

MAKOTO SHINKAI AND
NARUKI NAGAKAWA

SHE

AND

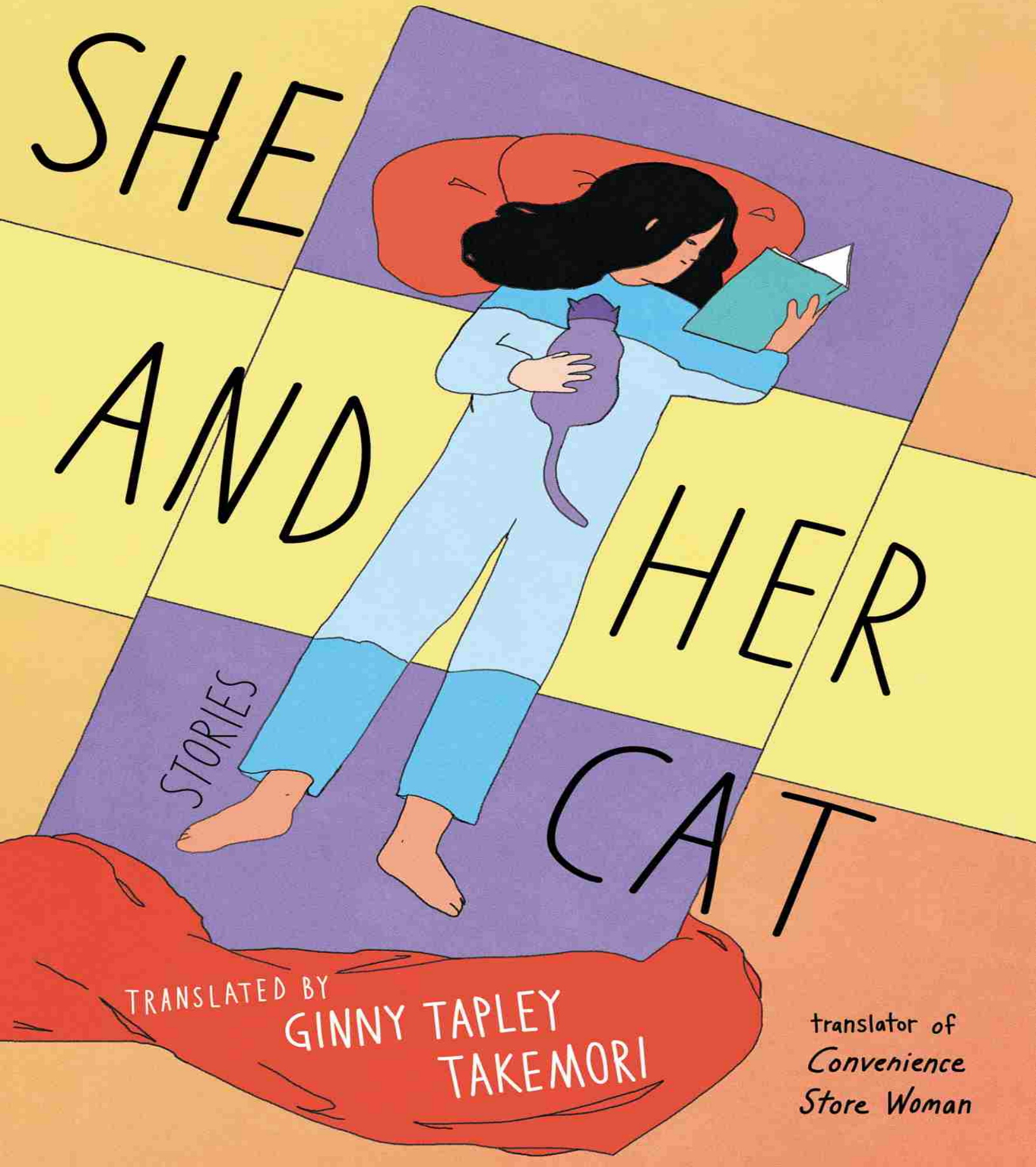
HER

STORIES

CAT

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SHE AND HER CAT

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Credit: Rohan Eason

SEA OF WORDS

It was a wet day in early spring.

