

# AYA KA

— あ や か —

## SIDE STORIES



# 12

## Lonely Boys

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**"AYAKA – SIDE STORIES 12"**

**LONELY BOYS: THE CASE OF KURAMA HARUAKI**

His grandfather passed away. At that time, for Haruaki, who was only six years old, he was the only family he had.

"Haruaki-kun is still young, but he is alone..."

"Kurama-san and his wife passed away early... his grandfather raised him well alone, but..."

"What are we going to do with Haruaki-kun? He has no close relatives."

"I wonder what we should do with the Kaizumi Shrine. I guess I'll have to call a substitute priest."

"But will the priest who comes from outside be able to protect the two dragons that are enshrined in the fire spring?"

"Nevertheless..."

Haruaki was listening to the words spoken by the adults at the wake from a place on the other side of the sliding door.

Haruaki cringed as he sat next to his grandfather's futon, where his cold body lay.

A Mitama floated in from the porch where the shoji doors were open and floated around the body of his and Haruaki's grandfather.

Looking at him, who looked like a jellyfish swimming in the air, Haruaki sobbed a little.

It seems that the Mitama is not visible to everyone. His grandfather could see him, but he heard that his father could only feel his presence.

Haruaki has been able to see the Mitama since he was a child, and it seems strange that there are people who can't see him. His grandfather patted Haruaki on the head and said, "Haruaki, you have the talent to connect with the life line. One day you will protect this shrine and, by extension, Ayaka Island.", so even as a child, he felt inspired to do so. However, that was based on the premise that his grandfather would protect and guide him.

"I can't do anything alone..."

Haruaki grabbed the edge of the futon his grandfather was sleeping on and looked down.

At this moment, a bright and strong voice rang, unsuitable for a wake.

"What's the problem? They're making too many soggy faces to send to an old man who lived a good life and came back to the line of life!"

Haruaki was surprised to hear laughter and gently opened the sliding door behind him. The adults who were busy mumbling a few words while preparing food for the wake looked at the sudden intruder with surprised faces.

At the entrance of the room, there was a young man in a flashy Hawaiian shirt with a smile on his tanned and fearless face, and a young man dressed in mourning with cold sweat on his serious face and glasses.

"Idiot! Idiot! Take your place!"

Sanji Inou, a serious young man, was pulling the arm of the young man next to him, looking impatient. Inou went to university on the mainland, but he seems to have returned to Ayaka Island for summer vacation.

"...Yanagi-san."

Haruaki blurted out that name.

The name of the scandalous young man who appeared at the wake wearing a Hawaiian shirt was Makoto Yanagi.

A few years ago, a mysterious young man (at the time he was just a child) suddenly appeared alone on Ayaka Island and said things like: "I'm in the middle of a training trip, but it seems like it's a coincidence that has its roots in this island."

He seems to have settled there. Haruaki was too young to remember when Yanagi arrived on Ayaka Island, but he often heard about the strange episode from the adults around him.

Makoto Yanagi was a strange person, but Ayaka Island was also quite a strange island, so the residents were used to strange things and accepted him with laughter and said: "He is such a strange boy.". That's all.

Even for Haruaki, Yanagi was a very "Ayakai" person. When he saw him in Ninoshima, he was drinking alcohol and sleeping on the edge of the canal, or playing with his friends' rice plants, which gave him an unconventional impression, but when he arrived at Kaizumi Shrine in Sannoshima, and looked out over the island volcano of Shinoshima, stood upright and gave off an air of purity that was shocking.

Even now, his clothes and behavior were not appropriate for a wake, but when Yanagi saw Haruaki peeking through the half-open sliding door, he quickly calmed his expression and crossed the room to meet Haruaki and Haruaki's grandfather in the room where he was.

Yanagi sat next to the futon where his grandfather lay. The way he sat comfortably and with beautiful posture reminded him of the way his grandfather performed prayer.

Yanagi looked at his grandfather's face with a soft smile on his face. A few seconds passed slowly.

Haruaki had the strange feeling that Yanagi was chatting with his dead grandfather.

"Wel...!"

Yanagi suddenly screamed and hit his knee.

"Haruaki, are you coming with me?"

Yanagi said that with a bright smile. There was a commotion in the room.

"What are you talking about so irresponsibly, Makoto?!"

Inou made an irritated sound again. Yanagi pouted his lips in dissatisfaction.

"It's not that I'm being irresponsible. Haruaki lost his guardian, right? In that case, I'll be the one to take charge."

"You are a young man who has just come of age!"

"Isn't the third one the same age?"

"That's right! That's why I say that people like us are not yet in a position to take responsibility for our children!"

"What's wrong with this? Micchan from the commercial district is only 20 years old, but he's already raising his one-year-old son very well."

"Is there any difference between his child and someone else's child?"

"You're too loud, Sanji."

Yanagi pouted like an octopus and expressed his dissatisfaction with Inou, then looked at Haruaki.

"What do you think, Haruaki?"

Haruaki was simply shocked and looked at Yanagi with his eyes and mouth wide open.

"That..."

"Yes?"

"What will happen to the sanctuary?"

If Haruaki goes with Yanagi, will that shrine disappear and rot, or will someone unknown come and stop it from being Haruaki's home?

Thinking about that, Haruaki felt a stab of pain deep in his chest.

But...

"Well, I'll take care of the shrine too. Actually, Haruaki's grandfather asked me to do that. I'll be the substitute priest until Haruaki becomes an adult."

Yanagi smiled and assured him that. Inou was angry about something again, but Haruaki felt that the path Yanagi had shown him was the only path of light.

"...Thank you."

Haruaki bent his small body and bowed to Yanagi.

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Haruaki was taken in at Yanagi's house in Ninoshima.

No, to be exact, that was not Yanagi's house. As Yanagi came from outside, he did not own a house on Ayaka Island, but was staying with the Amamiya family, a large landowner on Ninoshima Island.

"God. The young man who I thought was evil suddenly says that he wants to keep a child. However, since you have decided to do so, you must take full responsibility. You cannot afford to do it half-heartedly."

Hatsu, the head of the Amamiya family, blurted out that. Although he is over eighty years old, he is a tall and dignified man.

"I know. You are a tertiary young man, so I can't believe it."

"No."

Hatsu loosened his stern expression and shook his head.

"I trust you. I guess you can do what you say you can do."

Haruaki was given an empty room on the second floor of the Amamiya family house. Having brought nothing with him from his house in Minoshima other than a change of clothes, Haruaki began his new life in an environment where there was almost nothing that smelled like him.

However, he often returned to Minoshima. As he promised, Yanagi took charge of the Kaizumi Shrine and, together with his assistants, cleaned the shrine, the shrine office, and the residential building where Haruaki lived.

"Yanagi-sensei, can I talk to you for a moment?"

When a visitor arrived at the shrine while he was at the shrine, there was a high chance that Yanagi would be called.

There are no villages in Minoshima. To get to Kaizumi Shrine, you have to take a sea train, so there is usually no chance to pass by, and the worshipers usually have some kind of "thing they would like to ask the gods to do". Then when Yanagi was there, they would ask, "Could you do me a favor in God's name?"

Yanagi always responded in a friendly manner and easily solved about half of the problems of those who consulted with him. (The other half of the time, he would just listen to what they said, then laugh and say things like, "It's really hard, but I'll do my best.", etc.)

In particular, the problem that could definitely be solved is when Haruaki saw something vague near the person asking the question. In those moments, Yanagi listened to the counselor and took him to the place where his problems lay. (That could be a family member who was unwell, on a farm machine that was not working properly, or at a location where accidents had recently occurred.)

There, something darker than the blurry color seen near the person they consulted floated, and sometimes there were groups of strangely colored Mitama. Haruaki felt uncomfortable and unbearable when he saw such a scene, but Yanagi laughed lightly and said, "I think I'm a little stuck.", and crossed his index and middle fingers.

"Man, earth and sky..."

Yanagi looked very beautiful when he said those words. Light rose from the depths of the earth, rising from Yanagi's feet to his entire body.

By simply doing that, the unpleasant feelings would dissipate and the problem the client was having would be resolved.

"Yanagi-san is amazing."

On the way home after completing a request from a person in the shopping district, Haruaki, who was accompanying him, revealed that to him in a low voice.

"You can do anything like magic."

Yanagi laughed out loud.

"I can't do anything. I am the connection. When bad things happen due to stagnation of life force, all you have to do is unclog it and make it flow cleanly. It is up to people to restore the unnatural spin of nature and resolve the rest through the life line."

"I see, are there things you don't do?"

"That's true. No matter what you do, there are things that cannot be avoided. Trying to do something about something that cannot be avoided creates a new stagnation. It is human nature to accept the way of heaven."

At that moment, Haruaki didn't really understand what Yanagi was saying, but the things that couldn't be helped were the fact that Haruaki's parents died so early that he didn't even remember them. He vaguely thought that might include the fact that his grandfather, who was his only relative, passed away after it, leaving Haruaki alone.

"Hey!"

Suddenly, Yanagi lifted Haruaki's body.

".....?!"

Haruaki was surprised and stiff.

Haruaki didn't remember being picked up by anyone other than his grandfather. His parents probably hugged him when he was a baby, but he didn't remember it, and the only time his grandfather hugged him was when he was a toddler (later, his grandfather developed back problems).

