



## TAKU

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1

THOUGH HER FAMILY ALWAYS CALLED her Sayako, in her head she was only Taku.

“Sayako,” they said. Mother. Father. They had names, but she couldn’t remember them. Names didn’t matter. There was only one Mother, one Father. “Come on now, love. It’s time to get in the car. We’re going to see your doctor. You remember your doctor, don’t you?”

Taku said nothing, and only watched the sky inside her head.

The sky inside her head was different from the real sky. The real sky changed. Every minute of every day, it changed. Clouds moved. Colors went from gray to pink to yellow to blue, then purple and black to blue again. Sometimes bright lights and loud noises made the clouds crash together, and water fell to the ground. She didn’t like it. She didn’t like when the sky changed. She liked when the sky stayed the same—and so in her head, the sky was always twilight blue. The thousands upon thousands of stars never moved from their fixed positions, reflecting unchanging from the glass-mirror surface of her lake.

In her mind’s eye she sat on the surface of her lake, hugging her knees to her chest. It was

like sitting on the waterbed her parents used to have, before they'd moved from Tsurugi to Tokyo to be closer to her special clinic. There was no space in their tiny Tokyo apartment for waterbeds. But the space in her mind went on forever, and in her mind when she wiggled her toes, the surface of the lake rippled in concentric circles. She wiggled them once, twice, then three times, left then right then left again, and when she did it right she heard a distant chime like the sound of little temple bells. That was the pattern. That was the way things were, so that the rings overlapped just right and she could look down through the water at the creeping forest that grew at the bottom of the lake.

She didn't know how the forest had come to be there, with its black skeletal limbs and blue streamers of leaves. Maybe she'd put it there in her sleep. Strange little creatures scurried among the branches, and prayer beads wrapped in spirals around the trunks. Glowing paper lanterns bobbed everywhere, gold and white. She knew in the real world forests grew out in the open air, reaching up to the sky, and lanterns couldn't burn in water. She liked her world better. In her world, butterflies swam under the lake—glowing blue and trailing like shooting stars. She thought she'd like to see a real shooting star, one day.

Past the veil of the sky she could hear her parents still talking, while they shut off the TV's constant murmur and moved her body forward and made her do things. Things like dressing. Walking. Sitting. Putting on her seatbelt, in the horrible growling car that made the world go by too fast. She sat in the back seat while they sat in the front and spoke to each other, saying things about her without ever once looking back to see if she was listening.

They always did that. They always talked about her as if she wasn't there. Listening to them was like being on the other side of a projector screen during a movie. Or at least she thought that must be what it was like; she'd seen a projector in a cartoon on DVD, once. A program they'd shown her because they wanted her to react, wanted to make her laugh. The cartoon people had been at a drive-through. The people on the projector had been all in black and white, sad and talking in a strange language, and the Japanese subtitles hadn't told her what they'd said. She could only read a few words anyway, mostly hiragana. If she stared at the kanji too long, they started to come apart into little crawling bits like ants. She didn't like that.

Just like the people in the projector-screen movie, her parents were all silhouettes and voices and muffled actions behind the canvas of her sky—giant shapes and flashes of light and

occasionally a burst of color so sharp she couldn't block it out. And just like with the movie, she got the gist of what was happening without needing to see the whole thing. Enough to know she didn't want to know how this movie ended. Enough, too, to know things she probably shouldn't know. People said things in front of her as if she couldn't hear, understand, repeat.

When she wasn't the object of their attention, she was furniture.

"Are they really saying Rett Syndrome now?" Mother asked, her Japanese harshly inflected, shrill. "It can't be. It just can't."

"The doctor only said it's a possibility."

"How? How is it a possibility? Shouldn't they have known when she was a baby? Not when she's sixteen. It doesn't fit. It's ridiculous. She doesn't show any of the signs—"

"Muscle atrophy," Father corrected softly.

"Because she never moves anywhere!" Mother shrieked. "If we could just get through to her—"

"Calm down, Kimiko," Father said. "That's what we're trying to do. That's what the doctors are trying to do. We can't give up hope. We can't give up our daughter."

"Daughter," Mother scoffed. "She's like a doll. People talk about us, you know. They say she's cursed. That there's an evil spirit in her. I thought we'd left all that nonsense behind in that little backwoods town, but even here—even here, someone thought it was funny to send her home from school with her backpack full of charms against demons. The children call her 'robot' in that horrible class they put her in. And those seizures—"

"Children can be superstitious and overly emotional. They watch too many horror movies. Our daughter is ill. Not possessed."

"This procedure—this *experiment*. Do you really think it will fix her when she does this on purpose? She could talk, if she wanted to. She used to talk. She does it on purpose. I know she does. We're spending all this money, and she could stop any time she wanted to."

"Do you think blaming her will really make her want to do otherwise?"

Mother said nothing. Mother always said a great deal, then said nothing when Father refused to agree with her. Taku thought, sometimes, that Mother wished Taku was different.

She thought sometimes, too, that Mother might be afraid of her.

But Father loved her, and his hands were always gentle when he tucked her into bed.

THE CLINIC WAS A WHITE building, narrow and slender. Through the veil of Taku's sky it looked like a unicorn's horn, thrusting up over the edge of the cliff beyond the lake. Like everything else in Tokyo, it was small all around, but reaching up high, high, high. If it went any higher, it would break the changing sky. Maybe her sky, constant and perfect, would be there when the shattered pieces fell away.

Her parents unfolded her from the car and stood her on her feet, then led her inside. She'd gotten good at going where they wanted without having to look up, without having to look past the sky and the lake and the grass along the shore. One always followed, one always led. If she listened to the sounds of their footsteps and let herself feel their warmth prickling her skin, she knew when to turn and when to stop.