Dense, fog-like rain fell on me as I lay at the side of the road, my cheek plastered against the bottom of a cardboard box. Pedestrians gave me sideways glances as they rushed on past. Eventually, I could no longer lift my head and was left gazing up at the leaden sky through one eye.

In the hushed surroundings, the sound of an approaching train boomed like distant thunder. It blared out regular and strong as it moved along the elevated tracks overhead, and it aroused a strong yearning in me. If the faint heartbeat I could hear within my chest was enough to move me, how big a thing this sound must be able to move!

Surely it must be the sound of the world's heart. The big, strong, perfect world. A world I wasn't to be part of.

XXX

The fine rain fell continuously without making a sound. Lying there in the box, I had the illusion that I was slowly rising.

I was rising up and up, high into the sky. Before long there would be a snap, and I would be severed from this world.

XXX

My mother was the first to secure me to this life. She was warm and gentle and gave me everything I desired, but she was gone now.

I couldn't remember what happened or why I was here in a cardboard box getting drenched in the rain.

We can't remember everything, only the parts that are truly important. But there wasn't a single thing I wanted to remember.

The soft rain kept falling.

The empty shell of myself rose slowly up into the gray sky. I closed my eyes, waiting for the moment in which I would be severed from this world forever.

The sound of the train seemed to be getting louder. I opened my eyes to see a woman's face. She was holding a large plastic umbrella and peering down at me.

How long had she been there?

She squatted down and looked at me, resting her chin on her knees. A strand of hair hung over her forehead. The train seemed louder than ever, as if echoing under the umbrella.

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Her hair and my fur were heavy from the rain, filling our surroundings with a lovely smell.

XXX

I carefully lifted my head and glanced up at her.

Her eyes wavered. She looked away for a moment, then turned back to me with determination, as if making up her mind. We gazed intently at each other like this for a while. The earth turned soundlessly on its axis as our bodies quietly lost heat.

XXX

“Shall we go, then? Together.”

I felt her fingers, cold as ice, against my body as she scooped me up into her arms. I looked down at the cardboard box, surprised by how small it was. She tucked me between her jacket and sweater. Her body was incredibly warm, and I could hear her heartbeat.

As the roar of the train overtook us, she set off walking. The heartbeats of she, me, and the world pulsed together as one.

XXX

That was the day she took me in. I was now her cat.



Society is mostly made up of words.

I began to realize this once I got a job and went out into the world. It was all “Get this done!” or “Tell so-and-so this!” Work progressed only through a vague exchange of words that immediately dissipated. Everyone got on with things as if this were completely normal, but to me it was almost miraculous.

I enjoyed dealing with documents. They felt permanent. My colleagues didn’t seem to like this kind of task, so I readily took it upon myself to do it and was thus considered useful to my work-mates.

Certainly, I felt more comfortable working with documents than with people. I was not a good communicator and would find myself running out of things to say almost immediately. My friends loved to talk, though. Whenever I spent time with Tamaki, whom I’d known since our student days, witty remarks came effortlessly out of her, sending me into fits of

laughter. Tamaki could draw meaning from any situation, as if she could see things that I didn't. I always found her astonishing.

I liked talkative people.

My boyfriend's name was Nobu. He was a year younger than me, and he talked *a lot*. About his job at an insurance company, about sci-fi movies and electronic music. About ancient wars in China. He would share all sorts of things with me.

Thanks to him, I knew a lot about the insurance system and about the names of warlords.

My friend Tamaki was good at putting external things into words, while Nobu was good at expressing what he'd stored inside. I couldn't do either.

XXX

The arrival of spring reminds me of the day I first rented my own apartment, especially on a rainy day like today.

I went around visiting estate agents and nervously put my seal on a contract. I was to live on my own for the first time.

It was raining the day I moved in too. Tamaki came over to help me and brought her younger colleague Nobu along with her.

After unpacking and putting up shelves, we went for a meal at a local eatery.

It was the first time a friend and some guy had ever helped me move, and it felt unreal, like something in a TV drama series, but I couldn't quite express this in words. Then Tamaki said, "This reminds me of when we were students!" and Nobu laughed.

