

The Legend of Manto

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Preface

This is a story about a fifth grader named Hikari and her three friends who traveled to find the Casket of the evil God Manto. Accompanied by a scarab beetle and a myna, they traveled in the world of Hikari's dream life, talking with animals plants, rocks water, and so on. When Hikari and the children took back "happiness" which the God Manto had taken from the people and put in the Casket, those people who had been changed into sheep, bats, or water could recover their previous form. Chidori, who joined Hikari's dream journey, was a child who was always bullied by Gonta, one of the their characters, and his friends at school. She became aware that everyone could have a better heart through experiencing a variety of incidents while traveling with the bully Gonta. Hikari and her friends overcame difficulties by realizing that joy, vitality, and beauty were kept hidden by bitter, sad incidents. Anger and resentment lockup happiness just like the Casket of Manto does. Let's make a journey to recover happiness from the Casket of Manto with Hikari and her friends by reading this story.

Table of Contents

Chapter 1	The Encounter	5
Chapter 2	Friendship.....	5
Chapter 3	Picking on Chidori.....	6
Chapter 4	A Vacant Seat	7
Chapter 5	At a Park.....	8
Chapter 6	Dream	9
Chapter 7	The Tree	10
Chapter 8	Reflection	11
Chapter 9	A Scarab Beetle.....	11
Chapter 10	Consideration	12
Chapter 11	Thanks	13
Chapter 12	An Old Man	14
Chapter 13	A Swan	14
Chapter 14	The Legend of Manto.....	15
Chapter 15	Departure.....	16
Chapter 16	The Hill of Sheep	17
Chapter 17	Wolves	18
Chapter 18	Confrontation.....	18
Chapter 19	Victim	19
Chapter 20	The Death of the Lamb	20
Chapter 21	Valley	21
Chapter 22	A Talk with the Wolf.....	22
Chapter 23	Signals	23
Chapter 24	A Surprise Attack	24
Chapter 25	Prayer	24
Chapter 26	Pebble.....	25
Chapter 27	Stunted Trees	26
Chapter 28	Faces of Trees	27
Chapter 29	A Warm Heart.....	28
Chapter 30	Likes and Dislikes	29
Chapter 31	God and Manto	30
Chapter 32	Rocks.....	31
Chapter 33	Birds.....	32
Chapter 34	A Grain of Sand	32
Chapter 35	Signals from God	33
Chapter 36	Bats	34
Chapter 37	Sounds.....	35
Chapter 38	Irritation	36
Chapter 39	Flowers Pride.....	36
Chapter 40	The Large Tree's Assertion.....	37
Chapter 41	The Murmur of Grasses	38
Chapter 42	The White Rock	39

Chapter 43	The Rock and the Pebble.....	40
Chapter 44	Under a Tree.....	41
Chapter 45	A Bridge Made by Monkeys	42
Chapter 46	Taking Care of Others.....	42
Chapter 47	Dia.....	43
Chapter 48	Cooperation.....	44
Chapter 49	Something Wonderful.....	45
Chapter 50	Something Wrong.....	46
Chapter 51	In a Basement	47
Chapter 52	A Chat	48
Chapter 53	A Small Light.....	49
Chapter 54	Fog.....	50
Chapter 55	At a Supermarket.....	50
Chapter 56	At the Old Man's House	51
Chapter 57	A Flower.....	52
Chapter 58	A Dove	53
Chapter 59	Question.....	54
Chapter 60	Red Seal	55
Chapter 61	A Dangerous Book	56
Chapter 62	A Fisherman	56
Chapter 63	Deep Pool	57
Chapter 64	Words of The Char.....	58
Chapter 65	Legendary Events.....	59
Chapter 66	Transformation.....	60
Chapter 67	At Midnight	61
Chapter 68	Mysteries	62
Chapter 69	Truth	62
Chapter 70	God and Satan.....	63
Chapter 71	The Parents of the Char.....	64
Chapter 72	A Painter.....	65
Chapter 73	Beauty.....	66
Chapter 74	Gentleness	67
Chapter 75	A Judge	67
Chapter 76	Documents	68
Chapter 77	Manto's People.....	69
Chapter 78	A Fragmentary Sketch	70
Chapter 79	The Real Factor	71
Chapter 80	Water.....	72
Chapter 81	A Comic Book.....	73
Chapter 82	Two Faces.....	74
Chapter 83	La Lahla's Younger Brother	75
Chapter 84	The Secrets of Manto.....	76
Chapter 85	A Merman	77
Chapter 86	The Battle	78
Chapter 87	Birdpeople.....	79

Chapter 88	The Wall.....	79
Chapter 89	Deduction.....	80
Chapter 90	The Incantation.....	81
Chapter 91	The Cave.....	82
Chapter 92	Moans.....	83
Chapter 93	The Assassin.....	84
Chapter 94	The Previous Night.....	85
Chapter 95	Chains.....	85
Chapter 96	Compassion.....	86
Chapter 97	The Inner World.....	87
Chapter 98	The Door to the Kingdom of God.....	88
Chapter 99	The Medal.....	89
Chapter 100	The Back Cover.....	90
Chapter 101	Moonlight.....	90
Chapter 102	Kite – flying.....	91
Chapter 103	The Horse and the Cow.....	92
Chapter 104	Farewell.....	93
Chapter 105	The Castle.....	94
Chapter 106	The White Cat.....	95
Chapter 107	The Fortune – teller.....	96
Chapter 108	King Manto.....	97
Chapter 109	The Heart to Love the Others.....	98
Chapter 110	The King’s Tears.....	99
Chapter 111	God Manto.....	99
Chapter 112	The Casket of Manto.....	100

Chapter 1 The Encounter

Hikari Minamida was dazzled by the glaring sea, and tears ran down her face. No waves were seen because of the sunshine falling from the sky. The sea, where sea birds were dozing, was shining. Hikari was shedding tears not only because of the shining sea but also because she was thinking about Chidori Kitakado who had transferred from another school. Thinking about her made Hikari sad.

Chidori came from Hokkaido three weeks ago, joining Hikari's class. She was a short, thin girl with two plaits of hair hanging down her back. She was a little frail looking and lonely.

If Hikari looked aside a little to the left, she could have a good view of where Chidori is sitting. Fanta regularly had a seat next to Chidori. He had this nickname as he was always fidgety, although his full name was Shiro Takasaki, which sounds like a Japanese warrior's name.

Hikari became Chidori's first friend. Chidori talks to no one without being talked to first. Hikari thought Fanta should make friends with her, but he was usually away from his seat and did nothing but play practical jokes. Even though three days had passed since Chidori joined the class, she was alone. So Hikari talked to her on the playground during P.E. class, willing to make friends with her.

"Don't you play dodgeball?"

Hikari was pretty good at playing dodgeball. She could catch any fast ball-thrown as firmly at her chest as any boy with a strong build. She could throw a ball very fast and hard. It never ailed to hit the mark.

Chidori shook her head in silence.

"How about swimming?"

Hikari got the first prize in the long-distance event at the swimming meet in fourth grade last summer. She was confident she would be the first place winner in the fifth grade this year.

"No, I don't like it." Chidori said in a low voice.

Hikari was disappointed. She was sure that she would make friends with Chidori if they could take part in sports. Even so, Hikari very much took to Chidori's eyes which were as clear as a lake. Hikari became the only classmate who would talk with Chidori. Chidori began to tell her story bit by bit.

"My father is often transferred to other offices. I transfer to another school every time he moves. This is the fourth time."

"Oh. You transfer to other schools about once every year. Then you part from your friends when you become familiar with them, don't you?"

"Right. I hate to transfer to another school. I put up with loneliness, gazing at trees till I make friends with someone. Gazing at trees sets my mind at ease, and it makes me feel they are going to tell me something."

"Have they told you a story?"

"No, not yet."

"Now I understand why you are shy."

"Really?" Chidori smiled with flushed cheeks.

Chapter 2 Friendship

Chidori's family lived on the fourteenth floor of a fifteen-stories housing complex that stood at the seashore. Since the building was situated just between Hikari's house and their elementary school, Hikari decided to call for Chidori and go to school. Hikari's house was a one-story house built of wood, and there was a pine tree in the garden. Chidori envied Hikari for her house, and because Hikari could see trees close at hand from her room. It was the first time for Chidori to live in a housing complex.

"I'm frightened, since looking outside my room makes me feel I'm floating," said Chidori.

Hideki was envious of Chidori's room, for Chidori could have a view of the horizon where the blue sky and the blue sea merged dimly and also the distant mountains, as if the landscape was painted in diluted ink.

"What about changing my house and yours ?" Hikari made a joke to encourage her friend. Chidori kept her eyes cast down all the time, and she wouldn't even look at Hikari.

"I want to exchange my mind for yours : I'll become you and you become me."

"You mean 'switch' ? But it's impossible, isn't it ?"

Hikari was surprised at Chidori's words ; apparently she was taking it very hard.

"I have come to dislike myself once in a while."

"Why do you say that you dislike yourself since you are very pretty ? Hikari sometimes felt Chidori was very beautiful when Chidori smiled, staring at her friend with her eyes as clear as a lake. However, she looked lonely, like a shrinking sparrow beaten by rain when she stared only at her desk top with her head drooping, as if she didn't want to be looked at by anyone.

"Hikari-chan, you can make friends with anyone, can't you ?"

"You are my friend, aren't you ? Call me, Hikari, and let me call you Chidori."

Chidori stared bashfully at Hikari with her wonderful smile. However, her face clouded over.

"Besides, nobody is hard on you."

Hikari was startled, for that reminded her of an incident which happened between Tetsuo Kuroda and Chidori. Tetsuo was fat and short. Moreover, he had big arms and thick legs. His close-cropped head was hard like a stone, so, even a sixth-grader could not match him in appearance. He was rough-mannered. What was worse, he was ill-natured. A large number of pupils was bullied by him to the point of tears. That's why he was disliked by everyone and nicknamed 'Gonta'.

"You look close to tears all the time, don't you ? What did you say your name is ?"

As Gonta talked to Chidori, it gave Hikari a shock.

Chidori answered in a low voice, but it seemed Gonta couldn't hear it. Gonta took that for her ignorance of himself, so he was offended. Gonta regarded all his classmates as his followers. Hikari hates him for that.

Nevertheless, he must have some good characteristics.

Gonta, just as Hikari feared, bullied Chidori. He barked once in her ears like a dog. Chidori turned ghastly pale and ran out of the classroom.

Chapter 3 Picking on Chidori

Hikari soon forgot the incident since she regarded it as Gonta's practical joke. However, the situation was getting serious for Chidori.

When Hikari came for Chidori as usual, Chidori had already left home. However, Chidori didn't attend school. As for Fanta, he may know some reasons why Chidori didn't come to school.

“I don’t know.” He looked at Hikari with upturned eyes.

“You can’t be unaware of it because your seat is next to hers. If you really don’t know, you should change your attitude concerning your friends.”

Hikari asked the other classmates, but all of them remained as silent as clams. The atmosphere of the classroom was strange.

Hikari found a boy beckoning to her from the hallway through an opening made of glass in the classroom wall.

He was a boy in the next class, and she had heard his name was Masao. He slipped out of the classroom into the hallway or to the playground even right in the middle of a class. He hated studying, so it was an agony for him to sit at his desk. Teachers treated him as a troublemaker. What did he want Hikari for ?

“Gonta’s followers barked at your friend, imitating dogs. They kept barking at her and enjoyed looking at her although she was weeping.”

Masao had watched the whole incident from the hallway.

Hikari had despised Masao who hated studying. But now, she changed her mind. He was the only one who told her Chidori was in a fix. Judging from the fact that he beckoned to her expressly to tell the story, Hikari understood very well that Masao was really concerned about Chidori.

Hikari was sorry, thinking that Chidori could be helped if all the classmates had sympathy like Masao.

The picking on Chidori was done secretly. No one notified the teachers about it, for pupils feared that Gonta would pick on them because he had great authority over them.

Why didn’t Chidori ask for some advice from Hikari who was on the most friendly terms with her ? Hikari reflected that she lacked affection for her friend Chidori. It wouldn’t be this way if she had shown kind consideration for her.

Hikari didn’t notice it since Chidori didn’t tell her —she shouldn’t think like that. She had to do her best for Chidori even if she was not asked. That’s a friendship, Hikari thought.

As soon as classes were over, Hikari called on Chidori at home. Chidori had already come home, but she had shut herself in her room, and wouldn’t see Hikari at all. Hikari told Chidori’s mother that Chidori was absent from school.

“Oh, dear ! Where was she if she didn’t go to school ? I have to question her this evening after her father comes home,” Chidori’s mother said, wondering about her daughter.

Chapter 4 A Vacant Seat

Chidori didn’t come to school the next day as well. When Hikari came for her, her mother said, “I will see her to the gate of the school ahead of us.” In spite of that, where had Chidori gone ?

Hikari told the homeroom teacher, Kohichi Fukuda about Chidori. He was called “owl”. His eyes resembled an owl’s as both of them were goggled.

Mr. Fukuda wrote “About Happiness” in big chalk letters on the black board, silently stroking his bald head.

“Please have a look at Miss Chidori Kitakado’s seat,” he said solemnly.

The whole class became perfectly silent. Fanta, who was usually restless, was scared stiff. His head dropped.

“Chidori hasn’t come to school. Some of her classmates did something to her that she didn’t

like. Close your eyes for three minutes, and think intently about Chidori.”

After three minutes, he said, “Now open your eyes and look at Chidori’s seat. Say something that you thought about and what you were impressed with during those three minutes.”

Spoken to by Mr. Fukuda, the pupils began to express their opinions from the front row in turns.

“I think picking on someone is a bad thing that hurts feelings.”

“We were too indifferent to Chidori.”

“I never join in picking on anyone.”

There were a lot of pupils who didn’t know that Chidori was picked on. Hikari said loudly and clearly, “It is mean and cowardly to take pleasure in picking on a gentle girl. I didn’t notice that she was picked on. I am ashamed that I couldn’t do anything for her,” Hikari reflected.

Now, it was Gonta’s turn to speak. He stood up lazily and took a quick look around the classroom.

“I have nothing to say in particular,” he said in a deep voice.

The pupils sitting around Gonta’s seat were his followers. They made the same speech as Gonta’s, but their voices were low. Although Fanta was one of Gonta’s followers, after he stood up, he kept biting his lips in frustration with his head down. He sat down without saying a single word.

“It is never pleasant to pick on someone nor to see those who are picked on. All of you were born of your fathers and your mothers. Your fathers and mothers were born of their fathers and their mothers. So, you are all children of God. If children of God hurt one another, it hurts God. To take care of yourself mentally and physically is to take care of God.”

Next to the line he had written “About Happiness”, Mr. Fukuda added, writing on the blackboard. “Take care of yourself mentally and physically,” stroking his bald head. And he drew an arrow pointing down and wrote, “Let’s take care of our hearts and bodies for one another.”

Masao was watching the words on the blackboard from the hallway.

Chapter 5 At a Park

Chidori wasn’t at home or at school. She was scolded by her parents for having been absent from school without telling anyone in her family. Chidori didn’t tell her parents that she was picked on. Hikari thought that’s just like Chidori. If Hikari were in Chidori’s position, she wouldn’t want to say bad things about others and wouldn’t want to make her parents anxious about her. Chidori with her clear eyes that looked like lakes full of sorrow was worrying all by herself.

Chidori’s mother was in conference with Mr. Fukuda in a classroom from which all the pupils had left after school. Hikari became impatient. The most necessary thing is to find Chidori as early as possible and encourage her.

Hikari started to look for Chidori. She left school and went to a wharf where fishing boats were tied up at the shore. No one was there after the boats had left. She went to a yacht harbor. A large number of yachts were at anchor, and the painted white hulls made a splashing sound every time they rolled. Hikari liked to hear the sound. When she sat down with Chidori and heard the sound with her eyes closed, she felt as if her body had become a yacht swaying on the waves.

Hearing the sound of the waves, Hikari’s heart swelled with grief and she began to run. She went to the park of the housing complex where Chidori lived. There was a small playground. Boys were playing softball. There were round stools among the trees which had grown lushly

green. They were made of concrete, so her bottom was cool where she sat. She never cared about the coldness of the stool when she was eager to let Chidori hear her speak if they were together. In Chidori's absence, Hikari realized that she hit it off the most with Chidori. An ill treated child who was transferred to her school had become her dearest friend without her noticing it.

Hikari sat leaning against a tree on the soft grass. The word 'Manto' was engraved on the trunk of the tree, with something like a knife, but she didn't know who had inscribed it. If Chidori liked trees, she might follow its example. Although it was engraved, it continued growing patiently and the cut would heal in the end.

A breeze brushed Hikari on the cheek. She suddenly came to herself. She seemed to have slept for a while. Feeling someone near her without warning, she looked up and found Chidori standing over her.

"How long have you been here ?" Hikari asked, hugging Chidori.

"I've been here all the time. Before you came here."

"Where did you hide yourself ?"

"In a dream--- I sat where you are sitting now, stroking the cut of the tree carved 'Manto'. And I went into a dream without noticing it. Into Fanta's dream, to boot."

"Oh, dear ! So you've come back from Fanta's land of dreams."

"That's right. You can see I look pale. I had a dreadful experience in the dream."

"What on earth happened to you ?"

"Hikari, I really watched, Fanta kill Gonta."

Chapter 6 Dream

Chidori began to tell Hikari about the murder that took place in Fanta's dream. Before Hikari came to the park, Chidori sat on the grass, stroking the carved 'Manto' gently. The whispering of the wind in the tree sounded like the tree's own sigh of grieving over having been damaged.

Chidori saw something spread out on the sky through the slash of the tree. From there she could see the place she liked best at school, that is, the flower clock in the school garden. The shadow of its hand distinctly indicated four o'clock in the afternoon.

Gonta and Fanta were quarreling.

"I cannot bear to pick on the girl sitting next to me any more," said Fanta.

"If you won't obey me, I'll teach you a lesson with this." Gonta said, clenching his fist.

"I can't bark at Chidori under your direction. Why do you make me do such a thing ?"

"Because I am shunned by the whole school. That's why I get my revenge on them."

"That's because you are rough mannered. You shouldn't blame others."

"If you tell me such a thing, you are my enemy from now on. I'll attack you." Gonta glared at Fanta, his eyes sharp as a knife.

Fanta pulled out a wooden stake from the flower garden, and hit Gonta on the head as Gonta was walking away. Gonta fell down as if he had been buried in the flower garden. His body became cold as ice.

"It's my fault," Fanta murmured.

"I am to blame as well because I am the source of what you have done."

Chidori shed tears for Gonta and Fanta. When her tears fell on the face of Gonta, he disappeared. Instead, she found Fanta sleeping, breathing lightly. She got out of Fanta's dream.

Chidori finished her story.

Fanta fell asleep while he was doing some sketching for his homework in the shade of a tree

near the tree that Hikari leaned against. Hikari wasn't aware of his presence, because of the obstruction of a bench.

"Thank God. It was only in my dream that Gonta died," Fanta also came and said so, apparently relieved.

Gonta ran up from the wharf. Fanta tried to run away in a flurry, but Gonta stood in the way with open arms.

It seemed that he was seeking an opportunity to do something spiteful to others.

Fanta turned pale with fear.

"You were killed in Fanta's dream, so you are a ghost," Hikari said, making a face at Gonta.

Chapter 7 The Tree

Hikari laughed and told the story of Fanta's dream into which Chidori had peeped.

"Nonsense ! If you make fun of me, I'll teach you a lesson. It's impossible for Chidori to go into Fanta's dream," Gonta said, clenching his fist.

"I agree with Gonta's opinion. But what Chidori said sounds plausible, too, for Chidori knows about my dream quite well." Fanta said.

"You never commit yourself to anything definite, so I want to bully you. I'll try stroking the gash of the tree engraved 'Manto' and see whether what Chidori said is true or not. If she is right, I can go into someone's dream."

Gonta roughly stroked the carved 'Manto'.

"Look there. The gash won't move a bit," Gonta said in a deep voice.

"Yes. Something has changed. It is certainly the same park where we were, but it has turned from daytime to evening."

As Hikari said so, dusk came over the park, a streetlight lit up.

"What's this ? The apartment buildings around us are growing dim. As Chidori said, it seems we have come to another world," Gonta said, looking around restlessly.

The surroundings, except for the streetlight and the thicket of trees around them, gradually grew dim and sank in the darkness at last.

As things stood, they didn't know which way to go home. They decided to stay for a while. If they came into someone's dream, he or she would wake up from it.

Gonta stepped forward to Fanta hesitantly and bowed his head.

"I deeply apologize to you for roughing you up. So please grant me a favor. I want you to wake up from your dream once again. I wonder if we are in your dream and your real self is sleeping somewhere, for you know all the members here. I just want to go home soon and watch cartoons on TV."

The usual sharp light had vanished from Gonta's eyes.

"If you really apologize from your heart, I may wake up from my dream right now, but I wonder if this is really my dream."

"All dreams differ every time you dream," Hikari said.

If this is my dream world, as Gonta says what should I do to wake up from my dream ? " Fanta asked seriously, looking around at all the children.

"Try to reflect on what you do—that is, having killed Gonta was a merciless act. Try to apologize, 'I will do whatever to make up for it' " Gonta said.

Fanta sat up strait and vowed many times, saying, "I'm sorry. I won't have such an awful dream any more."

Chapter 8 Reflection

“Haven’t you awakened from your dream yet ? You try my patience. If you say you killed me in your dream, shall I kill you in return ? It doesn’t matter, does it, for you were killed not in my dream but in your dream. And you must be astonished and wake up.”

Gonta, scratching his bald head, was about to grab Fanta.

“Stop ! Why do you behave so barbarously ? Tell me. For what reason did you bully a gentle girl like Chidori ? ” Hikari asked him.

Chidori was afraid to hear what Gonta was going to say. She thought she may possibly have a disagreeable characteristic that Gonta disliked.

“Reasons ? I didn’t have such an extravagant thing. I just had a little bit of interest in what sort of girl Chidori, who transferred from another school, was. And yet, she was scared of me and tried to avoid me. So I made fun of her.”

“Human feelings get hurt easily. Is it fun to make fun of others ? ”

“Far from fun.”

“Then, why ? ”

“I’m not sure. Probably—”

After Gonta thought about it for a while, he muttered, “Because I felt lonely.”

The others didn’t accept Gonta’s explanation. When they felt lonely, they called on their friends. They were concerned because Gonta’s behavior was exactly the opposite.

“What I did was wrong, but what I said now is how I really feel.” Gonta said pensively.

“Speaking of it, we sometimes do what is the opposite of our feelings. We can’t blame only Gonta. As for me, once in a while I say I don’t want some things, although I thought I wanted them. But why do human beings get perverse ? ”

Hikari’s opinion set the others thinking.

“As for me, I want to be regarded as somebody great. I feel lonely as a matter of fact, but I throw my weight around and pretend not to be lonely at all. To conceal my loneliness, I roughed others up and was unkind. After they went home, I felt very lonely because I couldn’t even do anything spiteful.”

“I also really want to make myself look good. I want to be regarded as a nice person by others. As a result, I tend to get ahead of others. When I realize that, I dislike myself. Well, I’ve said what I thought about myself. I’m a bit ashamed, but I feel relieved,” Hikari’s voice turned cheerful as well as her look.

Chapter 9 A Scarab Beetle

Chidori said in a low voice, almost a whisper, “ I have the same feeling at the bottom of my heart. But it is a bit different from Hikari’s. I would rather be seen as not bad than be seen as nice. I’m not good at talking or making friends with others. So it’s rare for me to be happy or to enjoy something. Wishing to make friends with others, one way or another, I try to make myself loveable, but it doesn’t work out. Every day I am afraid of losing other’s favor. I’m scared to talk with others. So I came to mind going to school since Gonta barked at me ‘Bowwow’. Gonta isn’t to be blamed, but only myself.”

“Although you say you’re scared to talk with others, you really speak a lot. You wouldn’t talk with me, would you ? My weak point is dealing with girls. I’m shy. But I’ll make friends with you, so why don’t you go to school beginning tomorrow ? ” Fanta said proudly.

“Why, it’s so conceited to say, ‘I’ll make friends with you,’ ” Hikari said.

“That’s right. You don’t deserve to be Chidori’s friend,” Gonta said in a deep voice, having forgotten that he had repented.

“He doesn’t have enough reflection,” Hikari and others heard a voice say.

Everyone was shocked and looked around, but no one was present.

“Here I am,” they heard a voice say. And then, a scarab beetle, which had been flying around the streetlight, flew up to them and perched on Hikari’s shoulder.

The scarab beetle spoke like a human.

“Even an insect can understand words if it can see how you feel,” the scarab beetle said, affecting intelligence.

The scarab beetle knew well that Hikari was good at dodge ball, swimming, and so on.

“Hikari, you rub the end of your nose when you boast triumphantly of your success. On the other hand, you twist your hair with your left thumb and little finger when things don’t work out.”

“Oh, my ! How come you know that ? ” Hikari became so surprised, she chased him.

“Ha-ha-ha. You shouldn’t conduct yourself badly, for you can’t predict who will see you behaving that way wherever you go.”

Chapter 10 Consideration

The scarab beetle perched on the treetop and said, “I am by your side all the time, Hikari. Don’t you recognize me ? ”

“I don’t. Tell me. What do you mean ‘by my side’ ? ”

“Well then, I’ll tell you. I am on the cover of your textbook.”

