

Eventually, I heard the roaring sound of moving water. It grew louder and louder the closer I got to it. I slid, feet first, down what I hoped was a small ramp, and not a cliff, until my feet surprisingly plunged beneath the water.

By then, I was sweating. I flashed on my light. I was in a huge chamber with a ceiling so high that it wasn't illuminated by my light. In front of me was a bubbling, torrential underground sea, breaking on the edge of the bank. I had no clue of this sea's dimensions or the cave's. I radioed the crew to ask what I was to do. Someone's voice came back, but with the poor reception, plus the thundering water right next to me, I couldn't hear a word.

I told them I needed a boat to cross the water. Then, as I was in the middle of holding my radio up to my mouth, a wave of unknown height rose toward me. I didn't make it up the hill, but I made it up a few strides before the gush of water crashed over me, followed by hot water washing me into the depths of the sea. I swam toward the surface. I reached it and inhaled as much air as I could before a volume of water crashed me against the cave wall. The cavity was flooding, and I had no way of escaping.

I leg-pressed myself away from the wall and was rag-dolled upward. I tried to swim toward the surface again. I scored a breath and dog-paddled around as the tide slacked, accompanied by a mighty, hissing noise. However, this calmness was deceptive. The hot-tub-temperature water never actually slowed, as I had hoped, and suddenly, the crown of my head was smashed between two needle-sharp stalagmites, or maybe they were stalactites. I couldn't tell which way was up or down, if you can imagine that. It all happened so fast. Instantly, before a lump could sprout or the pain of having my head crushed could even be registered, the water line went above my mouth and nose. I tried to kiss the bubble of air next to me goodbye, but the opportunity was stripped, and I was without air, floating in pitch-black silence. My survival instinct kicked in. I tilted my neck back and tried to locate a pocket of air with my nose, like an

upside down, amphibious truffle hog. I panicked beyond anything I've experienced in my life. Feeling the ceiling for air, any air, and not finding it, convinced me that this was the end.

I fantasized about pressing my lips into an air bubble and inhaling one last time, but no luck. The remaining empty spaces had all been flooded. I blacked out. I don't remember much after that. But I do remember something. I found myself in this unworldly void. But it was familiar, if that makes sense. The space I was in wasn't empty. There were beings with me in this space. They were spirits. I am certain they were. I felt their presence before they even stepped out of what I can only describe as doors and windows that had been around me the whole time, but invisible. These spirits knew of my presence too and they approached. I could tell they were intelligent because they made a decision as one to come to me and the closer they got, I could tell, the more they knew about me. They knew I was worked up being here. I think they were my ancestors. They assuaged my fear of being in this space with some unseen tool. I felt them entering my body with it, and it pushed me and pressed on me. I tried to comprehend these beings. There were many of them. They were shapeless, and yet, made of many colored shapes like a rainbow, but a rainbow fractured into a thousand different colors and placed on top of and underneath... nothing, empty space. These entities were like a kaleidoscope that was always spinning and mapped onto a three-dimensional shape that, at the same time, appeared to be flat. But they were real. It was all real. They instructed me to raise my arms. Their message was so direct, it shot my eyes open, and as I came to, my body flowed with the rush of water. This unexpected current was taking me somewhere. I obeyed the ancestors, and my fingertips scraped what I thought was air, and I stretched my arm outward. There was definitely no water where my hand was, so I paddled my feet toward this air bubble. I reached it just in time before I couldn't hold my breath another second. Air, precious, precious air filled my lungs, like... like, I get emotional, I could cry thinking about it.”

Satomi's wings flutter under the blanket.

“My first thought was gratitude toward the ancestors. At that moment, breathing air was like winning an extension on my life. I traded one life in for another. I felt an ineffable ecstasy. But the bullshit was far from over because I was soon cascading down the surface of the sea, head first. Somehow, in a moment of clarity, I realized the surface was vertical. My body skipped toward a huge whirlpool. The thought of where I was going or what the water was draining into scared me more than bouncing again and again over the surface. My head hit one final wave, and I body-surfed over the cusp and into the wet abyss. I was powerless to stop myself. Immediately, I felt great pressure on my head, then my shoulders. I was being swallowed, but after I felt my shoulders pinched into their sockets, the compression ended, and my head contacted cold air. I was dumped onto solid ground.

The damn sea turtle shell was spewed out from the liquid avalanche and landed *conveniently* on my upper back. It made me cough and helped me breathe. I had no concept of where I was, all I cared about was that there was air. I rolled onto my side. Finally, I was breathing air. I vomited up water and lay on my stomach. Water continued to fall like crazy behind me.