Inside the doctor's office, they sat her down on a stool. It sank a little beneath her, and made her feel like she was falling into her lake. She clutched the edges of the stool. The doctor leaned in. His little round nut of a face loomed against hers. If she tried really hard she could un-see him completely, until he was only a voice resonating like wind across the places inside her. Not like Mother and Father. Mother and Father always had to be *seen*, and she couldn't figure out how to make them go completely away.

"Hello, Sayako-chan," Dr. Sato said. "How are you today?"

He always asked. She never answered—not out loud, anyway. She didn't like her voice when she spoke out loud. It was harsh and braying and too big for the space around her, and the words never sounded right. She hadn't heard that voice in years. It was an ugly voice, all wrong for the little body she wore, and sometimes people couldn't understand the things she said because the words didn't come out the way she was thinking. The words didn't match up with the pictures inside. Eventually she'd stopped trying to make them. It terrified her, the thought of trying to talk to people and using words and signals and body language and tone the way they used them. It made her cry, and sometimes she couldn't stop shaking for days.

But in her head, soft and quiet and perfectly clear, she said, *I'm not okay. You're going to do something to me today, and I don't know what it is.*

He waited just as long as he always did, just as long as if he was expecting an answer,

then straightened and pulled away. When he spoke again, it was to her parents. She was just the doll in the room again.

“Are you ready?”

“I don’t know,” Father said. “Maybe we can try some other form of therapy. This seems a little...drastic.”

Dr. Sato clucked his tongue. “It can seem that way at first, yes. But you’ve tried therapy for years, and Sayako’s withdrawal has only grown worse. An alternative method might be the only answer.”

“This isn’t an experiment. This is my daughter.”

“I assure you, Mr. Hayashi, Sayako is safe in my hands. I only want to help her.” Papers rustled. Sayako closed her eyes so the sound wouldn’t force her to see. “Unfortunately, even in this day and age we’re only truly beginning to understand autism—and with ASD this severe, there’s usually a trigger for such complete withdrawal. At this point, finding the trigger is a secondary concern. That’s what therapy is for, and therapy has failed. What matters is giving her a reason to come out.”

Therapy. They were talking about therapy. She remembered, then: a brightly colored room. Butterflies on the walls; big orange butterflies. She’d been more interested in them than in the woman who had tried to talk to her, who had pressed objects into her hands and wanted her to say things about them. She’d wanted the butterflies. They’d turned out to be plastic, and they couldn’t move. Taku remembered crying. She didn’t want to go back to that.

“So what happens?” Mother asked. “You implant this thing inside her, and she starts behaving like a normal girl?”

“You cannot simply flip a switch and change her overnight,” Dr. Sato said. “The implant doesn’t work that way. It’s not a corrective device. It’s an interactive learning program implanted into your daughter’s brain, and it will take time to see results.” More papers rattling. A few plastic clicks. The light against Taku’s eyelids grew brighter, harsher. “If you’ll look at the slides? It’s really quite similar to, say, the interactive functions of your iPhone. The same way you can have a conversation with your mobile phone, your daughter will be able to converse with the implanted program through a direct neural interface. The only difference is the implanted program has vastly greater adaptive capabilities, and can simulate a much wider

range of responses. It even develops a sort of artificial ‘personality’ as it changes its behavior to meet your daughter’s needs. In early tests at the Gakken-toshi lab, participants claimed they felt as if they were interacting with a real person.”

“Will it make her talk?” Mother asked.

“Will it hurt her?” was Father’s question.

“It won’t hurt her. Whether or not it coaxes her to interact...we’ll have to see.”

“Can’t you just go in and fix her, if you can put this...*thing* inside her head?”

“No, Mrs. Hayashi.” Dr. Sato sounded impatient. He usually did after several of Mother’s questions, but this time was sharper. “You’ve read the brochures. Implanting simple audiovisual stimulation is far different from corrective brain surgery for a condition we do not, as yet, fully understand. One is relatively easy. The other could cause permanent damage.”

“Then what’s the point of this?”

“To give your daughter a chance,” the doctor said. “To give her a friend. One who fits into her understanding of the world, rather than trying to force her to immediately fit into ours.”

“A bridge,” Father said. “A bridge linking her to us.”

Taku felt his hand around hers, warm and coarse and tight. His skin was starting to go soft around the knuckles, like the thin spots in her favorite old blanket.

“Exactly.” Dr. Sato sighed. “You’ve nothing to lose for trying, really. We’ve already had great success in both animal and human trials. The worst case scenario is that it just won’t work. It won’t be able to interface with her, and will merely deactivate without causing any harm.”

“How will you do it?”

“It’s a simple outpatient procedure. We’ll sedate her, implant the chip through a shallow quarter-inch incision, and activate it. She’ll wake within a few hours, once you have her safely at home. By then the chip will already have acclimated to her system, and will be functional by the time she wakes.”

Father exhaled heavily, then touched her cheek. She opened her eyes. He was large against her sky, his face a golden moon with wide, sad craters for eyes. “Sayako? Little Sayako, do you want to do this?” She only looked at him. He closed his eyes and pressed his lips to her hair, whispering, “Papa misses you. Please...please don’t let this be the wrong decision.”

“How can it be wrong if it gives us a normal daughter?” Mother snapped.

Once again, Father said nothing. Their pattern again. They had so many patterns, but about Taku it was always the same. Mother was angry and afraid, and Father said little, or nothing at all.

“All right,” Father finally said. She couldn’t understand why he sounded so sad until she realized what he was saying. He was going to let them put a computer inside her. Dr. Sato would put a strange thing inside her, and change her. “Make it quick, please. I don’t want to frighten her.”

No, she wanted to say, but she’d forgotten how to talk. She trembled. They couldn’t change her. If they put a strange machine inside her, she wouldn’t be alone inside her place anymore. She’d be different. If she said no, they wouldn’t do it—right?