“There is no textbook that has a scarab beetle or anything like that on its cover.”

“You are quite careless, Hikari. You should read and look over your textbooks, every nook and cranny of them. Covers of textbooks have a lot of valuable information as well.”

“Where on earth are you ? Tell us right now,” said Gonta, waiting for a chance to catch the scarab beetle.

“Humph ! You always use such rough language. I am on your science textbook.”

“But that is a picture of a field, isn’t it ? ” said Hikari.

“I perch on a tree in the field,” grumbled the scarab beetle.

The scarab beetle had been staring at Hikari.

“I know bullies and those who are picked on, too. When Gonta’s top henchman, Rokusuke bullied Hitoshi, it was awful. With his fellows, Rokusuke forced Hitoshi to the corner of the classroom, and then hit and kicked him. Hitoshi became black and blue all over. Though Hitoshi was yowling with pain, those nearby pretended not to see it. Don’t you others have a friendship with him ? I suppose those who pretend not to see their friend in torture will pass by a person lying by the roadside with no sign of recognition. Even Hitoshi had an experience of pretending not to see when one of his friends was picked on. People don’t know sorrow and pain until they have it happen to themselves.

“I wonder if such things happened,” Hikari said, glancing at Gonta, placing her finger on her cheek.

“I poked the poor fellow, Hitoshi because he was wailing. I only played for fun,” Gonta apparently looked as if he wanted to say it didn’t matter much.

“Although you reflected on what you did, you still won’t put yourself in Hitoshi’s shoes,” Hikari glared at Gonta.

“Though you criticize him, at that time you were talking with Yochan, saying ; ‘What do you think of my hair in pigtails.’ Since all of you are egocentric, bullies grow powerful.” The scarab beetle was so disappointed that he flapped his wings.

“I can bully you easily because you aren’t ready to help each other enough,” Gonta murmured.

“You can’t say that even jokingly when you see the distress of others. We lack the most important thing—consideration for others,” Hikari said.

The scarab beetle reminded all of the children that they had treated each other coolly. Hikari thanked the scarab beetle, and she really came to like him.

Chapter 11 Thanks

The scarab beetle preened his wings and said gently, “It is yourself who ruin this wonderful world.”

Even the scarab beetle has enemies. For instance, a bird. If it snaps him up, this is the end of him. And it is human beings that he should be more careful of than birds. But, he said, as he knew Hikari was kind to insects, he could perch on Hikari’s shoulder with ease.

“It doesn’t take much time to make friends with someone. If you get through to each other, the moment you meet, you can make friends. On the other hand, if you don’t, you keep an eye on each other, and in the end, you will bully the other or quarrel.”

The scarab beetle let them know that to think badly of others makes people most unhappy. He thought not bearing malice toward others is not enough. He made it a rule to thank the sky and the earth. If it were not for the sky and the earth, he couldn’t fly in the air nor perch on trees that grew on the earth. So he thought he had to thank the sky and the earth.

As Gonta was irritated by being taught by an insect, he rebelled, “What difference does it make whether there is the earth or not.”

The instant he said that, the earth collapsed, suddenly and all of the children fell in.

“Wow ! Help ! ” they screamed.

Sure enough as the scarab beetle said, they needed the earth.

Their bodies landed softly on the gentle grass. Many flowers were blooming all over the grassy plain. The kids were no longer in the park where they had been. Where were they ?

The sky suddenly dazzled them from a distance. Plants began to shine. Even the earth and the stones were making faint vibrations like those of the wind.

“The plants, and the earth and the stones are singing songs, giving their thanks to God,” the scarab beetle said.

To the ears of Hikari and others, they sounded like the wind rustling the grasses or blowing through the trees.

To the scarab beetle, they sounded like songs.

“As I live in the natural world. I can guess the feelings of plants. But it’s my first time to hear them sing. At present, I am communicating my feelings with the plants, the earth and the stones for each other,” the scarab beetle was filled with rapture listening to the music.

“What song are they singing ? How about singing their song for us ? ”

The scarab beetle nodded at Hikari's suggestion and begin to sing to the accompaniment of the song around him.

Chapter 12 An Old Man

Voices of all creation thanking God were singing, the sky and the earth shone with a rosy color. Gonta, without realizing it, picked a flower that gave off a pale light at his feet. The flower lost its light and withered away before his eyes. The light of plants, the earth and the stones suddenly became faint, vanishing in the end.

"Now you've done it ! If you pick a flower, it will lose its life."

"Oh, will it ? It was so pretty that I picked it by mistake."

"You always used to pick flowers in the flower bed of our school, and nobody gave you a piece of advice. For you would rough others up. By the way, it has been getting cold since you picked those flowers," Fanta said.

A wind blew against the kids, strong enough to blow away his voice. From the horizon a snowstorm surged toward them, and in an instant, the field turned into a snowy field. They heard growing voices mixed in with the roaring snowstorm. Abusive voices came from the sky and the field as well. All the kids distinctly heard the weird voices since they themselves had secretly borne such slanderous ideas. Envy, jealousy, hatred and hostility were coming from the sky and the earth with the roar of the snowstorm.

"That's the voice of my evil thoughts. Don't let out your horrible voice," Hikari cried out.

"I'll repent with Hikari, so don't talk about my disgraceful thoughts. I'd rather die than be ashamed to hear it," Chidori shouted clinging to Hikari.

"Ha-ha-ha ! " the sound of laughter rose in that place. There, the kids found an old man with a long white beard, standing with the aid of a cane. All the snow disappeared and they were back in the field where flowers were in full bloom.

"Look ! Isn't he Mr. Fukuda ? " Gonta asked dubiously.

"No, I'm not Mr. Fukuda or anyone like him."

Hikari thought he looked just like an owl, merely older than an owl.

"Harumph", he let out a cough and began to talk, full of dignity.

"Welcome. You all had two experiences in the field. At first, you heard the choral singing of all creation thanking God. Heaven and earth shone beautifully. Another experience was when you heard weird voices abusing others, and you nearly froze to death. Well, to live in good health thanking God and to lead a hard and unpleasant life are as different as day and night, even though you stay in the same field. All the people born on the earth have passed here. Whether you lead a lovely and happy life or a hard and disagreeable life depends on how determined you are. People passing here perished or prospered according to which way they chose. I've seen the state of those people from long ago."

Chapter 13 A Swan

Who on earth is this old man ?

"You may well wonder who I am, but I dare not tell you now, for each of you will know it by and by."

The old man seemed to see through the others.

“I can see a woman calling for a child,” Chidori informed them.

All the members agreed to go there. A woman was weeping, holding a swan in her arms. The plants around her had withered, and the air, full of deep grief, was as dim as if it had been evening.

“What’s up ? ” Hikari asked the woman.

“My child Dahlia was lost by this river. After that only this swan was left.”

Chidori stared at the swan’s face.

“The swan says ‘Help me’ in a girl’s voice. Your Dahlia was transformed into a swan. I hear her speaking.”

“Even so, how come Chidori alone can hear the girl’s voice ? ” Fanta wondered.

“That’s the same case as when the scarab beetle could hear the voices of the plants. Only those who have been overwhelmed with deep grief really understand grief. God gave Chidori the power of understanding grief profoundly. Her patience with sorrow and loneliness has blossomed in the way,” the old man said.

The swan stared at Hikari with her narrowed eyes and said “Coo, coo,” sorrowfully. Holding her, her mother wept as well. What a poor mother, not to be able to help her child although she was holding her child.

“That’s too bad. I wonder if there’s something I can do for you,” Hikari also wept for this mother and her child.

“You like singing, don’t you ? Sing a song to cheer them up,” the old man said, who looked just like an owl, with his blinking eyes.

Hikari sang sincerely, gently and cordially as if she had wrapped those up who were frozen by their sorrow.

A face of a young child appeared faintly on the surface of the swan.

“As Hikari sang a song thanking God just now, the magical power placed on the swan failed. So the face of a girl, who had been changed into a swan, appeared.”

The old man prayed to God for something, pointing at Hikari with his cane.

“Oh, dear. The swan is saying something,” Chidori strained her ears.

“According to her, the Devil settled in her selfish mind so that she wouldn’t listen to her mother, and he put happiness into a casket and took it away,” Chidori said, stroking the swan.

“So that legend was an actual incident.”

The old man wrote ‘The Legend of Manto’ on the ground with his cane.

Chapter 14 The Legend of Manto

The old man narrated ‘The Legend of Manto’.

“Although space was created by God, there’s a formidable one who says he himself created space. It is a Devil called ‘Manto’. Manto challenged God in order to rule God’s fair, lovely world and create a dark, combative world. As Manto is a shrewd schemer, God nearly loses once in a while. But still God is mightier than Manto. Therefore, Manto preys on the minds that disobey the teachings of God, and Manto adopts the strategy in which he puts human happiness given by God into a casket. They say people are changed into something else if their happiness is put into the Casket. I was convinced the legend was true when I saw this swan.”

A wind moved the old man’s beard gently.

“There is only one method to get her former figure back. Take back from Manto the Casket

in which her happiness is kept.”

To think of her, somebody has to go and get it back. The kids including Hikari were the only ones who could do it now.

“Let’s go and look for Manto’s Casket,” said Hikari, calling up all her courage.

Gonta shrank. “We came here only to peek into someone’s dream. I’m unwilling to get into trouble.” Although he dared to say so, there was little chance he would escape from someone’s dream world.

“I’m too old to go with you. Instead of me, you may take this myna.” A deep-black myna struck its head out of the breast pocket of the old man, and said in a voice identical with his. “I will go with you.”

“This myna is a master of mimicking. It is helpful when you fight with Manto who can do anything. Manto goes underground once in a while. According to the Legend of Manto, there’s something helpful. Look, this is it.”

The old man went up to a rock, and picked up a white stone the size of a marble, and handed it over to Hikari.

“If you keep this stone with you, you can pass through places only Manto can, they say. It is said it shines when you pray and that it shines brighter and increases its power when a large number of people pray.”

“I do hear the voice saying, ‘What a surprise that you managed to decipher the Legend of Manto’,” Gonta whispered bringing his ears closer to the swan.

“Nobody really understands evil thoughts except those who have done evil deeds. God is showing us that amazing abilities are latent in wicked thoughts and sorrows.”

Chapter 15 Departure

The old man was brimming over with dignity and affection. Everyone stared at the old man’s face.

“God will show you He certainly makes you happy no matter how our mind works. Though happiness will be a long way off and it takes much time.”

Everyone was awestruck because they would know about the great world of God by His leading them through the journey of looking for Manto.

Be that as it may, where should they go looking for Manto ? The swan cried in a quavering voice as if she sensed their bewilderment. I looked like a few feathers on the belly had been plucked, and there the letters ‘Manto’ were scratched.

Let’s save the girl changed into a swan as soon as possible—each had in mind the same idea. No one mentioned it, but they prayed so.

The stone the old man presented them began to shine in Hikari’s hands. All members were veiled in the light.

Everyone stood on the hill at the foot of a high mountain capped with white snow without their realizing it. The hill, covered with soft grasses, looked like it was covered with a green carpet. A large number of lambs gathered here and there.

Hikari noticed just one lamb bleating sadly, separated from the flock. “That lamb is looking for its mother. It lost its way.” Chidori understood the language spoken by the sad lamb. She saw several mother sheep who led many flocks of lambs. “Hello. Isn’t your mother among those flocks ?” Chidori asked the lamb.

The lamb told a story looking around at the flocks of sheep here and there on the hill : “I

can't find my mother there. It is the third day since I came to this hill. I'm so tired from looking for my mother that I can't walk any more. My mother and I were attacked suddenly by wolves when we were grazing by a wood of white birches, and I ran away desperately. When I realized it, it was alone on the hill. I just can't remember my father. Where has my family gone ? ”

It was getting dark on the hill. Lambs having leapt around, fell asleep.

The stray lamb was missing its mother more than ever. It continued to bleat for such a long time, its voice became hoarse.

Stars twinkled, and sleeping figures of sheep in a heap were seen here and there in the starlight. Hikari and her friends sat on the grass with the stray lamb in the center. Looking at the lamb bleating and quaking, they became sad.

“Oh ! What beautiful stars ! ” Hikari cried cheerfully in order to change their depressed mood. The lamb stopped bleating and looked up at the night sky.

Chapter 16 The Hill of Sheep

The night sky in which stars twinkle is filled with silence. However, it invites the minds of those who watch it to the world of infinitely deep peace and calmness.

“I wonder what makes me so calm watching stars in the sky,” Gonta said quietly, as if he had become another boy.

“Because you feel the infinitely great power of God when you look at the mysterious universe He made, I think,” Hikari said, searching for the faint starlight.

“Watching the starlit sky, I feel like I'm held between the earth and the faraway universe. God created the heaven as well as the earth. On earth plants grow, and in the sky air flows, the sun shines and stars twinkle,” Chidori whispered.

“The heaven is our father, and the earth is our mother, aren't they ? We are kept alive between the heaven and earth. Don't be sad even if you lose sight of your mother, because God protects you,” Hikari said stroking the lamb gently.

“God will surely save you.”

A shooting star streamed across the sky above the hill.

The lamb twitched its ears. Over there flocks of sheep began to run unexpectedly. A great many flocks of sheep ran down the hill in a white belt. In the moonlight those sheep were distinctly seen falling from a cliff in the side of the hill one after another. Driving the sheep away, a dark cluster of something was moving rapidly toward the kids. It was not sheep.

Hikari and others stood up in surprise. The lamb began to bleat incessantly. The dark cluster was very close to Hikari and her friends.

It was a pack of wolves. In the moonlight the eyes of the wolves glared and even their breathing could be heard.

“Awoo,” howled the wolf at the head to the night sky. Having heard the cry, innumerable wolves came up from a distance.

The myna soared up in a panic.

“Everyone, hold still, don't move. If you move a bit, they will spring on us,” the scarab beetle said in a deep voice.

“Baa, baa,” the lamb bleated to the wolf at the head.

“It asks what has become of its mother. I can understand it,” Chidori whispered.

“Awoo, awoo,” the wolf howled.

“How cruel ! They ate her up, and they will eat us up as well, they say,” Chidori said,

shrugging.

Fanta sat down, unable to stand up.

“Hum ? The wolf at the head said as follows : ‘If we surrender the lamb, they will have nothing to do with us,’ ” Gonta said.

“Surrender the lamb. It’s the only way to save ourselves,” Fanta said in a voice about to cry.

Chapter 17 Wolves

The lamb stopped even bleating after a twitch of its body. I did nothing but stand still, like a sheep made of stone toward the pack of wolves.

“Are you going to save us alone at the sacrifice of the lamb ? ” Hikari cried.

“I can’t do such a thing as to let the lamb die in order to protect myself. If ever I did and saved myself. I wouldn’t be happy at all. I’d rather be eaten together than have the lamb eaten by the wolves,” Chidori said, sobbing so as to appeal to Gonta and Fanta.

“Take a look. Even the brilliance of the stars in the night sky has frozen. It’s merciless to stand by and watch the wolves eat the lamb. Doing nothing is to allow the brutal act of the wolves, isn’t it ? ” the scarab beetle on Hikari’s shoulder asked each of them.

“I don’t think it’s good to save ourselves by the sacrifice of the lamb, either. But as things stand now, all of us will be killed. So I told you so. That’s all there is to it,” Fanta said, hanging his head.

“If you were the lamb, how would you feel ? ” Chidori said weeping.

“If I were the lamb, I would resent you all. I would feel sadder because all of you abandoned me rather than just sad because wolves ate me,” Gonta whispered.

“I got it. You are right. I was wrong to intend to sacrifice the lamb in order to save ourselves,” Fanta said with his back to everyone.

“Thank you, everyone,” the lamb uttered in a feeble and sorrowful voice. The lamb and everyone else became able to communicate and understand the other’s language.

“My mother was eaten by the wolves. I can’t live keeping such a grief to myself. Though I was frozen from grief, I am really happy to feel your heartfelt kindness. That’s enough. I will be eaten to save you.”

The lamb sprang out in front of the wolves and closed its eyes.

Then the leader of the wolves spurted words from his red mouth, staring fixedly at the lamb with his glaring eyes. His way of speaking was unexpectedly dignified.

“We hunt sheep not for fun. Since we were born into the world, we have the right to live, too. In order to stay alive, we hunt sheep for food, and we eat them, thankful to our God Manto. Human beings have killed innumerable numbers of our ancestors and companions. I persuade myself it cannot be helped because they do it in order to defend their lives from our raiding. If so, it also cannot be helped that we attack human beings and eat sheep. If we are accused of it, I suggest that human beings also be accused of the same sin.”

Chapter 18 Confrontation

The pack of wolves were waiting, without stirring an inch, behind their leader.

“I wonder why we understand the language of wolves. We don’t have any ferocious thoughts

like yours, though,” Gonta said.

“If you have the courage to see into your own thoughts honestly, how can you tell me such a thing without any doubt ? Human beings have killed countless animals and plants to live. Therefore, even you understand what I am talking about. That you get through to me and understand my words means that the same thoughts as ours lurk in your minds.”

Hikari thought what the leader of the wolves said was true.

Can we treasure all the lives given by God ?

“The helpless world we compose is the world of our God, Manto. If you won’t surrender the lamb, by all means, we must attack you, too.”

Then Hiari and the others and the wolves glared at each other.

Hikari felt a deep despair resembling a soft breeze at the bottom of her heart, because she too understood well the existence of the helpless world the wolf spoke of.

Imagining that she would die eaten by the wolves made her feel the beat of her precious life in every moment, so she shouted, “God,” in her heart.

The pack of wolves came gradually closer.

Then, from a mountain in the distance a howl of a wolf arose. The pack of wolves was startled, because the howl was exactly like the wolves’ leader’s howl in front of Hikari.

The leader bristled all over, and started running off in the direction toward where the howl had come from. Lit up with moonlight, the wolves were running up the mountain in a dark pack.

“Wowoon,” the same howl arose from a higher place on the mountain.

The hill return to the former quiet landscape that only showed gentle slopes again.

The myna flew down circling slowly from the sky.

“A coward ! Now you’re back when the wolves are away,” the scarab beetle said contemptuously.

“You abandoned us and escaped into the sky by yourself. You don’t deserve to join our party,” Gonta abused the bird as well.

The myna perched on the top of a tree that stood alone on the hill. And it howled, “Wowoon,” the same howl that came from the mountain.

“I flew away as far as possible, and imitated the way the leader of the wolves howls. At this moment those bastards are desperately looking for a wolf that gave a long drawn-out howl, I guess. In any case the leader of the wolves is the only one, so the bastards are at a loss, I suppose,” the myna said in the voice of the old man.

“Stop mimicking the old man,” Gonta glared.

“What’s your own voice ? ” the scarab beetle said displeasingly.

Chapter 19 Victim

The myna was thinking, tilting his head slightly. As it had mimicked the voice of others all the time, it forgot its own voice.

“Gaa, gaa,” the myna let out a cry of a bird instinctively.

“That’s an original voice of a myna, isn’t it ? ” laughed Fanta.

“Don’t call me ‘myna’ in the language of humankind without my permission. That’s why I dislike you human beings. You think you are the greatest.”

“Do you have a name ? ” Hikari asked.

“Among our species names aren’t needed at all. It’s not fun, for you human beings take it for granted that you call everything by a name. though you just name it to suit your own

convenience,” the myna said unexpectedly in a cute childlike voice.

“Then, how about giving it a name as a present ? ”

Hikari proposed that everyone submit a name respectively. Among them she chose a cute name : “Cue”.

The scarab beetle perched on the shoulder of Hikari, shaking its wings incessantly.

“Sorry to have forgotten you. A name should be given to you, too, ” said Hikari.

As Hikari let the scarab beetle move to her hand and smiled, it said, spreading its wings straight, “I wish to have a vigorous name.”

So the kids named it “Bunn”.

Something like a dark whirlwind leaped into the circle formed by the kids. A wolf had been in hiding nearby. The lamb lay covered with blood, and the wolf ran away.

“Dear Lamb. Cheer up. You had terrible treatment just because we were off our guard,” Hikari said, lifting the lamb in her arms.

“We, who should have guarded you, were thinking about something else. Forgive us, dear Lamb.”

Chidori pressed her cheek against the lamb. Her cheek was stained with the lamb’s blood, which formed the word ‘Manto’.

Fanta wiped the word from the cheek of Chidori.

“We are sure to take revenge on the wolf for your injuries,” Gonta said when the lamb opened its eyes slightly.

“Don’t fight because of me. I am doomed to die in this way. I’m going to where my mother is, so I’m not afraid at all.”

“Don’t say you’re doomed to die. God will surely save you. When you recover, let’s go together. We’ll never leave you alone.”

The lamb shed tears from its cute eyes hearing Hikari’s words.

“I’m very happy now. Stars in the sky, are shining brighter than usual. That a wolf attacked me cannot be undone. Watching the night sky, watched over by you all like this, I’m becoming peaceful as my grief has eased. So, please don’t feel sad.”

Chapter 20 The Death of the Lamb

The lamb was gone. After the kids buried the lamb by a tree on the hill, they prayed that its sound may rest in peace for a long time.

“Why didn’t God save the life of the lamb ? ” Hikari asked, gazing at the night sky. But the stars just twinkled, and she couldn’t hear any reply of any sort from God.

Hikari sang a song lamenting the lamb’s death, with all her grief. Sheep who had been driven away by wolves, were back and they flocked together around the kids, listening to Hikari’s song attentively. Soon an old sheep stepped forward and said, “Your song is sad, but full of tenderness. I’m sure the dead lamb is listening to your song under the earth.”

Hikari’s eyes were brimming with tears. She didn’t want to believe that the lamb, which had been alive, was dead. The life of the lamb vanished as if a balloon had burst.

“I am the eldest of these sheep. I was impressed by your acts to protect the lamb. We repented deeply. However, since there are so many of us, we couldn’t even console the stray lamb. As the eldest, I’m ashamed of my indifference to the lamb in spite of the fact that I am a sheep as well.”

“I wish the lamb could have heard your words before it died.” Chidori folded her hands in

prayer before the lamb's grave.

The sheep flocked together around the grave, and prayed with Chidori. They promised to take care of those who were sad or in trouble in order to cheer them up, if there were any more.

"Having heard of the lamb's death and having listened to Hikari's song, they have changed their minds," Chidori said and folded her hands in prayer for the flock of sheep. It seemed very precious to her that every sheep in the flock had repented. Even if a lamb loses its family, the flock of sheep would protect it from now on.

"The poor lamb lives in the memory of these sheep on this hill. They will live in cooperation, recalling that lamb," Hikari decided to believe so. It really was true. The death of the lamb taught many lessons to these sheep. The lamb's achievement made the sheep change their minds. Hikari believed it must be a divine act.

"The dear lamb may be a messenger of God," Chidori whispered, looking up at the night sky.

"I wonder if every incident that happened on this hill has been what God has done," Gonta said with deep emotion.

The death of the lamb seemed to have changed Gonta's mind.

"Does God let a wolf attack a lamb?" Fanta pouted, having doubts.

"Everyone. Listen to me. Remember what the lamb said before it died. Accepting that it was attacked by the wolf and that it lost its mother, it thanked us, watching the night sky. And it could feel peaceful. The dear lamb felt the power of God," Hikari said.

Chapter 21 Valley

Hikari asked the eldest of the sheep about Manto.

"How come you know about Manto?" the eldest of the sheep shook his head keenly in surprise.

So Hikari related the story of a girl who had been changed into a swan, and the Legend of Manto she had heard from an old man.

"The Legend of Manto is real. It is reality rather than a story. Manto's followers, the wolves, are ready to attack us all the time. And each time some of us become their victims. We don't know how to fight against them. It was all I could do to lead the flock of sheep to escape. I couldn't rescue those who were attacked."

"The lamb was willing to be eaten, trying to save us from the wolves. You have inner strength to fight at the risk of your lives for others, too," Hikari encouraged the elder of the sheep.

From that day on, these sheep began to think of standing up against wolves. When the wolves attacked, only one ram lunged at the wolves full tilt, or lured the wolves in a different direction in order to save the other sheep. Such a ram was sure to be sacrificed, but other rams challenged the wolves one after another. The story of the sheep on the hills became famous among the wolves, and was handed down generation after generation. However, that was long after Hikari and the others left the hills.

"It has been said that the castle of Manto is ---look, on that high mountain," the elder of the sheep said.

Hikari and her friends waited for day to break, and started for the mountain on which the castle of Manto was said to be standing. Suddenly they came to a deep valley. It was a wide valley that led to the place where the sheep, driven by the wolves, had fallen, one after another the other

night.

As the group was going down into the valley step by step, a wolf appeared from behind a rock.

“That’s the one that attacked the lamb,” Gonta picked a stone and was about to throw it at the wolf.

“Wait, Gonta. The dear lamb will be sad if you hurt the wolf,” Hikari stopped him.

“Do you mean you won’t fight against me, your enemy ? ” the wolf stared at Hikari in surprise.

“We don’t thin of you as our enemy. Your life was given to you by God, just like ours.”

“The God I believe in is Manto. According to His teachers, you don’t forgive your enemies in a battle nor ask them to forgive you. I killed a lamb. So, you could kill me, couldn’t you ? ”

“We can’t take your life for any reason. Because a life is a part of God’s will.”