Eventually, I looked around and could make out bluish gravel. I was surprised by my unaided vision returning. I scanned for this light source and realized I had a shadow. So, I looked up and to my surprise the cave's ceiling was speckled with dots of blue light that progressed outward in the dark in every direction like cities at night, seen from space. The starlight above was bright enough, collectively, for me to make out two marble pillars ahead and a door between them. I reached for my flashlight. But it must have been torn off me. As I got closer, the door resembled the one at my parent's house. I scratched the side of my noggin and stepped toward the door, switching the sea turtle shell under my arm, then lifting my right forearm in the air in case what I was seeing was a trap. Not a hair on my body erected itself. But

as I got close to it, it had something attached to the wood, unlike anything I had seen in my life, despite it resembling my parents' front door.

I squinted at what was in front of me. I reached for my radio, to relay my experience, but that was gone. So, I alone was stuck with this confusion before me. I could barely make it out in the dim, blue light, but there were images of me with my eyes closed. But I had never seen anything like it. If I scanned the images one way, they'd age in reverse to the direction I looked at them prior. It was weird. Always, no matter how I observed the portfolio of me, laid out in a circle, they were either of me starting out as a newborn and advancing in age or seeing me wrinkly and white-haired and smoothly reverting back to childhood. But each time a time-lapsed mug shot of mine went by, my eyes were closed, like somebody had been photographing me sleeping my entire life. I reached for the disk-like knob and twisted it. I pushed on the door, but it wouldn't open. The bastard was locked. I kept trying to muscle the knob to the right and then to the left while booting it. The door was shut, for sure. I closed my eyes in frustration and tried again. The knob spun, and I easily pushed the door open. The only way to gain entrance was for me to close my eyes. At this point, nothing surprised me. I shoved the sea turtle shell into the chamber and entered.

I entered the room, as a swarm of bats or something that could fly went whooshing above. I ducked down away from the flying creatures and squeezed into the room. Suddenly, I felt the ground under me rumble. It was another aftershock. The ground rippled, and in the dim beam of light from the dome outside, I saw a landslide of Lizard Children eggs falling toward me. I turned around to escape the room, but the door quickly slammed shut, and I couldn't open it. Instead of letting myself get squished, my sympathetic nervous system kicked in, and I soared up the cave wall, sea turtle shell in hand. Once the dust settled, the door below me was buried in what must have been at least two meters of Lizard Children eggs glowing a dim brown color.

I jumped down on top of the first egg, with the sea turtle shell tucked under my arm like I

was carrying a damn car tire. Somehow my feet, when they landed on top of a lizard creature's egg, powered on a human voice.

'You're not in their group. Why save them?' This person talked my language. The voice was coming from inside the egg. I looked down to learn where this person was, but under my feet was only the lizard creature's shell. It was somewhat spongy and wet, like a giant tapioca pearl. I leaped away from this and touched down on another.

'Human beings are vermin.' It used my voice, like it used me, Satomi, my voice. But it wasn't me saying it; it was the lizard creature's egg saying ...as I look back at it the realist things about me. That nest of Lizard Children was a no bullshit zone. I dropped feet first on another, 'Are you an alpha female? Without allowing her to kill them all.'

Each egg I landed on flashed a reddish-brown color. On the next egg, I heard, 'Even if you save them. They're not going to respect you.' I jumped off this one and crashed onto another.

'You're sick. You are a foul little girl.'

The more I hopscotched across this field of Lizard Children eggs, the louder each statement was that I made; well, the burrow made. 'You're an idiot Satomi!' I jumped off this egg and springboarded down onto another egg. This egg laughed. It was my laugh. I don't laugh often, but it was, without a doubt, my laugh. And it was the highest quality sound you can imagine. It was like it was coming from a Yamaha NS1000 speaker or something of phenomenal quality. I looked beneath the semi-clear shell, past the membrane of mucous-like goo. Inside was a lizard creature curled up, nose to tail, developing into a fully functioning energy-producing product of CoPet's electric grid.

The accusations continued. 'You hurt Haru, Satomi. Haru that gentle boy. You broke his heart, and you still don't care. You've hurt many men. Remember Kaito?' I trampolined off this asshole egg and bounced onto another, which unfortunately resumed mid-sentence. 'You haven't forgotten. What makes you think someone that can do that to an intoxicated boy is holy

enough to save everyone?’ I dropped feet first onto another egg. ‘You’re a coward. You won’t go through with it. And Takaki San knows it!’