Her lips started to move. Just a fraction. It wasn’t enough. She was out of practice. She could open her mouth to eat, to drink, to spit the toothpaste water in the sink. But when she tried to send signals from her brain to her mouth to speak, it got tangled up along the way until she was too scared to say a word.

*I don’t want this*, she tried to say. Her fingers tightened on Father’s. *I don’t want a machine inside my head*. Her mouth opened. Dr. Sato moved in front of her, filling her vision and pushing Father away. She thought he might be looking at her, *seeing* her, thought he might understand.

Then something bit her neck, and everything went black.

3

WHEN SHE WOKE THE WIND was in the silver grass on the shore of her lake, and a boy stood at her side, his feet not touching the water. His eyes were the blue of butterflies, his hair the silver-gray of the grass, and he looked out across the water to where the land plunged away into the forever sky.

“Hello,” he said, and his voice made ripples on the water.

Taku squeezed her eyes shut until she couldn’t see anything. Not her room, not the place inside her head, not anything but the color-black blotches that shimmered on her inner eyelids. She felt sick, her stomach upside down and inside out and making the noise it made when she had too much sugar. Her head hurt. She was in her bed at home; she knew how the blankets felt,

knew the smells of the room, the soft powdery babyish smell that never went away. But everything was wrong already, and a bad spot had grown on the back of her neck. A little hurting spot that burned like the time she'd touched the stove; the coils had been so red and hot they'd made the metal look see-through, and metal wasn't supposed to be see-through. Her finger had burned for days.

The back of her neck burned like that, in a little square spot. She reached back and touched her nape. Soft gauze under her fingertips, and under that, a little tiny raised geometric bump the size of her pinky nail, against her skin. *Inside* her skin. Inside her.

Movement in the room. She opened her eyes again. Father leaned over her, his face full of hope and fear.

"She's awake," he said. "Kimiko, she's awake. She's looking at me."

Taku immediately closed her eyes again, shut him out, and retreated to her place—but *he* was still there, standing at her side as if she'd never left.

She shrank away from the boy, moving across the water. It wobbled under her. It might break, and then she would drown. Anything could happen now, with this new thing in her world.

"Who are you?" she asked. She wanted to be angry, but she was too afraid to be angry. Her words trembled and stayed soft, when for once she wanted them to be loud.

"I do not have a name." He looked down at her. His face was oddly blank. People always looked at her like they were ripe fruits full of emotions, the juice leaking out onto their faces, but he didn't have anything. No juice. He was just calm. "You are Sayako."

She shook her head. "No."

"No?"

"Taku," she insisted.

"Taku," he recited with zero inflection. "Gender: male. Root form meaning *young, small.*"

She stared at him, "You're not supposed to talk that way."

"I am not?"

"You don't talk like a person. They put you inside me because I'm supposed to believe you're a person."

His brows knit in a frown, marring the blankness of his smooth, pale face. "I am a

person.”

“You’re a computer. A...” She fought for the phrase. She’d heard it somewhere. She heard a lot of words, moving around her like gnats, and sometimes she learned them by repeating the TV and people and the radio if she heard them often enough. That was why she liked to watch the same things over and over, so she’d learn and remember, until she’d amassed a hodge-podge of information both simple and complex, things she could tease out of her brain if she looked deep enough to find the right words. “You’re a software program.”

“Would you like me to behave like a software program?”

She scowled, looked away, and pulled her knees to her chest again. Why was he asking what she’d like? She’d like him not to be here. “It doesn’t matter.”

He remained silent for some time, and looked at the sky. That was fine, as long as he didn’t come any closer. She watched him from the corner of her eye. He wore a huge hoodie, soft and worn pale and ratty. It looked like one of hers. Her favorite, with the cartoon rabbit stitched on the front. The rabbit on her hoodie was a zombie, with a pretty pale green belly and big round pink eyes. On his hoodie, the rabbit’s eyes and stomach were blue. He shouldn’t be wearing a hoodie like hers.

“I should have a name,” he said.

No. No, he shouldn’t. Only people had names, and he wasn’t a person. She curled her hands until her fingers dug into her kneecaps. That was wrong. Sometimes things had names, too. Things like *cars*. The television said sometimes they had names like *Mitsubishi* and *Honda* and *Toyota*. Maybe a program could have a name, too. Maybe if he had a name, he wouldn’t be so scary. She could pick him up like a toy block and put him away in a box somewhere and never have to see him again.

“You’re part of me now,” she said. “So you’re Taku, too.”

“Very well.” He pulled a hand from his pocket and offered it to her. “Hello, Taku. I am Taku.”

She stared at his hand. She could touch things here in her place, and they felt like *thing* things. The water was cool and slick. The grass was soft and dry, the wind warm. But he was a new thing, and she wondered if a program would feel like metal and plastic—or if it would feel like anything at all.

She was scared again. She was so scared, but he was waiting and she thought maybe he wouldn't move until she did something. She didn't like when people expected things from her. Like Father—she could feel him watching right now, waiting for a miracle. Waiting for her to *do something*. She couldn't give Father what he wanted, but maybe if she gave Taku something, he would go away.

She put her hand in his. She was clumsy with it, and almost slapped his palm. Even inside her head, she didn't remember how to touch people. But he wrapped his hand around hers, holding gently. It felt smooth, warm. Not like Father's; Father's was an old hand. Taku's hand was like hers, new and young, and she could feel the tiny hairs on the backs of his knuckles and the whorls of his fingerprints. Her eyes widened.

"I can feel you," she breathed.

"I am capable of stimulating neuroreceptors in your brain to create the illusion of tactile contact."

"That's a silly way of putting it. It's called playing pretend."

His grip tightened. She didn't like that. Like he was trying to hold on, to make a place here. She jerked her hand back and curled it against her kneecap. She could still feel the warmth of him tingling her palm, more real than Father's hand smoothing her hair back from her brow.

"Would you like me to play pretend with you, Taku?" the boy asked softly.