The wolf gave a low suspicious growl.

Chapter 22 A Talk with the Wolf

Hideki talked about the thankfulness which the lamb had spoken of just before its death.

The wolf was listening to her, trembling.

“Can such a frightful story exist ? ” the wolf murmured in a husky voice.

“What ? You are more horrible than that story,” Fantasqueezed out his words from inside his throat.

“The frightful thing is to have the strength to thank those around one, even at the point of death. Am I able to have that marvelous power ? ”

“God gives the power. Anyone can have the power. If you die, you can’t talk with us in this way nor see the beautiful mountains and valleys.”

“You may be right,” the wolf said, toning down the pale light of its eyes which were sharp as a knife.

“While I was waiting for you, I was facinated by the soft earth which gives the fragrance of grasses and trees, the hard rocks which are as smooth as a fang, the flow of a mountain stream where white ripples crash against the rocks, and the beauty of the high and deep blue sky. I am a warrior among the wolves. Although I am quite satisfied to lose my life in a battle, all theselovely things will disappear from my sight when I die. I thought I wanted to live a little longer.”

“Everything around me is shining with glory. Everything, including that which you feel is beautiful, is the act of God. Isn’t it nice for you and me to talk like this ? ”

The wolf came up to Hikari, and sniffed the palm of her hand. Then, it sniffed her chest and hair.

“That’s the scent I smelled a long time ago. A very nostalgic scent,” the wolf purred.

Hikari related that an infant girl had been changed into a swan. “You may have been changed from a human being into a wolf.”

“That reminds me — I’ve spent my time without knowing my parents and brothers or sisters. I may have been a human being before,” the wolf looked around at its limbs. “Even if I were a human being changed into a wolf, I would understand that a wolf’s life is as precious as the life of a human being. All lives are precious. I cannot help feeling sorry to have killed the lamb,” the

wolf drew a deep sigh and closed its eyes. Then, it shook itself, and said as if it had determined something, "I will have to attack you as things stand now. Get out of here in a hurry."

The wolf climbed on a rock and howled toward the sky, "Woon."

Then, from here and there in the valley, wolves began to howl as if they were answering the howl; "Woon," "Woon."

"In order to go to the castle where the God Manto is, you must pass along this valley of wolves. I'll tell you something helpful in atonement for my sin of taking the precious life of a lamb."

Chapter 23 Signals

Wolves convey different messages by altering their howls. The wolf told Hikari and others in a low voice how to howl so that its fellows could not hear.

"Awoo, awoo." Signifies nothing unusual has happened.

"Won-won-awoo." Means that an enemy is approaching.

"Wo awoo, wo awoo." Says that there is a strong enemy, so get together, everyone.

"Our leader noticed that its way of howling had been mimicked, and conveyed its message to its warriors to carefully get in touch with one another. It's very hard to slip through the warriors' cordon. Well, good luck."

The wolf warrior ran down the valley, and went out of sight in a moment.

Hikari and her friends went down slowly, hiding themselves behind rocks. Over there on a rock, another wolf appeared.

"Now, it's your turn. Hurry up and make a signal that means nothing unusual has happened." The myna Cue said mimicking the wolves' howl, "Awoo, awoo."

The wolf disappeared from the rock. However, another wolf stretched itself out on the slope, looking around, not giving them a moment of relief.

"Divert the wolf attention till I reach the shadow of the rock," Hikari said.

Cue flew up quietly, and at the upper part of the valley it again made a howl that nothing unusual had happened. The wolf on the slope howled in the same way.

Hikari and others noticed that wolves were lurking here and there when they reached the bank of a stream down below the valley.

"There is no hope at all for us to give our pursuers the slip," Fanta said, and he would not move.

Looking at the steep valley she had come down and the stream splashing in front of her. Chidori murmured, "What led us to this place in safety was the grace of God. I think He is beside us, guarding us. For the valley is so bright and beautiful, you see. I'm sure the power of God extends through it."

"Though you say so, a wolf has appeared there," Gonta pointed to the opposite bank of the stream.

"Woawoo, woawoo", the wolf began to howl madly. It found Hikari and her friends.

Wolves all over the valley came together in packs.

Hikari and the others, in a squatting position, held each other, and prayed to God with their eyes closed. The stream had never sounded as quiet as at this time. The scurrying sounds, which the wolves made when they ran kicking the dry earth, were close at hand.

Chapter 24 A Surprise Attack

The wolves' hot breath blew upon Chidori's cheeks.

"It's all over for me. I'm done for."

It was lonely for her to be torn to pieces and die in the valley. At this time her family having noticed her absence, must be looking for her.

However, Hikari didn't regret being there. She was glad that she and the others were able to unite their efforts even for a short period to save a girl who had been changed into a swaan. She could carry out her desire to help others for the first time since she was born.

"Young lady, it's me," a husky voice said close to Hikari's ear.

The warrior wolf, whom had talked with Hikari, was there, leading ten wolves.

"When I talked with you, your odor permeated my body. Here are those who have smelled a scent similar to yours. Probably, we are human beings transformed by Manto."

Other wolves began to talk : "We aren't able to become human beings any more. We have lived too long in the wolf society to return to the human world and live our lives over again. Although we may remain as we are, we would also like to have hearts to thank God for His power. We want to know how to give thanks which would make us cheerful and relaxed, although this may be seen strange to say."

"I don't even care if I remain a wolf, I just want to be happy. I want you to let me know the way to happiness."

"God will tell you that. Try to ask Him, by praying to Him intently in your heart," Hikari answered.

"Does God grant the requests of a wolf ? " another wolf asked.

"Of course. You were created by God as well. As proof of it, you live in this beautiful valley, don't you ? "

The wolves barked, apparently feeling relieved to hear Hikari.

"The only thing we can do now as a token of our gratitude, is to fight in order to help you escape. Come on. Go in a hurry."

"There are too many opponents. Don't fight. You'll be killed. You, too, must run away. I'm sure God will guard you," Chidori said shuddering.

The wolves wagged their tails slowly.

"We receive your warm words as those God gives us."

The eleven wolves rushed out of the rock's shade ; they dashed away at full speed.

The leader of the wolves appeared from a bush on the bank. It was so close by that it was almost impossible to run away from it.

"You showed my soldiers feelings of thankfulness. As a result, most of my soldiers have lost their fight."

Chapter 25 Prayer

The leader of the wolves gnashed his teeth regretfully,

"The brave soldiers have never betrayed me. Why ? What has changed their minds ? "

"We, who were made by God, are endowed by nature with hearts to love and take care of each other. Your soldiers have become aware of it, too," Chidori said quietly.

“God endowed us with not only feelings to love each other but also a fighting spirit. As proof of it, I am to destroy you, aren’t I ? The fight is mine. If you surrender to me and become my followers, I will save your lives.”

“Life is precious to me. And to you, Gonta ? ” Fanta glanced at Gonta.

“I didn’t feel like going on this journey from the beginning. We don’t have to lose our lives at a place like this, do we ? In this case, we can obey the wolf, I reckon.”

“You mustn’t do that,” Hikari objected. “If you lose your desire to thank God, to thank Him for your living in this beautiful world, you are nothing more than a living skeleton. How can you become happy spending your days in battles, and bearing agony and grief ? To abandon a girl who has been changed into a swan, implies that you have the same heart as Manto.”

“Do you have any children ? ” Chidori asked.

“I have two young children,” the wolf said.

“You want them to lead a peaceful life without wars, don’t you ? ”

The leader of wolves awkwardly scratched the earth with his forefoot.

“Battles day after day are horrible for children. When I was in my childhood, I also worried whether my father would come back safely when it came to his going into battle. My father never came back in the end.”

“Many of the enemies you have killed in the battles were someone’s father or son.”

“A battle is such a horrible world, it curdles the blood. I took the lead of a lot of battle corps and have never taken a step backward. Yet, when I killed my enemies, a vacant world spread over my mind as if a gaping hole had opened up in my heart. From then on, an unspeakable loneliness rose up in me. Now, recalling the faces of my dear children, I find that that feeling was grief.”

“You were blessed by God with your feelings to wish for your children’s happiness. You have feelings to wish for other’s happiness by nature. Come on. No more fighting.”

Spoken to gently by Chidori, the wolf howled sorrowfully.

“I’m the leader of the wolves. Many fellows and enemies have died in my command. It is impossible to bring the dead back to life. I have lost my power as the leader of the wolves. Today, heaven and earth are filled with sadness. Children, have pity on me and forgive me in the name of God. This is the first time for me to show faintheartedness. I confess honestly that what you told me touched my heart. But, even if you call Manto an evil God, He is the only almighty ruler who exists in space.”

“Though Manto is the God of struggles, who causes only grief and agony, how come you worship Him ? ” Hikari shouted.

“Even though your God is warm and kind, the world has grown in my heart so deep and vast as to be almost impossible to fill up. Manto’s severe commands and the fear of His punishment, if I would betray Him, became my only salvation.”

Hikari and the others squatted in a circle, and prayed to God intently, because they understood the wolf’s firm resolution to attack them.

Chapter 26 Pebble

As Hikari and the others squatted in a circle and prayed to God, light began to surround them. It was a pearl gray – colored light. The pebble, given as a lucky charm by the old man, who looked just like an owl, began to shine in the pocket of Hikari’s clothes.

The wolf, who had taken a posture to spring on Hikari and the others, was dazzled by the glow.

“Oh,” exclaimed the wolf, “it has been getting continuously brighter here, and the light puts the innermost darkness out, this darkness in which agony and grief lurk. This light makes my feelings cheerful. What do you call this power to reduce my fighting spirit and make me gentle? I can’t live without rejecting the power which brings to peace that Manto hates most. Where is the darkness where I live?”

The wolf howled in agony, and ran away to the end of the earth into darkness.

“When we prayed, this pebble shone. The stone emits light in response to prayer, I believe,” Hikari said, taking the pebble out of her pocket, and staring at it.

“Replying to our prayer, God made the stone shine to protect us from the wolf,” Chidori whispered.

Bunn, the scarab beetle was perched on Hikari’s shoulder looking in the direction that the wolf had run.

“If only it could gain a heart full of brilliant light and shake off its agony and grief, it wouldn’t have to keep running nor would it have to fight any miserable war.

Then it could return to its family in peace.”

“I don’t mean the way the wolf feels is hard to understand,” Gonta said. “It is faithful to Manto. Even in the world of wickedness, there is a faithful way of life. So, evil can maintain public order and thrive in the evil world. I am very fascinated by the combative power of the God of struggles, Manto,” Gonta seemed to be admiring Him.

“That’s strange,” Bunn objected to his opinion.

“We don’t have any fangs or claws as wolves do. Why did we defeat the wolf although we didn’t fight it with arms?”

Everyone looked around the silent valley, silent as a grave. The valley of wolves, which had been filled with an air of imminent violence and alertness, was full of sunlight, and the leaves of the trees were rustling faintly in the breeze.

“The trees around us are saying that the power of prayers defeated Manto and the wolves,” Chidori whispered.

Hikari sang a song, thanking God. The trees began to sing to the accompaniment of Hikari’s song, as well. The plants, the earth and the brook sang, too. Liberated from the rule of Manto, everything was restored to cheerfulness.

Chapter 27 Stunted Trees

Choral singing to thank God resounded in the valley, and everything increased its life force given by God and shone in rosy color. However, several trees sighed deeply and didn’t sing. Those trees were withered and their bark was ragged. The earth around them was dry, so even grass didn’t grow on it.

“Why don’t you sing?” Chidori asked a skinny tree, which stood quietly with its leaves drooping.

“I can’t sing. My voice is hoarse, so I can’t make a good sound,” the tree said dejectedly.

“That can’t be true. Your voice is beautiful, but it sounds sad.”

A loud rattling voice sounded, “Hey, you. It’s none of your business whether we sing or not. I hate songs, for they are noisy.” A blackish tree, which grew next to the lean tree, was swinging

its branches.

“Really ? Do you hate songs so much ? ” Hikari asked. She sang a few words of the song to thank God gently with all her heart.

Oh, no. I don't want to hear the song. It's ridiculous to thank God. We have to struggle for existence in this world. It depends on whether you eat or are eaten, whether you are dead or alive.”

“You put it in an extreme way, eh ? You live together with companions. You don't grow by yourself, do you ? You can understand that when you see a tree growing next to you, can't you ? ”

“What ? Such a skin – and – bones ! I couldn't care less about such a fellow. What has he really done for me ? ”

“I can do nothing for you. But why do you always say bad things about me ? Though I haven't done anything to hurt you.”

“I bully you, and you bully me. Those who live here bully or are bullied, attack or are attacked by each other. Look, I cannot be too careful of those standing on this side. They are watching for a chance to beat me. They tend to spread their roots at my feet, and branches before my eyes. That's why I hate my neighbors.”

“If they annoy you, so do you annoy them. We are of the same groove, friends, aren't we ? Don't you feel considerate of your friends or want to cooperate with them ? ” Hikari said, glaring at the swarthy tree.

“Humph ! My friends ? I come from a different origin from the ones growing here. A seed, blown by a strong wind from that high mountain, fell here. And it grew up. That's me.”

Chapter 28 Faces of Trees

The seed of the swarthy tree was blown from the high mountain, which was overcast with rain clouds, on which it was said Manto's castle stood.

“Although that mountain is my native place, I don't want to go home again, because even if I have sorrow or trouble, Manto doesn't allow me to say it or express it by my friends or gestures. To endure them patiently, controlling yourself is a dignified attitude and is what is expected,” the lean tree explained in a faint voice.

“Do you trees have faces ? ” Fanta asked, a disagreeable smile on his lips.

“What ? You don't even know such a thing ? ” the swarthy tree said contemptuously.

“I knew it,” Chidori said, coming closer to the lean tree and stroking its bark. “This is the nose, and this is the mouth. The arms are those boughs spreading over the ground.”

“It's a strange face. The arms are much higher than the face, and awfully long,” Gonta said.

“It's rude to put it that way,” Hikari scolded him.

“Tree faces are different from human faces. Every tree has a face, and they have been talking with me all the time when I have been alone. But, I wonder what's the matter with them. Trees, those growing here, look merely sad or spiteful. The only one who seems willing to make friends with me is the sad looking, skinny tree,” Chidori said.

As she stroked the lean tree, waterdrops fell from the leaves. The tree was weeping. “The tree which has grown from a seed from that mountain has been excluded from the trees originally grown in this valley. I feel sad for it.”

The skinny tree was timid, so it couldn't talk as pleasantly as the trees originally grown in

this valley. Occasionally it had a chance to talk a little with the others. But, it said, it could speak only in fragments, so it couldn't fully convey what it thought. It was so shy and backward that the others talked down to it, or they didn't talk to him because they misunderstood and believed that he was trying to avoid them. The skinny tree is similar in character to Chidori in some ways.

"I wonder if you can introduce a pleasant friend like Hikari to this skin – and – bones," Chidori talked to all the trees there.

"But we trees cannot walk, can we?" the skinny tree said.

A voice arose from a clump of trees in the distance, "Let's talk, even though you are far from here where I am. Speak in a loud voice, like me. I've been interested in you all the time."

"Interested in me?"

"Yes, I was attracted by your quiet look which was uncommon in this valley. I want to become a tree like you. I've been impatient to talk with you, but I haven't had a chance to talk to you," the tree over there said cheerfully as if it were singing.

"You could make friends with another tree, couldn't you? Talking is just like taking a chance to understand each other. That tree is ready to welcome you very warmly. So, you should try talking to it more actively as well," Hikari encouraged the lean tree.

"On that mountain, I was told not to make myself understood easily, for if I said what I really felt to another my weakness would be realized by the other," the lean tree said, its thin branches trembling.

Chapter 29 A Warm Heart

The lean tree seemed to have believed this up until that time.

"I know how you feel," a tree in the clump of trees said, "Since we heard the wolves howl, we were too scared to sleep a wink as well. But you kids came and drove the wolves away, then this valley regained its peacefulness," the tree in the clump said, apparently looking relieved.

"We didn't really drive the wolves away. God protects the wolves yet He admonishes them as well, so they gave up attacking us. Although God loves everyone equally, they just don't see it." Chidori's words spread out, carried on the wind.

"I wonder if I am protected by God, too," the skinny tree said.

"God protects us all. You and I are talking like this, you see? This, too, is what God does, who protects us," Chidori said. The tree responded to Chidori's words, rustling its leaves faintly. It was smiling.

"Don't tell a lie!" the swarthy trees shouted, "I don't count on such a God. You just white-wash yourselves, paying lip service to the deceit in us and in yourselves."

"Why are you so stubborn?" Hikari had finally become angry. But she thought that she should have given a full explanation of it rather than responding angrily. Hikari repented her bad manner. So, she said as gently as she could in a low voice, "Do you mean you live by yourself? Look at your feet. If the ground at your feet dries up, you will wither and die."

"Be that as it may, the ground here is short of water, compared with other places. As things stand now, every single tree will wither up," the scarab beetle said, crawling on the ground and checking on it.

"Water isn't willing to go to that fellow since it says nothing but spiteful things," a voice arose at a riverside. But no one was there.

"The water of the river spoke. It dislikes us, so it won't water the ground," the lean tree said

pitifully.

“Moisten the ground only where the skinny tree stands,” Gonta said and kicked the dry soil.

“Please, moisten the ground where the dog in the manger stands, too. It would be awful to survive only by myself, watching my neighboring tree die. If I did such a thing, I would be sick from the horror and coldness of my heart, and would die,” the lean tree said.

“Oh, I was foolish. Why did I burry you, although you spoke up for me so much ? Why didn’t you tell me something like that much earlier ? ” the ill – natured tree said.

The swarthy tree was aware of what the skinny tree thought for the first time.

Chapter 30 Likes and Dislikes

The tree with the swarthy bark wept. The lean tree wept, too.

“Dog in the manger, do you dislike the skin – and – bones now ? ” Hikari asked gently,

“Nope, I’ve come to love her,” the ill – natured tree said.

“Look. Anyone can love others. Everyone just produces distasteful things sometimes. Don’t you think so ? ”

“No, I don’t. I have good reasons to dislike others. I dislike wolves because they are cruel. I hate crows which come flying over sometimes, for they perch on me without permission, and the only thing they leave is their droppings. Oh ? You aren’t a crow, are you ? ” the swarthy tree said, having noticed the presence of the myna.

“You make so many sarcastic remarks. I don’t associate with ill — natured ones like you. As a proverb in the human world says, “The one who keeps company with the wolf will lean to howl’ ; I believe this proverb. Looking at you makes me feel so. Cue, the myna said, not giving in to the swarthy tree.

“Hey, why do you lock horns so with each other ? You cannot be bulls. If you say you dislike each other, you will truly come to believe it. You didn’t care for each other just a few minutes ago, did you ? Cue, why do you think it happened ? ” Hikari asked the myna.

Having been asked by Hikari, the myna soared into the sky in a hurry. It flew off. Still, it thought it over, flying in a circle way up in the sky.

“I’m not sure what to think, I couldn’t help it, but I responded too quickly. Ask God who has created me why I have acted this way,” the bid said, still flying.

Hikari shouted into the sky, “If you put it that way, God will feel sad. You owe your ability to fly with your wings to God’s protection sa that the joints ofyour wings don’t hurt. The sky in which you’re flying was made by God as well. You’re surrounded by everything created by Him.”

Cue must have been aware of this. He had just become angry at what the swarthy tree had said, and had said what he didn’t mean.

Even Hikari does so once in a while. So it seemed to her that to scold Cue was to scold herself.

Cue flew down unhurriedly, and perched on the treetop of the tree with swarthy bark, and said, “God created this tree as well. So you might call it an irreplaceable part of God. I feel like I am perching on the body of God.”

The tree listened to what Cue said in silence.

A wind whizzed through the trees.

“Now I remember,” the swarthy tree began to talk after a short silence.

“When I was a seed held by my mother tree in a forest on that high mountain, I wondered at seeing seeds fall on the ground and grow to be big trees. I asked my mother and the other grown – up trees around me, but they just answered that is because trees are created that way.”

Chapter 31 God and Manto

Why were seeds made by trees, and why did they continue to fall and grow ? The tree with the swarthy bark asked its mother and other grown – up trees. But no one knew it, to tell the truth.

So, the tree with the swarthy bark thought seeds live and grow through their own efforts. The tree has believed so even since it was blown to this valley and grew up into a big tree.

“That’s the power of God. Can you be born if you want to be born ? All lives are raised up with the power of God,” Hikari said, pointing to the sky with her forefinger and making a large invisible circle in the air.

“All creatures are children of God. So you must be kind to everyone,” Chidori said.

Having been told this by Chidori, the swarthy tree’s leaves rustled restlessly. It lost its composure.

“I wonder if I can do so,” the tree said.

“You could do it already, for you came to like the skin – and – bones. You can develop links of friendship one by one,” Hikari said in high spirits.

Cue flew to a branch of the swarthy tree.

“It depends on how determined you are. If you bring yourself to believe in God, you’ll come to feel even the gloomy sky is bright,” the myna said, picking a branch of the tree.

“I have suddenly come to relax. I feel refreshed , like the blue sky. I’ve come to life all over. This is the first time for me to feel fine like this since I was born.”

The soil, in which the swarthy tree stood, became moist. A stream of water had flown under the ground and had moistened the dry soil.

A tree in the clump in the distance spoke to the swarthy tree, “I’ll show you how to sing a song. Let’s sing a song together.”

Hikari and the others felt relieved, for the ill – natured tree and the lean tree seemed to get along pleasantly now with the trees in this valley.

“But I wonder what Manto will say,” the swarthy tree said, with an anxious look.

“Have you ever seen Manto ? ” Bunn pricked its antenna straight up.

“No, I haven’t. No one has seen Manto. Just wishing to see Him will bring you a curse. Oh, I’m scared. Don’t tell me such a thing,” the swarthy tree said, with its leaves rustling noisily. A chilly blew down from the mountain and whirled around Hikari and the others. The trees in the valley became silent again.

“All of us are thankful for our God since He protects our lives and raises us. God exists in the natural world and in our bodies as well. He encourages us to be full of life,” Hikari said in high spirits.

“How does Manto curse you ? ” Fanta asked timidly.

“Manto teaches us a lesson to win a victory in a fight. If you obey the teaching, you can win honor, but on the other hand, if you disobey Him, He will bring revenge upon you and you will lose your life. All the creatures on that mountain decide to believe in His teaching firmly because they are scared.”

Chapter 32 Rocks

The river water, which had moistened the soil the swarthy tree was growing in, said, "I am the clear watersprung out from between rocks on that mountain. Those rocks on that mountain are likely to have a lot of worries, too. I think that comes from Manto's magical power to make them obstinate. My comrades were turned to cloudy waters, but as I sprang out from a deepcrack of a rock, I could narrowly deceive Manto and sneak out of the mountain."

"Have you ever seen Manto ?" Hikari asked the river water.

"No. No clear waters nor rocks have seen Manto." The water said the same thing as the swarthy tree did.

Hikari and the others went upstream along the river. The width of the river became narrower gradually, and as they reached a plateau where only jagged rocks continued, they found the same river water gushing out from beneath the rocks.

"Wait a moment," Hikari stood on the rock, straining her ears, "Listen. The rocks are saying something."

The others followed suit and strained their ears, too.

"Oh. Many have come again."

"Anyhow they will trample on us and go somewhere else, I suppose."

"Why ? I can hear the rocks speak," Fanta strained his ears, turning around here and there.

"Oh, boy. You seem to understand what we say. As I can see, you stand on two legs. You are not familiar with faces around here, are you ? Though I know that bird and that insect there."

"Don't call us a bird or an insect so familiarly. Well, we don't have to introduce ourselves, though, for we will never be able to introduce ourselves since you rocks are all over the place," Bunn said in a huff.

"you are an insect talking big, aren't you ? It's you insects who are crawling and alive and bother us," one of the rocks said.

"How do I bother you ?"

"If small insects fly about, I can't stand it, the restless feeling. We like quietness."

"By the way, what were you complaining about ?" Cue asked the rocks.

"You heard our conversation ! Well, we have a big problem deep in our hearts," the large rock answered.

"The problem is that we are immobile."

"There's no rock which is running around. You are called rocks since you are immobile and heavy," Hikari reproved the rock for its dissatisfaction.

"That's right. But we became unable to settle it by saying so because of disgusting fellows," the large rock said close to tears.

"Chirrup, chirrup, chirrup, chirrup." Such sounds came from the sky.

"What's that ?" Gonta shouted.

A confetti of many colors danced down from the heavens.

"Look there. Here comes the disagreeable bunch who upset and worried us," a small rock said.

It was a great number of birds. They flew down to the plateau of rocks, chirping and twittering.

Chapter 33 Birds

The wings of the birds were rainbow – colored. The flight of the birds, dancing down in a row, looked like a rainbow spanning from the sky to the plateau.

“Chirrup. Chirrup.” The merry twittering of the birds became words in the end.

“Hi, dear rocks. We played beside the clear, deep blue lake.”

“Trees have their ripened fruit and nuts in clusters. We had them until we were full.”

“Don’t we smell of a very sweet fragrance ? If so, that’s because we played hide – and – seek at the lakefront where the flowers give off sweet honey blooms.”

These birds chattered merrily, flying above the rocks.

“Oh, I don’t want to hear such conversation any more. You intentionally let us hear such a happy experience to make us envious of it again.”