Haruaki was shocked and humiliated when Yanagi picked him up. In his childish mind, he felt sorry for making him be too careful and allowing him to hold his six-year-old body.

"Hey, Haruaki. Don't float."

Yanagi lowered his eyebrows and put a little more pressure on his arms around Haruaki.

"Float...?"

"Haruaki, you have a great ability to connect with the wind. You unconsciously tried to manipulate the wind to fly."

Haruaki was confused.

"I cannot fly."

"Haha, that's true. But with the help of the wind, you're trying to float, even just a little bit. Haruaki, don't you like being hugged?"

"...No."

"But I don't feel like giving myself away. Hmm, that means I'm not a good enough father. I'm diligent, sorry."

Yanagi nodded several times as if he understood, saying things that Haruaki didn't really understand.

On the way to the Amamiya house, Yanagi was careful not to drop Haruaki and hugged him tightly so that he wouldn't fly away, and Haruaki remained frozen in place.

A gentle breeze blew steadily beneath them.



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"That kid is so good, I'm a little worried."

In the living room of the Amamiya family, the owner, Hatsu Amamiya, said that while he was drinking tea. Makoto Yanagi made a slight comment: "Well, I see."

It had been about a month since Haruaki arrived at the Amamiya family.

Haruaki helped him clean up dinner, and when he suggested that he take a bath, he quickly took a bath, brushed his teeth before being told, bowed his head to say goodnight, and retired to his room. He is a surprisingly "good" kid for a six-year-old.

Neither Yanagi nor Hatsu had turned against him or asked Haruaki for anything.

"As he is a very intelligent child, it may be difficult for him to act like a child. Since we are not his immediate family, I guess he first thinks about the inconvenience he can cause and doesn't want to be spoiled or selfish."

Yanagi opened the window and was sitting on the terrace drinking sake. There was a beautiful full moon, so he wanted to make a joke about it in order to observe the moon.

"Compared to that, you were a villain who always caused trouble as soon as you arrived on Ayaka Island."

Yanagi laughed out loud.

"Although I have no blood relatives, I instinctively knew that Ayaka Island was the place where I would return to my life. So, everyone on Ayaka Island is my family."

After saying that, Yanagi remembered the calm expression on Haruaki's face, which was uncharacteristic of a child, as if he was trying to hide his loneliness.

"Haruaki was born with deep roots on Ayaka Island, and if he stretched out his hand, anyone would take it, but now that his family is gone, there is no one he can lean on anymore. That's what I'm thinking "

Yanagi looked up at the vast sky of Ninoshima and tilted his glass as he gazed at the pale golden moon.

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Haruaki's life continued to pass calmly and smoothly.

They give him three meals a day at the Amamiya family and let him use a room.

He lived a life as comfortable, as when his grandfather lived, if not more so.

Even so, something cold was gradually gathering deep in Haruaki's chest.

Every time it rains, he feels his core tremble and his steps become restless, as if he were walking in the dark.

Young Haruaki didn't realize for sure that it was loneliness.

"That..."

His life was supposed to go smoothly, but one day, Haruaki discovered it.

A corner of Ninoshima Park (although it's just a vacant lot with no play equipment). At that time of year, the flowerbeds where the cosmos was supposed to bloom were withered.

Ninoshima is called the island of water and flowers. According to his grandfather, the plants on Ayaka Island grow well thanks to the flow of life, and no matter what kind of flowers you plant there, they will take root and bloom beautifully. In fact, Haruaki has never seen seasonal flowers die without blooming on Ayaka Island.

"I'm confused."

In the bed of withered flowers, he could see the faded clothes that people who come to Yanagi for advice usually wear on their backs. It's also darker than anything he's seen so far.

As he approached, he found a Mitama lying in the middle of a withered flowerbed covered in misty flowers.

"Ah!"

The center of the Mitama was a mysterious reddish color. Haruaki slowly lifted the fallen Mitama with both hands. The Mitama, which was supposed to be floating freely and lightly in the air, was limp like a dead jellyfish in Haruaki's hands. His normally clean and transparent body was now cloudy with a reddish tinge in the center.

For Haruaki, the Mitama was a "symbol of good things". A place where the Mitama are lively is clean and easy to breathe.

The Mitama's abnormality worried Haruaki.

"Haruaki-kun? What's wrong?"

A boy playing in the park called him.

"This... Mitama is weird..."

At a loss, Haruaki showed him the Mitama in his hand, which was in an abnormal state. He felt like asking for help, but when he saw the boy, he bowed his head in amazement.

"What? Hand?"

That's all. The Mitama are invisible to most people. Thinking about that, Haruaki's anxiety increased.

The other children who were playing went to see Haruaki, who seemed worried.

"What happen?"

"Haruaki-kun, you're doing something, but I really don't understand it."

"Haruaki-kun, you're a bit strange, so sometimes I don't understand what you say."

"Mom said you're not weird, you're a great kid."

"Hmm."

There was no harm to the children. They were even nice to Haruaki because they didn't make fun of him or walk away just because they didn't understand his behavior.

However, the line the children drew between themselves and Haruaki made Haruaki feel alone.

Something cold gathered in his chest again.

Haruaki ignored the coldness and smiled.

"I'm sorry I said something strange. It was nothing."

The children turned their heads, not looking very convinced, but the atmosphere changed when the voices of the adults calling to them echoed through the square.

"Kyo-chan! Let's go home!"

"Nao-kun! Let's go!"

The meeting in the meeting room should have ended. Meanwhile, the parents who had let their children play in the square entered one by one and each one called out to their child.

The children headed towards their parents, happily or reluctantly, thinking that it was time. Seeing Haruaki alone, a neighbor of the Amamiya family lowered his eyebrows and said, feeling a little sorry for him.

"Haruaki-kun, you are currently living at Amamiya-san's house. Shall I take you there?"

Haruaki shook his head with a smile on his face.

"It's okay. I have something to do."

"Really? I don't think I should worry because Haruaki-kun will be fine, but please go home before it gets dark."

The children returned home to their respective parents. As he watched the children saying something to their mothers with sweet voices, and the children being carried on their fathers' shoulders and cheering, Haruaki suddenly noticed something.

"That... I feel confused..."

The uneasy feeling that was clinging to the Mitama, who seemed to be sick and was probably causing the flowers in the flowerbed to wither, was also felt in Haruaki's body.

His body was heavy. The coldness that had built up inside his chest was getting colder.

Without knowing why, he became extremely sad and tears welled up in his eyes. Haruaki, who was a child who rarely cried, became even more confused and anxious because he was crying.

The color of the Mitama in his hand became worse and worse as Haruaki's chest grew colder. Instinctively, Haruaki felt that things would not go well if they continued like this.

(Yanagi-san. I'm sure Yanagi-san will do something about it.)

Haruaki ran out with the Mitama wrapped in his palm, who was in an abnormal state.

"Oh, Haruaki-kun?"

On the way, he crossed paths with a father and son who lived in the Amamiya family's neighborhood. They called to him, but he ignored them and he concentrated on running. He felt that he should not interact with other people. He thought that, if he let anyone else come into contact with that weak Mitama and the uneasy feeling that had spread through Haruaki's body, at worst, he would end up like the flowers in that flowerbed.

He chose a path with as few people as possible and ran while he moved his little legs as much as he could.

His anxiety increased. He was lonely, sad and scared. As his body gained weight, Haruaki lost the strength in his legs and fell.

"Ah!"

The Mitama, who was wrapped in his palm, fell to the ground.

The Mitama, completely dyed a stagnant red-black color, stretched helplessly on the ground. Wondering if he was dead, Haruaki crawled towards him in his fallen position.

Suddenly, a crack appeared in the dull color of the Mitama.

"Ah..."

Haruaki timidly withdrew the hand he was about to extend to the Mitama.

The crack that ran through the Mitama slowly opened.



Inside was a bulging eyeball.

In front of Haruaki, who was watching silently, the red-black Mitama that had turned into a large eyeball emerged and began to stir up the earth around it.

The earth flew and accumulated around the Mitama, whose eyes were open. The amount of accumulated soil increased at a rapid rate and the surrounding terrain was hollowed out. Haruaki took a step back, shielding his face from the violent sandstorm.

Finally, the collected soil took the shape of a clay doll made by a child.

The eyeball that was supposed to be the Mitama until just now was embedded in the big head and was moving.

"What...?!"

The clay doll turned its bulging eyes towards Haruaki. Moving slowly and shuffling past him, he took a step closer to him.

Haruaki was frozen in place, unable to escape.

The clay doll gave off a rotten, stagnant smell that made him feel as if he were sinking in a swamp. In fact, he couldn't move as if his legs were stuck in a swamp. He couldn't even make a sound.

The clay doll's hand approached Haruaki.

For some reason, what appeared in Haruaki's mind at that moment was the image of Makoto Yanagi while he was solving the problems of the people of the island.

When Yanagi crosses his fingers and sings a few words, a mysterious and very beautiful power rises from his feet and envelops his body.

(I'm sure Yanagi-san wouldn't be afraid of this at all.)

As soon as he thought that, he felt a strange sensation, as if something warm flowed from under Haruaki's feet and spread throughout his body.

The one-eyed clay doll that was trying to get closer to Haruaki stopped moving.

"You have an incredible talent."