‘You stood by as your childhood boyfriend microwaved his family’s kitten. You are evil.’ The Mama Lizard and her legion of Lizard Children were defending their burrow.

‘You defecated on him because it turned you on. You are a vile woman.’

‘You abandoned your family.’

‘You will break Takaki San’s heart, like you’ve done to all the others. You never paid them attention, until your flower obsession was temporarily satiated for the night. They wanted to give you love, but growing flowers to make you happy was more important than beloved ones wanting a relationship with you.’

‘You’re the most selfish human being alive.’

‘You’re not a woman,’ I heard myself shout.

‘You’re going to protect the Mama Lizard and not kill her.’

Then, out of nowhere, something alighted on my shoulder. I wiggled out and flicked it away. I didn’t know what the hell it was at the time. *Could have been the same creatures that flew out the door*, I thought. I proceeded anyway, to find the Mama Lizard in the blackness.

I listened for the Mama Lizard, over my imposter shouting, ‘You’re not a woman.’

‘Grow a baby if you are a woman.’

‘Your flowers will never be good enough.’

I could hear the wind exhaling and inhaling and knew it had to be from a nearby Mama Lizard.

‘Father was right. You’re a failure, since you were born a girl.’ I bunny hopped onto the next egg.

‘You will never be a world-famous flower grower!’ I scaled eggs and slid down eggs and kept moving closer to the breathing. The breathing from the Mama Lizard grew louder and

louder in the blackness. The verbal abuse I was taking started to mount, and I told myself, *Yes, it's true. I have injured many people, and I'm about to do it to this bitch.*

I didn't know when or where I'd get my hands on the Mama Lizard, but I was confident I would, and I needed to do it soon. I couldn't take another bullshit comment from these Lizard Children eggs. I finally came across something that wasn't eggs. I still don't know what it was, I do know it didn't talk. They were long strands of something prickly. They were able to penetrate my suit and each piece of it felt rough against my skin. It was like a waist-high field of something surrounding the Mama Lizard. The long, thin objects were moving right through my suit and scraping against my legs. It hurt crossing this barrier around the Mama Lizard but I somehow could deal with it. Regardless of whatever it all was, I kept working my way forward, seeing with my hands and reminding myself I was comfortable with all things uncomfortable, until I eventually touched something very different than slimy shells or coarse, furry grass. This object felt like granite. It was hard — harder than the cave walls surrounding it. Whatever it was, it was hot as shit. It had to be the Mama Lizard, I concluded.

I was right. I had no idea of the creature's dimensions. It could have been as tall as a building or as small as a car. I wondered what would happen if I climbed into her jaws. *No! Don't think like that.*

It appeared the talking eggs had inflicted self-doubt upon me. However, coupled with fear were images in my mind of kowtowing to my parents before riding up to Fukushima. Snapshots danced in my mind's eye of my great grandfather's butchering knives, the tools of his trade, preserved by our family. I reminisced about many other things, like the sound the bell makes at our family's ancestor shrine. The smell of incense and the lighting of their candles. I somehow remembered the smell of the fruit of the stars. It triggered my memory of Takaki San. Takaki San believes in me. Thinking of a man like him believing in me shrunk my remaining fears into nothing and swelled me with pride. Pride inspired me to act. I placed my hand above my head

and found a hold. I may not be a part of the future, but there is going to be one, if I shrink her.

Then, the rock-hard body of the Mama Lizard glowed a brownish-red color. It was a pale light, like the kind the eggs made, but the light didn't flicker out. Her light stayed on, and it helped me make out details of a spinal plate next to me. I put my foot in between her lightly-glowing scales and ascended like it was a ladder. The glow increased and became slightly brighter the higher I climbed. The now dull, blood-red light revealed the Mama Lizard had a chain around her neck. I ascended a link of the chain that was as tall as me. The chain was the size of one found on container ships. It was anchored to something strong, I hoped, somewhere out in the blackness. I scaled her metal collar and reached the spot between her eyes. Normally, this spot is as big as my cell phone on a lizard creature. With a Mama Lizard, the spot was large enough for me to stand on. I pulled my flower out, having kept it faithfully in my possession. I set it on the crown of her head. She was glowing a pure red color now. I lifted the giant ampoule vertically, and my hands slammed the needle point into her skull. But the needle point snapped the shaft in two. My mouth hung open in disbelief. I leaned down to pick up my flower.