“Though you know that we cannot move, you always make lovely conversation in front of us on purpose to make us feel sad. We, too, want to fly freely and get away from such a desolate place like this and go to a lovely spot as you do,” the rocks grumbled to the birds.

“Well, there’s no help for it even if you make a complaint to us. For, God gave us wings so that we can fly freely, and He made you stick in the ground and stay there.”

“God painted our wings with such beautiful colors like this so that we deserve to bathe in the sun, to fly dancing round and round in the open spacious sky, and to play near the beautiful lake or in the field.”

The birds spread their rainbow – colored wings, and watched them with rapture.

“Even if you could fly in the sky and walk on the earth, beautiful trees or flowers would never speak to you because you’re too ugly to make friends.”

“You should be happy to be stuck in the ground eternally as you are rather than to feel sad that friendship is refused to you.”

“Those who can experience beauty are us who were created beautifully by God.”

Other birds agreed, “That’s right.”

How could Hikari and others understand the words the birds speak ? They supposed that they had a mean part of their thoughts which was connected to the thought of the birds looking down on the rocks.

Hikari and the others reflected on themselves, thinking the matter over. All of them had an idea. Their vanity to show themselves better than others lurked in their unconsciousness all the time. The working of those thoughts made them look down on and make light of others.

“Shut up !” The large rock raised its voice angrily at last.

Chapter 34 A Grain of Sand

Although the large rock raised its voice, the birds weren’t scared at all. That’s because the large rock couldn’t move an inch.

“You birds always speak boastfully about the fact that you have flown in the air and seen beautiful spots, but we rocks never wished to become birds,” the large rock said arrogantly. It couldn’t move an inch, so only its mind sounded as if it drew itself up.

“Neither have I wished so,” another rock said.

“We think we rocks are the best,” one more rock added. Other rocks voiced arrogance

unanimously.

“We have been here since your ancestors a long, long time ago chirped on our bodies,” said the large rock.

“Right. In those days there was a lush green field all around. Families of elephants were walking around unhurriedly,” the medium – sized rock said with nostalgia.

“We have been here much much longer than the others. We saw dinosaurs walking, rumbling along. It was quite annoying that the dinosaurs had fights with each other. Although I told them to stop fighting, they never stopped. So they were abandoned and completely destroyed by God.”

“Well, well. You’re all just chickens, compared with me, a grain of sand by the large rock said in a hoarse voice.”

“Oh, my ! You are speaking. It’s unusual for you. This is my first time to hear you speak,” the medium – sized rock said in a contemptuous way.

“When I was a rock as young as you, this area was a deep, deep ocean. So deep that fish could hardly live in it. I used to have a view of the upper part of the water which sparkled like pearls when the sun shone through the sea, from the bottom of the ocean. The color of the ocean changed on account of the weather every day. Even on a clear day, when clouds drifted along and the sun shining on the sea was cut off for a while, the ocean turned purple. And the moment when strong sunlight shone again through the sea suddenly it became a golden ocean. As I watched those scenes every day, I began to think that no one could do such beautiful works without God. That sort of beauty must belong to the kingdom of Heaven.”

The birds stopped twittering and were listening attentively to what the grain of sand said.

“I can’t see the beauty here any more, for the sea has dried up,” the small rock said sadly.

“Well, let me see. I’ve spent my days staring fixedly upward for a long time until the water of the deep ocean dried up into a grassy plain, and the plain dried up into desert, and the valley sank and became the plateau you can see now. Anyhow, I have been stuck in the ground longer than all of you, so I can see only what’s above my head. I’ve been thinking as well that I could never see the beauty of the kingdom of Heaven when the sea was there. But the beautiful kingdom of God has been just where I can see it, all the time.”

Chapter 35 Signals from God

The grain of sand had been staring at the higher sky farther and farther away. Rather, it had been staring at twinkling stars in space, through the sky.

“Every night when stars begin to twinkle, I become very devout. From the remote regions of space farther and farther away from here, stars talk to me in whispers, I feel it. Young stars shining in bluish white colors, yellow stars old and weak as I am, and faint starlight, all these stars talk to me in silence,” said the sand.

“What on earth do they talk about to a grain of sand like you ? ” one of the birds asked.

“They talk to me, not in words but with their lights,” the sand answered.

“With lights ? You can’t make your feelings known with lights,” the other birds yelled with looks of amazement.

“Can’t you see ? Try to stare at stars tonight. The starlight will tell you many things. I learned that it is very wonderful to be a grain of sand on the plateau and watch stars, tonight as well. I come to feel very peaceful and still because I become filled with the beauty of space as I watch the stars. It must be God who created such beautiful stars,” the sand said.

“You were deeply touched, saying ‘God created this beautiful ocean’ when you watched the

blue sea, weren't you ? To be touched each time like you, you have to be touched by everything.”

“Hey, you, twittering bird there ! Hold your tongue a bit. What our elder said is right. We've been speaking nothing but complaints, watching the starlit sky. Thinking it over carefully, we cannot move, so we are suitable to watch stars carefully,” the middle – sized rock said forcefully.

“The twinkles of the stars might be signals from God,” the small rock murmured.

“Let's make it a practice to thank God, watching the starlit sky from now on. He created us, you know. Hey, you birds. He created you, too, you know ! ” a jagged rock, which was usually reticent, said.

“Oh, my ! How rudely you speak ! Well, I don't mean that we don't thank God. Our mothers sat on eggs and we were hatched as baby birds. We probably owe it to God. I can fly like this because of my ability, can't I ? It is my own decision whether I go and play at the lake or not. Do you mean God made me talk with you like this ? ” a bird with especially vivid colors said, as if it sang.

“Right. It is also done by God,” the grain of sand said.

“Don't be silly,” the bird raised its voice in anger when the sky became dark suddenly. The birds which were speaking, vanished. A group of bats, each one the size of an eagle, had flown down and were munching at the rainbow – colored birds.

Chapter 36 Bats

Bats, eating rainbow – colored birds, stared with glowing eyes at Hikari and the others.

“Can we eat those fellows ? ” one of the bats said.

“We can eat them somehow, but they don't taste quite well, compared with these birds,” another bat laughed with its red mouth wide open.

“Say ! You are merciless to eat birds. Stop it ! ” Hikari shouted.

“You have no right to say ‘Don't eat birds’ because they are our food,” a particularly large bat with a beard like a black tassel appeared out of the crowd. It was obvious that it was the leader of the bats, judging from the respectful attitude of the others.

“I tell you, human children. Do not say unpleasant things about our having a meal. We have just one kind of food, that is, these rainbow colored birds. We eat the hearts of birds who boast of themselves and look down on others. They are the only food given to us by Manto. There's no other way to eat their hearts except to eat them whole. But these rainbow – colored birds are multiplying infinitely, so they will never become extinct.”

Secondly, a waiting bat next to the leader, which seemed to be its confidant, said, “We were attacked by you for unjust reasons, so I'll tell you a little more truth. According to what I heard about the tradition Manto spoke of, your wish to show off, which lodges itself at the bottom of the human mind, produced these birds. You're the founders of the beautiful but mean birds, which insult the rocks which cannot move, and which were born only to be eaten by us. Since human vanity knows no bounds, we don't have difficulty finding food.”

Another confidant shouted, “As you produced food, the birds, this plateau is under the rule of us. How glad Manto will be to hear that. No one is to be blamed. This is what your mean hearts have done. Before you reproach us, you should blame yourselves and repent of what you have done.”

The bats flew around above the plateau, with their red mouths open. Their figures blocked off the sunlight, and the plateau became dark.

“This is the inner view of your hearts. Manto showed you the inside of your hearts,” the leader

said, with its large, black wings spread out.

Hikari and the others put their hands on their chests and wondered if that could be true. They hadn't thought that they had such hearts as to produce this ugly scene. But it doesn't mean that the rowdy fellow, Gonta didn't forget his pride as a human being. Also, Fanta, though his friends said he was irresponsible, had a good mind to show his steady side someday.

Hikari and Chidori had thought they would become sad when they saw others in agony. And yet, the bats said the hearts of Hikari and the others produced the birds.

Chapter 37 Sounds

The large rock shouted in such a loud voice as to shake heaven and earth, "I don't think so!" "I came to understand that we were lucky to have stayed here here unable to move. If the hearts of human beings produced the rainbow – colored birds out of your vanity as the bats said, it is the patience of human beings that produced us, rocks. I don't think Manto rules the hearts of human beings."

The voice of a large rock resounded, and then, the large group of bats disappeared all of a sudden.

The sun began to shine on the plateau. Where had all the rainbow – colored birds gone? The rocks wouldn't speak any more. It was only for a short time that the kids could communicate with the rocks.

"I hear nothing," Fanta murmured.

"I can hear something," Chidori said, but she didn't know where the sound came from since it was very faint.

"I'll go and look into it," Bunn said and took off from Hikari's shoulder.

He didn't come back for a long time. Everyone became tired of waiting for him, and remained silent, sitting on a rock. The sun set, glowing below the horizon. It was utterly dark around the highest part of the mountains.

Bunn flew down on Hikari's shoulder, painting.

"What have you been doing all this while? you see, Cue had long since fallen asleep," Gonta said in a bad mood.

"What? Give one to me, too," Cue said and shook himself from a crouching position, rubbing his sleepy eyes with his wings.

"Have you been dozing, though I worked busily and exhausted myself?" Bunn said, shaking his antenna around.

"It's none of my business. Since you came too late, I was dozing against my will. First of all, it's not my fault, though you say you exhausted yourself," Cue flew into a rage.

"Don't get so angry. You get into a fight because of trivial conversational give and take. By the way, did you find out the cause of the sound Chidori heard?" Gonta asked like a big brother.

Bunn told what it had seen, tapping its breast which was still beating so fast.

He flew toward the mountain Chidori had pointed at. Around the area where the plateau ended rocks had weathered and crumbled into soil. Large trees grew there with lush green leaves and lustrous dewy grasses, and flowers of various colors bloomed.

Bunn could hear a faint but clear sound, too. Bunn flew here and there and discovered the cause of the sound finally. Pebbles rolled down the slope of the mountain and hit a rock as large as a desk at school, and sounded echoes.

Only that rock was white among black or brown rocks around it.

Chapter 38 Irritation

There was something Bunn was impressed with more. The moment the white rock stopped making a sound, the surroundings became noisy. No sooner had the blossoms at their peak closed their petals, when suddenly they opened again. The lush green leaves on the branches of the large trees withered in a moment and fell down. And on the bare branches new shoots sprouted up and began to grow. In the grass plain every blade of grass began to shake and soon withered. Then, new shoots of grass came up all together and grew rapidly ; They were making a popping, whooshing, and flipping noise.

The white rock made an outstanding sound again. As the bracing sound, like a wind, spread over the circumference of the rock, flowers and grasses brought out their latent vibrancy, and large trees started brimming with the light of their green leaves which made a deep impression on Bunn.

When the sound of the white rock died away suddenly, it became noisy again.

Having seen the sight, Bunn felt dizzy and couldn't fly.

When a fragment of a stone the size of a little finger tip fell on the white rock and extended a faint sound over it, Bunn recovered from his dizziness at last and could come back.

Towards the end of Bun's story, stars started twinkling in the night sky. Everyone decided to sleep on the plateau that night. They watched the starlit sky, stretching themselves in hollows of the rocks. The pale twinkling starlight and the touch of the cool bare rocks appeased their fatigue.

"Ding – dong. Ding – dong."

"Was that a ring of a bell ?" Fanta raised himself.

"Two pebbles hit the white rock and made sounds," Bunn answered.

After dark the sound of the rock came through more clearly. The sound, which occasionally penetrated the stillness of the night, filled the whole plateau and made them who had become lonely and helpless feel peaceful.

"Listen. I hear someone talking," Chidori whispered.

"You can hear more clearly if you do it like this. Rocks here are made to convey sounds," Fanta said, pressing his ear to the rock.

The others did so, too.

"Ah ! I'm relieved. I can feel relaxed only at night."

"I feel peaceful, with my heart filled with something serene and warm just when I hear the white rock sounds in daytime, and when I watch stars at night. I can forget to compete with others in flowering." Those flowers were speaking.

Hikari and the others went toward the voices across the rock field gleaming dimly, flooded with moonlight. At last they reached the place where trees grew and flowers were rustling in the wind.

Chapter 39 Flowers Pride

A beautiful tinkling voice came from among the flowers. "I am the queen of the flowers, since I opened the most beautiful flower today."

“I am the second queen today, but I have reached the position of queen for three times for the past seven days. This is the second time for you, isn’t it ? ”

“I am fed up with a competition like this. It makes me shabby somehow to see us boast of ourselves. It is self – conceit to think oneself is the most beautiful, isn’t it ? It is haughty for you to think you are more admirable than other flowers even if you become the queen. In the meantime, you will be robbed of the position of queen by a young flower as you grow older,” an old flower with shriveled petals said quietly.

“You’re a former queen of the flowers, aren’t you ? You shouldn’t say such silly things now, though you used to look down on us, the other flowers when you were queen. I’ll never forget my chagrin when you laughed at me. So, I’m showing off my beautiful flower which I worked on much harder than others. I defeated you.”

“We think all the flowers are beautiful whether you compete or not,” Chidori cut in, in spite of herself. She couldn’t hold her tongue any longer about the flowers’ quarrel and their hurting of each other.

“Who are you ? ” the queen of the flowers asked shrilly.

“I am a friend of yours. As each of you have your own beauty, you are queens respectively. When the flowers calle pheasant’s eyes come out of the blackish thawing soil, people in a snowy district are almost excited since the flowers let them know that spring comes after a long, cold winter. Flowers planted in flowerpots along streets refresh those who pass by. I find beauty in the attitudes of flowers trying to bloom with all their strength,” Chidori said.

“A flower blooming alone is beautiful, but flowers blooming in mass are very beautiful, too. Large, fascinatingly elegant flowers, smal lovely flowers, bright flowers, and pale flowers. Since all these various flowers are nestling close to one another, all of them become more beautiful,” Hikari agreed with her.

“I’ve never spent such a delightful night since I was born, for I am small, and what is worse, have a verypale, inconspicuous color,” the smallest flower murmured timidly.

“Oh, it’s kind of you to understand how I feel. Could you come and talk to me ? ” the former queen said in a voice full of excitement.

A large tree rustled its spread – out boughs. Trees around it rustled their boughs following its example.

In the moonlight the trees looked as if they were dancing.

Chapter 40 The Large Tree’s Assertion

“I have a different opinion,” the large tree said in a powerful voice, “I wonder if you don’t know the true life force of creatures, though I don’t mean to criticize your gentle hearts.”

A strong wind blowing down from the mountain tore off leaves from its branches and scattered the leaves on the ground where Hikari and the others stood.

“I think the more beautiful the flowers are, and the larger the trees are, the better they are. God gave us lives so that we would become beautiful and large, didn’t He ? ” the large tree said in a solemn tone.

Cue flew to a bough of the large tree, scrubbed its sharp beak against the bough to polish it, and then said, “I feel, when I fly in the sky, that the higher I fly, the more beautiful everything looks, the trees, flowers, grasses, mountains, the ocean, lakes, and grassy plains. Everything, which belongs to the earth and the heavens, without exception, is shining.”

“Is everything beautiful ? Looking from a higher place, you can see beauty which we don’t

notice below, I guess,” another tree said.

“The more beautiful things are, and the larger things are, must cause them to shine more intensely,” the large tree said confidently, “I am one thousand years old. Take a look at me ; how thick my trunk is, and how powerfully my branches spread. My appearance is second to none in magnificence. The power of my life is the strongest. I want to live longer still.”

“As you spread your branches and roots steadily toward me, I don’t get enough sunshine and I am robbed of nourishment in the soil, so I just go on becoming weaker. A number of trees have withered up and died because of you,” a slender tree said reproachfully under the large tree.

“Do you want to say it had better take years off my life in order to let you live longer ? ” the large tree said, offended.

“Won’t you let me speak, too ? ” Gonta stepped forward to the large tree. “My younger brother died at the age of two. When he was playing at a yacht harbor, he fell into the sea. Although I was near him, I noticed it too late. Five years have passed since that, but I remember him all the time. Compared with the large tree, his life was too short, but my younger brother has been alive in my heart. I think he lived two years with all his might.”

Gonta’s speech created a general stir in the trees ; it seemed as if the moonlight dropped off from their smooth leaves. They were talking to one another in a whisper. Hikari and the others had not known that such a sorrowful incident had occurred to Gonta. They had a better opinion of him because he cherished the sad accident as a precious memory.

Chapter 41 The Murmur of Grasses

“I’m 950 years old and I am the oldest tree around here. But I realize that the dignity of life has nothing to do with the length of life. Let’s quit competing in making annual rings from now on,” the second largest tree said.

“I agree with you. I agree,” the trees around them were in favor of that idea.

“Oh, thank God. I would wither away if the previous situation continued.” The slender tree felt quite relieved.

“Why, were you busy dropping your leaves and growing your new ones in order to compete with one another in the length of your age ? ” Bunn said, flying around slowly, for he couldn’t bring himself to perch on a branch.

The leaves of the trees made faint rustling sounds in the breeze. It sounded like a shameful noise.

Although the kids spoke to the trees, they wouldn’t answer any more.

A low stumbling voice arose. It sounded as if it had come from the deepest part of the earth. It was the voice of a blade of grass, “Having kept Manto’s teachings, we’ve been growing our leaves over and over again keenly. There is no doubt that our lives have been protected in doing so.”

“When this area was a desert, there was no grass. If we grew, eight out of ten of us withered away,” another blade of grass said.

“We became liable to exasperation while we were impatient to grow more and more,” one more grass said.

“We came to be in a highly nervous state, and we couldn’t control our feelings. We grasses picked on and hurt each other, you know.”

“Are there bullyings in the world of grasses ? ” Gonta became depressed.

“A bullying occurs when one doesn’t radiate one’s will to live properly,” Cue said, with its

beak aimed straight toward the heavens.

“Why can we recover our composure only when the white rock sounds and when stars twinkle in the night sky ? ” a blade of grass murmured.

“The sound of the white rock and the twinkling of the stars bring the message of God, I am sure,” Hikari said, full of excitement.

“You have wonderful abilities, too. Looking at you bending in the wind sets my mind at ease when we are sad and lonely. We are touched by you who are full of life,” Chidori said gratefully.

The sky was starting to grow light. With a busy day near at hand, there was a stir in the area.

“It’s all right. Let’s pray to God all together that He might protect us.” Having been encouraged by Hikari’s words, the grasses prayed with the others. The trees and flowers prayed as well. Then, a sound came which was like a wind passing by. The white rock vibrated, shining in pearly color, and began to sound, “Ding – dong”. The praying voices of the grasses, the trees and the flowers which sounded like a wind, created a resonance.

Notes

1. Manto : “manto” means mantle.

Chapter 42 The White Rock

As the white rock shone, the pebble in the pocket of Hikari’s clothes shone in pearly color, too. It was the lucky charm pebble the old owlish – looking man gave her when she departed on her journey.

Since the white rock was resonant with the voices of the trees, the flowers and the grasses and spread its sound quietly, the plants breathed regularly and Hikari and the others became composed. The white rock seemed to bring the power to set us at ease, as though responding to our prayer.

Hikari took the pebble out of her pocket and brought it close to the white rock. The sizes of the white rock and the pebble were different, but they looked almost exactly like each other. As the small pebble flashed the white rock sparkled as if it had responded to the other.

A sound like a wind came from the rock and the pebble.

“What’s this ? ” Fanta said to himself after he brought his face close to the rock.

Fanta’s face shone, lit up by the rock.

“Are you talking about something ? ” Gonta said, looking into the rock as if he had buried his face in the light of the pebble. The light didn’t blind his eyes at all.

“Hi, dear. Do you understand what I’m saying ? ” the large rock said in a voice like the wind.

“I have been anxious about whether you sense my heart or not. There are a lot of people who pass here by without noticing us.”

“Heart ? Do you, rock have a heart ? Do you feel sorrow or happiness ? ” Fanta strained his eyes to see the light of the rock.

“Of course I do, for you and I are talking this way. Yet, there are two kinds of people : the ones who can speak with me, like you who notice my shining, and the others who just wear me as a ring or a necklace, that is, use me as a beautiful stone even if I shine from my side,” the white rock said.

“At first you just flickered, and were reluctant to speak to us immediately, weren’t you ? ” Fanta scolded the rock.

Bunn perched on the white rock, and then joined in the talk. He was itching to talk with the

rock. "I have led my friends to you. But for me, you would have lost your chance to talk for good."

Hikari glared at Bunn, to hold his tongue.

"Surely, you are right. I thank you. At first I couldn't talk with you and made a noise because I was calling you to the accompaniment of the sound of blowing wind sweeping over us. Since you spoke to me, I could speak in your language, tuning in to your voices. If only others could accept my signal, I could speak with whomever I want."

"Who on earth are you ?" Bunn flew up in a panic.

Chapter 43 The Rock and the Pebble

A faint sound, just like a wind shaking a clump of bamboo, came from both the white rock and the small pebble in Hikari's hand.

"Voices ! Voices of a lot of people who are praying !" Gonta shouted.

Praying voices sounded from Hikari's small pebble as well as the rock.

"We were originally from the same stone. The voices coming from our bodies were the prayers of the village people living here, toward God." In Hikari's hand, the small pebble spoke in a voice like the wind as the white rock did, too.

"I was the rock of prayer that was admired by village people. One day I was smashed by an unsavory group of people who aimed to rule the village," the white rock said in a gloomy voice.

"The rock of prayer, which was very large, was smashed and broken into pieces. I'm one of the fragments. Having come along with this young lady, I could see my alter ego," the small pebble said happily.

"I don't think the prayers of the village people were smashed even though I broke into pieces. As your hearts cannot be broken into fragments, even if you became as small as grains of sand, each piece of mine will go on shining the light of prayer, the same as when I was one large rock, if only you would pray," the white rock talked calmly.

"How ruthless to smash the rock of prayer ! What happened here ?" Hikari asked the white rock.

"During your journey to look for the Casket of Manto, you will undergo the same ordeals which happened here. I won't resent or blame those for their deed who smashed me, because it's against the prayers of the village people who give thanks to God for their entire life."

"How come you know that we're going on a journey to look for the Casket of Manto ?" Fanta stepped back.

"Explaining the reason now will only surprise you. You will understand through your experiences on your journey."

The white rock wouldn't talk any further, and went on spreading its calm sound, shining resonantly with the prayers of trees, flowers, grasses, and so on, around it.

The mountain path Hikari and the others followed became steeper and steeper. When they approached a dangerous part where they had to pass as if they were clinging to the face of the mountain, looking down the steep cliff below them, Fanta shrank back. "I want to go home now. I want to see my father and mother."

The others exchanged glances in silence. They half came to feel as he felt.

"If we turn back from here, what will become of the girl changed into a swan ?" Hikari continued cheering herself up, "Just because we took pity on the girl, God protected us and we could come this far. We have confronted various sorrows and hardships. But we all have endured,

haven't we ? God gave us inner strength to help others, I suppose. Our fathers and mothers will be glad to understand this."

Chapter 44 Under a Tree

Hikari and the others wondered which climbing path to take. Since there were no tracks, they moved, finding the easy places to climb. However, large rocks and steep cliffs blocked their path.

Cue indicated to Hikari and the others which course to take, flying in a circle slowly above them. Leading them, Gonta thrust his way through a thicket of thorns with a branch which had lain on the ground ; a gorge appeared before their eyes.

Below in the valley a freezing cold wind was whirling and the gorge seemed bottomless. They couldn't find places to cross the valley.

"Look at the tree shaped like an umbrella beyond the valley. You can see a person under it," Cue flew down and notified them.

An old lady sat as if she wanted to hide herself behind the tree.

"Well, that old lady is muttering to herself," Bunn said. He flew toward her and perched on the trunk of the umbrella – shaped tree.

The old lady was singing a song in a low voice as follows : "On rainy days, windy days, sunny days, cloudy days, I come under you. I'll pick up nuts to fill one basket and give them to him. How long can I, an old lady, protect him ? This tree bears heavily laden nuts and gives them to him. He's been surviving up to now. Thank you, dear gentle, strong tree. Only you are on his side."

The old lady finished singing, and she folded her hands, praying to the tree.

"Let's go home, shall we ? He must be hungry waiting for me," the old lady called upward to the tree, and then two white monkeys ran down to the old lady.

The old lady carefully carried a small basket woven of vines, and plodded halfway up the mountain, accompanied by the monkeys.

"Yoo – hoo !" Hikari shouted in the direction beyond the valley.

"Oh, my ! Who is it ? " the old lady said. Having tried to turn around, she stumbled over a tree root.

The basket dropped from her hand and fell down into the valley. Cue swooped down the valley. After a short time Cue flew up with the basket between his beak ; Cue said that the basket had gotten hung up on a branch of a tree growing on the cliff far down below.

"Oh, my ! What a wise bird !" the old lady stared at Cue, round – eyed with amazement.

"Hello, dear. You have something to worry about, don't you ? " Bunn said after he flitted onto Cue's head from the tree trunk.

"Oh, my ! What a clever insect ! You can talk," the old lady opened her eyes wider, so they became horse – like.