He heard a voice above his head. It was a deep, low, resonant voice that he had grown accustomed to hearing for some time now.

When he looked up, Makoto Yanagi was standing right behind him. He lightly supported Haruaki's body, who had stumbled from looking up too much under the weight of his head.

"Um, Yanagi-san, that... Mitama..."

Haruaki pointed to the clay doll and tried to explain it somehow. However, Yanagi nodded as if he knew everything even before Haruaki spoke and patted him on the head.

"It's an Aramitama. This is a monster born from the stagnation of the earth. Haruaki, go behind me and touch my body."

"Ah, yes."

Although he was confused because he didn't know what the instructions were, Haruaki immediately obeyed. He stayed hidden behind Yanagi and grabbed him by the waist.

Yanagi smiled and crossed the index and middle fingers of both hands in front of his chest.

"Man, earth and sky..."

The moment Yanagi sang that, Haruaki was once again struck by the sensation he had felt moments before, as if something warm was flowing under his feet. It was also dozens of times stronger.

"Aaah!"

If what he felt before was a gentle flowing current, this time it was a violent waterfall. From beneath his feet, deep in the earth, deep within Ayaka Island, a torrent of incredible power rose up and filled Haruaki. The power passed through Haruaki's body and leaked, but it did not leak from Yanagi's body but rather circulated through his body, shining.

"All things endure the shadow and embrace the light, and use open energy to create peace."

When Yanagi spoke those words, the power that had filled his body was released towards the clay doll, enveloping it.

Immediately, the clay doll's sinister eye went slack and narrowed, as if it had been released from the pain, and it began to crumble, glowing with a golden glow.

"He is disappearing..."

When the eye crumbled, the rotten clay doll turned into soft sand and finally melted in the wind.

Haruaki opened his eyes as wide as he could and looked at Yanagi standing in front of him. By touching Yanagi's body, Haruaki literally felt the mysterious power that Yanagi controlled.

"Now..."

"It is called pacifying the Mitama, and it is the work of connecting the pulse that calms things that have become stagnant and bad, and restores harmony. Pulse connection draws energy from the life line that flows at the bottom of this Ayaka Island. I borrow that and

do the work. When you touched me, you could feel the power flowing under your feet, right?"

"Y-yes."

"If you can unite that flow of power with your own, you can also become one with natural things like wind, water, and fire, and make them follow your will."

When Haruaki bowed his head, unable to understand, Yanagi turned his head and said, "That's right.", and slowly picked him up.

"Ah."

"Hold on tight."

After saying that, Yanagi said something special again.

"Between heaven and earth, it will never end, it will move and never come out!"

The wind rose beneath his feet. Haruaki was shocked and clung to Yanagi's neck. He thought the wind was going to blow him away, but the wind lifted not only Haruaki's small body, but also Yanagi's adult body.

"Eh?!"

The ground moved away. Ridden by the wind from below, the two continued to rise. Now he could look down at where the two of them were, and the canals surrounding Ninoshima, the fields, and the people who work there became smaller, like miniatures.

Haruaki was surprised, but strangely, he wasn't scared.

"Look, you're one with the wind, aren't you?"

Yanagi said in a light tone.

"If you practice properly, you will be able to do the same in a short time."

"I...?"

"Ah. Actually, although you still didn't know what the lifeline was or what the technique was, you once tried to pick up the wind and float away, right?"

He didn't remember it. While Haruaki was stunned, Yanagi burst out laughing.

"I never thought that you could borrow the power of my life line unconsciously. It means that Haruaki is loved by Ayaka Island."

(I'm loved.)

Haruaki was stunned and looked at the scene below.

As Ninoshima moved away, he could see the entire island, Ichinoshima and Minoshima, which are connected by the sea railway track, and beyond, the volcanic island of Shinoshima, and in the distance, he could see the shadows of Gonoshima, Rokunoshima and Nananoshima, islands that cannot be easily accessed by the inhabitants of Ninoshima.

He was floating at a height that was almost like a cloud, and normally he would have been freezing, but Haruaki, whose life force flowed through Yanagi's arms, didn't feel any cold at all.

Haruaki was simply admiring the aerial view of Ayaka Island.

That's where he lives. Little by little the feeling arose that this is a place where he can love and be loved.

At that moment, Haruaki saw a line of light connecting the Ayaka islands like the Big Dipper.

He felt as if the island and the sea were transparent and he could see the river of light below.

"Yanagi-san..."

"Ah, that's right. That is the life line. The place where life is born and returns. The peace on Ayaka Island is based on that harmony."

(One day you will protect this sanctuary and by extension Ayaka Island.)

He remembered the words his grandfather said when he was alive.

After about ten minutes of walking in the air, Yanagi slowly lowered his altitude and landed in the garden of the Amamiya family in Ninoshima.

Haruaki surrendered completely to Yanagi's arms. Although he was flying at an incredible height, he felt safe and relaxed when Yanagi held him.

Before he knew it, the cold loneliness that had been building up in Haruaki since his grandfather died was replaced by a warm determination.

Yanagi lowered Haruaki to the ground. Maybe it's the remains of flying in the sky, but, even though he was stepping on the ground, his feet felt spongy, making him stumble a little. Pressing his legs, he stood up and faced Yanagi.

"Yanagi-san, I have a favor to ask of you."

When Haruaki said that, Yanagi let out a strangely happy voice, "Oh!"

"This is your first time, right? Haruaki is going to ask me a favor. Go ahead and say it."

Haruaki straightened his back, looked at Yanagi's face and said...



"Please make me your disciple."

When he said it out loud, the temperature of determination in his chest rose.

"Grandpa said that one day I would protect Kaizumi Shrine and Ayaka Island. I want to be the person who can do that."

The corners of Yanagi's mouth turned up. A large hand rested on Haruaki's head and stroked him vigorously. The force was so strong that Haruaki's little head swayed from side to side.

"Ok. Then, from today on, Haruaki is my son and my disciple!"

Yanagi declared, smiling with all his might.

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"Man, earth and sky..."

Haruaki crossed his fingers and spoke the words that connected him to his life line. Energy surged beneath his feet. He can't compare to the torrent-like force he experienced when he was attached to Yanagi, but he absorbed the life force and circulated it through his body, as if carefully drawing water from a small spring. With his body full of life, he called to the wind. He blew a gentle breeze and the piece of paper cut out in the shape of a person that Haruaki was holding in his hand appeared.

"Oh, good, good."

Yanagi, who was lying on the edge of the river, praised him. Although he was still far from being able to fly, he was able to float paper dolls.

Manipulate the wind and make the paper dolls fly in the direction he wants. The paper doll glided through the air and saw an old man walking down a hill.

"Ah, that's Grandpa Hatsu."

Walking towards them was Hatsu Amamiya, the head of the Amamiya family. The paper doll flew towards Hatsu and landed on his shoulder. Hatsu approached laughing. When Hatsu arrived right next to Haruaki, who was still keeping his fingers crossed, and Yanagi, who was lying on the grass by the river, Hatsu took the paper doll that was tied to his shoulder and held it up.

"It looks like you guys are having a lot of fun playing."

"It's not a game. I was watching your training. Right, Haruaki?"

"Yes, sir!"

"I see. Training is fine, but now I'm going shopping, so please help me carry my things."

Yanagi responded, "Ah..." and stood up. Haruaki also enthusiastically followed Hatsu.

They went to the shopping street and bought fish, vegetables, milk and seasoning broth for dinner that night. Yanagi carried the heavy things and Haruaki carried the lighter bag.

"Is there anything else you want?"

Hatsu asked Haruaki in the middle of the shopping street after completing all the shopping.

If it were the usual Haruaki, he would have responded that he was fine, but after a bit of hesitation and trepidation, Haruaki pointed to the candy shop that was right next to him and said...

"Um... I want candy."

He said that, his cheeks turned a little red from the embarrassment of begging.

After about a second, Hatsu's hands and Yanagi's hands reached out from both sides at the same time and caressed his head as if scratching him.

They bought him so many sweets that it overflowed from both of his hands.

### **LONELY BOYS: THE CASE OF IBUKI AKA**

"I have no intention of raising you.", said Ibuki Aka's aunt.

It was the night after Aka's parents' funeral. Aka was eight years old.

Because Aka was hospitalized, he was unable to attend his parents' funeral. Aka was in the same car as his parents when they fell down a mountain road, and only Aka barely survived. No, it seems that he was saved, by his aunt who had special powers.

"What will happen to me now?"

Aka asked his aunt while he was lying in bed. His aunt looked at Aka without changing her expression.

"I'm looking for a suitable place to leave you."

He wondered if that was in some facility. Aka didn't know any other relatives apart from that aunt.

"I want to live with you."

Aka was very depressed. It's not that he felt attached to his aunt, nor did he particularly dislike going to the institution, nor did he want to cling to the person in front of him out of sadness.

But...

"I also want power like you."

Just as his aunt saved him, Aka could have saved his parents if he had the same strength as his aunt. When he thought about that, he felt a deep sense of regret that was even stronger than sadness, as if it was wreaking havoc inside him. The back of his eyes became hot and his vision became blurry. He sobbed hard and resisted tears.

His aunt's expression did not change when she saw the crying child in the hospital bed, his body covered in bandages.

"I won't raise you."

His aunt said it again.

"...However, I will try to satisfy your wishes."

After saying that, his aunt turned on her heel.

