And for you...”

That day, when cold winter slow fell on the Outsus Pass...

That day, when the cold wind seemed to freeze the very air...

“How does ‘Ayame’ sound?”

Those summer days when the light purple flowers swayed...

Those days when the strong sun beat upon the earth...

The days that we certainly, definitely, shined...

The days that we eagerly, nevertheless eagerly tried to live...

Those dazzling days...

Those summer days...

[Chapter 1, Outsus no Tawa... End]