"My head is full of worries. Is that you, dear insect, who said 'Yoo – hoo' ? "

"Yoo – hoo ! Yoo – hoo !" Hikari shouted, impatiently to know how things stood, since she didn't hear the conversation held by the old lady and Bunn.

"Those who stay over there are my friends. They shall be happy to be of service to you," Cue looked happy because he had met a human being after a long time.

"Oh, my ! You can talk, too. What a nice day for me to talk with an insect and a bird ! "

Chapter 45 A Bridge Made by Monkeys

Saying so, the old lady knit her brow in anxiety. “Surely you are not people of this village, are you ? No, no. You came across the valley, so I’m worrying unnecessarily. What brought you here ? ”

“We’re not the unreliable ones. We are on the way to look for Manto’s Casket, according to the Legend of Manto.” Cue told how they started on a trip to rescue a girl who had been turned into a swan.

“Oh, my ! You seem to think the Legend of Manto is true. How awful ! Don’t talk about the Legend of Manto, or you’ll meet misfortune. If, according to the Legend, King Manto is a devil and God Manto whom the King believes in is Satan...” the old lady lowered her voice, looking about her.

“But I well understand that you want to rescue the girl turned into a swan. Can I be of any help to you ? By the way, may I ask you to help me ? ”

“Sure. Why not. I’ll go and tell my friends,” Bunn flew to Hikari and the others, and told them what the old lady said.

“O.K. At first we have to cross the valley. Ask the old lady what we should do to cross the valley,” Hikari said, jumping up and down. This gesture was her habit when she wanted to proceed with things quickly.

Bunn conveyed her words to the old lady.

“This bottomless valley surrounds the mountain, and it is said that no one has ever crossed it,” the old lady said, taking a deep breath, and then she looked into Bunn’s small eyes. “But all the same I need your help. It will be an adventure with a grave risk ; I will let you cross over the valley secretly.”

“Drat” ! Can you manage to do such a thing ? ” Bunn asked.

The old lady ducked her head a little and laughed, and then told a white monkey, “Come on, let the children cross over here.”

“Gibber, gibber.”

As the gibber of the white monkey spread over the silent mountain, crowds of monkeys appeared and took hold of the hands and feet of each other which became like chains. And they swung over the valley, holding on to trees on both sides, and made three lines of monkey bridges. Two white monkeys crossed one of the bridges and came over to Hikari and her friends.

“The white monkeys are the king and queen of the monkeys. Since we are on friendly terms, I promise they won’t drop you,” the old lady shouted from the other side of the valley.

Hikari and the others crossed the monkey bridges safely, helped by the white monkeys.

“Oh, my! Welcome. Why do I feel so relaxed even though it is the first time we have met,” the old lady said, her eyes moist with tears.

Chapter 46 Taking Care of Others

They opened up to each other so much and said what they actually thought and they wondered why they did so, when they were asked by the old lady.

“We can understand that others want to help someone even if their faces are different from ours or we don’t talk much with them,” Cue said after thinking for a while, with a long beak pointing up to the sky

“Wishing to help others tied us to each other. I feel like my body is overflowing with power, being with the others in this way now. Although I used to spend chilly, lonely days, I don’t feel lonely any more,” Chidori said with a rare smile.

“Somehow my heart is getting warm,” Bunn flew around vigorously.

“I agree with you. I’ve been feeling warm from the bottom of my heart which used to be chilly as ice until I wished to take care of a child who had no support,” the old lady flushed as if she really felt warm all over.

“If you help others, I wonder if you feel warmed ? Or since you are warm – hearted, you can help others ? ” Gonta was thinking uncommonly.

“Is the boy your grandson ? ” Hikari asked and straightened her braids just a little.

“He is an orphan. It is not clear at all where he came from nor whether he had a family. He is all alone,” the old lady answered. She climbed the mountain with great difficulty, with two white monkeys leading her by the hand.

“Here we are at the entrance of the village. Don’t let out a single word, and follow me,” the old lady lead their way, casting a furtive glance around.

Fortunately they were shrouded in fog, so they barely managed not to lose sight of her.

“Come in, please. This is my house,” After the old lady shut the door she said, “Oh, my ! I hope you can help me, and I’m saddled with a lot of kids.”

“Is it a nuisance for you that we came here ? ” Hikari’s face clouded over.

“Because I have to protect you, too,” the old lady answered.

The others couldn’t follow her reasoning.

“We came here to help you. On the contrary, we are going to be helped by you ? ” Fanta cried out in spite of himself.

“Shh ! ” the old lady warned Fanta with her forefinger on her lips, and she peered outside through the narrow opening of the door. “If I don’t help you at first, you cannot help me. In this village strangers and those who help them are exceedingly suspected, so both of them won’t be able to live in the meantime,” the old lady quaked with fear.

“Why do they have a bitter experience though they do nothing evil ? ” Gonta asked in a low voice.

“Something horrible which I can’t explain well, lurks in this village.”

“Who are you ? ” Gonta cried with his finger pointing toward the ceiling.

Chapter 47 Dia

Near the ceiling a well – tanned boy with large eyes sat on the beam, staring at those below him. He had clear – cut features and his eyes were sparkling. He was about the age of a third grader.

“I asked you all to help me because I want you to ask him about his circumstances,” the old lady said.

“What’s your name ? ” Hikari asked. But the boy remained silent, staring at them.

“His name is Dia. Have a look at his eyes. They are shining like diamonds. But except for his name, he won’t say anything,” the old lady looked depressed.

The white male monkey carried a basket of nuts to the boy. Crunching on the nuts slowly, the boy kept staring at Hikari and the others.

“I don’t know why, but he will eat nothing but nuts,” the old lady sighed.

“Dia. Say hello to them. I had great help from all of them.”

“I picked up the basket wich had dropped into the valley, and brought it to the lady,” Cue said fluttering .

“The lady dropped it because Hikari suprised her saying ‘Yoo – hoo’. So it was reasonable one of us picked it up,” Gonta glared at Cue out of the corner of his eye.

“But I wonder if Gonta could pick it up,” Cue said. “You owe it tome that you became acquainted with the lady because I talked to her first,” Bunn said, perching on the beam Dia sat on.

“It seems that you, Bunn, Cue, and Gonta, always boast of yourselves. But anyhow, it was unexpected that we met her in this way,” Hikari said.

“Even if we want to meet each other, we can’t necessarily do so. I cannot help thinking taht God let us meet,” Bunn said, thinking it over.

“You may be right. It must be a teaching of Godthat we should help each other,” Cue scratched its small black head, throwing in words of agreement.

Dia spoke as if he was spitting out something nasty, “God exists nowhere. If you think I am telling you a lie, try to pray to Him for something. He won’t do anything for us.”

A white chilly light spread out of Dia’s beautiful shining eyes, and a spiteful look came over his face.

“Are you denying me ? What a thing to say ! ” Gonta glared at Dia, and Dia glared back without flinching.

Hikari looked at him sharply, and she said to him, “How do you know God doesn’t exist ? You are younger than I, aren’t you ? ”

“Although I have asked God to help me many times, He never rescued me. I have experienced the absence of God which was horrible. What you call God exists. That is God, Manto, whom the king of this country, Manto believes in. But he is a bloody devil who shows his power only in battle,” Dia said almost screaming.

Chapter 48 Cooperation

Everyone kept silent for some time, sensing distinctly how Dia was repressing his anger and sadness which had welled up in his quaking heart. Everyone was sure Dia would rebel no matter what they would say. The short silence seemed to have calmed Gia down.

“I think the God Manto won’t abandon you by any means. Certainly He seems a little fearful, but He is a great God who is strong in battle,” the old lady said almost whispering to Dia.

“Do people who live in this country believe in the God Manto ? ” Fanta looked at her with upturned eyes.

The old lady nodded without saying anything. And then, she took a deep breath and said as if she had made up her mind, “The God Manto is called the god of victory as well. As King Manto prays constantly so he can win wars, he has won hundreds of battles. So the God Manto is a guardian deity.”

“If we ask the God Manto for his power, we can rule the world,” Gonta’s eyes were shining.

“By the way is the God Manto differrent from the God we pray to ? ” Chidori looked around at the others timidly.

“Since we are in another world, He is a different god,” Cue said, with eyes spinning around.

Dia had been glaring at everyone ; now teardrops ran from his eyes.

“Why are you shedding tears ? You are keeping something sad to yourself, aren’t you ? ” Chidori suggested and then Dia cast down his eyes.

The two white monkeys nestled close to the boy as if they were trying to pacify him.
“Leave me alone,” Dia spoke with trembling lips under his breath.
“Since we cannot neglect you, we’ll speak to you,” Hikari said to admonish him.
“You say you will lend me a helping hand ? You wouldn’t be able to do anything for me.”
“I wonder if you’re right. Each has his own different abilities. You can solve any problems if you unite your efforts.”
Dia kept silent.
Hikari felt relieved for she sensed that Dia understood what she had meant.
“Oh, my ! What a wonderful day it is today ! Say ? Is my face flushed ? I feel very happy and my body is glowing with warmth,” the old lady pressed her hands on her cheeks.
“He, he, he ! You feel happy even at such a trifle. I’m getting warmer in my heart. Is my face beaming with happiness ? ” Gonta said abruptly in a coaxing voice.

Chapter 49 Something Wonderful

“Your expression describes that you are a courageous and warm – hearted boy. You are shining like a sunflower,” the old lady said.
“Well, really ? Do I look so ? ” Gonta was confused by her unexpected words.
“Say, how about me ? ” Fanta said after he straightened his glasses again.
“I saw that you were a very gentle, kind boy at first sight, for a soft pale blue light comes out of your body.”
“What sort of flower color does it look like ? ” Fanta asked in a low voice.
“Isn’t it that of a violet ? ” the old lady said, staring at Fanta’s face.
“I am also filled with rapture when I perch on a flower with sweet honey, but I’ve never seen a light shining around someone. Why can only the old lady see the light ? ” Bunn spoke, anxious to have her speak about him, his own color.
“I used to live by myself, feeling lonely as if I was chilled to the bone, but I became cheerful, able to see the shining light since Dia came to my house. As I grew older, I couldn’t go far away from home, and those who taked with me have been exterminated. I came to see nothing but this little house, the little field, and the road which connects them,” the old lady said.
“Nothing was beautiful until Dia came here ? ” Bunn asked her, preening, that is, opening its wings and closing them.
“My house and field and the road used to be gray. But everything, my house, the field, the road, and the trees, mountains, and streams began to shine since the day Dia came here,” she answered.
“Hearing your story, it sounds like Dia lights up his neighborhood,” Fanta, who had been listening to her with his chin resting on his hands, said.
“The facts are a bit different from your opinion,” the old lady said.
“I took pity on the boy, and the moment I made up my mind to take his mother’s place, my heart seemed to shine.” The old lady looked everyone in the face, and then she said as if she was confiding a top secret to them, “I’ve been expecting that someone would bring something wonderful to me. I cannot help thinking that seems to be you and Dia.”
“We didn’t bring anything to you, old lady,” Gonta seeme to be embarrassed.
“The good people I waited for have come together at last. However, thinking about Dia who doesn’t have a home to go to, I feel like the shining light around me is fading out. And, that’s not the only thing about Dia. I cannot help feeling anxious about you, too.”

“I don’t understand what worries you so much,” Gonta frowned.

The instant Gonta had come into the village, he had felt disagreeable, for he heard nothing as if the whole village were holding its breath.

“In this village nobody speaks out loud. They remain silent, seeing what will happen to each of them,” the old lady shrugged with squeamish reluctance.

“Why are they so cautious ? ” Hikari asked staring at the old lady.

“In my childhood I could do whatever I wanted in the village, and enjoyed talking with whomever I saw. Since I grew up, the village became bad gradually.”

Chapter 50 Something Wrong

“What’s wrong ? ” Gonta glared at her.

“Although you ask me that way, it’s difficult to express in words,” the old lady said with her face clouding over, and then was thoughtful for a minute.

“The whole village became rigid some how without nothing it. Before that, the people could talk about anything cheerfully, but they came to speak with their neighbors more cautiously for some reason or another.” The old lady related little by little : “All those who belong to King Manto should defend their country through united effort. There arose a movement all over the country in which they would take the responsibility for their speech under the orders of King Manto because telling lies or saying bad things about others causes quarreling, and makes them no longer have the heart to work together in order to defend their country.”

“That’s admirable,” Hikari nodded.

“I thought so, too. The whole village participated in the movement. Careless words hurt others sometimes,” the old lady said.

“In my school there are many kids who are worried about backbiting. I should have started a movement against it.”

After Hikari said that regretfully, Gonta and Fanta looked toward her, apparently feeling quite embarrassed because Gonta was at the top of the school when it came to using violence and abusing others, and Fanta liked speaking ill of others behind their backs.

“Although the movement started with the right purpose, it has been choking us.”

Hearing the story, Hikari and her friends felt difficulty in breathing.

“Since the people of the village warned each other against talking behind each other’s back, talking about irresponsible matters, and telling lies, the village became very cheerful. But that also created a horrifying atmosphere without their realizing it,” the cheerfulness of the old lady of a short time ago disappeared, and she looked sad.

“They feel it’s very hard when their speech is severely controlled, though there’s no problem when they stop backbiting on their own initiative.”

“Why ? You shouldn’t talk behind someone’s back,” Hikari said. The others agreed with her.

The wrinkles in the old lady’s face deepened, and she said, “Although you are critical of backbiting, if there is one who has never spoken ill of others or envied them, raise your hand.”

The whole house became perfectly still.

A giggle arose.

Dia was trying hard to stifle his laughter.

“Hey ! What’s so funny ? ” Gonta flashed at him.

“Nothing in particular,” Dia answered with a perfectly straight face.

“A disgusting fellow ! He seems to be laughing at us,” Fanta looked away sulkily.

“Coo,coo. Coo, coo.”

The old lady strained her ears intently to catch the sound.

“What’s that ? I wonder if a dove is cooing,” Cue tilted his head.

“A guard monkey is notifying us that somebody is getting close to us, by giving the signal call,” the old lady said nervously.

Chapter 51 In a Basement

Nervously, the old lady removed onefloorboard of the floor. “Come on, everyone. Get into this room.”

There was a basement under the floorboards. Dia jumped down from the ceiling and rushed into the basement, too. Then, the old lady set the floorboards back.

In the pitch – dark basement each gathered there and huddled up together.

They heard the door of the house open above them.

“Good evening,” the voice of a man called out.

“Oh, my ! Welcome. What can I do for you ? ”

“Since I happened to be passing by your house, I dropped in on you, wondering how you are doing. I felt uneasy that you might get into trouble in the case of your health going bad because you live alone,” he said in a voice one scarcely could hear.

“How kind of you ! But I am alive and kicking, as you can see. How about having a cup of tea ? There has been no one to talk to, so I am very bored.”

“No, thank you, for I don’t have time to spare. I’m having a hectic time, so I can’t waste a second,” the man said in a fidget.

Through a chink, a streak of light shone into the basement.

Hikari peered quietly into the room through the chink. She found a very thin man standing there. He was taking a look around here and there. He seemed to be checking for something dubious.

“Maabaasan,¹ did you hear about Nandehmo,² a man who just moved to our village ? ”

“Nothing at all,” the old lady answered.

The man went out of the house without saying a word.

“Oh, thank God ! If that man discovered you, he would grill each of you concerning where you’re from and what brought you here.” The old lady lifted the floorboard and led them out of the basement, then she smiled with relief.

“That man is an officer of a committee which checks if people of the village speak ill of others behind their backs. They revolt against him and call him Mr. X. ”

“Are you called Maabaasan ? ” Gonta asked.

“Yes. When I am surprised and when I am scared, and when something great happens to me, I say ‘Oh, my’. So I came to be called Maabaasan before I knew it.”

“The state of this village is strange. Won’t you tell me what happened in the village ? ” Cue said ruffling up its feathers all over its body.

“Everyone stopped backbiting, so the village seemed very peaceful. But one day two old ladies were suspected of having spoken ill of others and were questioned by Mr. X, the officer.”

“Can’t they settle it by insisting frankly that they didn’t speak ill of others ? ” Hikari wondered, tilting her head.

“Of course the two insisted on it, but the people of the village came to look badly upon them just because they had been questioned once.”

Notes

1. Maabaasan : “maa” is an interjection like “oh” which is used by women when they are surprised or amazed ; “baasan” is a colloquial word to indicate an old woman in a friendly manner, such as “granny”. So, Maabaasan is a granny ready to be surprised at anything.
2. Nandehmo : “nandemo” means “whatever”. So, Mr. Nandehmo consults with people about whatever they require.

Chapter 52 A Chat

“Though they didn’t do anything bad, why did they have such a bitter, bitter experience ? ”
Gonta glared at the old lady with his big round eyes.

Then the monkeys sent a signal again.

“Chitter, chitter.”

“Oh, my ! Someone else seems to be coming here. But it’s not Mr. X this time. It should be my good friend, for the signal sent was gentle. But carelessness is our greatest enemy. I’m sorry, but hide yourselves.”

The instance all the kids and the others entered the basement, they heard the door of the house open.

“I cannot repress my wish to talk with someone any more. A white fog lays thick over the village today, and hides my coming here. Thank God ! ”

An old lady, who came into the house, laughed with her mouth wide open without recognizing that she was being peered at through the chink of the floorboards. She had a snub nose and her hair was done like a rice – cake offering.

“It’s natural that people of the village call you Kerabaasan.¹ I’m envious of you who can laugh all the time.”

“It’s you whom I cannot help feeling envious of. If I could be surprised or touched, my life would be enjoyable as if I were watching a play.”

“I wonder if we will be questioned by Mr. X when we talk together. A short while ago, Mr. X came to see the situation here. He asked me if I knew about a certain Mr. Nandehmo.”

“You mean the man who has moved to the house next to mine. He came to meet me, but I could only say a few words, thinking Mr. X was keeping an eye out, though he invited me to come and see him, to have some fun.”

“Oh, my ! Great. He asked you to come and see him, to have fun ? As for me, I love to visit someone and have a chat. Though there’s the word ‘fun’ which sounds like a jewel, I haven’t heard that word for decades,” Maabaasan said.

“It was my only pleasure to laugh and chat. Neverthe less, when I talk with someone, I say back – biting things in spite of myself.”

“Can you speak only well of others, eh ? Once in a while I want to speak ill of others behinds their back to blow away my gloomy feelings,”

“When Mr. X watches persistently. I can’t help thinking he is a disgusting guy. Oh, dear ! We speak behind his back without our knowing it,” Kerabaasan laughed.

Notes

1. Kerabaasan : “kerakera” is an onomatopoeic word which is used when one laughs merrily. So, Kerabaasan is a granny ready to laugh at anything.

Chapter 53 A Small Light

Everyone in the basement heard the door open again,

“I thought something was wrong with you, and I’ve come back. I heard your whole conversation. Come along with me to the committee.”

Everyone could see Mr. X standing with glaring eyes looking through the chink in the floor.

Accompanied by him, the two old ladies went out of the house.

Everyone remained silent for quite a long time in the darkness of the basement. Since Maabaasan was arrested, it was as though they were thrown out into the danger of the village.

“Let’s pray to God and ask Him what to do,” Hikari said. Responding to her, the others prayed with their hands together in the darkness. In the pocket of Hikari’s clothes the pebble began to shine. She put it on the palm of her hand and whispered, “This light comes from our prayer. I’m sure God will protect us.”

Chidori put her face close to the pebble, staring intently at its light, and said, “I’m very scared now. I’ve hardly been able to control my fear, holding both hands on my pounding heart patiently. As I saw the pebble shine in the darkness, I remembered that I had put up with many things, staring at a tree when I was alone. Nobody understood how lonely I felt, so I came to feel bitter against my parents and my classmates.”

Everyone listened to Chidori attentively.

“The tree, which I was staring at, had one of its branches broken off and its bark was white and bare. The tree stood, enduring pain patiently and growing lush green leaves on its other branches. Since it is deeply rooted in the earth, God protects it, providing it with water and nourishment. While I stared at the tree, I came to think God may protect me just like He does it.”

The pebble light lit up Chidori’s face which usually looked plaintive, and made it full of life.

It seemed that Chidori’s words held an extraordinary power, and with every word she said she encouraged herself and the others.

“Trees say nothing, but they show me that the power of God extends over those around me and protects me as well. So I thanked God and made up my mind to help my friends. But I’m so timid that my mind and body tend to shrink, so I can’t help you successfully. Still, I’m sure I will be of help to you in everyday experiences.”

The stone increased its brightness, so the pearly colored light lit up every corner of the basement.

“Right. We have to rescue the girl changed into a swan by ourselves, calling up our courage. I wonder if we can manage to rescue Maabaasan and Kerabaasan,” Bunn said with his wings rubbing together.

“What you said has aroused me to want to help the old ladies. Just to want it is not of any use, so let’s put it into practice. Why don’t we go and see the condition of the village ? ” As Fanta listened to Chidori, he became motivated.

Chapter 54 Fog

With Gonta at the front of the line, everyone quietly went outdoors into the fog. A strong wind blew down from the mountain and the fog swirled about, they caught a glimpse of something black and huge.

It disappeared behind the fog immediately. Everyone exchanged glances. They walked slowly and quietly, and then another huge shadow emerged out of the fog close to Hikari and her friends.

“Gee !” Gonta cried and stopped walking. He was looking at a huge building, dumbfounded.

The building that appeared out of the fog was a high – rise housing development just like the one Hikari lived in. There was a park and streetlights.

“How this town looks like ours !” Gonta was looking around, wondering.

“Here’s a sign that indicates the name of the town.” Cue perched on the sign softly so as not to make a noise of flapping wings.

The sign said only “Kingdom Manto : The Village of Relaxation” in Japanese.

“Are we in Japan ?” Bunn said, flying around the sign.

“I cannot decide if we are in Japan or not. Maabaasan, Kerabaasan and Mr. X were speaking Japanese. Besides, all plants that grow here are very familiar to us,” Cue said, becoming lost in thought, goggle – eyed, his beak pointed upward.

“Excuse me, but may I ask you something ?”

A man’s voice suddenly rose from the fog, and everyone was startled out of their wits. They were convinced that Mr. X had found them out.

“I am not to be mistrusted. I just came to this village. I just asked you to tell me the way to a supermarket.”

There stood a very tall, thin, fair – complexioned man, apparently completely exhausted. “For, I have some very important business there,” the man said in a rather clear voice. His large moist eyes looked tender, as if they gently cherished those he saw. They were like those of sheep in some way.

“We’ve come to this village, too. We would like you to tell us the way,” Hikari stepped forward in front of the others.

The man took a business card out of the pocket of his wrinkled jacket and handed it over to Hikari. The card said the following :

A consultant on whatever
Nandehmo
Address : 1-Banchi 2-chome
Village of Relaxation
Kingdom Manto

“Your occupation is rare, isn’t it ?” Bunn said, perching on the edge of the business card, looking at the contents.

“Why ! You can speak, dear insect. My job is to give advice to others about whatever, so that they can solve their problems.”

Chapter 55 At a Supermarket

“Do you consult with a bird, too ?” Cue asked Mr. Nandehmo.

“Sure. Are you in trouble ? Well, it’s hard to say, I make it a rule to take on any consultation, but it’s me who wants to consult with someone about this village,” Mr. Nandehmo said in a wretched voice and drew a deep sigh. “Excuse me for winding up our conversation, but I must hurry, for I received a letter from another client so I need to go to the supermarket. I made an appointment to consult with him there.”

However, Mr. Nandehmo didn’t know the location of the supermarket.

“It’s very dangerous to fly in such a deep fog, but I can fly around nimbly. So, I’ll go and look for the supermarket,” Bunn said and he took off.

The fog hung over him like a white wall. Bunn nearly bumped against someone’s back. He shook his wings back – ward and barely managed to make a soft landing on a small back.

“I guess she is an old lady,” Bunn felt sure, looking at her gray bobbed hair. A large basket, hung on her left arm, was almost trailing along the ground.

“Well, what sort of dishes shall I serve my wife ?She wants to eat meat, fish, vegetables, fruit and some sweets. Since I am going to a supermarket after a long time, I’ll buy enough to fill this basket,” he said to himself.

Soon Bunn went into a large supermarket, stuck to his back.

A shopgirl came close to him.

“Hi, Nakisonajiisama.¹ Welcome. How are you ? ”

Her way of speaking was kind, but she was scrutinizing the old man.

“Luckily, I manage to get along. As I haven’t talked with anyone, my voice has gotten rusty, though.” No matter how you looked at him, he looked like an old lady.

“You’ve lost considerable weight, haven’t you ? Don’t be sad about your wife so much,” the shopgirl said, and then she frowned at the other shop assistants.

“Thank you. But I cannot help weeping when I remember her,” the old man was close to tears.

The customers in the supermarket exchanged significant looks with each other, and were indifferent to him even when he greeted them.

What on earth did the old man do to the people of the village ?

The old man was walking, weeping in the fog after he went out of the supermarket as well. He remembered his wife.

“It’s bad for your health to grieve over the death of your wife,” Bunn spoke to him.

“As my ears are not n good condition recently, I hear some strange voice,” the old man said to himself.

“Look at your breast pocket. I am an insect n your pocket. My name is Bunn.”

“Since even people of this village would not like to talk with me, it’s wonderful to be spoken to by an insect,” he said.