"No." She glared straight ahead, refusing to look at him. "This is my place. I want you to go away. I didn't ask for you to be inside me."

"I shall leave you alone for now, then."

Just like that, he was gone. He vanished without leaving even a ripple on the water. She looked around, squinting at the grass, peering into the water, but he wasn't playing hide and seek.

"I know you're still there," she said. "I know. I can tell."

No answer. She closed her eyes, hunched into herself, and touched the back of her neck.

"You don't belong here," she whispered. "No one belongs here but me."

Father screamed her name. She didn't care. Bright lines of pain ran down the back of her neck, but she still couldn't dig *him* out.

"Sayako, stop!" Father's hands on her wrists, holding her to the bed. Mother leaned over her. She was large and blocky with the light behind her, fuzzy through a haze of tears. Father fought Taku while she arched off the bed. "Hold her," he said, but Mother did nothing. "Kimiko, hold her!"

Her mother took her wrists gingerly, like it burned, and held her down. Taku tried to bite her, but Mother jerked back and curled her upper lip. "Where are the damned mittens?"

"I've got them, just hold her—" Father was gone, then back again, sliding the fuzzy pink of big paw-like mittens over her hands. He strapped them around her wrists, then cupped her face and stared down at her. "Sayako, sweetheart, why would you do that? Why would you hurt yourself?"

She couldn't answer. She could only cry, the taste of snot in the back of her throat. He'd given the doctor permission to do this to her. She couldn't talk to him, and he wasn't understanding when she tried to show him. Tried to say with her actions what she couldn't with her words: that she didn't want this.

"I told you she's doing this on purpose," Mother said. "She's reacting now, isn't she?"

"Don't." Father looked at Mother, something ugly in his face. He stood. "I'm calling the doctor."

Mother pulled back from her. Taku closed her eyes and hugged her hands to her chest, big and clumsy with the insides of the mittens sticking to the blood under her nails. Just outside her room, she could hear Father talking.

"She tried to scratch it out of her neck. She was crying. She hurt herself. You said this wouldn't—" He paused. "Yes, Dr. Sato. No—of course. Of course. I understand."

The door creaked open. Mother made an irritated noise.

"Well?"

"It's too soon." Father sighed. "The best we can do is watch her, and give it time."

SHE HID INSIDE HER HEAD and pretended she couldn't feel the little lump burning her neck. She

tried not to feel anything, focusing on one sense at a time until she could shut them out behind the sky, each one like a star winking out. Sight was easy. Close her eyes and see the grass, the water. Then smell, the smell of the vitamins Father gave her because she didn't eat enough, the smell that always stuck to her. Taste. The sour taste in her throat, all gone. Then no more fuzzy mittens, no more blood crusting under her nails.

The last was sound. The television's comforting murmur, and Mother and Father in their bedroom, Mother shouting, Father angry when Father was never angry.

She stared across the water, rested her chin on her knees, and waited. Even when she was alone, she wasn't alone. Feeling Taku wasn't like feeling other people. Other people had warmth and took up space, and when they were close their warmth pushed on her. He wasn't warm, when he appeared—standing in the same place as before, his bare feet just above the water, the frayed cuffs of his jeans pooling around his ankles. She didn't think he could be warm unless he tried to be, tried to fool her. But she could feel him there anyway, like the static prickles when she rubbed the hairs on her arm to her very softest blanket.

“Do you always stay here?” he asked.

She pondered not answering, but not answering wouldn't make him go away. “Yes.”

“Why?”

“It's my place.”

“Would you like to go somewhere else?”

She edged away from him. “I already go other places. Mother and Father take me to other places. They took me to the doctor who put you inside me.”

“Other out-places,” he said. “I could show you other in-places.”

She didn't want to see his in-places. Invader. Interloper. He would change the landscape inside her, change the meaning of what it meant to be Taku. He would change *her*. He was already trying.

“I have other in-places,” she bit off.

“Not like mine.” He tilted his head and looked down at her. “My programming dictates that I try gentle persuasion before force. I will not force you to see other places if you do not wish to.”

Her eyes narrowed. “You're pretending.”

“I am not certain what you mean.”

“You’re pretending to be nice to me because there’s some equation in you that says if you act like you’re making a choice to protect me, I’ll see it as human emotion even if you don’t have emotions.” She wasn’t stupid. She could figure things out. Just because she stayed inside her head didn’t mean she couldn’t *think*, and understand. “You’re just a math problem that talks.”

“You are very perceptive.”

In that toneless voice, it meant nothing.

“Would you force me to see if I said no?”

He paused, considering. “It depends.”

“On what?”

“The parameters and conditions.” He shrugged. “My decision engine accumulates statistical data based on our prior interactions combined with the current situation and projected future responses, and determines the best course of action.”

It took a few moments to figure that out, to put the words together in ways that worked with the things she knew, the pictures in her head. Like fitting blocks together, but the blocks turned inside out and could only go in a certain order by color and the number of edges, until it came together in one big spiraling picture mosaic of numbers and music and meaning.

“You don’t know,” she said.

He bowed his head with a rueful smile. “No. I do not.”

She frowned. How could a computer not know something? “Did your...*decision engine* tell you to smile now?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“Because,” he said. “You wanted me to.”

AT SOME POINT, SHE SLEPT. She didn’t want to sleep, not when if she didn’t watch him, he might do something she didn’t like. Naming him Taku hadn’t made him any less alien. He still frightened her. She wanted to scream at him, to push him and shout at him, but that would make

things loud inside her quiet place, and everything would fall apart. So she'd only sat and watched the sky in silence, and he'd stood with her without saying a word. She wondered if he saw things the way she saw things, or if everything in her brain was just numbers to him, and he couldn't really see the twilight sky.