A month later, when Aka's wounds had healed, his aunt took him to an island called Ayaka Island and gave him to a man she knew, who was not even related to him, as if she were giving a dog or a cat.

However, his aunt had certainly made a decision that met Aka's wishes.

Makoto Yanagi was a colleague of his aunt known as a "pulse connection", and Aka became his disciple.

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Putting his index and middle fingers together, he crossed them, calming his breathing. He traced the sensations experienced by the man who became his teacher and the boy who became his older brother and training partner.

"Man, earth and sky..."

He spoke "powerful words" and opened his senses. He felt the power flow from his feet. His head bobbed dizzily. When he attempted to touch the life line that flowed underground on Ayaka Island, he felt as if the overwhelming sensation carried him away. Aka regained consciousness by pressing his feet and feeling that he was about to be swallowed, and concentrated.

Most of the life force he drew from his life line left his body, but he was able to circulate some of it through his body. However, it didn't last long, and as soon as Aka let out the

breath he had been holding, the life force that had filled his body dissipated and disappeared.

"Wow, that's amazing. As expected of Yanagi-san's disciple."

Yuki Kodama, the man who was sweeping while Aka trained, rested the broom he was carrying on his shoulder and clapped.

"It is better not to hold your breath when pumping vital energy. It is necessary to relax and let the air circulate properly through the body."

The one who added some advice with a knowing look on his face was his older brother, Haruaki.

"Haruaki and Aka are amazing for their age."

Kodama was constantly impressed and Aka tilted his head to the side.

"So, Kodama-san, do you really understand what I was doing just now? Can you see the Mitama?"

"Yes. I am a person who can see the Mitama. When I was a child, I never thought that one day I would become Kado's apprentice and a connection master, but when Yanagi-sensei came to me, since then, he has been able to solve "All my problems. I can't really do anything but see the Mitamas, so I took over the family business and became a gardener."

Kodama was a gardener who had been pruning the trees at Kaizumi Shrine since Haruaki's grandfather was still alive. Although he is still young, he is barely 30 years old, he firmly follows in the footsteps of his father, who retired due to a bad leg. Aka also heard Kodama say things like, "I can hear the voices of the plants!", but regardless of whether he can hear the voices or not, he senses the vitality surrounding the plants and taking the appropriate form. It can be an intermediate line.

After Yanagi took over management of Kaizumi Shrine, Kodama not only helped trim the shrine's trees, but also cleaned the grounds and maintained the shrine building.

That day, Yanagi went somewhere on "foreign affairs" (Yanagi's trip could be both for connection work and drinking and gambling), so Kodama arrived in Minoshima with Aka and Haruaki and was cleaning the temple grounds, while watching them train.

Minoshima has more vitality than Ninoshima, which makes training easier. Together with Haruaki, Aka continued to practice feeling, touching, and drawing from the life line.

When Kodama finished cleaning the shrine, he told them: "It's time to go home." Then, Aka and Haruaki interrupted their training and returned to Ninoshima on the sea train with Kodama. Usually, Kodama's job was to lead Aka and Haruaki on days when Yanagi wasn't around.



They can walk back to the Amamiya house from the sea train station, but on days when Kodama is with them, they usually take a short detour in their car. They were going to Kodama's parents' house to pick up their four-year-old daughter Hana. Since Kodama's wife works in Ichinoshima, it was Kodama's responsibility to pick up his daughter.

"Ah! he's a baby!"

Hana, who was carried in Kodama's arms, pointed to Aka who was sitting in the back seat and let out an amused voice.

"Stop calling me baby."

He said that with a bitter expression, but Hana repeated good-naturedly, "Baby! Baby!"

Aka has only been on Ayaka Island for about a month and has only seen Hana a few times, apparently she liked the sound of the name.

"Even though I'm a big brother, I'm still a baby.", seemed to reach a certain point in four-year-old Hana.

He placed Hana in a child seat and the car started again. Haruaki was smiling and talking to Hana with Aka between them. Wishing he had sat opposite Haruaki, Aka leaned against the back of the seat and looked over the back of Haruaki's head as he leaned forward. As he vaguely observed the idyllic rural landscape that he had become accustomed to passing through, he suddenly heard a sharp brake sound and his body jerked forward.

The sudden braking caused the seat belt to dig into his body. Out of reflex, he reached out and supported Hana's body, but Aka didn't even need to help, and Hana's body was supported by the harness of the child seat.

"I'm sorry! Are you okay?"

Kodama looked back in panic.

Through the windshield he saw a deer running down the road. He apparently had to brake hard to avoid hitting him when he jumped toward the car.

"It's okay.", Haruaki said in his usual calm voice, but Aka could hear his heart beating violently. He broke out in a disgusting sweat.

"Aka?"

Haruaki looked in and raised his eyebrows suspiciously. Aka turned his face away from him to avoid that look.

"Woah..." The sound of Hana crying was heard.

"Oh, Hana-chan, you're very surprised. It's okay."

Haruaki called softly. Aka let out the breath he had been holding, as if to mix it with Hana's screams.

"Haruaki. Let's change places."

"Eh?"

"You're better at calming her down."

Pushing the confused Haruaki's shoulder, they got out of the car and swapped sitting positions.

Haruaki, who was sitting next to Hana, called her calmly, and Hana, who had only cried out of surprise, immediately calmed down. "Sorry, I'll drive slowly." Kodama said, starting the car.

Aka turned his entire body towards the window and pretended to be looking at the scenery outside. At the window, he could see Haruaki worrying about Aka.

Aka's parents died in a car accident. Aka barely remembered that moment.

However, when Kodama's car suddenly braked, the memory came back to him like a bursting bubble.

A typhoon night with poor visibility, rain and wind. A car going down a mountain road. The sound of the brakes echoing. However, due to the rain, the tires skidded and the car was unable to complete the turn and fell off a cliff.

Bleeding parents. His body did not move. Finally, his aunt appeared and, after briefly exchanging words with her mother, she turned to Aka.

Sitting on the futon in his room that the Amamiya family gave him, Aka groaned at the memory and covered his face with his hands.

He was rescued by his aunt, who was a "connection". He knew it for a fact. That's why he wanted to be able to become a "connector" and protect the people he cares about in an emergency.

However, vivid flashbacks of forgotten memories seemed to swallow Aka's consciousness as he looked into the future.

When he closed his eyes, the vision of the accident flickered behind his eyelids and sleep seemed unlikely. Aka gave up and got up from the futon.

He quietly left the room and tiptoed down the hallway. Haruaki slept in the next room and Yanagi slept in the room beyond. Careful not to wake them, he went downstairs and out into the garden.

The nights in the countryside are dark. With only the moonlight illuminating it, he could see a Mitama flying fluffy over the pond. In the darkness, the Mitama emitted a life force and seemed to glow faintly.

As he watched the Mitama swim in the air like a jellyfish floating in the sea, Aka clutched his chest.

"Tsu..."

He felt more pain than loneliness or sadness. His parents died. The fact that he should have understood and swallowed was now pressing painfully on his throat.

"You cannot sleep?"

Suddenly, in the garden at night, when no one else was supposed to be around, a voice shouted and Aka looked up in shock.

Makoto Yanagi was sitting cross-legged on a small bridge over a pond in the garden, smoking a pipe. Aka was shocked and blinked repeatedly. He was confused since there shouldn't have been anyone there just now. He is like a mysterious monster.

Aka still doesn't fully understand what kind of person Yanagi is. He easily took in Aka, a child with no blood connection, and teaches him how to train in response to Aka's request to become a "connection", and is said to be a great hermit and trusted by the people of the island. He also likes to drink and can be a bit rough.

"Master..."

"Well, there's a lot going on."

Even when he asked him if he couldn't sleep, Yanagi didn't try to probe the reason and just said it in a casual tone.

At that attitude, Aka's rigid body relaxed a little.

After having a flashback of the moment of the accident, Haruaki looked at him with concern. That must have come from Haruaki's kindness, and the intimacy that had begun to blossom since they met, but for Aka, it was somehow suffocating. Maybe it was because he didn't want to show his weaknesses to his brother, who was of similar age.

"...Life returns to the path of life, right?"

Aka remembered the story that Yanagi had taught him about how to grasp the life line when he began training in connection. The life line is like a great river through which the energy that is the source of life flows, and all things are born there and return there.

"Life and death are nothing more than phenomena in the cycle of life... Is that an idea? But if you don't fully understand it, can't you connect?"

The death of Aka's parents is just one of the most important events. There is no need to be sad because the lives that were destroyed will happen again.

Those thoughts did not save Aka. He felt a strong resistance as he tried to hide the pain that Aka was feeling at that moment.

"That's fine with you, Aka."

Yanagi pleasantly exhaled the smoke from his mouth and spoke in a relaxed tone.

"If you force yourself to swallow ideas that you can't swallow, you will only stagnate. You have to understand the nature of life and the principles of life in this world, but you can't adjust your emotions to that."

Aka stared at Yanagi. The Mitama was flying around Yanagi, who was sitting comfortably and without energy. He wondered if he also had a great affinity with the Mitama.

"You want to be the link that helps people, right?"

In response to the casually asked question, Aka hardened his expression, nodded, and then lowered his face.

"My family died. I didn't want them to die. I was left alone, and no matter what I do from now on, my family won't come back... But I don't want anyone to die in front of me again. I don't care about fate nor reason. I just don't want them to die..."