I tried to smile, but I realized that normal people did this kind of thing all the time.

Living alone would not change me after all.

XXX

Soon after I moved in to my apartment, Nobu came to visit.

The tap connected to my washing machine was loose, and water often leaked from the hose. When I had complained about this to Tamaki, she'd arranged for Nobu to fix it.

I'd assumed Tamaki would come, too, so I was a bit taken aback when he turned up alone. He bought a bunch of stuff at the DIY center and fixed the leak for me. I didn't even know that I had to turn the water off at the mains.

How nice it would be to have a man around, I thought. I was surprised by how easily I managed to express this feeling to Nobu.

It was the first time I'd ever been able to communicate so directly.

He stayed with me that night. The idea that words could change my world was a little scary.

We began meeting at my place every week, until suddenly Nobu became very busy at work and I began to see less of him.

As far as I was concerned, he was my boyfriend and we understood each other, even if he didn't exactly put his feelings for me into words.

The girls' manga magazines we used to take turns reading at school always ended when the girl had got herself a boyfriend, but I discovered that's not what happens in real life.

Even when you have a boyfriend, there are times when you feel terribly lonely, more so than when you didn't have one.

Today, I met Nobu for the first time in three months. We walked side by side in the spring rain. Even after so long, he was affectionate and talked as though nothing had changed.

Letting myself drift along with his chatter felt good. But when he'd gone, I was overwhelmed with anxiety. Almost like swimming in the sea and suddenly realizing you can't touch the bottom with your feet.

"We *are* going out together, aren't we?"

I just could never bring myself to come out with these words. If he said we should split up, I would definitely sink.

Today, too, I skirted around what I really wanted to say, instead circling him like an artificial satellite.

I was just like a little school kid. It was probably because I hadn't dealt properly with this sort of experience when I was still at school that these things were happening to me now.

In the end, he never did say the one thing I wanted to hear.

We said goodbye near his office. It would probably be a long time before we saw each other again, I thought.

When I got to my station, I took a different route home than usual. It was a long way round, but I felt like walking in the cold rain.

And that's when I came across the cat.



Her apartment smelled so comfortingly of her. The first morning I spent there, I was surprised by how warm it was. I'd never woken up in such a warm space before.

She was already up and was busy heating water on the stove.

"Good morning!" she said as I watched the steam gush from the spout of the kettle.

Then she flung open the curtains. The clouds were tinted by a beautiful sunrise.

Her apartment was on the first floor of a block of flats at the top of a slope. You could see the train going over the raised tracks from there.

That's when I discovered it was this train that had been making the sound that had so impressed me before. I was so excited by this discovery that I told her about it.

"Sure, Chobi, that's great!"

Chobi?

"Chobi. That's your name."

That was the first time she called me by a name. Chobi. I liked it, this name she'd given me.

I would remember this morning forever, I thought.

XXX

I fell in love with her instantly.

She was beautiful and kind. Whenever she caught me looking at her, her face would soften and she'd smile gently.

Before eating her own food, she prepared mine: a dish of milk, some tinned meat, and some crunchy dry biscuits.

While I lapped up my milk, she'd crouch down next to me cradling a large mug of warm milk in her hands. We each drank side by side like this.

Her movements were relaxed and graceful, and I felt calm around her.

I'd eat half the food she put out for me, instinct telling me I should leave some for later in case anything happened, and then flop down at her side, rolling over to show her my tummy. She would slowly circle her hand on my belly while I swayed my tail in satisfaction.

I liked to climb onto her tummy, too, whenever she lay on the floor. She would usually be reading and would stroke my back in silence.

I liked to watch her do the laundry. The clothes still smelled of her, and I snuggled my whole body into them ecstatically.

I liked to watch her hang the laundry out to dry as well. We'd wander out onto the balcony together, and I'd gaze contentedly at the blue sky, the cars, and the passersby below.

I slept on one of her sweaters, which she'd placed in a bed for me. It was the white one she'd been wearing the first time I met her.

In the early days, I'd often wake up mewling in the middle of the night from a bad dream. She would always stay beside me, gently stroking my fur.