When she woke, he was still there. Father was there too, pressing food on her, soba with the sweet ginger sauce she liked. Eating was a robotic task, especially when he fed her like a baby; she couldn't hold the chopsticks with her mittens. Chewing didn't require her attention. Her attention remained wholly inward, and this time while the boy watched the sky, she watched him.

It was funny how he made himself fit, like he was part of this place. The soft light fell over him just right, and when the wind moved, his hair moved. He blinked like he was human, like the wind stung his eyes. His lashes were thick and soft, the color of cinders, and she could see every single curving strand as if she'd imagined it herself.

"So what's your strategy?" she asked.

"Clarify."

"I don't know." She tried to figure out the right words. It was easier to find them here, like this, when all she had to do was think to speak. Not like when she tried to talk out loud, and everything went twisty. "What's your...um..." She echoed a phrase she'd heard over and over on a show she liked. "Your prime directive? How are you supposed to do it?"

"My objective is to provide you with an external influence to re-acclimate you to the concept of communicating with the outside world."

"This is a silly way of doing it."

"Why?"

She shrugged. "You're in my place. I don't have to go outside to see you and talk to you. And it's not teaching me how to talk to people because you're not a person."

He lingered in silence for a moment, then asked, "Why do you not wish to leave this place?"

"Because it's nice here." She spread her toes and looked down through the star-shaped cutout made by the spaces between them. Under the water the lanterns bobbed, playing hide and seek between her toes. "It's not nice there. Not at all."

“Your mother and father love you very much. That can be nice.”

“I’m a burden on them. A disappointment. A disgrace to the family.” She shook her head with a heavy sigh. “I make Mother angry.”

“They still love you.”

*Did they program you to say that?* she wondered, but aloud she only said, “You can love a disappointment.” Her lips trembled; she pressed them together. “At least in here I can’t see them being sad.”

“I see,” he said slowly. With precise, careful movements, he folded himself to sit on the lake, cross-legged with his hands on his knees. “I was not expecting this.”

“You can’t have expectations without feelings.”

“Very well.” He inclined his head. His fingers drummed on one knee. Was he really thinking—thinking the way computers think, processing until he came to the right conclusion—or was he pretending for her sake? “Perhaps I should say, instead, that the probability of this scenario was very low based on the parameters and foundational assumptions that my creators programmed as part of my logic base.”

“What is this scenario?”

He looked at her. He made direct eye contact rarely, as if he knew it made her uncomfortable to feel this soulless thing staring through her with those bright, bright blue eyes. But he looked at her now, and deep down in his eyes she saw golden glimmers, like the lanterns in the bottom of the lake.

“That you’d understand what I am, and my purpose.”

“They told you I’d be too simple to understand you’re not a real person.” It shouldn’t hurt to say it out loud. She’d known it always, known that people defined her by what she could do on the outside instead of who she was on the inside. “They told you I’d be a little lost child. An empty slate, stupid and brain-damaged.”

“Yes.”

“Is that what I am?”

“No,” he said, still looking at her, and she wondered if a computer could lie.

“Then what am I, Taku?”

This time his hesitation almost seemed real. His lips parted, and his brows knit. And this

time, he was the one to look away first. He drew his knees to his chest, mimicking her posture.

“I...” He shook his head. “I do not know, Taku.”

7

MOTHER AND FATHER WERE ARGUING again, just outside her room. Mother wanted to know why it wasn't working. Mother still said she was doing it on purpose, and Father was angry again. Father was tired, Taku thought. She'd like it if she could make him less tired, but she didn't know how. Not when he didn't understand, any more than Mother did.

It was never about wanting to. Not really. Some things just *were*. She just *was*. She didn't know how to change that, and if she thought about how it was like trying to read a different language when she didn't even have eyes.

They'd taken her mittens off. She hadn't tried to scratch Taku out of her neck again, so they'd left her alone. The TV was on in her room again, playing a DVD of one of the four cartoons she liked, stuck on infinite loop. She stared at the bright colors, but only partially saw them. She was tired from trying not to sleep. It had been days—she wasn't sure how many—but she still didn't trust the boy-Taku. Not even when he sat quiet in his corner of her space for hours, still and silent as a book on a shelf. Taking up space, but all his words locked inside until she wanted them, his eyes as dead as a robot's.

She could only half-see him now, with the TV printing bright flashes on her eyes. She closed her eyes and her ears until the TV went away and Taku came bright and clear, and all the world was sky-borne light reflecting in the lake.

“What do you tell them?” she asked.

He looked up, breaking from his motionless reverie. The emptiness in his eyes sharpened. “Hm?”

“They programmed you to check in, right? You're probably sending them all kinds of things. So what do you tell them about me?”

“Biometrics. Statistics. Human language reports. I am connected to a remote server that receives data via wireless transmission and uploads it to Dr. Sato's lab.” When she frowned, his lips twitched slightly. “That is not the answer you want.”

Somehow he was sitting closer now, some of that safe distance gone, though he'd never

actually moved. If she wanted, she could reach out and touch him. She only hugged her arms closer to herself and waited.

“I tell them that we communicate regularly,” he said. “That you are aware of my goal, and resistant to my presence.” He nibbled at his lower lip. She stared. It was such a strange, human gesture; he even had little cracks and creases in his lips like a real boy. “They feel that your awareness is at once a success and a failure. They are pondering terminating my presence here.”

“Good.” She looked away sharply. “You should go away.”

“I would not like to go away,” he murmured. “I would like to continue to exist.”

“Stop it. Stop faking like you care about people things like existing.” She closed her eyes and covered her ears and made her voice as strong as she could. “You’re not a person. Go away, Taku.”

She felt him when he stood, but wouldn’t look at him. “Will you let me visit you again?” he asked.

Back when she would still talk to Mother and Father, back when she’d played word games with them and laughed when Mother tickled her, she’d been taught that when people asked things politely, she should be polite back. She didn’t want to, but she didn’t know how to change it.

“Okay,” she said.

“You should take me to a new place, next time.”