I don't know what happened next. I didn't know where I was when I started to come to. I just remember I had no control of my body. I somehow knew I was surrounded by a sea of eggs, like I could feel it, despite not being fully awake. I could sense Lizard Children were sensing me, and they were moments away from taking violent action against me in this defenseless state. I could barely breathe and was terrified of not reacting to the threat. I knew if I screamed, it'd help me get control of my body, gradually. Control would spread from my voice box to my jaw, and with each subsequent bellow, greater and greater control of my body should be gained. It'd eventually reach my hands.

At first, I heard myself whimpering. Slowly, the whimpering developed into me screaming. My repeated screaming helped me start to awaken. The blackness started to reveal shooting



lights, like the ones you see in your vision in the morning when you rub your eyes. My spine felt a sensation of touch underneath it, and I erected my back. The burrow was super bright when I woke up on a pile of Lizard Children eggs. I looked at the Mama Lizard between the chink in my fingers and saw only a brilliant light except for two black spots that were her eyes. Everything in her burrow was a titanium dioxide white, minus two huge, almond-shaped bulbs of a blackness so rich and unreflective of any light, I couldn't help but gaze at them. They were alluring. They were gentle. Her eyes made you want to enter in one of them and lie down for a little while. They were inviting like a hot bath is at the end of a long day of working outside when it's cold out. I imagined myself in one of them, or rather looking into one of them felt like it swallowed me up. All thoughts of my mission and what I was doing down here disappeared like dust in the wind and I was somehow looking around in something so black, so devoid of light, so distant from light it made me lose sense of where I was and who I was, instantly. This blackness, I'm telling you, made space and time fuse together. The edge of this blackness could have been a centimeter away from my nose or millions of kilometers from it. I remembered, this is the eye of a Mama Lizard. I whispered, I must destroy this. *I'm not going to give up on my goal*, I shouted.

I wagged my head free and scanned her burrow, looking for my ampoule. I raced toward the ampoule, hopping from egg crest to egg crest.

'Stay away for your own safety.' I heard from another egg, 'You will kill yourself, so that they may live?'

As I weaseled across the tops of eggs toward the milk of the stars, winged beasts suddenly dive-bombed me. I snatched one out of the swarm. I held it in my hand. It was some weird species with transparent wings like that of a dragonfly. It was the size of a fruit bat but with a gray, thorny body, and a mouth like a Vietnamese centipede's. It had two large, black eyes, as black as the Mama Lizard's eyes. It had claws, too, long and sharp on each of its many tiny

legs. As it stayed imprisoned between my fingers, a loud pitch emitted from it. And, oh boy, did this bat-like dragonflyapede have some pipes on it for its size. Coqui frogs be damned compared to this! The scream coming out of this thing was such a high note that the little bastard caused the egg under me to vibrate. I felt my arm and neck hairs tingling as the shell started cracking beneath me. Then, the whole swarm started making this noise. I was worried all the shells in the Mama Lizard's burrow would shatter open, because of these flying creatures' sonic wave. Without delay, my fear came true. The eggs exploded open, all at once. Every strand of hair on my body felt like it was being ripped out of its follicle.

The little shit sunk its pincers under my glove. I twisted its head off from its body and dropped the two quiet pieces to the ground. The shrieking from the swarm hadn't stopped though. Suddenly, a hissing lizard creature pecked open the shell under me with its beak. I stomped on its skull and grabbed the milk of the stars. I wanted to scale the Mama Lizard again, but between me and her were Lizard Children. So, I raced in the opposite direction toward the wall. Leaning against the wall, I spotted a burrow builder's forgotten giant magnifying glass. I dashed to it and aimed the lens at the Mama Lizard. I lifted the ampoule above the magnifying glass and cracked it open into the glass disk like I was making a friggin' milk of the stars omelet. This abstract idea proved ineffective. It didn't shine like I had hoped. But, I tossed my flower up into the magnifying glass' lens anyway, in a last-ditch effort to shrink the Mama Lizard with it. The milk of the stars started to boil. However, my body was instantly crushed. Her giant, reptilian hand had snatched me off my feet. Her rock-hard fingers squeezed my body. I couldn't breathe. I couldn't even squirm. My face was blue by the time I went soaring through the air. Her mouth became wider and closer, and there was nothing I could do about it. The last thing I remember seeing was a brighter ray of light striking the Mama Lizard, between her eyes. I forget everything after that. I just came to a little bit ago in the hospital."

President Masatoshi, in his mask, leans forward and says, "Takeyuki San knows how you

were rescued. He was there for your arrival. He witnessed everything and put it all down in his report here.” He pauses and continues, “I can have His Excellency read it to you if you’d like, since your eye is damaged.”

