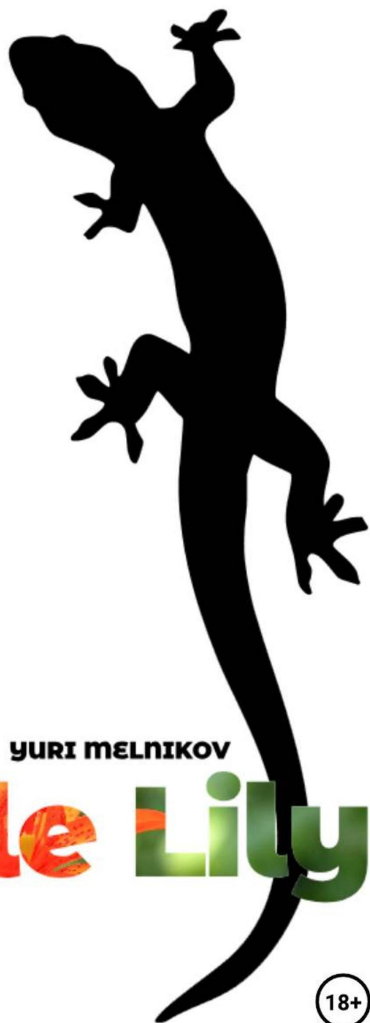


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Little Lily

18+

Юрий Мельников

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Аннотация

In modern literature about World War II, there would seem to be no blind spots left. We have witnessed the tragedy of Europe, read the chronicles of the Holocaust, and know the story of Hiroshima second by second. But the Okinawan catastrophe of 1945 — Operation Steel Typhoon (code name: Operation Iceberg), which ground up a third of the civilian population of the flourishing Ryukyu archipelago — long remained on the periphery of the Western and Russian book markets, locked within the confines of local Japanese memory

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Юрий Мельников

Little Lily

Little Lily

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

Prologue

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

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

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

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

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

The girl did not move. She knew – not from anyone else,

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

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

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

leave. To flash and vanish.

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

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

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

The stones around her began to hum with a dull, terrifying rumble. The earth sent a dry, fine vibration into her tailbone, her thighs, the very base of her skull – not loud, but so deep that the sound was perceived not by the eardrums, but by the spine

itself. Somewhere – close, behind her or deep within the cliff – a massive stratum shifted, tore loose, and crumbled into dust, and from this invisible destruction, the air was instantly filled with stone powder. It had no taste, but it possessed a heavy density: it settled on her dry lips, on her eyelashes, on her open, frozen palms.

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

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

The lizard vanished. No, it wasn't a disappearance. An unforgotten, immutable law triggered in its primal brain: to stay alive, you must be able to sever a part of yourself. You must

leave the world the very thing it is trying to use to hold you. There was a barely audible, wet, brief snap – the sound of living fibers tearing. An emerald-bronze lightning bolt darted into a dark, saving crevice between the stones. But the tail remained on the boulder.

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

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

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

And then the smell caught up with her. It wasn't blood – lizards do not smell of iron and human slaughter. It was a different scent

– delicate, dry, like a snapped green branch, like the sap that oozes at the site of a violent rupture. The scent of parting. The scent of how the living leaves a part of itself behind to keep breathing.

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

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

The stone dust slowly settled, swirling in invisible air currents. The birds fell silent, retreating into their rocky burrows. The sun returned – exactly the same as it had been before the sound, before the terrible shadow and the birds' cry. The boulder beneath her once again swelled with golden heat, the wormwood smelled just as bitter, and on the very edge of the earth, the invisible coal smoldered just as smokelessly.

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

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

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

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

Where to? She did not yet know.

Chapter 1. Awakening

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

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

The man with the bronze face turned around. His eyes, black and dry as sun-cured olives, met her gaze, piercing right

through her, through the thickness of centuries and someone else's memory.

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

And she ran. The narrow streets, squeezed by white limestone, rushed to meet her. The air burned her throat, smelling of fermented honey and overripe figs that burst beneath her bare feet. Her feet pounded against the scorching, uneven stone; her soles burned, but stopping was impossible, because behind her – she felt it not with her ears, but with the skin between her shoulder blades – something massive, heavy was moving, making the walls of the houses terrifying tremors. She dashed forward, her shoulders knocking aside woven baskets, and dark purple fruit oozing sweet juice spilled under the wheels of unseen chariots. She ducked into a blind alley, and bright, damp, freshly dyed fabrics hung from wall to wall struck her in the face: carmine-red, rich saffron, piercingly blue cloths entangled her, stuck to her lips, blinded her, suffocated her, stripped her of her name...

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

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

Yuriko opened her eyes and inhaled convulsively, with a rasp, as if surfacing from the bottom of a deep, abandoned well. Miko's thin, icy fingers still gripped her shoulder in a deathly

hold, biting straight to the bone through the filthy fabric.