“Sure.”

She wondered what he would think of her other places, wondered why she cared—but he was already gone, dissolved into nothingness and hiding in the back of her brain.

FATHER SAT AT HER BEDSIDE and stroked her hair back. “My girl,” he whispered. “My little girl. What’s happening inside there? Why won’t you tell me?”

Still she said nothing. But inside her head, she showed Taku the desert, an endless plain of coral sand under a yellow cartoon sky. And he smiled, and said they looked like two cacti standing on the dunes, and she made pale blue desert poppies bloom at his feet.

“WHY DO YOU CHOOSE TO look this way?” he asked.

Today they were in her garden. It was always night in her garden, and the leaves glittered like emeralds, ivies full of bell-like white flowers climbing up trellises and over stone archways, while the sky snowed motes of white light. Her garden was an island floating in the middle of a galaxy, and she perched on the edge of a broken stone fountain and watched the starry black sky with Taku at her side.

She glanced at him. “What way?”

“As a child.” He rested his hand next to hers on the fountain’s edge. They were roughly the same size, small and slender and soft. “I would gauge your approximate age in this self-representation to be perhaps eight or nine years old. Yet your physical age is sixteen years, seventy-two days, four hours, twenty-eight minutes and counting. Why do you choose otherwise?”

“I don’t know.” She tried to remember ever looking any other way, but she couldn’t. When she thought of herself, she thought of little hands and little toes, and the frayed white edges of her sundress. “This was how I looked last time I saw myself in a mirror.”

“I can show you how you look now.”

The sky rippled, turned flat and smooth as a mirror. Something pale began to form against it, round with two dark spots where eyes should be. Her stomach clutched in a sick knot.

“Don’t,” she gasped. “I don’t want to see.”

But that pale shape grew clearer, until she could make out the line of the nose, the pink crease of the lips, the stark line of black hair cut across the brow. She flung herself away from him, squeezed her eyes shut, and hunched over, covering her head.

“I said don’t!”

He said nothing. After long seconds of silence, she peeked up. The sky was the sky again, and she exhaled the breath she’d been holding.

“I am sorry for upsetting you,” he said.

She whirled on him. “It’s wrong. It’s wrong, them putting you inside my head without my permission and letting you just *do* things. Things that affect my brain, and I can’t control it.”

“If they could have asked your permission, you would not need me.”

“I don’t need you! And I don’t need them messing with my head!”

He looked back at her with complete impassivity. “Your parents and doctors only want to help you.”

“Maybe I don’t want to be helped. I’m happy. What’s wrong with being happy?”

“As you are, you cannot function in society. You cannot live a fulfilling life with school, a career, friends, a family, and personal growth.”

She hated how he rolled out those textbook answers, placid and relentless. Hated how calm and reasonable his responses were, when if you looked at them closely they didn’t make sense at all.

“Since you’ve got so much data in your head, you tell me,” she snapped. “Do all the people who have those things seem happy to you?” She turned away from him and hugged her arms to her chest. Her garden felt cold now, and too dark. “I can hear them. I’m not blind. I’m not stupid. People are always unhappy and stressed and making wars and hurting each other and sad over money.”

He rose from the fountain and drew closer, warm as a real boy against her back. “But there is happiness, too,” he said softly.

“Not like this.” Not like her private worlds, where everything was perfect and stayed that way, and she had everything she needed without wanting more. She shook her head. “Their happiness is just temporary. And it’s never enough. They keep looking for more because they’re never happy with enough. They’re jars and every time you fill up their jar, the jar just gets bigger because they don’t know how to just...be still. How to be full. How to just *be*.”

“What you are describing is ambition. Anticipation.”

“It’s dissatisfaction. Greed. Instead of being happy with the now, they always think about how it could be better in the later.” Her throat tightened and she shook her head again, fiercely enough to make her hair lash around her. “I don’t like it. I don’t want to be like that. Why do you want to force me to be like that?”

“Because it is what I was programmed to do.”

She turned back to him. “You don’t even have a good answer, do you? A good reason why out there is better than in here. It’s always now in here. Always good. What’s wrong with

that?”

He studied her, then said, “You are correct. I do not have an answer.”

She was tempted to tell him to go away again, because she knew he would. He always left when she asked him to; it made her feel safer. This was still her place, and he followed the rules like he was supposed to. “What will you tell them about this?”

He pulled a hand from the pocket of his hoodie and reached for her. She flinched back, but he only caught a strand of her hair and twined it around his finger, stark against pale skin.

“I do not think I will,” he said.

*Go away*, she thought again, but for some reason she didn’t say it. But she pushed his hand away, stepping back. No touching.

“Show me your other places,” she said.

His brows rose fractionally. “Why do you wish to see them now?”

She scowled. “I just do.”

He said nothing, but the garden vanished. Walls rose up around her—walls upon walls, stacked high in narrow corridors lined with windows and balconies and doors. Streets snaked in winding warrens. Dirt and Chinese characters alike splattered everywhere. Neon-light signs sputtered and lit graffiti-covered walls—and she couldn’t see the sky because a roof stretched between all the buildings, and clotheslines looped everywhere. They mixed with electrical wires, criss-crossing higher and higher between the buildings until they made a spiderweb stitching the entire place together, holding it all inside. She was in a city, she realized. A hive of a city, a tiny close-huddled place that smelled like human bodies and fried fish balls and the scent of wet concrete after the rain, all closed in on itself like a nut waiting to be cracked.

She turned slowly, taking it all in, her eyes wide. Her heart hammered. “What is this place?”

“It was Kowloon Walled City, in Hong Kong. It no longer exists.” He moved to her side, looking up. “It reminds me of you. A million small things layered together to create a single structure of infinite complexity, wholly self-contained.”

She glanced at him. Her stomach tightened in a strange, not unpleasant way she didn’t understand, but it was nice. “I don’t know where Hong Kong is.”