A large palm was placed on top of his head. Before he knew it, Yanagi had gotten up and was facing Aka, and was roughly stroking his head.

"Ah..."

"You are a kind person. You have a different kind of kindness than Haruaki."

When Yanagi stopped stroking his head with his strong hand and moved away from him, he smiled happily. It may not have been an appropriate attitude to show a child with a sad expression on his face as he reflected on the death of his parents, but Aka admired his smile.

"Although you may feel alone, you are now part of the Yanagi clan. Don't forget that we are your current family, Aka."

Even when they told him that he was a family member, it didn't really make sense to him. Although he is grateful that Yanagi took him in, and it is true that they live in the same house, they are not close enough to call it family.

Aka received Yanagi's words with an ambiguous gesture, between tilting his head and nodding.

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That day it was raining a lot.

"Ah, the forecast wasn't for such heavy rain today."

Standing on the damp edge of the Kaizumi Shrine residential building, Kodama lowered his eyebrows in annoyance.

Aka and Haruaki were studying by reading jutsu related books in the library. Although the sun was shining until around noon, the sky suddenly darkened and it began to rain heavily, with no sign of letting up.

Watching the rain fall to the ground, Aka frowned and turned around.

"Aka?"

Perhaps sensing something in his expression, Haruaki called out to him in a questioning voice.

"What's happen?"

"Do you hate rain?"

"...Not really. I don't think there's anyone who likes it that much."

The heavy rain reminds him of the day his parents died in the typhoon.

However, he had no intention of talking to Haruaki about that and replied curtly, but Haruaki did not press any further and instead he muttered, "I hope this ends soon."

"If things continue like this, I don't think the sea train will move today."

Kodama crossed his arms and groaned.

Yanagi was also absent that day, and Kodama, Haruaki, and Aka were at Kaizumi Shrine. Naturally, due to the heavy rains there were no visitors to the sanctuary.

"If the sea train doesn't seem to move, let's stay here today with Kodama-san."

For Haruaki, that is the house where his grandfather lived until his death. He guessed that there was no particular problem even if they couldn't return to the Amamiya house for a day.

"That's right. Well, I'll check the station once. Haruaki and Aka, please stay here."

It's been a long time since he had anything to do with that, Kodama said and left.

Aka looked back at the book in his hand. He tried to concentrate on following the words so as not to let his thoughts wander to unnecessary things.

As he tried to somehow gather the energy that he was about to disperse and concentrate on following the string of letters that was still difficult for Aka, his vision suddenly shook.

There was a vertical tremor, as if he was pushing up, and then he swayed to the side. An earthquake. Aka put down the book he was holding and looked at the situation. Ayaka Island is a volcanic island, so there are many earthquakes. Since earthquakes can be a sign of an eruption, emergency evacuation drills are often held, and Aka, who had just arrived on Ayaka Island, knew this. He didn't get angry, he just stayed alert and observed the situation.

"What?"

He felt a tremor from the depths of the earth that was different from a normal earthquake. A disturbing noise was heard.

Haruaki stood up without thinking.

The earthquake and rumblings subsided quickly. However, an unpleasant feeling of anxiety persisted and Aka stood up.

"I'll go see what's going on outside."

"I'm going too."

He immediately agreed with Haruaki's words and they began to run at the same time.

They jumped in the rain without umbrellas. The falling raindrops hit the kimono the two were wearing, and it quickly became heavy and wet. They jumped over puddles and ran across the large fields.

When they reached the top of the long stone steps leading to the sea railway station, they realized the true nature of the noise.

".....!"

"It's a landslide."

Next to Aka, who was holding his breath, Haruaki muttered in shock.

That heavy rain had loosened the soil and it seemed that the earthquake had caused the mountainside to collapse. The earth flowed and the trees fell towards the stone steps, and more earth covered them.

He could hear his own heart beating very loudly. His heart was beating so hard that his chest hurt. His breathing, which had increased due to running, did not calm down and became even heavier.

"Aka..."

Haruaki grabbed Aka's elbow.

"Let's contact Ninoshima."

"What about Kodama-san?"

"I don't know. Anyway, please help me."

Aka shook off Haruaki's hand that grabbed him elbow and ran away.

"Aka!"

He ran down the stairs as if he were rolling down the stairs, hearing Haruaki's voice behind him. Half of the stone steps were buried by fallen trees and mud, blocking the path to the station. It would be fine if Kodama was right at the station or at the foot of the mountain and separated.

However, what would happen if a landslide occurred while Kodama was walking on those stone steps?

What if there is a small ball buried under that tree and in the ground?

"Kodama-san!"

He raised his voice even though it was almost drowned out by the sound of the heavy rain.

He ran around the accumulated dirt. He stumbled in the mud and fell, and his kimono became covered in mud, but he continued shouting Kodama's name.

The heavy rain, the mountainside. A sign of someone's death.

Inside Aka, the memory of when his parents died and the scene in front of him overlapped. Fear filled his body.

Hana's face appeared. A young girl who calls Aka "baby" and smiles innocently. If something happened to Kodama, she would lose her precious family. Hana and himself overlapped, and Aka clenched his fists tightly.

(Calm down. First, I have to find Kodama's whereabouts.)

He took a deep breath and managed to calm his erratic breathing.

As taught by Yanagi, all things are imbued with vitality. All natural objects, all plants and animals. Including humans, vitality circulates and is shaped.

Kodama has a talent that allows him to see the Mitama, so he has a little more vitality than normal people.

Aka told himself that he must feel it and closed his eyes.

The cold of the rain, the discomfort of a tight kimono, and the sound of raindrops hitting the ground disappeared. He tried to capture and feel the world in a deeper way than through their five senses.

There was something.

He felt the vitality circulating in the human form. He suddenly opened his eyes. Under the fallen trees that seemed to bend over each other, he felt Kodama's presence.

Aka turned pale and scratched the dirt with his hands.

There seemed to be space due to the overlapping trees, but it was covered in dirt. If this continued, he would die.

"No, no!"

He came to mind, one after another, images of Aka's parents no longer moving, of Kodama laughing and watching Aka and Haruaki training, and of Hana having fun in Kodama's arms.

With his fingers that were beginning to hurt, he desperately scraped the dirt.

"No!"

"Aka!"

He grabbed his hand that was scratching the dirt. Haruaki, with a serious expression, knelt next to Aka and took Aka's right hand.

"I called Amamiya's house and told Grandpa Hatsu about the situation. He said that he would contact me and direct people to where they are needed."

"That won't make it in time!"

"Kodama-san is down here, right?"

Aka nodded loudly.

With that alone, Haruaki swallowed Aka's appeal and made a decision.

"I will help you with my techniques."

"Ah... That's..."

He was about to ask him if he could do it, but he closed his mouth. He couldn't do it. If they don't do that, Kodama will die.

However, although Aka has been trained to sense the flow of life, he still cannot use any practical techniques. Although Haruaki is several steps ahead of Aka as a pulse connector, can he do it?

"I can't do it alone."

Haruaki looked deeply into his red eyes and said that.

"As I am now, I don't have enough life force to control. Even if I activate the technique, I won't have enough power to move the earth and sand. So please lend me your life power. The two of us will become one, and we will use our techniques. I will take control."

Aka shook off Haruaki's hand that was holding him. Immediately afterwards, he reconnected, put his palms together and squeezed hard.

"I understand."

They nodded and stood up. They raised their joined hands forward until they were parallel to their shoulders and breathed in unison.

Just for now, he remembered that Haruaki and him were one living being.

"Man, earth and sky...!"

The two voices were in perfect sync.

Drawing power from the great river of life flowing dazzlingly deep underground, they circulated life force from their feet to their entire body, and from their connected hands to Haruaki's body.

Their concentration was greater than ever. The life force that filled his body did not escape, but moved powerfully through Aka and Haruaki.

Haruaki took a deep breath.

"The softest and strongest in the world will fight and nothingness will enter the world!"

The life force gathered under Haruaki's will and took the form of a technique. Even Aka, who had become one with Haruaki through his life energy, could clearly sense the response. A strong wind rose from the feet of the two and turned into a tornado.

The tornado created by the spell kicked up dirt and sand. His connected hands shook and Haruaki gasped in pain. He is trying to somehow maintain the great power that he is using for the first time.

Aka put strength into the hand connected to Haruaki. He trusts Haruaki to control the technique. In that case, he is in charge of producing horsepower. He gained as much power as he could and passed it on to Haruaki.

He drew out an amount of life force that was too much for Aka. His head was spinning and his body felt strangely numb, but he didn't care what happened to him. He decided to become a link to prevent people from dying.

The tornado carried away the dirt and he could see the gap created by the folded trees. Inside was a small ball.

"Kodama-san!"

As soon as Aka raised her voice, the spell expired. Haruaki's knees buckled and he collapsed. Aka also collapsed, but managed to move his weak body and crawled closer to Kodama.

Kodama's body was not crushed under the tree and was carefully contained within the cavity, and at first glance it appeared that there were no major injuries. Aka shook his shoulder.

"Kodama-san, wake up!"

However, Kodama remained inert and did not open his eyes. Haruaki, who had approached him like Aka, put his hand to his mouth.

"Isn't he breathing...?"