She cooked her own meals, and I especially liked to watch her make miso soup because she always gave me bits of dried fish. I really liked it when she ate cold tofu, too, because she would sprinkle dried bonito flakes onto my food.

She used to sing to herself while cooking, and I loved hearing her sing.
“Chobi.”



I woke up every morning at the same time, prepared breakfast, watched the same TV program, and left for work, always in that order.

Since I'd started living on my own, I'd found joy in living an orderly lifestyle. It was comforting to discover that I could control my routine.

Even when Chobi came to live with me, my life didn't change much. I'd had a dog growing up, and it had been a hassle having to take him out for a walk even when it was pouring with rain or snowing, but cats are creatures that don't need much looking after.

Today, as always, I woke up a moment before the alarm sounded and turned it off. I could feel Chobi's presence in my room. I took the thermometer from under my pillow and measured my basal body temperature. I'd been keeping a daily chart since I'd started going out with Nobu. Now that it had become a habit, it would have felt weird to stop, and all the records I'd kept until now would have been a waste of time.

Bathed in the morning sun streaming through the window, I made my breakfast of small rice balls. Any that I didn't eat would go in my lunch bento.

Chobi and I drank our milk, then I changed into my work clothes. I almost forgot the time as I watched Chobi wrestling with my pajamas.



I liked watching her reflection as she stood in front of the mirror, putting on her makeup. With practiced movements she spread out an array of brushes

and used each one in turn before carefully putting them all away again. She did everything scrupulously.

Lastly, she applied her perfume. Its fragrance spread through the apartment, smelling of grass wet from the rain.

As always, she watched the TV weather forecast for the day. Then it was time for her to leave.

I really loved watching her tie up her long black hair, put on a jacket in matching black, and slip her feet into high-heeled shoes.

She crouched down to where I was sitting by the front door and gave my head a gentle stroke with the tips of her fingers.

“See you later, Chobi,” she said, then she stood up with her back absolutely straight and pulled open the heavy metal door.

I narrowed my eyes against the sunshine that streamed across the threshold.

See you later!

She stepped out into the light.

Feeling the lingering presence of her fingers on my head, I listened to the sound of her heels clacking pleasantly as she made her way down the outside staircase and into the distance.

After seeing her off, I climbed up onto a chair and watched as a train traveled over the raised tracks beyond the balcony. Maybe she was on it.

I watched the trains till I'd had my fill, then jumped down off the chair.

The smell of her perfume still hung in the air. Enveloped in the fragrance, I went back to sleep.



Swaying inside the packed train, I thought of Chobi.

Whenever he was asleep or absorbed in something, however much I called his name, he pretended not to hear, but he would roll over and show his

tummy when he wanted attention.

If I stepped over him acting as if I hadn't noticed, he'd dash off, then roll over in front of me, flashing his tummy again. It was so unbearably cute.

I felt myself smiling suddenly and quickly composed my face. Some colleagues and students used this train, and I'd be embarrassed to be caught with a dumb expression.

It was so nice to have someone waiting for me at home. I caught sight of an ad above the train door for a matchmaking service. Maybe this was what people meant by marital bliss. The joy of my cat.

A friend my age was already married. She'd scored early, marrying her boyfriend from college on graduation. On the New Year's card she'd sent to my parents' place, there was a photo of her holding a small baby with her husband at her side. I tried to imagine Nobu and me in their place, but it didn't feel very real, and I smiled wryly.

I couldn't even ask him if we were actually going out together. If I got pregnant, would he even marry me?

And in any case, did I really want to get married?

I imagined myself growing old, living in my little apartment, surrounded by lots of cats.

I heard the announcement that the train was approaching my stop.

I stood up as straight as I could and got off the train.

XXX

In my job as an administrator at a technical college for art and design, there were always a lot of bulky documents to manage. This morning when I arrived, some had spilled over from my colleague's desk and knocked over my penholder, but pointing it out seemed a bit petty. The desks shouldn't be this small in the first place, I told myself as I turned on my computer.