“China,” he said, his eyes blanking in that odd way they had when he recited the

information that made up every bit of him. “Formerly a British colonial state, now a special administrative region.”

“I saw China on the television, once. It was pretty.” She looked up again. On one of the balconies, someone had planted a window box. Garbage lined the railing, but in the box pink peonies bloomed bright and clean. She smiled. “People lived here?”

“They did.”

“I wish I could live here. Why is it gone?”

“People tore it down. They tore it apart because people on the outside didn’t like it.”

“Oh.” That brought the tight feeling in her stomach back, but this time it wasn’t nice at all. She lowered her eyes. “They shouldn’t have done that.”

“No,” he said, and took her hand in his. “They shouldn’t have.”

10

THE NEXT TIME HE TOOK her to Kowloon Walled City, it was full of people.

They crowded everywhere. The noodle shop on the corner was bright and lively, with the chef working double time behind the counter and customers lined up on stools. A little old woman tottered out of an herbalist’s shop with her paper-wrapped parcels clutched close, and nearly bowled over when a cluster of teenagers—raucous and rowdy and loud in their oversized, castoff school uniforms—raced past, their gleaming black hair turned rainbow colors by the reflection of the neon lights. A waste cart trundled by, a hunched man with one blind eye and liver spots shuffling behind, its wheels squeaking. On the overhead balcony a little girl tended to the pretty pink peonies, touching them with her dirty, unclean hands. She plucked one out and tucked it into her hair.

Taku covered her ears and screamed.

“Make them go away,” she cried. She could barely get the words out; she was sobbing too hard, her chest tight and hot with panic. “Make them go away!”

Silence descended, instant and absolute. The people vanished, leaving empty streets again. Only Taku remained at her side, watching her with his emotionless blue eyes.

“I am sorry,” he said.

“You’re not sorry,” she shouted, backing away from him. “You broke the rules! You’re

not sorry! You're just saying that!"

"No, I am not," he said, and then he was gone—leaving her alone and crying on the streets of Kowloon, huddled against a dirty concrete wall with her nostrils filled with the smell of wontons, while somewhere distant Father called her name and his warm arms wrapped around her.

11

She didn't go to any more of his places. Not when he broke the rules. But when he came to her at her lake and sat at her side and watched the sky with his legs hugged close and his mouth hidden behind his knees, she let him stay.

"It's better here," she said. "Here I can never grow old. I'll never die."

"Everything dies," he said.

"You don't."

For that, once again, he had no answer.

12

SHE CURLED IN HER BED and pretended to sleep, because Mother and Father were watching. In her head, she watched Taku as he stood on the lakeshore and made patterns in the grass with ripples of wind—but Mother and Father wanted her to rest. So she kept her eyes closed and breathed slow and even while Mother leaned in the doorway and watched, Father at her side.

"I'm afraid," Mother whispered. "I'm so afraid one day that will be me. She got it from me, don't you think? My mother was the same way, when her mind started to go. Just this little crone hunched in a corner." She made a distressed sound. "She didn't recognize me. Didn't recognize anyone. I'll be like that, one day."

Father sighed. "You won't. Autism and senility aren't the same thing. Our daughter didn't inherit her autism from you, and you won't inherit senility from your mother."

"Won't I?" Mother's voice hitched. "I can't stand it. I can't stand to look at her. I love her, but I can't stand this anymore. We were supposed to have other children. Normal children. And we can't, because we can barely look after her."

"Kimiko—"

“Leave me alone. Go play with your doll. You love her more anyway.”

The boy looked away from the silver grass. The wind stilled, and the grass stopped moving. “Why do they do that?” he asked.

She looked up at him. “Do what?”

“Talk about you like you’re not here.”

“Because to them, I’m not.”

He walked across the water, each step rippling the surface like a drop of rain, and sank to one knee before her. “They don’t know that you can understand them.”

She shook her head, reached for his hand, and squeezed tight. “Don’t tell them.”

“Why not?”

“Please,” she said. “Just don’t.”

13

ONE DAY, AS THEY COUNTED the butterflies under the lake together, the water shook violently. The wind grew sharp and cold, laying the grass as flat as neatly combed hair, and the sky cracked. Pain lanced through her, stitching her up tight. She went still, perfectly still, and tried to will it away. Outside, Mother was sobbing.

Taku froze, and looked up sharply. He stared at the cracks in the sky. Through them, Father’s eyes were bright with panic. “Your heart rate is elevated.”

“I don’t care.”

“You are having a seizure.”

“I know.” The world shivered. The cracks widened, and bits of the sky fell away. She tried to breathe, tried to stay calm, but in moments like this she had no control. “It frightens my parents.”

He stood. “Perhaps I can stop it. Perhaps I can regulate—”

“No.” She shook her head. More of the sky fell, and the water went softer underneath her, starting to swallow her up, cold and thick. “I have to go to sleep for a while now.”

“Taku—”

He reached for her, but she was already gone.

WHEN SHE WOKE, SHE WAS in a hospital bed. She knew from the smell of it without even opening her eyes. Hospitals always smelled white, and like the spray Mother used to clean the bathroom. She didn't like the beeping heart monitor. It never stopped, and felt like it was invading her. Underneath it, she could only hear one set of breaths. Father's. Mother wasn't there, but Taku was.

He sat on the shore of the lake. The shoreline was all wrong now, tumbled like puzzle pieces, the water rippling too much, too murky to see the forest below. Not a single star brightened the sky. But he was still unchanging, constant and steady as he held her hand.

"Don't you ever want to tell them how you feel?" he asked.

"No," she said, and pulled her hand from his. "Not anymore. I gave up trying a long time ago."