Haruaki muttered in shock. Aka held his breath.

"That is..."

Besides, couldn't he help him? Couldn't he do anything? Did they let him die?

His body trembled in desperation.

"We did not arrive on time...?"

"No, you arrived on time."

A voice came from above.

When he looked up, Yanagi was floating in the sky. When Yanagi tied the seal, Kodama's body, who had fallen into the gap created by the fallen tree, floated, slid to the ground, and was safe on the flat ground.

Yanagi landed next to Kodama's body and placed his hand on his chest.

He could feel the life force flowing from Yanagi's palm into Kodama's body. Kodama's stagnant life force was swept away by Yanagi's powerful life force and began to flow.

With a deep cough, Kodama caught his breath. His throat hissed and he took a deep breath, but then he calmed down.

Seeing that Kodama's breathing had stabilized, Aka felt a wave of relief rise from the bottom of his stomach, making him want to cry.

At the same time as his heart became lighter, his body became heavy due to the reaction of drawing out more life force than he could handle, and he felt that he could no longer move a single finger.

"Well done, Haruaki, Aka."

Yanagi's large palm rested on the heads of Haruaki and Aka and caressed them tightly.



"I'm proud of you, my children."

With no way to resist, Aka allowed himself to be caressed, and with a more honest attitude than before, he accepted to be caressed by Yanagi's hands.

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Kodama was taken to a hospital in Ninoshima, but soon woke up and appeared healthy.

"Well, the moment I was swallowed by the landslide, I thought I was doomed. I'm a guy who can hear the voices of plants and the trees that fell screamed at me, "Here I am!" So I ran to that point and, just in time, I was able to slide into the gap. Space created by the falling trees. Well, the air was so thin that I quickly became stunned. I heard that Haruaki, Aka and Yanagi-sensei helped me! Thank you!"

After completing the routine studies, Kodama said that with a cheerful smile and went home with his wife and Hana, who had come to pick him up from the hospital.

Kodama's self-proclaimed claim of being a man who can hear the voices of plants was something he had to believe half the time, and Aka laughed weakly.

As soon as Haruaki and Aka, who had used a technique far beyond their own abilities, returned to the Amamiya house, the tension broke and they collapsed, and since they were completely soaked, they both developed fevers.

"Haruaki 38.3 degrees, Aka 38.6 degrees."

Yanagi, who was sitting cross-legged next to the bed, read the numbers on the two's thermometers.

"Aka is sicker."

"This is because Haruaki's normal temperature is lower."

They lay next to each other on the futon, and Aka and Haruaki talked to each other.

To make it easier to care for them, the two were placed in a room on the first floor, with futons lined up, rather than in their own rooms on the second floor.

"They both seem fine despite the fever."

Yanagi laughed happily.

"Children with fever, do you want to eat something?"

Hatsu looked into the room and asked that.

Haruaki fretted a little and then said in a low voice, "I want to eat warabi mochi."

Hatsu laughed and nodded.

"Haruaki, now you can say what you want." Yanagi said, seeming strangely happy as he directed his attention from him to Aka.

"What about you, Aka?"

He was about to respond that it was nothing, but then paused, thinking that that probably wasn't the answer Yanagi and the others wanted.

He assumed that he wasn't asking for reservations from him.

Even Aka felt the desire to approach them. After all, he would have to learn a lot from Yanagi in order to become a strong connection from now on, and he will continue to be indebted to the Amamiya family.

"...Meat."

When he said that, Haruaki looked at Aka with a surprised look.

"What, you can eat meat, even if you're sick?!"

"You are sick, so you should eat some meat and get better quickly."

"Will eating meat cure me? Well, I guess I'll do my best to eat it too..."

What was that? Honestly? Aka glanced at the brother next to him. Haruaki, whose cheeks were red with fever and who was breathing a little labored, seemed to be considering whether or not he could eat the meat with a serious expression on his face.

Yanagi said happily, "Despite the fever, you seem to be feeling fine."

He wondered if he could make it there. A vital link that can save people's lives. Under the tutelage of that master, with his brother.

To quickly heal his body, Aka pulled the futon over his shoulders to sleep until the meat was ready.

### **LONELY BOYS: THE CASE OF SAGAWA JINGI**

Jingi Sagawa lost his blood family when he was four years old.

At this time, Jingi was floating in the sea.

It wasn't painful. No, it was painful when he fell into the sea, but the painful sensation soon disappeared and he glided smoothly as if he was swimming in a dream.

The sea was light blue and there were many fish swimming around. The fish looked at a strange creature in the ocean (they never saw a human baby underwater) and then left.

His dream consciousness gradually became hazy, but in the midst of that, Jingi saw a large river of light.

It was such a beautiful and shiny gold that it attracted him. Immediately, Jingi's body and mind seemed to be drawn closer together by the river of light.

Just as Jingi's body was about to dissolve into the river of light, someone's hand lifted him up.

So...

The river of light disappeared from Jingi's sight as he was pulled out of the sea and a man's face appeared in front of him.

"Yanagi-sensei! What the hell is this...?"

Someone next to him screamed in surprise. The man who stopped Jingi narrowed his eyes in pain.

"It's probably a boat accident. This child was the only one who was saved. Please call an ambulance. Also, I would like you to organize a search at sea. I will also do a search."

The man entrusted Jingi's body to another person, floated to the surface, and flew over the sea.

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The Sagawa family's boat capsized in an accident and only his young son survived.

Hearing this, Haruaki frowned in pain. When he looked to the side, he saw that Aka was also silent with a gloomy expression on his face. Although he has never tried to find out the details, Aka is also a boy who lost his family in an accident, was left alone, and was taken in by Yanagi.

"I heard that Yanagi-sensei was the one who found Jingi-chan who was saved."

Momoko, who brought the news of the death of the Sagawa family, lowered her eyes sadly and said that.

Momoko is Hatsu's granddaughter and, although she is still in high school, she is a very mature girl. Momoko's mother passed away at a young age, and her father, a son-in-law of the Amamiya family, is often away from home, traveling to Ichinoshima and the mainland for work, so Momoko spends about half the week at Hatsu's house.

Momoko, the heiress of the Amamiya family, the large landowners of Ninoshima, used to help Hatsu with his work as a landowner when he was unable to do so. Since the Sagawa family was also built on the land of Amamiya, Momoko also seemed to be planning to help with the consequences of the family leaving a young child behind.

Haruaki nodded slightly.

"At that moment, my master made a surprised face and suddenly left. He headed straight towards the ocean and seemed to have found Jingi-kun..."

Haruaki and Aka were in the garden of the Amamiya house, where Yanagi was watching his training. Suddenly, Yanagi seemed to sense something and turned his gaze towards the sea, saying, "I'll be out soon." And using his technique, he flew away. Haruaki and Aka looked blankly.

Yanagi rescued Jingi, who had reached the shore, and entrusted him to a fisherman who was nearby, and went out to sea to search for the people who were supposed to be in the same boat. Jingi's parents and grandfather were apparently never found alive.

"What will happen to Jingi?"

Aka asked in a dark voice. Momoko shook her head silently.

"I can't believe it yet, Jingi-chan, he has no other relatives on Ayaka Island..."

Haruaki also knows about Jingi. He was a mischievous child and had the nickname: "The little monster of Ayaka Island". He is a healthy boy, but his heart hurt when he thought about what would happen if he was left alone.

He heard the sliding door to the front door open. Thinking that Yanagi or Hatsu, who had been absent due to the Sagawa family's accident, had returned, Aka went to find them.

Yanagi and Hatsu were at the entrance, and Inou was behind them.

When Yanagi looked at Haruaki and Aka's face...

"Let's have a family reunion."

After saying that...

"You are going to have a little brother."

Yanagi, Haruaki, Aka, Hatsu, Momoko, and Inou gathered around the Amamiya family's dining room table, and Yanagi said those words as the first thing they said when the "family reunion" began.

Haruaki and Aka gaped as Yanagi looked at them and exchanged sidelong glances in confusion.

If that were said by a normal father, it would be a mother who has a baby in her womb, but Yanagi is a master, even if he acts as a father, and there is no equivalent to her mother. Then...

"Are you taking on a new apprentice?"

"Yes..."

Yanagi nodded in response to Haruaki's question. Aka had a momentary expression that said, "At a time like this...", but that expression quickly changed to "No way...".

"If it happens a third time, I won't stop either..."

Inou smiled tiredly.

"Rather than finding a relative he has never met and sending him somewhere, I also think it would be better to raise him under Makoto's guidance on Ayaka Island. This time I will cooperate properly."

Deeply convinced by Inou's words, Haruaki stood up straight.

"It's about Jingi-kun."

"Will that Jingi not only be raised by the master, but also become a disciple?"

"Jingi has the quality of the connection."

Yanagi said, crossing his arms.

"It is no coincidence that the boat capsized and only Jingi survived. He has a strong sense of water and, when his life was in danger, he unconsciously manipulated the water to take him to the shore of Ayaka Island, where his life flowed."

"Jingi-chan..."

Momoko rolled her eyes.

"Master, did you feel Jingi-kun's power subconsciously manipulating the water and did you notice the boat accident?"

"Ah, well, that's right. I should teach that boy proper etiquette for connecting the pulse."

Yanagi patted his knee.

"That's why, Haruaki. Aka. Don't you want a little brother and younger disciple?"