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

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

The girls – students of the First Women's School – sat huddled together in the damp darkness, clustered in heaps like freezing, terrified nestlings. Their school uniforms, once immaculately neat with sailor collars and starched blouses, were now stiff with ingrained dirt, clay, and dry, brown, alien blood. They were children – ordinary fifteen- or seventeen-year-old girls from the village of Mawashiasato, with sharp knees protruding from hunger, thin necks, and cracked lips bitten to the flesh. They were shaking – not from the cold, though a tomb-like, bone-

chilling dampness filled the cave – but because the fear inside them had outgrown the stage of tears and hardened into a dull, numb stupor.

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

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

A quiet, collective, convulsive sigh swept through the cave – like the rustle of dry leaves caught in an autumn wind. Those who had been sleeping woke up. Those who had been quietly moaning on rotting mats in the depths fell silent. Duty was over? To them, who had considered their work in the hospital as something eternal and unbreakable, this "over" sounded as if they had been told the sun simply wouldn't rise over Okinawa tomorrow.

“You know who is coming here,” the teacher continued, and

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

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

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

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

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

“And one more thing,” the teacher pulled small paper packets from his pocket, rustling in his trembling fingers. “This is cyanide. In case the grenade misfires. Over there, by the exit, in the kitchen, there are two milk cans with condensed milk left.

You can... add this in. Stir it. And drink it. It will be easier that way.”

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

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

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

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

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

“Let’s go,” the sensei ordered.

And they ran.

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

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

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

The girls scattered through the brush like pearls from a snapped thread. Yuriko saw it happen ahead, some twenty meters away: right on the path, a blindingly white, silent sphere of an

artillery shell flared up. Two fleeing figures in school skirts simply dissolved into that flash, ascending to the zenith along with a pillar of red Okinawan clay, turning into dust, into nothing, in a split-second of pure destruction of life. Yuriko didn't even have time to feel afraid. She merely registered it with her eyes and kept running, feeling the two grenades in the pockets of her hakama battering her thighs – heavy, rhythmic, like a second and third heart.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The ceramic orb hit a thick banyan root with a dull, dry thud,

rolled over the wet, slimy moss, smearing itself in the white tree sap, and came to a stop in the grass at her feet. The second grenade followed the first.

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

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

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

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

Chapter 2. The Forest

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Miko stopped behind her back, watching these movements. Yuriko was washing it meticulously, intently, with the obsession of someone trying to erase something far greater than dirt – the very memory of a touch. She rubbed the pad of her thumb against the pad of her index finger in small circular motions, bringing the skin to a glossy shine. The skin had already reddened from the friction; tiny flakes of washed-away epidermis were carried off by minuscule, silent whirlpools of water.

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

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

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

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

Miko sat down beside her on a flat, wet stone, cupped water

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

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

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

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

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

Miko said nothing. She accepted this lie as one accepts a prolonged tropical rain – as a fact, as a part of a changed world.

Yuriko needed the lie as a shield, so Miko simply set the question aside for later, until the time when the truth would come out on its own, like a splinter emerging from a healing wound.

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

“Let’s go.”

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

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

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

millstones: the blind, suicide-demanding honor of their own, and the mythical horror of the enemy.

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

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

But morning came. And now they walked on.

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

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

Yuriko stopped, gazing at the gray surface. The stone reminded her of something – no, not reminded, but imparted – some unfamiliar sensation of warmth and the smell of wormwood under a desert sun. But there was no wormwood here, only moss, grass, and drops of dew.

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

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

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

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

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

world tilted slightly, and the ground felt unstable, like thawing ice.

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

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

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

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

Yet it was not the smoke that made her stop.

The feel of the forest behind them had changed. Ever since dawn, an itchy, clammy sense of a stranger’s gaze had lingered between Yuriko’s shoulder blades, but now it became dense, almost tangible. In the motionless, humid air, something shifted.

It was not the snap of a fallen twig. It was a soft, careful, yet heavy sound – the way a creature shifts its body weight onto damp, yielding soil.

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

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

The hairs on Yuriko's arms stood on end. The thread of tension pulled to its limit. The forest no longer felt indifferent – someone was following them step for step, breathing in time with their stumbling paces, stopping whenever they stopped. Someone was hiding in that impenetrable wall of ferns, watching the two exhausted girls from behind.

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

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

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

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

Yuriko turned her head slowly, fraction of an inch by fraction of an inch, peering into the greenish gloom of the vines from

where they had just emerged. The shadows there intertwined too neatly, forming a foreign, motionless silhouette.

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

Chapter 3. The Sunflower

The shadow moved.