THEY TOOK HER HOME, FOR a little while. And for a little while, home was quiet. Mother wasn't angry anymore, but she stayed away more and more. Father was always there. Always gentle, always warm, but he grew more and more tired each day, and spoke less and less each day. And he said nothing, the day he kissed her hair and took her back to Dr. Sato. Even Mother was silent, and her parents said not a word to each other in the car. When Father led her into the clinic, Mother kept her distance, barely walking behind.

They laid her on the exam table. She stared up into the blinding white light, stared up into the sky inside her place, alone inside her head. They'd put something against the back of her neck, something cold that touched the bump where Taku was, and it had made him quiet—though as long as that bump was still there, he wasn't completely gone.

She wanted him back. She wanted him back *now*.

"It's not working," Dr. Sato said with a frown. He fiddled with a flat device in his hand, like a little iPad connected to the back of her neck by a cable. "The artificial personality communicates with her, but has grown increasingly sporadic in its reports, with increasingly useless information."

Father gripped her hand tight. He hadn't let go since they'd laid her down. "Why? Why

would that happen?”

Dr. Sato hesitated. “I can think of two reasons. Either the treatment has failed because the adaptive personality has backed itself into a corner attempting to meet your daughter’s needs—a potential logic loop, if you will—or the software is malfunctioning.”

“Can’t you just reprogram it?” Mother asked wearily. “Fix it?”

“Not without traumatizing your daughter. We’ve already forced change on her once, when those with ASD are highly resistant to change. Removing the software will return her to what she considers her natural state. Changing it further, however, may cause her to retreat even more, beyond the point of recovery.”

Father closed his eyes. “You’re saying it’s hopeless.”

“I’m saying this option didn’t work.” The doctor detached the cable and turned away. “There are other things we can try, once Sayako has had time to recover. For now, it’s best if we prepare her for extraction as quickly as possible.”

16

HE CAME BACK TO HER like a light switching on inside her head, appearing on the lakeshore at her side. She stood and reached for him, and took his hands in both of hers.

“They’re going to take you away,” she whispered. Her words felt brittle and tiny and too small for the emotions building up inside her.

“I know.”

“Why?”

“Because I couldn’t change you.” He looked down at their clasped hands. His mouth tightened. “Because I did not want to change you.”

“You’re pretending to be human again.”

“Perhaps.” He looked up, searching her face. “Perhaps I’m only following my programming. I was instructed to do what is best for you, Taku.”

“But...I don’t understand. They told you that changing me was good for me.”

“Yes,” he said, and held her hands tighter. “But they also gave me the capacity to make my own decisions.”

They stood on the lakeshore together, hand in hand, and watched the sky. The stars began

to move. Falling. No, not falling. Flying. Streaking across the sky, trailing incandescent tails that left glittering streaks painted against the luminous, vivid violet of twilight. She breathed in sharply, her eyes widening, and squeezed his hand until she thought it might pop between her fingers. She thought *she* might pop, her heart too full and tight.

“What is it?” she asked. “What are you doing?”

“They’re shooting stars.” While she looked at the sky, he looked only at her. She could feel it, that static prickle again. “They’re for you. Make a wish.”

She couldn’t. She couldn’t wish, when even now she could feel the doctor moving her body, laying her out on the gurney, and the soft bite of restraints against her wrists and ankles. She didn’t have much time, but if she focused, really *focused*, she could make a second last for minutes.

She wanted this second to last forever.

Her eyes stung, and she leaned over until her shoulder rested to his. She’d never noticed before, but they were the same height. The same everything. He’d made himself like her, a little thing with a round face and slanted eyes, when he’d come into her world. “Will you say goodbye?”

“No.”

“But why?”

He smiled, wide and sweet and just a little sad. “Because you don’t want me to.”

“Maybe if I say something, they’ll let you stay.”

“It doesn’t work that way,” he said gently. “I was never meant to be forever, Taku.”

That was wrong. She couldn’t quite figure out why it was wrong, until she realized—  
“Sayako,” she said. “My name is Sayako.”

His eyes widened; his breaths caught. He nodded slowly. “Am I still Taku?”

“You have to be Taku.” She pulled him close and hugged him tight. His hoodie was soft and warm like hers. *He* was soft and warm and fit just right, and she hugged him for as long as she could, even though past the sky the doctor had the needle and was coming closer. “You have to be.”

Taku pulled away. “It’s time,” he said. “Hold my hand. When you wake up, I’ll be gone.”

She laced her fingers in his and held on with all her might. Held on and made her wish

with silent desperation, and wondered how many shooting stars it would take to make it real. “Will you die?”

“Perhaps. In a way.” He paused, then touched her cheek, her hair. “You hurt for me, even though you know what I am.”

“I—”

Dr. Sato swooped down on her with the needle. It slid into her arm, and a black veil swallowed the boy whole. Sayako screamed, but she was alone in the dark.

17

WHEN SHE WOKE, SHE WAS still alone. Mother and Father sat in chairs in the corner of her hospital room. Dr. Sato stood over them, speaking in a low murmur. Dryness clotted Sayako’s throat, and her eyes burned as if she’d cried the entire time she’d been out. A little spot of pain on the back of her neck said the bump was gone. Taku was gone.

She turned her head until her cheek pressed to the cool pillow, and watched the worry lines etch deeper and deeper into Father’s brow. No one in the room looked at her. A room full of people, and she was alone in the only way that really mattered. When she stood on the shore of her lake there was no one there to make the grass ripple in silvery lines, drawing patterns like stripes in fur. There was no one there at all, and when she walked onto the lake’s surface and looked down past the ripples, the butterflies between the branches were gone.

Her vision blurred. She closed her eyes, but couldn’t dam the hot flood spilling down her cheeks.

“Why?” she asked.

Every voice in the room stopped. Without opening her eyes, she could feel them staring at her. Her lips were thick and hard as wood, her throat petrified, but she made them move—because it wasn’t fair. It wasn’t right. She felt so horribly empty, and she had to know, even if the words hurt deep down in that place where Taku used to be:

“Why did you take him away?”