Notes

1. Nakisonajiisama : “nakisohna” is an adjective which means close to tears ; “jiisama” is a colloquial word to indicate an old man in a friendly manner, and this expression is more polite and gentle than “jiisan”. So, Nakisonajiisama is an old man who looks sad, and he is on the verge of tears all the time.

Chapter 56 At the Old Man’s House

Bunn said that his friends were in trouble, unaware of how the village was. As the old man listened to the story, he started weeping. “I’ve long been living alone, so I well

understand how lonely people feel. I'd like to be of some help to you."

The old man came up to those waiting for Bunn's return.

"Bunn is very kindly concerned about my condition," the old man told them.

"I did nothing special," Bunn said self-consciously.

"You spoke to me kindly, which I almost forgot about after my better half died, didn't you? Your kind words encouraged me." The old man bowed very deeply to Bunn who was on Hikari's shoulder.

The counselor – of – whatever, Mr. Nandehmo said, "Whenever you're in trouble, please come and see me," and handed his business card to the old man.

"I have to go to the supermarket. What will you do, everyone?" Mr. Nandehmo said, looking at those around him.

"Come to my house, if you would like. I bought a basketful of food, so you have come at just the right moment," the old man said in a low voice.

Hikari and her friends decided to go to his house first and listen to him in order to learn about the village.

The apartment of the old man was located on the fourteenth floor of a housing development in the Village of Relaxation.

"My home is on the fourteenth floor, too. Are the buildings the same height?" Chidori looked outside the window.

The mist was clearing. Gradually steep mountains appeared, together with a plateau of brown rocks below them. The sunshine didn't reach the deep valley between the mountains and the plateau, so the valley was dimly visible. It was the valley where Hikari and her friends had crossed on the monkey bridge.

"As I don't have a TV at home, I don't know much of the world. And since I have no telephone, I can't talk with anyone on the phone. As I live alone in my room which is so silent that I can hear my own breathing, I have a hard time of it and I thought I would throw myself into the valley many times. Every night I fall asleep after I announce to my wife in the next world that I will be with her the next morning. But when I wake up all at once in the morning and see the bright sunshine outside the window, I have second thoughts and I think that I want to bask in the sun one more day. Have a look at this," the old man pointed at a calendar hung on the wall next to the household Shinto altar. Each date was circled in red. "I make it a rule to mark the calendar like this when I am able to live on every day."

"You live your life with all your might, feeling it to be so hard, don't you? But what makes you so sad? you mean you live by yourself and feel lonely?" Hikari asked in surprise.

Chapter 57 A Flower

According to the old man, his wife loved to chat. She was questioned by the police on suspicion of backbiting others.

Since then, all people in the village wouldn't talk to him and his wife for fear that they would be regarded as friends of the suspect.

"I asked Mr. X firmly, 'Why did you question my wife, though she insisted she didn't say bad things about others?' Then, he said someone reported to him that my wife had criticized the committee. I asked him desperately who in the world had said such things. Rumors invented the tale as if it were true, that is, the one who reported it had heard it from someone,

and that someone had heard it from another someone.”

“Our backbiting resembles that,” Fanta said, embarrassed.

“My wife, who liked chatting, felt so sad at not being spoken to by anyone that she threw herself into that valley fifteen years ago.”

“Oh, dear ! Wouldn’t anybody in the village talk with her ? ” Hikari asked, with her eyes wide open in surprise.

“Even I, who lived together with her all the time, couldn’t cheer her up,” the old man said.

“Only the person who is concerned can understand the loneliness of having no friends. Your wife wanted to express her feelings, but she couldn’t,” Chidori said, holding the old man’s hand gently.

“It pains me even now to think that there may be some people who have hard times like my wife did,” the old man shed tears.

“Don’t kill yourself. I was hated as a worm, called a ‘bad boy’ or a ‘rough fellow’. Even when I didn’t do anything bad, it was rumored as if I did, I remember. But I don’t care, for I will study hard to succeed someday and look down on those people,” Gonta encouraged the old man.

Nakisonajjisama blinked, with his eyes full of tears, and he said, “There was also something else that encouraged me when I was on the verge of suicide.”

The others stared at his lips because the power which had supported his life seemed to surge up.

“One day I made up my mind to kill myself on that very day. I just looked out of the window to see the view because that would be my last chance to see it.”

The old man walked up to the window, looked at the sky first, and then looked at the ground. “Everyone, won’t you all come and look at the clump of grasses by the roadside ? ” he said.

A single large nameless white flower bloomed widely, swaying in the wind.

Chapter 58 A Dove

“I didn’t notice that this flower bloomed here. It bloomed quietly and solitarily among the grasses, with the shadowy clump of trees in the background. It’s white, as you can see, in the darkness, isn’t it ? ”

Staring at the flower, the others became composed as the old man said : “I wonder if the flower opened for me on the morning. I felt as though my heart were being purified by the whiteness of the flower, so my mood to kill myself calmed down. But one morning when I looked out of the window, I couldn’t find the flower.” The old man, fixing his eyes on the white flower, said in a low voice, “Someone picked it.” He continued, “I decided to go and throw myself into the valley in earnest. I said good – bye to my room. And when I looked at the veranda by chance, a dove was there looking for food. I gave the dove some beans left in the corner of the kitchen, and it ate them one by one with great relish. Though there were no beans left, the dove stared at me as if it were pleading for more. As I thought I would do something good before I die, I went to the supermarket and bought some beans for the dove, but I found that it wasn’t at home when I came back. Since I took the trouble to buy the beans, I had to put off my suicide and feed the dove. Since then, the dove came to the veranda every morning. So how can I die ? ”

The old man’s eyes were similar to those of a dove. His voice sounded just the way a dove

cooes, rolling something inside its throat. “And this morning a white flower bloomed among the clump of grasses. I guess the stalk and roots of the previous flower remained, and a new shoot grew. I was glad I was alive. Surely God Manto protected me. I was so glad that I made a plan to offer a great dinner for God Manto and my wife.”

Hikari felt the white flower and the dove, which supported the old man’s life, close to her as if they were friends.

“Even I, a scarab beetle, could ease Nakisonajjisama, but some children take it for granted that they catch any insects no matter how many, because insects are insect ; besides adults concentrate only on raising crops and scatter insecticides, don’t they ?”

“All creatures including human beings, birds, insects, trees, and flowers should live together in cooperation. If some creatures become unable to live, it is not good for human lives, either,” Cue said thoughtfully, scratching his head with his claws.

Chapter 59 Question

“I love flowers and doves, but I feel lonely after all. Loneliness tends to increase gradually as if a disease has become worse, eh ?” the old man said and dropped his head.

“I suggest you make friends with more flowers and doves. Looking at a tree growing vigorously, I thought I had to live by not being discouraged by hardships, like the tree when I felt lonely. But I noticed encouraging those who feel lonely is the best way to get out of loneliness in the true sense of the word.” It was the first time for Chidori to assert herself so convincingly before her friends.

“I’ve never been cheered up so much as today since my wife died. I suppose I can manage to overcome sorrow and loneliness one by one,” the old man said. He was good at cooking. He let the others eat the food he would offer for God Manto in whom people in this country believe, and for his wife.

“All of you, who cheered me up, have come to seem to me a messenger from God,” the old man was happy. But having heard that Maabaasan and Kerabaasan were arrested, he began to weep again, saying, “It’s just the same case as my wife.”

The office of the committee was at the center of the housing complex. Having waited until it became dark, the old man lead them to the office. A steep paved road went up to the top of the mountain, winding around the mountainside. The office was a solid two – storied concrete building.

“Oh dear ! It cannot be true,” the voice of Maabaasan came from the building.

A window on the first floor was open, and smoke was drifting out from the pipe of Mr. X.

“Officer, soon after you left my home, Kerabaasan came to visit me. And you came back again before long, didn’t you ? During your absence no one came to see me,” Maabaasan said.

Kerabaasan began to laugh shrilly ; she discovered the kids in the window.

“I’ve seen the face of Kerabaasan. Now I remember, It is that of a cow in a dairy farm where we went sketching,” Gonta said in a low voice.

“Must I record the conversation of a moment ago ?” a man’s voice was heard.

Everyone outside the window didn’t notice until then that the man with bleary eyes had been scribbling while sitting at a desk installed in the corner of the room.

“Of course, for every record on investigations of the committee will be a valuable historical record of the Village of Relaxation.”

“Yes, sir. Then I’ll write down all the conversations.”

Chapter 60 Red Seal

“Otahkesan, Otahkesan,” a voice sounded in the room.

A myna bird was shut up in a cage on the desk. The bird became aware of Cue who was on a tree by the window.

“It’s strage ! It’s strange ! ” the myna cried.

Tryig to fly away, Cue plunged headlong into a golf net laid next to the office. His legs were caught by the net, so he became paralyzed.

“Who is it ? ” Mr. X said, and came outside. Everyone hid in a clump of grass.

“Oh, my ! You got caught,” Maabaasan said in spite of herself, looking at Cue who was seized by the scruff of his neck by Mr. X.

“There’s someone who saw a boy with a dark complexion go into your house. Does this bird belong to him ? ” Mr. X asked in a low voice.

“Oh, my ! ” Maabaasan was at a loss and covered her face with her large hands.

“If you won’t answer me, there’s nothing else to do. I will put a red seal on your nationally – registered name because you went against the rules and disobeyed the committee. You won’t be allowed to watch television or to use the telephone. Besides you won’t get the Manto Paper, delivered by the State, for free any more. All right ? ”

“Oh, my ! But it’s okay. I’m poor, so I don’t have any telephone or television to begin with,” everyone heard the voice of the ld lady speaking from the office.

“My wife was so sad since the red seal was put on her name. It is more horrible that the paper carries names with red seals on them and that those people are excluded from the others when a festival or a meeting is held, than the loss of television or a telephone,” Nakisonajiisama said close to Hikari’s ear.

“Bullies among adults, aren’t they ? It’s terrible,” Hikari frowned.

Dia walked boldly into the office. The boy had come up to his friends without their noticing him, and he had been looking at what was going on in the room.

“The one you call ‘the boy’ is me. I am an orphan and had no place to live. I just had some food at Maabaasan’s home. The myna is mine. Now you can see the situation clearly. Pardon her and let her go home,” Dia said.

“You are admirable enough to appear. If you are an orphan, you can live in this village ; for the God manto is merciful. Shall I become your foster parent and record your name on the national register ? ”

“No. According to the Legend of Manto which is handed down among the villagers, an orphan, like me, is captured. I’m recalling the story right now. The orphan will wage war against King Manto because the king is tormenting the people, making use of God Manto’s magical power. In fact, the orphan is...”

“Stop it ! ” Mr. X shouted, “Do you know the Legend of Manto ? ”

Dia remained silent.

Chapter 61 A Dangerous Book

A car drove up at full speed and stopped in front of the entrance of the office of the committee. The driver came into the office and whispered in the ear of Mr. X.

Mr. X handed Cue to his secretary, and then went out by car with the driver.

The secretary put Cue into another cage.

“You’re not a bird changed from a human being, so I don’t feel guilty putting you into a cage,” he muttered, looking at other vacant cages piled up at the corner of the room.

Dia was kept in a room which was locked at the back of the office.

“Now you can go home, Maabaasan, Kerabaasan.”

“It pains me that the boy has such a hard time. He didn’t do anything wrong, did he ? It’s cruel to treat him as a bad boy just because he is an orphan, though the committee didn’t investigate him,” Maabaasan said, to the secretary her eyes full of tears.

“You well know that one who isn’t recorded on the national register can be locked up in jail as one of the dubious characters, don’t you ? ” the secretary said.

Maabaasan and Kerabaasan went home dejectedly. A patrol car arrived as soon as they left.

A policeman dropped off a boy with a round – shaped face and put him into the same room where Dia was. Mr. X. who had been in the same car, was in a very bad mood.

“Why on earth was such a dangerous book found in the Village of Relaxation ? I will investigate in detail who passed the book to that boy. And where it was passed.” Mr. X was irritated.

Hikari and the others quietly left the office of the committee, and looked for Maabaasan and Kerabaasan, but they couldn’t find them. So they decided to go to Nakisonajisama’s house first. The mist completely cleared away, so the lights of the housing complex which stood in rows half way up the hill, were seen shining like ropes of jewelry.

“Don’t you have to go home ? I guess your parents must be anxious,” the old man asked in a touching tone. Everyone walked on, remaining silent.

“Worrying just makes us gloomy and depressed. Let’s try to ask God what we should do,” Hikari said. She took her lucky charm pebble out of her pocket, and she and her friends squatted in a row. Bunn perched on Hikari’s shoulder.

Chapter 62 A Fisherman

“What should we do from now on, God ? Please protect us with Your grace,” Hikari prayed in a low voice with the pebble in her palm. The others folded their hands in prayer toward the pebble. The stone shone a pearly color, lighting up their folded hands in prayer.

“It’s bright. The light is caused by all of our prayers. Looking at this light, I’m coming to life.” Chidori’s voice was full of excitement.

“Me, too. I will pray firmly to God that we may find the Casket of Manto,” Gonta said, and he showed his vitality by flexing his upper arm muscles.

“Oh, my ! Were you here ? ” Maabaasan said.

Along came Maabaasan, Kerabaasan, Mr. Nandehmo. They said they had happened to be passing nearby and had noticed the light of the pebble. Although Mr. Nandehmo went to the supermarket, he couldn’t see the customer who should have been waiting for him.

“Anyway my business is flourishing ; I am now consulting with Maabaasan about Dia. Besides I have a previous visitor. Come out, dear first customer of my consulting,” Mr. Nandehmo called out to the person left behind the darkness.

“Is it all right ? ” He got such an answer after a second.

“These are my acquaintances, so you don’t have to worry.”

A brawny man with bushy whiskers came close to the kids cautiously.

“When I came out of the supermarket, I found this guy sitting on a bench, apparently lost in thought. I thought he might be the one that I had to meet, but I was wrong. Still , he became my first customer,” Mr. Nandehmo introduced him to the others.

“When I saw Mr. Nandehmo walking out of the supermarket, I was overwhelmingly eager to talk with him. Hi eyes looked sorrowful, so he seemed willing to listen to my sad story sympathetically,” the man said.

His name was Hige.¹ He made a living by fishing in a river. His real name was Milchandler Ebenezer Hige. It’s too long to remember for the others, so he made it a rule to introduce himself as Hige : the last part of his name. As he said he wanted the others to see the cause of his worry, they decided to go there with Mr. Nandehmo.

They passed by Maabaasan’s house and went up anarrow mountain path at the outskirts of the village.

“If you go down in the other direction, you’ll reach the Umbrella – Shaped Tree in the valley,” Maabaasan explained.

After they ascended for some time, they saw a white cascade fall like a swaying curtain in the darkness. Water splashed like small white flowers until it reached the basin, so the sound was just like that of wind blowing over, swaying trees.

Notes

1. Hige : “hige” is the general term for a beard and mustache. So, Hige is a person with whiskers and mustache in this story.

Chapter 63 Deep Pool

Standing on a large rock, they could see a deep pool below them. The deep black surface of water was silent in the darkness, as if it were sleeping.

Hige sighed deeply and said, “About one month ago I cast a net into the river in the early morning haze. I remberd that I had stood on the same rock a long, long time ago when I was really young.”

“How did you notice you were in the same place ? ” Hikari asked, blinking her eyes in wonder.

“I clearly remembered what I had forgotten by the scent of the wind, the color of the water, and the rugged face of the rocky surface. When my heart swelled with nostalgia, I pulled in the net, and then I found I had caught a fish,” he said.

The water of the falls broke into a mist, drifting in front of the kids.

He continued, “The scales of the fish, which was almost two meters, glistened, reflecting the sunshine. A wind mixed with scents of the waterfall and the leaves blew toward me. And the deep bleof the water startled me. Memories of my childhood, which I thought had passed, came back to me. Well, have you ever unexpectedly had an experience of thinking you went through the same experience in a previous time ? ”

“Yes, I have. After I come home, I sometimes fall asleep. When I wake up suddenly, it is evening and the sky at sunset is already red. Looking at it, I am dying to see any friend of mine. And I have the experience of wondering if I had the same feeling before and I rush out of my house,” Hikari said, thinking the matter over with her hand on her chest.

“I definitely sensed that it was the fish I had caught when I was young. When I was a first – grader, I was fishing in the deep pool. I caught a small char with great difficulty. I jumped for joy, saying ‘I got it,’ for it was the first fish I had ever caught since I was born. But I let the fish go into the deep pool because I took pity on it, imagining its parents were waiting for its return,” Hige said in a gloomy voice.

“Oh, dear ! The fish had a narrow escape,” Maabaasan said.

“I’d like to try such a thing once, like saving the life of a fish. I’m sure the fish would be grateful to me,” Kerabaasan said with sparkling eyes.

Only by hearing his story a moment ago, the others became fond of him.

Chapter 64 Words of The Char

“Soon after the incident, I was almost drowned in the deep pool which was swollen after heavy rains when I was swimming. Then, two huge chars appeared. They supported me underneath and took me to the shore. Beside those chars, the small char, with a scar made by the fishhook when I had caught it before, accompanied them. I was sure that the parents of the char I had let go in the water helped me. Since then I’ve never forgotten the char parents and their child because they saved my life. The small char has grown up to a huge size, and it took the trouble to be caught in my net the other day.”

“It sounds like you are thanking the fish to say ‘it was caught on purpose,’ ” Kerabaasan laughed.

“That’s right, or I wouldn’t have seen the fish at all.”

“But how do you know it was the fish you once helped ? ” Maabaasan said, her round eyes growing wider with wonder.

“In the net the fish was staring at me. After I let it go into the deep pool, the huge fish swam near the shore and spit out water over and over again. Watching it and wondering how funny it was to do such a thing, I noticed the sound of its spewing water was because it was speaking very distressful words,”

“Oh, my ! What did it say to you ? ”

“It just said, ‘Quit fishing.’ ” It said that over and over. When I asked the fish if it was the char I had caught once, it jumped energetically off the surface of the water as if it was making a sign to say ‘yes’.”

“Does that mean ‘Don’t kill fish’ ? How about asking it for more information ? ” Hikari emphasized her words.

“It seems thhe fish can speak only those words. I heard them over and over, I came to regret I had become a fisherman, for anyhow, I would have to catch its family and friends. Even so, I cannot quit fishing without permission because the committee decided my occupation would be a fisherman, judging my personality and competence for it.”

Nakisonajisama hesitated, then he began to say, “My wife loves to eat char living in this deep pool. So, I always make char dishes and offer them to God, and my wife, in the next world. I’m sorry I gave all of you a meal of char today.”

Hikari and her friends held their stomachs with their hands. As for Gonta, he had eaten as

many as five fried char by himself.

“Oh, my ! If those fish had been alive, they would have shouted for help before they were fried,” Maabaasan said.

“I will give up eating fish and hold a memorial service for all those fish I’ve ever eaten,” the old man looked close to tears.

“I’ve never been spoken to by fish. But if it happens, I suppose I wouldn’t be able to eat them,” Gonta said pensively.

Chapter 65 **Legendary Events**

Holding his hands in prayer to the night sky, Nandehmo closed his eyes for a while. He made it a rule to pray that way whenever he had to think something over ; he was wondering what more he could do for Hige. The mist cleared and a multitude of stars were twinkling in the sky. The others held their hands in prayer as well. Hikari’s pebble began to shine with a pearly color, lighting up the surface of the deep pool.

Splash ! Everyone heard the loud splash of water and then, a huge char broke the surface of the water.

“Why do you ask me to quit fishing ? ” Hige asked the fish.

The fish gurgled water from its mouth many times. Its sounds turned into words like when one is gasping heavily.

“I don’t know, either. I have been thinking I would repay my favor to you someday since you helped me. Though fish cannot speak with people, my parents know human language somehow and they taught me that short phrase. It’s strange how I can speak so fluently like this tonight because I learned only that phrase.”

“God allows us to communicate with each other. Because we prayed combined with your wish to repay your kindness to Hige, we touched Him. When your sincerity touches God, something you cannot think of happens and you can do what you don’t think you can do at all,” Cue said quietly.

“Why do you think my parents told me to give you the message to quit fishing ? I asked them the reason, but they didn’t tell me, saying ‘You had better not know it’ ”, the huge char said perplexedly.

“I’ll tell you why.” Dia’s voice echoed from the darkness of a clump of trees next to the deep pool. The others thought he was still locked up by the committee.

“The tale of that fish there and the fisherman is written in the ‘Legend of Manto’, ” Dia said and he continued : It is an incident of the Legend which is not chronologically clear in the Castle Manto in the Kingdom of Manto. A fisherman used to fish diligently. However, he came to wish that he would rather make friends with fish than to catch them. His commander, who paid a visit of inspection in the territory of the Manto, sued the fisherman who had quit fishing against orders, for the lord of the Castle, Manto. In the Kingdom of Manto people who refused to carry out orders deserved the heaviest punishment, and the offenders suffered a terrible experience more cruel than the death penalty.

King Manto furiously said, ‘If the fisherman loves fish so much, why not let him just be a fish ? The king decided to let people all over the country say that the fisherman was a fish. King Manto prayed to the God he believed in asking that the fisherman, too, thought he would be happy to become a fish, having suffered from people all over the country. At that moment the god turned him into a fish. Since then, the god has been called God Manto and has been feared

by all the people.

Chapter 66 Transformation

“I wonder if my parents know the Legend of Manto ?” the huge char murmured on the face of the dark pool.

“I guess they know it. That’s why they tried to warn your benefactor. They didn’t talk much because they didn’t want to bring you and the benefactor, Hige, to despair,” Dia answered.

“Do you know why the God Manto treats people so cruelly, Dia ?” Hikari stared at him.

“According to the thought of King Manto who obeys the teaching of God Manto, people have to carry out whatever he says faithfully for the nation at the risk of their lives. It’s forbidden to give up jobs that King Manto granted.”

As everyone heard Dia’s disconsolate voice, each came to understand why the village was deadly silent. The people of this country were shut up like a calm, absolutely obedient to the policy of the nation.

“Were all who disobeyed King Manto changed into fish according to the Legend of Manto ?” Fanta asked awkwardly.

“Some were changed to bears, insects, birds, and horses. Others were turned into flowers, grasses, and trees. There are some who were changed into moss, rocks, water, and air, as well.” Dia answered.

“Dia, you seem to know the Legend of Manto. Tell us more about it. I’m sure it will be a clue for us when we look for the Casket of Manto.”

Dia didn’t reply from the darkness.

“If God Manto rules this world with his tremendous power still now as the legend says, and if you, Hige quit fishing, you’ll be changed into a fish I think. Still won’t you regret it ?” Nandehmo asked quietly.

Hige thought for some time, and then he said in a choking voice, “Don’t speak ill of God Manto. Since we have faults in our behavior, God Manto is wrathful. But now I absolutely need the warmth of people to go on living, which I can’t feel in this village much more than as a victory in competition. Since I’ve been on such friendly terms with the char, the fish is my most precious mainstay for my present life, because I began to feel that the only happiness granted to me is the warmth which I feel when I communicate with the char. But I still want to remain a human being.”

“Oh, dear ! You seem so lonely, Mr. Hige,” Chidori was moved to tears.

“Splash !” Everyone heard a loud splashing sound in the water again. It was the char. The fish said, “As I heard you talk, an idea occurred to me. I imagine my parents as well, as I used to be a human being. That explanation is easy for you to understand that my parents know the language of human beings. Even if I were a human being who had been changed into a fish by God Manto, I don’t want to regain the figure of a human being, because I have my family and friends in the world of fish, too. I’m quite satisfied to live serenely sailing in the clear water. Yet human beings have their own greatness. So, I hope, Mr. Hige, you will remain as human beings to fight against God Manto and King Manto, Mr. Hige.”

Chapter 67 At Midnight

Hige said to the others that he would like to consider his future by sitting near the deep pool during the night.

Everyone went down the mountain path with the help of the starlight and came back to the entrance of the village.

A boy came dashing toward Hikari and her friends with tremendous momentum. He asked them, “Have you come across a thin, dark – complexioned boy with bright eyes ?”

They vaguely saw the oval shaped face of the boy under the dim street lights.

“Dia is in the mountains. How lucky you came out of the committee room so early !” Maabaasan said shrilly without noticing her loudness.

“Monkeys rescued me,” the boy said, looking around cautiously. He said the following : After Mr. X went home, his secretary was dozing, and the room key was on the desk. A big white male monkey stole the key and passed it through the iron – barred window of the room to Dia. So the two boys opened the door with the key and ran away.

Everyone wondered why the monkeys helped Dia.

“Why were you arrested by the committee ?” Hikari wondered.

“He was to blame for having read a comic book,” the boy spat out the words.

“What’s your name ?” Hikari asked.

“Tamago.¹ Everyone calls me so because the shape of my face resembles an egg,” he answered and hurried away to look for Dia.

What had become of Cue after he was put into a cage in the committee’s office ?

Hikari and her friends stayed at Nakisonajisama’s house that night. At midnight Hikari and her friends woke up to a sobbing voice.

Fanta was rubbing Gonta’s back incessantly.

“What’s up ?” Hikari asked Fanta softly.

He answered, “Gonta dreamed of all his family warmly welcoming him back home, he says.”

Gonta was weeping. He felt unbearably lonely. Hikari felt closer to Gonta than before when she knew it.

Chidori, who lay next to Hikari, stretched out her hand and held her friend’s hand under the quilt.