"Yes, of course."

"If my master decides, I will do what I can."

When Haruaki and Akane nodded, Yanagi laughed and turned to Inou.

"I will ask you to take care of the troublesome procedures!"

"You're a..."

Inou took a deep breath.

"Well, since it's about taking care of Jingi, I think I'll have to count on Hatsu-san and Momoko-san's help in many ways..."

"I would be glad to help you."

Momoko smiled, but Hatsu looked at Yanagi with a difficult expression on his face.

"I'm not against it and of course I will do what I can for that child. However, that child is different from Haruaki and Aka, who are children, but they are firm. You have to be prepared."

+++++

Jingi, who came to the Amamiya family after the Sagawa family funeral and other formalities, was not as depressed as Aka had feared.

He doesn't know to what extent young Jingi understands the concept of human death. For some reason, it seemed as if he had been deeply irrational because his family suddenly left him behind, as if he was trying to hide his sadness with anger, but as time passed, he started to feel better.

Although he had recovered, Jingi was a bastard who was in a hurry to die.

"Jingi, wait! Wait!"

"I told you to wait, Jingi!"

Haruaki and Aka desperately chased after Jingi, who took a moment to run towards the road. Seemingly amused because they were desperately chasing him, Jingi rushed towards the moving car while he laughed.

A kind hand approached the moving car.

Aka kicked the road hard and reached for Jingi, grabbing his body. With such force, Aka fell to the road, along with Jingi, who was being carried. The car Jingi was about to touch suddenly braked.

"Jingi... you..."

"What is it?"

In Aka's arms, Jingi pouted in dissatisfaction. Angry, he tightened his grip on his arms and let out a hoarse sound.

"Wait... Oh... What...? Did I run over you...?!"

A pale driver got out of the car that stopped suddenly.

"Ah! I'm sorry! Jingi, Aka, you're not hurt, right?"

Haruaki caught up with them and bowed to the driver, who must have been horrified, and asked Aka and Jingi, who were still lying on the road. Although he was unharmed, he



could not get up due to lack of energy and managed to squeeze out the only thing he could say: "No..."

After apologizing to the driver, Aka and Haruaki firmly grabbed both of Jingi's arms, brought him into the house like a captured alien, and scolded him with the entire family. When asked what he meant, he said: "He wanted to touch a moving car."

And these abuses did not happen just once.

"Aaaaah! Jingi!"

"Stop that, Jingi!"

He thought he was playing quietly on the slide in the park, but for some reason he did not go down the slide by the normal route, but instead climbed the fence (his athletic ability was unnecessarily high) and declared, "I'm going to fly!", and it really flew.

Aka and Haruaki ran out and Aka arrived in time. He caught Jingi and dropped him on his butt to pin him down. He suffered damage to his buttocks to the point that he lay in agony for a time. At that time, the motive for his crime was simply that he wanted to fly.

Currently, Haruaki's ability as a bond is greater, but when it comes to simple athletic ability, Aka has the advantage (or rather, Haruaki is slow to start moving, perhaps because he is calm). Usually, Aka's role was to put his body on the line and stop Jingi's outrageous actions.

When Yanagi is with him, he is always that person, so he can quickly detect and stop Jingi's dangerous behavior. He may be a little cute with Hatsu and Momoko, but he doesn't act as recklessly as he does with Aka and Haruaki.

Therefore, it is Aka and Haruaki (especially Aka) who are being violently thrown around.

Of course, they can't let their guard down even at home. He is cute when he doodles on sliding doors and breaks things, but he is unusually good at finding things that adults have hidden and usually discovers the location of things that adults have kept away from them because they are dangerous. When he found the sake that Yanagi had hidden, he probably thought: "Since Yanagi was drinking happily, it must be very good.". He was about to drink it when he was discovered just in time and walked away.

With the strength of a four-year-old child, he couldn't drink a single bottle of sake and ended up knocking over the bottle, turning the area into a sea of alcohol.

"They did a good job raising him to this age!"

Aka respected the members of the Sagawa family for their mischief befitting the name of a little monster, and for Jingi's nature, that he would rush towards death if he let his guard down, even for a moment.

Even Hatsu, who had been the first to say how difficult it would be to take care of Jingi, said it with a wry smile.

"I feel that his personality to do dangerous things has been perfected..."

Now, Jingi has finally fallen asleep in his room on the second floor, and everyone is spending their quiet time drinking tea in the living room.

"I wonder if the fact that he would be fine even if he fell into the sea gives him a feeling of invulnerability..."

Haruaki tilted his head with a worried expression on his face. Aka murmured: "What's wrong?"

"He doesn't think about whether he will live or die, he just does what he wants to do when he wants to do it."

Jingi is a boy who lives in the moment. He seems to be giving in only to momentary impulses.

"Jingi-chan, if you talk nice to him, he'll be a good boy for a while..."

"That's just with Momoko-san."

"Yes, it's just with Momoko-san..."

It doesn't matter if Aka gets angry or Haruaki tries to advise him, Jingi doesn't listen. Even in Hatsu's sermon, the sermon flowed from right to left, but when Momoko grabbed both of his hands, looked him in the eyes, and, with her amazing patience, spoke to him deeply, Jingi became calmer that day.

Momoko never raises her voice, but she never lets him go, and Aka feels a kind of fear when he watches from the sidelines, so he can understand his feelings. Still, when he wakes up, he goes back to being the usual Jingi.

"Well, it's okay to take a long-term view."

"Why don't you tell us more, master?"

Aka pouted. Yanagi stops Jingi from doing dangerous things, but he feels that he lets Jingi do his own thing too much. He thought it would be more effective for Yanagi, who is a grown man, to scold him firmly, but Yanagi just laughed happily.

"He's a troublesome guy, but he's not stupid. He'll calm down a little after a while. Right now, he's probably protecting his heart with his own bravado."

At Yanagi's words, Aka closed his mouth and lowered his eyes. Aka remembers that feeling too.

Thinking of the emotions inside Jingi's small body, Aka took a deep breath.

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Early in the afternoon, in the Amamiya family living room, Jingi woke up from a nap and decided to run away from home.

Although he ran away from home, he had no purpose or motive. When he woke up, he was alone in his room, and when he looked into the other room, he saw Hatsu boiling red beans in the kitchen and he couldn't see Yanagi, so he thought of taking that opportunity to do something he wouldn't normally do. Both Haruaki and Aka were at school at the time, so as long as Hatsu and Yanagi weren't watching, there will be no one to stop Jingi.

He had tried to leave through the front door earlier, but the sound of the sliding door opening alerted him and trapped him, so he grabbed his shoes at the front door and left the terrace.

He passed through the Amamiya family garden and reach the road. Walking alone was light and free. He walked with a firm step, feeling like he could go anywhere.

At first it was fun. Without being judged by anyone, he chose the path he wanted, he touched the things that interested him, he collected tomatoes that were in the field, and while he walked he grabbed pretty sticks and shook them.

But, as he got further away from the Amamiya family and his little legs began to get tired, he began to feel uncomfortable.

Although he continued to move forward, little by little his legs began to hurt. Walking became slow and he suddenly got tired of running away from home. However, he had no desire to turn around and go back the way he came.

"...Haa."

Jingi sighed, walked along the embankment and approached the river bank. Sitting with his butt close to the water's edge, close enough to see his face reflected in the water.

"...It's boring."

Jingi muttered to himself.

Jingi still didn't have the ability to put into words the vague things swirling inside him. However, babies no longer express their emotions through crying and the best they can do is express themselves with words like "boring" and "I don't like it."

He felt even worse when he saw his sullen face reflected in the surface of the water, as if he was holding back tears.

From one day to the next, Jingi's life changed.

His family, who had been by his side all that time, was gone and for some reason he was left alone.

Now, the Amamiya family and the people who live there take care of him, but Jingu doesn't really understand why that happened.

Jingu usually likes Yanagi, Haruaki, Aka, Momoko and Hatsu, and when he does what he wants to do and gives in to his impulses, he can get excited and have fun, at random times. When he gets tired or bored with something he wanted to do, his mind gets stuck.

Jingu hugged his knees tightly at the edge of the water.

They taught him that he would never see his father, mother and grandfather again. Some people told him that they had returned to the lifeline, while others said that they will always be watching over him.

Jingu looked at the river water. Ninoshima's water is clear and flows gently.

It was in the water that he became separated from his family.

In the middle of the sea, the boat capsized and fell into the water, and that was the last time he saw his family. He had no idea what was happening, but I vaguely remember a strange, dream-like feeling of floating on water.

Gently floating in the clear blue sea, Jingu saw a majestic river of light. Jingu's body seemed drawn there.

He somehow felt that, if he returned there, he could meet his family again.

Jingu lifted his butt off the ground, leaned forward, and looked into the water.

The beautiful waters of Ayaka Island.

As he looked at it, his center of gravity changed. His small body, which has a big and heavy head, rolled forward.

"Ah..."

With a thud, Jingu's body fell into the water.

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"Well, you saved me, Yanagi-sensei. It was my fault for calling you so suddenly."

"Oh, thank you. These vegetables look delicious."

It wasn't bad enough to become an Aramitama, but a stagnant Mitama was causing some problems, so he cleaned it up at a neighbor's request. When he returned to the Amamiya house with a basket full of vegetables given to him as thanks, Hatsu jumped out with a different complexion.