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

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

But the barrel did not appear. Out of the green twilight, a tiny, bare foot stepped onto the soggy soil of the path. Then a second.

A creature stepped onto the path. Without a bayonet.

Small. Outside of time.

It was so caked in filth, so implausibly dirty, as if this very ancient, rotting forest had birthed it from the dusk, the moss, and the damp vapors. In height – barely above her waist. Wearing a torn cotton shirt with three buttons that had once been white, but had now become the color of reddish ash, the color of everything this creature had crawled through over the past few days. Below the waist, he was naked. His thin legs, covered in scratches, with cracked soles, resembled the fragile stems of a stubbornly living plant.

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

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

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

this forest child would crumble into fern spores.

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

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

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

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

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

A hundred steps later, the jungle parted, exposing a scorched wound in the earth. The village was empty. Four or five peasant yards. All that remained of the houses were black, charred

skeletons of beams sticking up into the sky like the ribs of a beached fish. The ground between them was covered in gray, damp ash. The war had passed through here like a blind giant, trampling everything, but leaving behind a glassy, absolute silence.

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

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

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

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

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

Beneath the dead, burnt crust hid a blinding, moist, golden

flesh. It was so bright it seemed all the sun their island had now lost was hidden inside this root. This was not food. This was communion.

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

And the boy smiled.

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

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

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

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

"Eat, Yuriko," Miko said quietly, opening her eyes.

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

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

"I am Hinata," he said simply.

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

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

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

I looked for it, and then Mom was already gone.”

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

“And your dad?” Yuriko asked softly.

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

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

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

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

At the edge of the yard stood a half-ruined shed – a former goat pen. One of its walls had collapsed, but the sloping thatched roof was still holding. They flew under the overhang the second the downpour turned into a roaring waterfall. Inside, it smelled of musty straw, wool, and a rescuing, enveloping dryness. In the

corner lay a pile of old mats. The girls pushed them together, building a warm semblance of a nest.

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

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

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

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

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

Under the roof of the old shed, in the middle of a bleeding island, it was dark and damp. But for Yuriko, this place was now the brightest on earth. Her stomach no longer howled with

hunger, filled with the warm sweetness of the sweet potato. There were three of them. They were full. And they were alive.

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

Chapter 4. The Anatomy of Pain

The first thing she felt was a hand.

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

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

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

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

Quiet.

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

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

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

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

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

of their small shrine.

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

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

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

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

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

Familiar English phonemes broke through the veil of terror – this language had been taught in school before it was declared the

language of the enemy. “He says... you can eat. Don't be afraid,” Yuriko rasped. Her voice was dry and foreign.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Yuriko swallowed the chocolate. A lie right now would be a

house of cards. “We are... students of the First School. We were assigned to the hospital in the Ihamigama cave. As nurses. When the order came to die, we ran away. And we found the boy in the forest. He lost his mom in the shelling.”

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

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

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

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

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

The medical truck was covered with a thick green tarpaulin; light poured through the ventilation slits in uneven stripes,

resembling streams of rain. Inside smelled of iodine, carbolic acid, clotted blood, and heavy, sour human sweat.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The three of them.

Chapter 5. The String

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

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

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

Below, on a round square by a dried-up stone pool, lay the dead. There were not many of them – five or seven bodies.

Yuriko didn't know who they were. They wore strange clothes of thick leather with iron plates, and on their heads – round helmets with scarlet crests on top. They resembled the warriors from the antique, darkened pictures Yuriko had seen in school: like samurai, but different. Foreign. Their armor was crumpled, their swords broken, and blood flowed lazily across the white slabs.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Plink.

Yuriko opened her eyes.

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

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

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

Plink.

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

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

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

By evening, six sanshins had been made.

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

The children came to the sound.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Yes,” Miko answered.

“Were you nurses?”

“Yes.”

“Do you have experience dealing with children?”

They stayed silent.

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

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

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

“We will try,” Yuriko said.

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

First, they ate.

Not the camp porridge, not rice, not canned fish, but what Yuriko and Miko gathered in the evenings: roasted peanuts traded at the camp kitchen, dried bananas, pieces of sugarcane – and they handed it out to the children, and the children ate, and from the food their eyes changed: they didn't become joyful, they

didn't become happy, but they settled. They stopped jumping, darting, looking for danger. They settled and looked at what was in front of them.

Then the *kankara-sanshin*.

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

Then English.

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

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

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

“Thank you.”

“San-kyu...”

“I am hungry.”

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

And there was something absurd and terrifying in this scene. The children of Okinawa, whose homes had burned down, sat in the dust under the scorching sun and chanted in chorus, like a prayer, the phrase “I am hungry” in the language of the people who just yesterday were devils to them. But in this spell lay the

great magic of survival: a child who could say “I am hungry” to a soldier by a truck would get a cracker or a piece of chocolate. The girls were teaching them to live in a new world, where there was no longer an Emperor, but there were jeeps, canned goods, and bread.