Chidori whispered in her friend’s ear so that only she could hear her words, “Gonta was always bullying and roughing others up till they cried. Nobody could make him cry. But the working out of his own heart missing his family made him cry. Even Gonta, who is hated as a rough boy by all the school, is very timid sometimes.”

Hikari whispered as well to her friend, “We have all sorts of sorrow. But sorrow is an essential function for human beings to go on living. So, even when we face incidents that make us sad, we should put up with them and overcome them, without trying to escape from them.”

A dark swell of the quilt under which Gonta lay with his back to Hikari and Chidori seemed very small to them in the darkness.

Notes

1. Tamago : “tamago” means egg. In this story Tamago is a boy who has an egg – shaped face.

Chapter 68 Mysteries

Everyone heard a few sharp taps. They found the one who knocked at the carriage window of Nakisonajiisama's room on the side of the veranda. Cue was pecking at the glass with his beak.

"Oh ! It's Cue. What a surprise you managed to slip out of the cage ? " Bunn flew about joyfully.

"I just used my head a little bit," Cue said, stroking his head with his claw, and he related how he escaped from the cage as follows : The secretary, who noticed that Dia and Tamago had run away, notified Mr. X on the phone, and he went out of the office, saying, "I have to ask for help from the village people." Another myna bird in another cage was speaking in a carefree mood, "Otaakesan." Cue continued, "Then, I taught the bird 'the evil God, Manto.' When the secretary came back the next morning, apparently exhausted, my same species boastfully mimicked the words he had just memorized . So the man got angry and kicked the cage. He mistook the bird for me. I watched for the chance when he would open the cage to feed me feeling sure I was his pet, and I took the change to fly away in a moment."

"How severely Mr. X will scold the secretary because all captives ran away ! " Jiisama said, with his eyes blinking weakly.

"A more difficult problem happened to the committee," Cue said, and he continued as follows : Cue got out of the cage and flew up high in the air ; when he found that a man with a beard wet into the committee's office, Cue perched on a tree by the office and watched what was going on in the room through the window.

"When the man said he would quit fishing, the secretary eargerly persuaded him to think twice since it is forbidden to quit your job."

"That's Mr. Hige, a fisherman. I guess he decided to quit his job at last after considering the matter by the deep pool," Hikari said and prayed instinctively for Mr. Hige's safety in the future.

When Cue looked into the room, Mr. X came in with a fierce look.

"What made you quit fishing ? " he asked Mr. Hige.

"Because I was informed that fish in the deep water have human minds. It seemed to me there should be some hidden mysteries for their having talked to me."

"What sort of mysteries do you think they are ? " Mr. X asked as if he was ready for a fight.

"I have no idea. Still I suppose they have something to do with the lives of human beings."

"In Kingdom Manto you are not allowed to change your jobs selfishly in the middle of them. The committee decides the villagers' jobs under the order of God Manto, so trying to change jobs selfishly against their decision equals betrayal of King Manto."

As Mr. X looked as if he was glaring at the tree, Cue then flew up in a flurry, and flew to Maabaasan's house and that's how he got to know where the others were.

Chapter 69 Truth

What had happened to Hige and the fish seemed to be closely related to the Legend of Manto. Cue suspected that Dia knew the truth. The myna thought he should find him as fast as possible. Cue flew off the veranda and perched on the tallest tree in the dense forest.

"Dia, it's me. Come out," Cue experimentally mimicked a voice exactly like Maabaasan.

Two old white monkey who were married jumped, hand in hand from tree to tree toward Cue.

The white monkeys sat on a bough and stared at Cue looking around restlessly in the air his mimicking voice ringing.

“Quit that useless mimicry. Dia is out now,” the male monkey spoke in human language.

Cue was surprised at how the monkey spoke human language so fluently. Cue, too using the same language, said that the kids were eager to have Dia’s help. And he said that he suspected the Legend of Manto held the secret key to saving people.

The two white monkeys listened attentively to what Cue said, holding each other’s hands.

The male monkey said quietly, “It is needless to ask Dia because we are the living proof that the Legend of Manto is true. We are human beings turned into monkeys by God Manto, and Dia is our grandson.” The white male monkey related the cruel treatment toward his relatives when he had been a human being. “Our relatives were exiled to a mountain where monkeys lived because we objected to wars. We could not help it but become monkeys in order to get along with other monkeys. Because we thought so, we succumbed under cruel treatment, and our relatives were turned into monkeys by the power of the God Manto.” The male monkey rubbed his chest with his hand, feeling a pain, still the quite tone of his voice continued.

“Dia’s father was killed, and his mother and sister’s whereabouts became unknown. And Dia also came into miserable circumstances, that is, driven out as an orphan by the whole country, as you know,” the white female monkey said. “Maabaasan is the only one who protects Dia in this village. So we are on friendly terms with her. But that’s why Maabaasan was blacklisted by Mr. X of the village committee, so Dia was driven into a corner more than ever and he couldn’t help but hide himself in the group of monkeys. Aside from Maabaasan, we are the only ones who stand by him.” The white female monkey shed a tear.

“On what sort of charge was he turned into a monkey ? ” Cue asked the monkeys with surprise in his voice.

Chapter 70 God and Satan

“There used to be a book in which the Legend of Manto was written, in my house. It was called a phantom book, and there wasn’t anyone who had read it. If the book was left somewhere, you were supposed to take it to the committee immediately without reading it. I heard the book was prohibited a long time ago, and that there is no such book left in the world today. But Dia happened to find one which was covered with dust in the corner of the study in my house. My whole family except for one person just looked at the old brown leather cover of the book, so they didn’t read even one word of the book. Dia, though, seemed to manage to read it.” The male monkey cast a thoughtful eye on Cue from behind his white long – drooping eyebrows, and the monkey groaned.

“How come the existence of the book became known to the committee ? ” Cue asked.

The female monkey hesitantly related how it happened, blinking her eyes, “Dia had a sister named Dahlia. She showed the Legend of Manto that her brother had found to one of her friends, saying a book from the old times and been discovered.”

Dahlia was too young to read the book. She and her friend had an interest in the strange picture on the front cover of the book.

“The picture was surrounded by grape vines, and in the middle of it a girl was drawing water from a fountain with a jar, and Satan was about to grab her from behind. Looking at the

picture carefully, I noticed the fountain, rocks, and plants were a part of a figure of God who was holding Satan as well as the girl with His large arms. Indeed, His divine appearance showed up as if it was embossed,” the male monkey said in a solemn tone.

“As I looked at the picture, I thought it strange, wondering if He granted King Manto’s wish to destroy other countries, even though the god had such a gentle face. And I came to suspect God Manto, who was worshiped during wars, was Satan in fact,” the white female monkey shivered, as if just to think of it made her shudder.

“The child who borrowed the Legend of Manto from Dahlia enjoyed looking at the pictures on the cover and the illustrations, but her parents took the book away at once and brought it to the committee, because the book was absolutely forbidden to be read. Our family came to be punished for having kept the Legend of Manto,” the female monkey shrugged.

“What has become of the book ? Cue asked, moving a few steps closer to her.

“I hear the book was burned immediately. Since Dia finished reading the Legend, he will be transformed if he is caught, and his name will be on the list of those transformed,” the male monkey said, and he groaned looking at his body covered with white fur. “We accepted the destiny to live in appearance of monkeys. We never curse our present lives as monkeys, for we can live rather free from all cares as monkeys more than as human beings. But I am newly anxious about only one thing. Dia seems to be plotting revenge on the King who prayed to the God Manto that He might turn our family into monkey. That equals waging war against God Manto, and that will bring about a disastrous tragedy.”

Chapter 71 The Parents of the Char

The female monkey said with her hands held together, “If Dia endures everything patiently and attends to others warmly with his whole heart, he won’t suffer more agony from the villagers than he does now. If you come across Dia, tell him to run away to a place where the committee can’t keep an eye on him and not to commit an outrage such as rising against King Manto.”

“Dia did have such a bitter experience ! How patient he is not to say even a grumbling word. If I were Dia, I wonder if I could endure by myself the sorrow and chagrin he accepted ? ” To be honest Cue didn’t care for Dia who behaved as if he looked down on others. Nevertheless, Cue took to Dia at once since he listened to the monkey’s story and knew Dia was so courageous in his stand against King Manto.

Then, everyone heard shrill screams of the monkeys from the heart of the mountains.

“Mr. X of the committee and the villagers are coming toward the mountains to look for Dia, my comrades say. We will run away to the heart of the mountains,” the male monkey said, and he disappeared, leading his wife by the hand into the mountains.

On the way back when Cue passed over the deep pool, he saw two old large chars swimming under the shade of a rock. Cue did a nosedive and perched on a bare tree which was on the water and mimicked Hige’s voice. “Perhaps you are the parents of the char that I know ? ”

“That’s right. It’s the voice of the one who saved my child’s life. But where are you ? I cannot see you,” the large father char said.

“Excuse me. I am the bird perching on the bare tree.”

“How dare you notice that we can speak human language,” the char said.

“Since you taught your child human language, I’ve been sure that you could speak. Let me

know, in order to help Mr. Hige. Why did you tell Mr. Hige to quit fishing ? He's been very worried about it since he heard the words," Cue answered.

"We used to be human beings. Hereditary kings, including the founder of the country, King Manto, have lead their people to be strong in order to survive. However, we insisted that we wanted to become those people who could understand how those who always tend to mae mistakes feel. I think kind – hearted people who don't like quarrels have a wonderful world, whereas those who think of only winning dn't have gentleness in their minds. Such an assertion was regarded as treason against King Manto's policy, so we were turnd into fish by the fury of God Manto whom King Manto prays to. I seriously wondered whether I had better tell Mr. Hige to quit fishing because he would e turned into a fish as we were if he quit his job. Besides, we don't know what the words 'Quit fishing' mean, either," the fish said.

"What ?" Cue jumped a little in surprise.

Chapter 72 A Painter

"When my child was saved, the water, which is respected by fish as the fountain of life, taught me secretly some words as a way to repay the kindness of Mr. Hige," the huge father char said, shaking his fins slightly.

"The water ?" Cue questioned in surprise.

"We didn't quite believe what the water said since the words were short : besides, it said the time to say the wors will come after our child would be grown up. However, the water couldn't have said what would hurt or annoy us since it is very pure, it protects our lives and raises our children. We thought surely there was a long story behind it, so we decided to do exactly what we were told without asking why. And, one day after our child grew up, he was caught in Mr. Hige's net and could convey the words," the father char said.

Gurgling water out of her mouth, the mother char said, "The water said, to this effect, that we may be able to repay Mr. Hige's kindness and also we may have on opportunity to save all the people, if we do as he told us, perhaps because the water was anxious, having seen us look doubtful. We became more and more puzzled. Then, the water, having told us the Legend of Manto says so, went away somewhere else."

"Why does the water know such a thing ?" Cue asked .

The two large chars sank to the bottom of the deep water, without replying.

Cue rushed to Jiisama's house and told the others what the monkeys and the chars had said.

Then they heard a voice merrily singing to the accompaniment of a mandolin, "La lala, la lala, la la lah."

A man, fat as a beer barrel, wearing a beret, was coming along, singing and playing the mandolin, carrying a canvas on his back. He put the canvas on the lawn of the housing complex, and put the mandolin beside him, and then began to sketch while singing.

"Mmm...Although I can manage to sketch the old man and the children, the eyes of the insect and especially this myna's beak are difficult to draw."

"Swish, swish, swish." He was drawing a picture with astonishing rapidity.

"Sounds like he is talking about us. Let me go and see what he is doing," Cue said. He flapped his wings and flew away.

"Oh ? I'm just drawing you," the man said to the bird. Cue received a sketch from him. On that paper all the faces of Hikari and her friends looked surprised, gazing down from Jiisama's window.

The painter was looking at his half drawn sketch. He looked dissatisfied. So, playing the mandolin, he made an effort to sing merrily, "Lalala Lah." And then, he scribbled with his pencil and finished the picture !

Cue received the new sketch from the painter. It was the painter himself sprawling out on the grass under a big tree. Many stars twinkling in the sky were in the painting as well. The edge of the drawing paper was surrounded by the starlit sky. Between the painter and the starlit sky, Hikari and her friends and Tamago were talking.

Chapter 73 Beauty

When the painter slept in the open under a tree the previous night, he happened to see Hikari and others.

"Swish, swish, swish." Another picture was completed.

Cue carried sketches like a carrier pigeon from the painter to Hikari and her friends. In the picture he carried this time was painted a lot of people, who were looking into the committee office through the window.

"Oh, why ? This is Tamago," Fanta said, finding him in the sketch. Only his face was shown between some adults.

"Here is Dia, too," Gonta also discovered in the picture. Dia sat on a tree branch by the building.

The painter took off his beret and bowed toward the window.

"This is the first time my pictures have attracted so much attention in all my life. I have to celebrate today. Let me sing and play a song I'm proud of to all of you as a small token of appreciation. I love singing songs so much that I used to wonder if I should be a painter or a singer."

The painter slowly strummed a mandolin, then he sang softly with his eyes filled with rapture.

Jiisama decided to treat the painter to tea specially reserved for guests, in return for having sketched him. As a rule, Jiisama drank tea, recalling his dead wife, Baasama. As Cue went to call the painter, the painter himself, his huge body swaying, approached Cue and the others. The painter introduced himself as La Lahla. Sitting around the painter, they had tea.

"What is the key to drawing pictures well ?" Fanta asked.

"Marvelous beauty which God Manto gave exists in everything. I recommend you to shift the beauty something has gently, just as you feel it, to the drawing paper. So I intently gaze at what I want to describe, I find something flashes in it. And the moment I am surprised, I am drawing with the brush unconsciously. Then I feel something like a sign from God."

"This villa is rather gray. I'm sorry but I suppose you can't paint a good picture here," Jiisama said regretfully.

"No, no. It's very beautiful."

"What ? How is it beautiful ? This village is always dim like the evening, since Baasama died. As I look on it, it makes me lonely."

"Beauty appears and disappears depending on how you feel. I feel beauty when I feel mellow," the painter said with a very mild expression.

"How can you become mellow ? I am depressed as rainy sky, so I am close to tears, feeling sorrow for everything I hear and see. Won't you tell me how to find beauty in this village ?" Jiisama said painfully.

Chapter 74 Gentleness

The painter, La Lahla strummed his mandolin slowly.

“I suggest making efforts to become gentle voluntarily. When I sleep in the open playing the mandolin, I become calm, and I whisper to grasses, trees, and stars twinkling in the night sky without even realizing it. Just then, Nature, responding to me, holds me gently. I come to feel like a baby in its mother’s arms. Oh, yes. If you tell yourself you have become a baby, you can become mellow.”

The painter played some music like a lullaby on his mandolin.

Nakisonajiisamasaid in a low voice, with blinking eyes, “As I heard La Lahla play the mandolin, I made up my mind to reconsider whether there really is beauty smewhere in this village, too.”

“That’s wonderful, Ojiisan.¹ I’m sure we can find beauty, too ; for only to hear you say so makes my spirits rise.” Chidori was happy that Jiisama who had been close to tears had renewed his mind.

“Let’s go looking for beauty in this village with innocent feelings like those of a baby, like La Lahla,” Hikari suggested.

“Mmm...” Gonta as thinking, folding his arms. “I might be able to feel like an adult, but I can’t become just like a baby, for I couldn’t fight against anyone if they attacked us.”

“Even if someone attacks, don’t fight. Remember God is on your side all the time. When you feel bitter, you must be patient, thinking God is watching you,” Chidori said, as if she was imploring him.

Gonta cast a svere side glance at Chidori and said, “You just think so one –sidedly, don’t you, Chidori ? ”

Chidori rebutted, “God is always on our side and protect us. Looking at trees, I thought so. Even if winter comes and the leaves fall, the tree begin to bud and come into leaf again when spring comes, don’t they ? Even if you become sad or angry, you will become calm, reflecting on yourself and being anxious for the other. All of that is because God protects you equally as His Children. If you do nothing bt be sad and angry, you hurt the life which God gave you.”

Gonta was confused by Chidori’s words.

“Maabaasan came to me with a proposal concerning what to do with all of you who are hiding yourselves in Jiisama’s room, and I finally found the answer. The more I am grateful to God that He protects us, holding us in His arms just like babies, the more I can overcome doubts and fears, and I’m encouraged. All of you gave me the answer under the guidance of God. Thank you,” Nandehmo said. He had been kneeling in prayer while the others talked.

Notes

1. Ojiisan : You usually address an old man as “Ojiisan.” It sounds more common than “Jiisama.” “Jiisama” is used incomparatively friendly relations

Chapter 75 A Judge

“Although I don’t know what will happen, let’s go,” Hikari said decisively.

“Where ? ” Bunn asked, flying off Hikari’s shoulder.

Hikari answered, “To the office of the committee. Judging from Mr. La Lahla’s sketch, you can see Dia and Tamago are there. Besides, I’m anxious about what has become of Mr. Hige.”

The others nodded in silence.

Just as La Lahla’s sketch showed, a crowd of people were gathered around the committee’s office. Hikari and her friends couldn’t find Dia and Tamago although they looked at the bough and throughout the crowd for them.

A big automobile stopped in front of the office, and a man got out of the car. The painter La Lahla started to sketch him. On the painting the tall huge man with a hooked nose was about to capture the crowd of people. The man was distinguished by his eyes. The outer corners of his eyes turned upward. Besides, they gave the impression they were split like a crescent moon, so they resembled those of a bat. It seemed as if a red – hot fire was burning in each of his purple eyes.

Hikari and the others managed to make their way, threading their way through the legs of the adults, toward the window, and they looked into the office.

“Judge, I’ve been waiting for you,” Mr. X greeted the man respectfully.

“Are you the man who wants to quit the job of fishing ? ”he spoke to Hige gently, but his eyes were furiously angry.

The man, who had been called “judge,” sat on a chair opposite Hige.

“It’s my duty to judge whether you are worthy of citizenship in the Kingdom of Manto, after I find out the cause that has turned you against fishing.”

According to what the judge told Hige, this Kingdom was once brought to its knees, though it was a long time ago. At that time, Manto became the king, and he swore to God that he would build a powerful nation which could win wars, not to make the people suffer terrible experiences again. King Manto advocated that the people get themselves into shape, make an effort, and be patient in order to develop superior abilities. Committees were established in each district under the king’s order, to decide the jobs of each citizen, and to place them in a suitable position.

They said that this policy was decided by the first King Manto in order to save the country, and it has been handed down from generation to generation for thousands of years, from the first tragedy of this country, to the present King Manto’s reign.

“When the first King Manto prayed for reconstruction of the country, he heard the voice of God. Hige, as a member of the Kingdom of Manto, you should have known God Manto had advocated that love means being helpful to the Kingdom and the other citizens, not minding your self – sacrifice. Which is more important, the lives of fish or those of the people of the Kingdom ? Can you quit your honorable job, even though you were appointed by the King ? ” the judge asked, staring at Hige.

“Would I be allowed to retire as a fisherman after your conveying my feelings to the King ? ” Hige said hesitantly.

“I’ve never done such a thing,” the judge said flatly, and then became lost in thought. “The only person, who can see the King is the Chairperson of the national assembly. I wonder what kind of person the King is, where he stands in the order of the previous kings of this country... I have no idea, either.”

Chapter 76 Documents

“I have no choice but to say it this way,” Hige said bravely. “I feel honored that my work is

helpful to the country and to other people, but I have gradually become unable to sacrifice the lives of small creatures in order to carry out my mission.”

“Why ? ” the judge asked, seeming very disappointed at what Hige said.

“I noticed that a fish also has a soul after having exchanged words with the fish. It made me think that the other animals, such as cows, sheep, monkeys, birds, and insects also have souls, like human beings. Not only animals but also plants, water, air, and the soil, too, have souls, as a matter of fact. And human beings don’t notice it. I sat by the deep water, wondering about it.”

“You seem to have become a good – for – nothing because your spirit as a citizen of the Kingdom of Manto has grown weak,” the judge said, looking at Hige sharply.

“By the way, was my family transformed into chars, sir ? When I was a child, I was told by the students of the same school I went to, that I belonged to the clan of chars. I was shocked because they were not picking on me. It was only what they had heard from their parents. I used to think I was told that because I was an orphan and my foster father was a fisherman, but what they had said gradually seemed to be true. Information about me is recored in detail in the committee’s documents, isn’t it ? Please, tell me.”

There was a low – pitched stir among people who surrounded the committee office.

“Since all of the committee’s documents were made under the King’s order, they should not be opened to the public without his permissin. Besides, they have never been opened to the public. Now, please don’t mind these unnecessary things, and go home, without saying anything for today.”

The judge noticed Hikari and her friends in the crowd, looking into the office through the window.

“Hey, bring those children over here,” Mr. X shouted to the crowd through the window, and Hikari and the others were caught by several men instantly, and taken into the office.

“What are you doing here, not going to school ? Tell me your names and adresses,” the judge said, as scarlet lights flickered like burning fires deep in his eyes.

“Boron, boron, bororon, boron,” Painter La Lahla was strumming on his mandolin. It was an enchanting turn.

As Hikari heard the musi the painter was playing, she overcame her fear with great difficulty, and she could smile. She persuaded herself to feel like a baby, the way she and her friends had talked about doing, and felt she had nothing to worry about because she was held by the arms of God, though she was not sure if she could manage it, for it was the first time for her.

“We came from Japan,” she said.

“Japan ? The world outside, isn’t it ? ” The judge showed a sign that he suddenly noticed something. It seemed that he was thinking of something.

Chapter 77 Manto’s People

“You crossed over the valley by using monkey bridges, right ? ” the judge asked calmly.

“Right. You know that, don’t you ? ” Fanta said, straightening his glasses with his fingers which had slipped down.

The red flames in the purple eyes of the judge gradually intensified.

“Who told you about this country ? ”

“We lost our way and wandered into this country. We had’t learned at school that Manto’s Kingdom existsanywhere. Besides, this country isn’t on a map,” Gontasaid angrily.

“Judge, there is no report about their illegal entry into this country,” the secretary with a sall

mustache cut in. "Even if there are those who enter this country illegally, there is no precedent for sending them back because all the illegal aliens become members of Manto's Kingdom."

"What ? Do you mean we can't go back to Japan ?" Gonta said, glaring at the secretary.

"That's right. This is King Manto's command. In case of violating his order..."

"You don't need to explain any more," the judge said in a sharp tone.

"If a child is registered as a member of Manto's Kingdom on the list of the Nation, a personal guarantor is required. It is necessary to stay at the office till we find a suitable guarantor."

"Boron, boron, boron. La lahlala, lalalah la, lalah." Strumming the mandolin and singing, La lahla appeared at the entrance of the office.

"I'll be the guarantor of all the children."

"If the children run away from you, you'll be charged with it. All right ?" the judge said, staring at the painter.

"I'm willing to vouch for them because I can find another beauty in the faces of children who feel relieved again," the painter said cheerfully.

The painter was permitted by the judge to become a guarantor, and the officers decided to draw up the documents for the procedure.

"My name is La Lahla."

"Lalala ? Ha, ha. It's a funny nickname, isn't it ? I'm asking you for your real name."

"La Lahla is my real name."

"I don't live in any fixed place."

"What ? Do you really think a man of no fixed residence has the right to become a guarantor ?"

"I haven't been registered as a member of the Nation," La Lahla said, shrugging his large shoulder.

The committee officer, Mr. X, shook his head as if to say that's absurd.

"It's my duty to go looking for beauty and to draw it. I just arrived in this village last night after drawing beautiful things one by one, since beauty exists here and there. I intend to stay in this village and draw its beauty for some time."

"It's a very important mission to draw beauty in Manto's Kingdom and show it to the people all over the country. Well then, report your temporary address so we can stay in touch with you, and then, we'll register the children," the judge said.

Chapter 78 A Fragmentary Sketch

After La Lahla took his beret off and made a deep bow, he began to sketch the judge.

"I'd like to give you this sketch as a token of my gratitude for your permission to let me become the guarantor of the children. Would you accept this ?"

On glancing at the sketch, the judge started quivering and he tore it into pieces.

Why on earth was the judge so angry when he saw the sketch ?

"What did you sketch ?" Hikari asked La Lahla, under the shade of a tree after they went out of the committee office.

"I drew the first view of the judge as one who was born vigorously, and I showed his happy parents. And the next view was of a toddling baby, running after a bouncing rabbit in a field full of flowers. Strangely enough, I feel as if my pencil can draw by itself since I came to this village. I haven't once, decided what to paint by myself, so I mostly don't know what I will draw next."

“You speak like you’re not really drawing,” Bunn said, moving his antennae slowly.

“Right, I would rather say that God Manto draws by moving my hand, than to say that I draw ? Well, I drew something like this on that sketch, I believe.”

The painter began to scribble quickly on some drawing paper with a pencil. First, two boys in short pants appeared. Were they creeping on the earth, one behind the other ? No, it seemed one was riding on the other’s shoulders. “Swish, swish,” he drew. A tree was drawn next to the boys, and its trunk was entwined with vines, and huge clusters of wild grapes huge from them. One of the boys, riding on the other’s shoulders, was about to pick one of the clusters, stretching out his arm as far as possible to reach the fruit. It was obvious that the boy on the other boy’s shoulders was the judge as he was in his childhood days, since the boy, and the judge today had the same hooked nose.