“Read it.”

The clay mask with horns and an all-devouring mouth with sharp fangs spoke in a dignified tone, “Right at sunrise, the ground encountered another round of contractions. A crowd of us were in line waiting to board the final bus when this happened. Out of concern for Satomi, I happened to face the field, wondering how she was doing deep in one of the burrows as the ground shook. Then, from the morning sky, appeared a rainbow. Every color was ultra-vibrant. The end of the rainbow was in the nearby field. I alerted Haruto San, supervisor of the Fukushami Knights and Takaki San, commander of the Dove Knights, to this sight. To our disbelief, we saw a pale body expelled up into the rainbow from a slit in the earth that, moments before, was nonexistent. The body landed in a shallow lake. We raced over and were startled at what we saw. It was a creature with two large feathered wings. They projected from its shoulder blades. This alien creature with long, human-like hair, the same color as its wings, floated, face down in the muddy water.

There was another minor aftershock, and the bulge collapsed in on itself. We debated on approaching the creature until Takaki San charged ahead. He boldly tilted the creature’s head and to our disbelief Takaki San announced it was Satomi. We immediately raced to her aid. We flipped her on her wings. There was no pulse. She was lifeless. Takaki San administered resuscitation. She remained unresponsive, until Takaki San pressed his lips into her lips to deliver the first breath of air. She instantly began breathing. Satomi was naked. Some unknown waxy substance coated her body. We soon found a blanket to cover her muddy breasts and private parts. We carried her to the med clinic. Takaki San I would note did an outstanding job rescuing the girl. Takaki San was so concerned about her safety, he remained by her side, as I

returned to the Mama Lizards' burrows. Last I heard at 7 a.m. Satomi was still unconscious."

President Masatoshi unfolds his hands and retrieves the paperwork from His Excellency. His Excellency stands. All the masked spirits stand. The devil-horned spirit speaks with his upper-class tone, "You may not see out of your left eye. You have two wings. Your sacrifice entitles you." His Excellency removes his mask. All the masks make a thudding noise as they contact the table. Robes, various animal hides, and beads drop to the carpet. These silver-haired men shed the last of their disguises. They stand and wait for the prime minister's next move.

"Is there anything you would like Satomi San?" His Excellency, Prime Minister Abey Shiro asks.

"My father is to be ennobled. I want my family's name taken off the list of unclean people," she says.

All the men, now dressed in business suits and barefaced, agree.

Prime Minister Abey Shiro says, "You taught all of us a lesson."

"What's that?"

"It's evident the entire system was wrong about you. You'll never again be shackled by rules or debts. Would you agree, men? She'll be welcomed in the top of each of our echelons?"

"Call me Satomi San."

"Satomi San. Pardon me." The men agreed to the prime minister's ultimatum.

"You know, Your Excellency, they weren't wrong, but you are. Had I been associating with any other class of people, yesterday would have never afforded me the opportunity to create something so appreciated."

"You are a miracle. You changed everyone's life at this table. That is why we must recognize your talents and ask to have you join our circle, guide our circle. With you as the spirit of destruction and creation, we'll continue to thrive," Prime Minister Abey Shiro says. The chubby faced prime minister slides his mask across the table. Satomi San picks up the

mask. Hammers beat the sides of a sake barrel. On the table, a glass with water in it ripples around a black feather from the noise. The rhythmic drumming stops when she covers her feminine face. Abey Shiro San falls to his knees, as do all the elders.

“Everything looks like mine through these,” her muffled voice says.

“It is, Your Excellency. All that we need in return is for you to never pass on what happened. Keep all information about Fukushami’s meltdown between us.” Some elders bite their nails, as they wait to hear her acceptance. Others clap their fingertips together.

Then, Satomi slowly removes the mask. Her face is naked again. Everyone looks at each other and blinks with confusion. Abey Shiro San’s words seem to spin around in Satomi San’s head, as she rotates the mask in her hand. The elders gasp in horror, as she cracks off the devil mask’s horns. Abey Shiro stands.

“What are you doing?” he screams.

“We’re going to tell the truth about what happened. We will not lie.”

The two pieces of clay swoosh into a nearby trash can. She reveals two flowers in her hand and wraps their shriveled stems around the mask’s stubs. Abey Shiro’s hands cover his face and he sits.

The mask returns to her face. She points to the lever pullers and button pressers of society and snarls with razor sharp teeth, “Now everything is mine through your eyes as well.”

The End