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

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

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

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

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

Neither Yuriko nor Miko had once spoken the words “mom,”

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

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

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

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

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

“You know,” Miko said quietly, not lifting her eyes from her work. “The string on the sanshin is going to snap tomorrow. It

has frayed completely against the edge of the tin. We'll need to ask Mr. Kimura for a new wire tomorrow."

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

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

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

This was her promise of life...

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

there was more warmth than in the entire Empire.

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

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

Chapter 6. The Wall of Paper Birds

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

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

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

livestock. And at nine, school began.

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

Tap. Tap-tap. Tap.

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

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

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

For Ren, this war had long turned into a surreal immersion into the hell of an alien, fractured consciousness. He was a Nisei – a *hafu*, half-blood, from Sacramento – a man stuck in between. In America, boys had called him a “Jap,” while in the POW

camp, Japanese officers spat at his feet, viewing him as a traitor to his blood. At home, his mother always spoke a language his father was ashamed of, and prayed into her pillow. Out of this eternal loneliness, Ren had learned the main thing – to look and notice what others missed.

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

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

And Yuriko... Yuriko was different. Ren caught himself following her with his eyes as soon as the staff jeep drove into the southern sector. In Yuriko there was no such efficient armor. She moved hesitantly, nervously, as if afraid to take up space, as if constantly trying to make herself invisible, to shield some inner, ringing brittleness. Dark, tangled hair, thin wrists, a pale collarbone protruding from under a bunch of washed-out school uniform... She seemed to Ren like a glass *furin* wind chime that had miraculously survived at the epicenter of a typhoon. In her defenselessness lay the beauty of an open palm – honest, wounded, unable to hide pain – and strong. And he felt a desire – painfully, to the point of clenching his teeth – to walk up

to her. Not because she was beautiful – he had seen beautiful women in Sacramento, in San Francisco, in hospitals. And not as an employee, a junior officer of the US Army, but simply – to walk up, push back a strand of hair fallen over her face, and do something that would make her thin lips quiver into a smile.

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

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

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

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

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

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

As long as the names of her mother, her brother Soma, and her father remained unspoken, they existed in a state of tangled, blissful uncertainty. They lived in her memory whole and unharmed. Writing them on the board meant setting off the ruthless mechanism of reality. It meant admitting: they were lost, the world was destroyed, and perhaps there would be no one left to check the ashes. To write was to give the world the chance to shatter you completely.

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

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

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

They were far from the first. The white boards were already

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

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

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

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

“There is no home,” Yuriko finally wiped her cheek with the

back of her hand. “Our village, Mawashiasato... it burned down. Nothing is left.”

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

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

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

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

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

“No,” he said very quietly.

“Why, Hinata?”

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

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

Yuriko turned to call Hinata back to the mats, but her gaze

met something heavy.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Yuriko sat on the edge of the mat. Hinata was already asleep, as usual burying his nose in her *hakama* and tightly, to the point of white knuckles, clutching her index finger with his small palm. Miko sat beside her, shoulder to shoulder. In the dark, her silhouette seemed carved from ebony. As always, she was darning the torn hem of her skirt with a thread pulled from the strap of an American parachute.

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

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

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

Just for a second. And her hand stopped trembling.

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

became, for one brief moment, a little quieter.

Chapter 7. New Skin

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

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

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

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

The children shouted “Gud mornig! Ai em hangri” – no longer in a chorus, but individually, raising their hands like in an arithmetic lesson – and from this shouting, from this funny, ridiculous, childish “I am hungry” in a foreign language, the tent felt warmer. Not from the temperature. From the rhythm. From

the fact that the world had found an order, and that order was not military, not camp-like, but school-like: the bell (a stick striking the bottom of a tin can), a lesson (letters, numbers, sanshin), recess (peanuts and banana peels), another lesson.

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

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

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

A woman stepped out of the vehicle.

Yuriko recognized her immediately – it was the very same woman with the Red Cross armband who had come to them at the very beginning with cold, appraising questions. But now there was no cross on her. She was dressed in an austere, dark-blue dress of heavy cotton fabric with a high collar. There was nothing feminine about it – no darts, no folds, no ruffles; it resembled

workwear or a buttonless closed tunic, cut so as not to hinder movement. On the fabric there were no patches, no insignia, no stars. And in this absence of symbols, in this stern cleanliness of the cloth, there was more weight than in any military uniform.

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

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

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

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

“My parents are from the island. From Urasoe.”

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

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

“Can we help you with something, Mrs. Sanchez?” Miko

asked. Her voice sounded steady. Slightly steadier than it should have been.

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