"Jingu is gone."

Apparently, he was working in the kitchen while Jingi was taking a nap, and before he knew it, he had disappeared.

Yanagi thought with a wry smile that he might be escaping this time, and when he left the basket of vegetables with Hatsu, he said, "I'll look for him, Hatsu-san, please wait at home."

At that moment, Yanagi's senses realized.

He suddenly looked up and looked in the direction of the presence.

It's a feeling he's felt recently. It was the same feeling as the day he picked up Jingi at the sea. There is a sign that a living person is about to touch the life line.

Yanagi jumped using the wind jutsu.

"You are such an amazing boy!"

He laughed bitterly and ran across the sky to retrieve the little third disciple that he had taken as his son.

+++++

While struggling in the water, Jingi saw that river of light again.

It was closer than when he saw it in the ocean.

The bottom of the water that he had been able to see until a moment ago disappeared, and in front of him was a vast river made of darkness and golden light flowing in the depths.

Jingi's body slowly descended through the darkness and approached the river of light.

Some people said that Jingi's family had returned to the life line. Yanagi also told him a story he called "Study on Connections", in which he said that life comes from the life line and returns to the life line.

(I wonder if everyone is inside that light.)

When he thought about it, it seemed wonderful to go to that river of light.

Jingi's body was sinking. He approached a river of dazzling light.

Suddenly, something invisible slipped out of the river of light and swam towards Jingi. He couldn't see it, but he understood it. The water around Jingi sparkled as something swam.

And Jingi's body stopped sinking.

He felt as if something was supporting Jingi's body from below, preventing him from sinking further into the river of light.

"Where are you going?"

He heard a voice in his head. It seemed to him that his voice was as innocent as Jingi's, but it also sounded relaxed and calm, like that of a very old person.

Jingi turned his head and tried to respond to the voice in his head.

"I don't know, but I wonder if everyone will be there if I go in."

"If you leave, you won't be able to come back."

(Back to where?)

Jingi thought as he gazed at the river of light as if fascinated.

His family has left him with nothing to do. The house where he lived with his family is no longer a home to return to.

However...

Yanagi's eyes watch Jingi. When Jingi does something, Haruaki and Aka come running in panic. Momoko's hand gently caresses Jingi's head. Hatsu's voice lectures him and calls him softly.

When he remembered those memories, he felt that, if he disappeared and left them behind, he would feel sorry for himself.

Jingi tightly hugged that something that carried him.

"Well, then I guess I'll stop going."

Jingi murmured, and his body suddenly surfaced. Somewhat loaded, Jingi swam up.

The river of light moved downward and further, and the surroundings became brighter. When he looked up, he saw the surface of the water glistening in the sunlight.

(I'm lazy.)

When they pulled Jingi out of the water, Yanagi's face was right in front of him. Jingi blinked, thinking it was the same as then.

"Haa~ Jingi, you should give me a break..."

Yanagi took a deep breath and lowered the soaked Jingi to the ground.

Yanagi then turned towards the river and worshiped it with both hands together.

"What are you doing?"

"I'm thanking the dragon god for letting you go."

Jingi tilted his head.

Yanagi worshiped the water for a moment and then turned to Jingi. His forehead was poked with a finger.

"Come on!"

"Jingi."

Yanagi's serious eyes caught Jingi. Jingi pressed his forehead with both hands and looked at Yanagi with wide eyes.

"Every life will return to its life line someday. You too will return to the river of light that you have seen one day. But that will be only after you have lived a full life in this world. Don't forget the place where you live and the people with the ones you live. Do you understand?"

He didn't understand.

He couldn't understand most of what Yanagi was saying, but he still felt like he understood something, so he nodded.

"It's okay.", said Yanagi taking his hand, who got up and started walking towards the Amamiya house. His wet shoes made a squelching sound.

"After apologizing to Hatsu-san for worrying you, we'll go straight to the bathroom. Don't drown in the bathtub."

"I won't drown."

"I don't know if the dragon god will help me next time."

"What do you mean dragon god?"

"Did you hear what I told you about "studying pulse connections"? Listen, there's nothing more important than that on Ayaka Island."

The great hermit and his little disciple walked along the road in the early afternoon.

### **LONELY BOYS: THE CASE OF YUKITO YANAGI**

Yukito Yanagi lost his father, Makoto Yanagi, when he was five years old and was placed in an orphanage on the mainland.

Due to his ability, he always stayed away from others and lived a solitary life, but now he lives on Ayaka Island surrounded by people.

"Congratulations on entering high school, Yukito-kun."



"When I saw the entrance ceremony, I was so moved that I started to cry."

When Yukito and his friends left the school building, Inou and Momoko, who had attended the entrance ceremony as their parents, were waiting for them and called out to them. In fact, Momoko's eyes were wet and Yukito panicked.

"Oh, that's right, Momoko-san..."

"Hehe, I'm sorry. I've been waiting for this day to come since I sent Yukito-kun to the mainland..."

Momoko wiped her eyes and turned her gaze to Chatarou, Yako, and Ibara next to Yukito.

"Congratulations to Chatarou-kun, Yako-kun and Ibara-chan on their admission to the school. The uniform fits them very well."

"Ah. I'm used to seeing Chatarou-kun and Yako-kun in Japanese clothes, so it's kind of refreshing."

When Momoko and Inou said this, Chatarou and the others looked embarrassed.

"Hehe, that's it... Hmm?"

Chatarou gave a quick thanks, then looked at the sky behind Inou and his friends and frowned. Yako realized the same thing and exclaimed: "Ah!"

A young man dressed in Japanese clothing, similar to a kariginu, flew by with the wind. Yukito smiled bitterly. That's Haruaki Kurama. Seeing it coming from heaven is like a divine being descending.

Haruaki landed softly in front of Chatarou and Yako.

"Master! I said you don't have to come!"

"I told you to do your best!"

When his disciples reprimanded him, Haruaki lowered his eyebrows and laughed.

"I'm sorry. The number of visitors to the shrine has just stopped. I came because I wanted to see you all in the sun, if only for a little while. Oh, how beautiful it is."

Haruaki seemed genuinely happy, and Chatarou and Yako also softened their expressions, as if they couldn't help it.

Ibara took a step back from the exchange between teacher and students of Kaizumi Shrine and looked away, but her eyes widened when she noticed something.

"Boss!"

Yukito was also surprised and looked beyond Ibara's line of sight. Aka Ibuki was standing under the peach tree in the front garden. Ibara ran towards him and Yukito instinctively followed her.

"Boss, what's wrong?"

"I finished exterminating the Aramitama that appeared near here. I just passed by."

Aka looked up and looked at Haruaki. Haruaki also looked at Aka with a complicated expression. There was a strange feeling of tension.

"Hey, let's take a commemorative photo together."

Momoko stood between Haruaki and Aka and spoke with a soft voice that seemed to loosen the tense atmosphere. He nodded and said, "That's good."

Yukito compared the faces of his two older brothers. Neither of them moved, as if they were undecided.

(I'm going to ask you to help your incompetent brothers!)

Yukito gulped as he remembered his father's words that he had heard on the life line.

"Oh, that! I want to take a photo too. Let's all take a photo together."

When he mustered up the courage to say that, Haruaki smiled bitterly.

"If Yukito-kun says so..."

"....."

"Boss."

"I understand."

At Ibara's urging, Aka also reluctantly nodded.

Momoko let out a sigh as everyone walked to take a photo in front of the school gate.

"I wish Jingi-chan had come too."

Yukito laughed and was about to say, "I agree."

"Congratulations on your admission!"

He heard a very familiar voice, so he stopped halfway.

When he turned his attention with a bad feeling, he saw a man sitting on top of the school gate drinking a can of chuhai. Sagawa Jingi. He is drinking alcohol and talking to the students as they pass through the school gate.

It was a scene that gave him a sense of déjà vu, but since this is Ayaka Island, he wasn't as excluded as when he was in a high school on the mainland, and those who know Jingi look at him and say, "What's wrong, Jingi?" when they passing.

Yukito approached the school door with a deep sigh.

"What are you doing, Jingi-san?"

"Oh, Yukito! Congratulations to Ibara and Chakombi on your admission!"

"Sagawa Jingi is the worst."

"He was drinking somewhere!"

"Also, please don't call us all lightly!"

Complaints came from Ibara, Chatarou and Yako. Momoko said with a wry smile, "You can't help it.", and Inou held his forehead and sighed, thinking that he had a headache.

"Isn't it strange that you and your brothers coincide?"

Jingi said that with a happy smile.

"It's not that we agree."

"We do not agree."

Haruaki and Aka's words overlapped, and the two closed their mouths in a bad mood. Jingi laughed and drank the can of chuhai he was holding.

When he was about to open the next can, Yukito reached out and snatched the sake from Jingi.

"What are you doing?"

"You've been drinking too much."

"What are you doing now?"

"Stop drinking a little and live a long life."

When he said that under his breath, Jingi looked taken aback, then his face fell and he laughed with an indescribable expression on his face.

"...Hehe."

In the photo taken that day, the new students Yukito, Chatarou, Yako, and Ibara were lined up in the middle, Momoko and Inou were next to them, and Haruaki and Aka were on either side. Jingi was still crouched above the school gate, smiling and placing a peace sign on Yukito's head.