I woke up from my nap and had a big long stretch before deciding to go out for a walk. I could get out onto the balcony through a hole in the kitchen wall that had been made for a vent when the gas stove or something was installed. She'd turned it into a door for me after realizing I wanted to go outside.

"You might not be able to get through it when you grow bigger, though. We'll have to come up with something else by then," she said. But we cats could get through much smaller spaces than she thought, so it was fine, at least for now.

The weather today was clear with a fresh breeze. I squeezed my head through a gap in the balcony railings to watch the train, the flow of cars, and the people on the street below. Having ascertained that the world was in motion, I leaped to the next balcony and then to the one after that to reach finally the external staircase.

There was an abundance of smells outside. The smell of the earth, of other animals carried on the breeze; the smell coming from some kitchen or other, of exhaust fumes and the garbage collection point.

Once I'd landed on the ground, I lifted my head up towards her apartment. It was a two-story affair sandwiched between two tall buildings. All the windows were the same, but somehow her apartment looked special.

I roamed around the block. We cats had territories, and the area around her apartment building was mine. I sniffed here and there, checking whether other cats had been over or not, then left my mark.

To be honest, I wasn't all that bothered about who owned which territory, but it was a cat's instinct, so I couldn't help it.

And so my regular patrol was done. But now that I'd grown used to the area, it occurred to me to maybe expand my horizons a little.

I headed for the top of the slope on the opposite side of the raised tracks. No other cat smells had wafted over from there.

It was best to have a large territory. That was our instinct. But it was also a bother having to deal with trouble from other cats.

I made my way along the tops of fences and under the cover of plants, to avoid being run over or disturbed by anyone.

Eventually, I reached a house with a garden full of greenery.

I could tell right away why there weren't any other cats living around here. At the bottom of the garden was a big dog. It looked old, with floppy ears and black-and-white patches on its fur.

Dogs never welcomed cats, and I was just about to take my leave, when, of all things, it called out to me.

"It's been a long time, Shiro."

The dog sounded so remarkably easygoing that I did a double take. It didn't seem to be putting on any airs at all, despite its size.

"Er, hello," I answered.

"As beautiful as ever, I see!"

Beautiful? This dog obviously couldn't tell the difference between male and female cats.

"Er, but I'm male," I said, a little irritated. After confirming it was on a chain, naturally.

"Is that so?" It didn't seem annoyed in the slightest and added, "Well, in that case, a splendid male."

"Thank you," I answered graciously. What a peculiar dog. My curiosity was aroused. "My name is Chobi, not Shiro."

The dog looked at me, its eyes wide with surprise.

"Chobi, is it? Not Shiro? My mistake, sorry. You're both white cats. This was Shiro's territory."

I was disappointed to hear another cat had got here before me.

"But there aren't any other cats here. I can't smell any."

"That's right. I'm guarding the place for Shiro, so they don't come close."

This dog said the oddest things.

“I’ve never heard of a dog guarding a cat’s territory before.”

“I promised Shiro I would.”

“Well, where did this Shiro go?”

“I haven’t seen her for a while now. The last time I saw her, she had a large belly.”

Oh! Even I couldn’t miss the implication of this. A cat identical to me, a pure white cat...

“In that case, she must be my mother,” I managed to say. The reason I was all alone and the area at the top of the slope didn’t smell of cat was one and the same: Shiro was no longer alive.

The dog took a deep breath.

“Jon,” he said.

“Jon?”

“That’s my name. I’m now going to tell you something very important. I think it’s best you know.”

“Understood, Jon.”

“Chobi, did Shiro treat you affectionately?”

“I don’t remember, but I’d like to think she did.”

“I see...” Jon didn’t say anything for a while, then suddenly changed the subject. “Shiro and I were like sweethearts.”

“Sweethearts?”

“All beautiful women are my sweethearts, you know!”

“Ah.”

“Shiro had the same lovely white fur as you,” Jon said dreamily.

“Thank you.”

My fur was lovely because *she* always brushed me.

“I’ve often wondered about you and your siblings.”

Hearing this, my chest constricted a little.

“From now on, Chobi, this will be your territory.”

“Really? Are you sure?”

“Shiro would certainly approve. And it will be proof that she lived here too.”