“Swish,swish, swish,” the painter drew. The painter drew one large circle, enclosing it with wild grapevines hanging down and the two boys inside it. Also inside the circle were some rocks, a waterfall, and two chars.

“There are the parents of the char whose life Hige saved,” Cue said. He was looking at the sketch from La Lahla’s shoulder without the others’ realizing it, though he had flown away before, at the time when they were taken into the committee office.

“What’s that ? ” Cue said. It’s no wonder he leaned his head to one side.

The painter drew another small face in the middle of the deep water, the face of the boy supporting the judge on his shoulders in his childhood. The face was repeated over and over again, spreading out and taking up the whole width of the drawing paper , and at last it became the face of an adult. The painter represented ripples of wter by drawing wavy lines. Was the man under the water ? No, it looked like the face was appearing on the water.

“The face of the deep pool ? ” Hikari wondered, placing her hand on her cheek.

“I just sketched half of the judge’s life so far, under the guidance of God Manto. Did I represent him as water, the judge’s friend, who used to play with him, gathering wild grapes ? ”

Chapter 79 The Real Factor

“Are you...”

A boy was looking at the canvas. The others thought they had seen him somewhere else. “That’s Ukkari sensei,”¹ the boy said in an undertone.

“Do you know this man ? ” Chidori asked.

The boy had a runny nose. He said, “He used to be my homeroom teacher. Others say he disappeared, but I know why. I watched the scene in which the teacher was changed into water beside the deep ool in the village.”

“Who are you ? ” Hikari stared at the boy with her wide eyes.

“My name is Masao,” he answered.

The others exchanged glances. That name reminded them of a boy who hated studying, who was always hanging around the hallways. And the boy in front of Hikari and the others looked exactly like Masao.

“Ukkari sensei used to sit alone for a long time beside the deep pool. I saw him weeping there. I went to see him after school every day.” He said, sniffing, “Though I carried food to him, he rapidly grew weak since a heavy rain beat him down. I watched it. I watched him sink into the deep pool on a windy day...”

“Why did he sink into the pool ? ” Gonta ased in a low voice as if he was growling.

“He went into the deep water little by little himself. Though I cried out, ‘Sense !’ he looked back at me only for a moment and sank into the water.”

Everyone kept silent.

“After that, I continually went to that deep pool every day. He floated on his back on the water, but one day he sank into the pool after a while. As I looked at the surface of the water, his face appeared on it and he said, ‘Masao, go home now.’ He became water after all.”

“Why didn’t you save him ?” Gonta shouted.

Masao dropped his eyes, and his shoulders shook. “Ukkari sensei said, ‘Since I was changing into water at that time, I went into the deep pool, ’” Masao told us, muttering.

Hikari and her friends thought Ukkari sensei was changed into water by God Manto.

Just then, grasses rustled at their feet. A snake appeared, raised its head, and said, “I am the secretary of the committee. It’s God Manto who changed my appearance like this. The judge reproached me severely for the escape of the children and the myna. Besides, I have my pride. So, I criticized the extreme severity of the present King Manto. Because the judge handed down the decision of my transformation on the charge of having rebelled against King Manto, day by day, I became a snake.”

“But Dia hasn’t been transformed,” Gonta said proudly.

“Dia, using his family who had been changed into monkeys, erased his name from the list that mentions the names of the people whom the judge had given the decision of transformation. It was just before the King placed the list in front of God Manto to pray for the transformation of the people on the list, so Dia was saved. On the day someone is changed, Manto’s Mountain is covered with dark rain clouds and the village is shrouded in fog. On the day you came to this village, Ukkari sensei was changed into water.”

After the snake said this, he disappeared, crawling into the grass.

Notes

1. Ukkari sensei : “ukkarī” means careless or carelessly, and “sensei” is a word used to address a teacher.

Chapter 80 Water

Masao knelt down and folded his hands in prayer toward the deep pool.

“Masao, you like Ukkari sensei very much, don’t you ?” Hikari said, from a squatting position.

Masao nodded slightly.

“Why do you like him ?” Gonta asked, throwing a pebble into the deep pool.

“He told me, ‘You don’t have to care if you don’t do well at school.’”

“Good Lord ! Is there a teacher who says such a wonderful thing to you ?” Gonta said in a quick grin.

Kerabaasan came toward them. It seemed that she was asked to look for the children by Maabaasan who had been sick in bed, and was very anxious about Hikari and her friends, and that she came to see what had happened to them.

“Kerabaasan, do you know Ukkari sensei ?” Hikari asked.

“Everybody in this village knows him. He is a very careless person, and I hear that he said something against the spirit of King Manto. Such as, ‘Don’t reproach the others,’ or something like that,” Kerabaasan said.

“He is an admirable teacher, isn’t he ? The king should be blamed,” Fanta said, seriously.

“Oh, my ! A chicken like you can tell the greatness of the King ? ” Kerabaasan said in a rage. So, La Lahla sang a gentle song, playing the mandolin, to calm the feelings of the two.

“I wonder if I can see Ukkari sensei who was changed into water ? ” Hikari said and took Masao’s hand.

Masao lead them through the road which ran in front of the committee office onto a mountain path, and came to the deep pool. Looking into the deep blue water, Masao said, muttering, “Sensei. It’s me.”

On the surface of the water where a dead silence reigned, ripples appeared as if a strong wind had blown over. A voice echoed as though drawing a deep sigh from the depths.

“Masao, you shouldn’t come and see me any more. Even talking with me who was changed into water makes the committee suspect you.”

“I brought people who would like to see you.”

A large face appeared on the surface of the water. That was the man’s face La Lahla had drawn, completely covering the drawing paper.

“When you were a child, you played with the judge of the committee, gathering wild grapes, didn’t you ? ” La Lahla asked.

“That’s right. Although we were close friends, he handed down a decision to transform me into water.”

“You mean the terrible punishment which has been spoken in whispers from a long time ago occurs in front of us ? ” Kerabaasan said in a low voice.

“Splash ! ” The spray fell on everyone.

“Who is that who jumped into the water ? Don’t you know it’ll be difficult for me to fly if my wings get wet ? ” Bunn yelled, crawling on Hikari’s clothes.

Chapter 81 A Comic Book

Everyone noticed that Tamago dove into the deep pool from a branch hanging over it. Ukkari sensei’s face vanished in the ripples Tamago made.

“I can’t hear that story without saying something. Sensei was changed into water because of me,” Tamago said, swimming and splashing.

“I am the main reason that Ukkari sensei was changed into water.” Hikari and the others heard Dia say. The leaves rustled as Dia approached them. Quickly, he perched on a branch sticking out over the deep pool, and looked down at them with glistening eyes.

“Ukkari sensei took a comic book from Tamago while he was sitting under a tree in the playground, and sensei read it. Then, he returned it to Tamago without saying anything. Another teacher watched that act, and informed the committee.”

“Why do you know such a top secret, the story that only Tamago and I should know ? ” A voice was heard echoing from the deep pool.

“I created the comic book. I handed it over to Tamago. I know everything about Ukkari sensei because I heard about him from Tamago.” Dia said the book, made of loose – leaf paper, had thirty pages in it on which a six – frame comic strip was written on each page. It was a simply madebook bound with string, so it looked like a dirty notebook at first sight.

“Are you a friend of Tamago’s ? ” Ukkari sensei said unexpectedly.

Hikari felt relieved since she found Dia had a friend, for having someone whom you love warms your heart and makes your ability to be patient greater.

“Why was Ukkari sensei transformed into water, just because he read a comic book ? ” Hikari asked Dia passionately, which was rather unusual for her.

“Because a part of the Legend of Manto was drawn in the comic book. All who know the Legend are going to be transformed by King Manto’s prayers under the magical power of God Manto. So, Tamago will be changed too, because he is on the list of the people to be transformed,” Dia answered.

“I didn’t expect that God Manto whom we believe in would do such a terrible thing,” Kerabaasan said, her lips trembling.

Then the huge char appeared from the depths of the pool, and he spoke as follows, gurgling out words. “It was water that recommended me to deliver words to show my gratitude, more than ten years ago, to the fisherman who had saved my child. If so, did the water used to be one of the human beings who had read the Legend of Manto a long time ago ? ”

“You’ve got it. What is written exactly in the Legend is occurring again. What is written in the Legend seems to occur in this world repeatedly every several hundred years,” Dia said, looking around cautiously.

“I wonder what the conclusion of the Legend is,” Cue murmured, dipping and shaking his head.

Everyone stared at Dia, wondering what he would say. Buthe remained silent.

Dia gave a wry smile, staring fixedly at the others. He wouldn’t answer, though he had read the Legend, and he looked very spitefully at the others.

Chapter 82 Two Faces

“Boro, boron,” La Lahla, who had been listening to the others in silence, played a passionate tune up – tempo on his mandolin.

“L’ll sketch the judge in another way.” The painter drew quickly with dancing flourishes.

An odd face was sketched on the paper. Two different expressions were represented in one face. The right side of the face had a hooked nose and an eye looking like a crescent – shaped blade, and the mouth slanted toward the ear. However, the left side the face appeared calm, and the eyes looked mild, with a smile on its lips.

Hikari showed La Lahla’s sketch to Dia.

“The half of the face with the crescent – shaped eye is that of Satan which was drawn on the front cover of the book, the Legend of Manto. Indeed, the judge’s face resembles that of Satan, but the other half of the face which gives a gentle image is not the judge’s face,” Dia answered.

“I found the judge had a marvelously gentle expression once in a while,” La Lahla said, full of excitement.

“If you find gentleness in him, it means that you sense gentleness in King Manto and God Manto and that you admire it. I absolutely forbid it,” Dia said in anger, swinging the bough violently, and he disappeared into the heart of the mountain.

“Though Dia says so, I’m sure the judge’s face certainly looks beautiful to me.”

La Lahla strummed a quiet, sad song, as if to calm himself.

“As I looked at the judge’s face, as cold as ice, I thought in a corner of my mind, to speak bad of other people, to keep them away, to wish they don’t exist, to wish them dead, to mean to hurt or kill them,” La Lahla confessed. “In my childhood I had the same feelings, just as I found beauty in the judge’s face now.”

La Lahla started speaking of an episode in his life, saying his parents were peasants. His

younger brother, a new – born baby, had begun to suffer from a high fever. There was, what they call, “a skilled doctor,” in their village, but unfortunately he was out. There was another doctor in their village, rumored to have let a lot of patients die, and the villagers spoke of him as a quack.

“My father asked him to examine the baby. The doctor came and told my mother to put cool cloths on my brother’s body to cool him down, and then he went home. He didn’t make my brother take medicine, or give him injection. The doctor didn’t have a large practice, so perhaps he didn’t have enough money to bring medicine with him, I thought. My parents cooled some cloths in the stream in front of their house, and they did as they were told. The stream, which gathered spring waters of the mountain, was cold as ice, but soon the cloths became hot, absorbing the high fever. ‘No matter how the villagers speak ill of the doctor, he did as much as possible to save the baby’s life. Now, let’s pray to God that he will recover from illness,’ my parents said. We all sat beside the baby’s bed, and went on praying earnestly.”

Chapter 83 La Lahla’s Younger Brother

“I couldn’t go on praying sadly, so I went outside. I saw a thread of smoke rising straight from some burning straw toward the sky at sunset. Fields and mountains were shining beautifully in the rays of the setting sun.

How peaceful ! I thought. Is my brother dying on such a beautiful evening ? Thinking this way, sorrow welled up deep in my heart. While my heart was torn by sadness, the smoke of burning straw continued to rise straight to the sky without the slightest shaking, and it disappeared. I had second thoughts that it was God who made the smoke rise peacefully or scattered it by the wind. My younger brother was fighting against the disease as hard as he could, I thought. So I made up my mind to ask earnestly for a favor from God, thanking Him who protects my brother, without brooding over it myself. So that doctor who was called a ‘quack’ came to seem a reliable doctor who could cure my brother of the disease without using medicine or an injection. My brother’s fever completely withdrew after a night because his family’s prayers may have touched God.” La Lahla related the story so far with rapture in his eyes. He was staring at his beautiful memories. “When I found beauty in the judge’s face, I was very puzzled. But I remembered that I could admire the doctor who was called a ‘quack’ and my brother’s life was saved by praying to God.”

Just then the trees of the mountain rustled, and a large number of monkeys appeared. Tamago was at the head of them. Why didn’t Dia show up ?

“Where are you going to go with a lot of monkeys ?” Hikari asked.

“Dia is going to attack the committee, taking the command of another large monkey unit. We are going to go there to support him. Give us your hand.” Tamago’s eyes gave off a strong light of rage, like Dia’s.

“Although you attack the committee, it will only result in violating the laws of the kingdom Manto, won’t it, such as, fighting and injuring each other ? It doesn’t suit what God wishes,” Hikari shouted with her hands placed on her waist, just like a boy.

“Do you want to say ‘Forgive the committee members ? ’ I have to beat them before they transform me,” Tamago said.

“Why does a child like you have to have such a terrible experience ? ” Cue wondered, flapping his wings constantly.

“Because the contents of the book I had read, represented the truth of Kingdom Manto,” Tamago told the others. “On the cover of the comic book I read, a rough map of the Kingdom

Manto and the title of the book, *The Secrets of the Kingdom Manto*, was drawn. The story began with the scene in which the Kingdom Manto fought against many countries, it won victories, and became remarkably prosperous. A brave soldiers, King Manto believed in the god of war, and he governed the people under the teachings of that god, and he made war with the help of that god's power. So, he never lost. The people from senior citizens to children were overflowing with bravery, and they wouldn't spare their lives, if they could defend their country by means of war. All the people respected King Manto and God Manto in whom the King believed.

Chapter 84 The Secrets of Manto

Tamago continued the story : “In the next frame of the comic, a curious thing was written. Nobody has ever seen King manto whom the people respect so much. Why ? Because he is a legendary figure who existed several thousand years ago. The prayer of King manto, who is willing to defend the country, has existed up to today. Responding to his prayer, the power of God Manto, who brings victories, covers the Kingdom of Manto completely.

“Then, who is the leader of the Kingdom at present ? It is King Manto of the Legend, though almost all the people aren't aware of it. The King's last words are not to have any kind after his death. Because he prayed to God manto that he would be alive as a spirit forever, guiding this country, God Manto permitted it. The King's spirit, which died several thousand years ago, is alive now. And the teachings of God Manto, in whom King Manto believes, guide the people of the Kingdom.

“In the next frame, a scene of the session of the Kingdom Manto's Parliament appears. An old lady with a stern look, wrinkles all over her face, and a long cane in her hand, sits in the chairperson's seat. She is the most influential person next to the King's spirit. Although she could bring the opinions of assembly members to a conclusion, she doesn't have the authority to put the matter into practice. The chairperson reports the opinions she has settled, and consults an oracle of the spirit of King manto at the shrine. The King, who is alive as a spirit, sends it to God Manto, and God hands down the decision to the chairperson through the King.

“The most horrible time is when the chairperson reads out the list that mentions people who are to be transformed, which the judge had written down. Soon the mountain is covered with dark clouds, and the whole country is shrouded by fog. Nobody but the chairperson knows who has been changed into what. Only he can hear King Manto's voice. She acts as a psychic serving God Manto and the spirit of the King.

“As the Legend of Manto mentions the secret power of God manto and the King, the spirit of the King decided not to leave any copy of the book for the people to find out the truth. No one knows the Legend clearly today.

The comic book which Tamago read, ended here.

Having heard Tamago's story, a gloomy silence fell on everyone.

“Halloo !” Hikari and her friends heard a voice calling. They were sure the voice came from the deep pool.

They found a char peeping out of the surface of the water, though neither of the char's parents nor their child appeared.

“It's me. I am Hige. I asked the judge to make me a fish.”

“Why did you become a fish by choice ?” Kerabaasan could not contain herself any longer and burst out laughing.

“I don't want to suffer a life of affliction any more. Though it is different from the happiness

I was given when I was a human being, I want to live honestly with myself to set my mind at ease. Now I can tell you that I don't admire God Manto."

"I don't want to be transformed no matter what. I will estory all of them, God Manto, the spirit of Manto and the members of the committee instead. Mr. Hige, did you give up living as a human being ?" Tamago was irritated.

Chapter 85 A Merman

"I changed my view of life, having been talked to by a fish. After my foster father died, who had brought me up, I spent my life casting a net, standing alone on the shore every day. Fishing, which I could work at as I liked, was an occupation rather suitable to my nature under the severe regulation of the Kingdom Manto, I suppose. I am thankful to the committee for its giving me a job like that," Hige, who had become a fish, said.

"Thankful ?" Tamago said, showing his hatred.

The monkeys Tamago led also protested against Hige's remarks, shrieking all at once.

"I thought of a strange thing after I was spoken to by a fish. Mr. X had been asking one thing gently, but persistently many times so far."

"What did he ask you ?" Kerabaasan aske, leaning forward from the shore and looking into the deep pool.

"He asked if there had been anything wrong with the deep pool ?"

"Why. Just like that ?"

"That's a very important point. Somehow Mr. X thought I might happen to be spoken to by a fish, I suspect."

"I think it is just your imagination that the members of the committee expected that a fish would seak to a human being," Kerabaasan said, with a very serious look on her face.

"When I went to the committee and told them that I could communicate with fish and that I felt like my family had been changed into fish as the reason why I should quit fishing, the judge and Mr. X exchanged glances and nodded to each other. The committee members thought I must have heard something important from the fish."

"They are afraid of the exposure of the secret which only the chairperson knows, if someone would talk to the people who were transformed," Tamago said, grinning.

"But that's what I also want to know. What was the fish uneasy about concerning Mr. Hige, and why did he ask him to quit fishing ?" Hikari said, poking her cheek with her finger.

"The char told me that all the fish I had caught in order to earn money were my relatives who had been changed, in fact, after I became a fish. The Char thought I wouldn't believe the truth if he told it to me, until then."

Three chars rose up to the surface of water beside Hige.

"I'm grateful for the chars' asking me not to kill my relatives any more. Since I was changed into a fish, I could touch the truth which was unknown at that time in this country."

"You can speak quite fluently though you have become a fish, Mr. Hige," Fanta laughed.

"Because I became a fish just now, I will adjust to the world of fish little by little from now on and use only fish language, I won't be able to speak human language, just as rusted gears won't turn, and at last I'll lose my human mind. I would rather hope to be a fish than to be a human being of the Kingdom Manto."

Chapter 86 The Battle

“But can you quit being a human being so easily ? ” Chidori, who had listened, intently to the conversation between Hige and the others spoke. “Sad or disagreeable incidents happen in the world almost everyday. I make it a rule to pray to God every time they occur in order to overcome the bad tides. Mr. Hige, just try to pray to God that you believe you will be restored to your former human body in the end.”

“Try to pray to our God even now. Maybe you can regain your human figure,” Gonta sided with Chidori.

“It’s too late now for you to say so...” Hige’s words turned into a burbling sound as he sank, gurgling.

Hige and the other three fish went on sinking in the deep pool and disappeared.

Then, Hikari and the others heard a siren blow incessantly from the direction of downtown.

“What’s up ? Let me go and see what’s happenin,” Cue said and took off.

“The battle has started at last. We can’t sit still here like this,” Tamago said. At his command a continual stream of monkey corps left for downtown.

The pebble of prayer began to shine in Hikari’s pocket. She put it on the palm of her hand, and held it above her head.

The pebble flared in her hand. The strong light emitted by the stone filled the area, so the monkey corps were dazzled and couldn’t advance. But Hikari and her friends’ anxiety was softened by the gentle light.

“Turn out this light. Which side are you on ? ” Tamago cried out.

“This stone represents our prayer by means of its light. God granted our prayer that we wish you would stop fighting,” Hikari said, staring at the light.

“The committee office is on fire ! ” Cue shouted, who had come back, and was circling in the air.

“They did it ! Dia’s unit succeeded in the attack,” Tamago shouted triumphantly. But he couldn’t move an inch because the pebble of prayer which Hikari was holding shone even more. The monkey corps groped along and climbed trees, then they hid themselves in the thicket of leaves.

“The battle has started. Those bastards will attack us, too,” Gonta said, with a stern look.

“If you intend to keep away from the battle, let’s flee now. Chances are against us. Discretion is the better part of valor,” Fanta said, ready to run away.

“You say ‘run away,’ but where ? We’re in the Kingdom of Manto. Besides, why do we have to run away ? Did we do anything to run away ? ” Hikari said, looking around at the others who were upset.

“If we run away, we can’t solve the matter. What is more, we have to look for the Casket of Manto, you know,” Cue also said.

“Let’s pray we may avoid fighting. I’m sure God will guide us to the right way. If someone causes us distress doing something wrong, God will punish that person,” Hikari said. And she tried to start walking, leading Tamago by the hand, who was dazzled by the brightness of the stone of prayer, but she couldn’t. His hand became a vine before she knew it. He was transformed into a thin tree, with a lot of huge egg – shaped fruit on its branches.

In fact Tamago’s name was written down on the list of those who were to be changed by the judge.

The chairperson read it out to King Manto who was alive as a spirit, and the King prayed to God Manto that He could transform Tamago into something else just then.

Chapter 87 Birdpeople

“Boron, boron, boro ron boron,” La Lahla strummed his mandolin, and he sang, “Leave everything to God and pray to Him intently.”

As the others listened to his singing voice, they became composed.

“There should be a key somewhere to look for the Casket of Manto. Let’s call up our courage and investigate the village,” Hikari said in an excited tone.

“Lan lalan, lan lalan, lan lalan, lan.” La lahla let the others hear his voice. He was proud of it, playing a lilting song. As they walked to his music, their steps grew lighter, they felt refreshed and became full of power.

When they came near Maabaasan’s house, two doves nosedived to the ground.

One of the birds said, “It’s me. I couldn’t forget my wife and said finally to a shopgirl that the ways of the committee are wrong, and that it’s King Manto who made the villagers unable to talk when I went to the super – market. And it became known to the committee and I was changed into a dove, too.”

The dove was Nakisonajjisama who had been transformed.

“This dove was Baasama, in fact. That’s why she came to the veranda of my house, though I thought she threw herself into the valley. So, I’m really glad.”

The other dove spread her wings in greeting, and said, “The villagers will march on here. Since you were on friendly terms with Dia, the committee ordered them to arrest you.” Two doves said together, swiftly cooing.

Maabaasan, who stayed at the window, found Hikari and her friends, and ran to them, as if she had tumbled over. And she guided them into the basement of her house in a hurry.

Someone was already there, and he was staring at the wall of the basement, lighting it up with a flashlight.

“You don’t have to worry. It’s Dia. He fled to me, so I sheltered him. What shall we do now? The committee office was totally destroyed by fire from the attack of Dia and the monkey corps, but I hear almost all of them were killed.”

Hikari and the others heard excited cries rise here and there. Looking through the window, they noticed smoke rising from several places.

“Is the attack of the monkeys still going on? I’ll go out on a scouting trip for a while,” Cue said and flew out in a hurry.

“Be quiet!” Dia shouted, staring at the wall which was lit up in a circle.

Chapter 88 The Wall

Cue hurriedly came back from scouting. He said, “The villagers are fighting among themselves. People, who demand their civil liberty and peaceful life at the center of those whose family and friends were transformed, have taken up arms.”

“Humm!” Dia said proudly with his head held high. “Everything is going on following the plot.”

“What do you mean by ‘following the plot’?” Fanta asked with his cheeks convulsed.

Dia answered, “The plot of the Legend of Manto. I read the same incidents which are now

happening here in that book. That the monkey corps of my relatives was completely destroyed is the same as the legend. And in the legend I ...”

“tell us the continuation quickly !” Gonta gave a penetrating cry.

“When I took refuge in this basement, I remembered that I took the same actions as the legendary hero had done. And I was convinced that this basement must be the same one which appeared in the legend.”

“You can’t mean it !” Fanta turned his eyes away from Dia.

“It’s an incredible story, but it seems true somehow,” Cue said dubiously, shaking his head violently.

“Look. The wall was made of cave rocks. Maabaasan’s house must have been built on the basement which had been there for a long time.”

The rock wall, which was lit up by Dia’s flashlight, showed various patterns reflecting the strata. Judging from its stage of weathering, many years had passed since after it was made.

According to the Legend of Manto that Dia had read, a mansion of an influential nobleman had stood on the basement.

“I don’t have enough time to go into details. In short, the lord of this mansion was killed by King Manto’s henchman. He had an only son whose name is Dia.”

“Oh, my ! The same name as yours, isn’t it ?” Maabaasan was astonished.

“And the boy is about my age,” Dia said.

“Exactly the same incidents the Legend of Manto mentions are happening here now.” Cue looked around the basement with squeamish reluctance.

“However, the actual situation is different from the legend just a little. Just before the nobleman died, he handed over a pebble to his son Dia, and he said his final words, ‘Stand in front of the east wall of the mansion’s basement with this stone in order to pass through a road narrower than the thread which gets through to God only, for the happiness of all people.’ I don’t know what the stone looks like, and I don’t have it. Look at this. You can see the word ‘Manto’ carved on the east wall, just as the legend mentions. I wonder what the next words are.”

Dia traced along the rock with the light of his flashlight. Next to the word ‘Manto’, Hikari and her friends found more words, although they looked like crevices in the rock :

You can cross the wall when you resolve to help other people.

“I wonder who carved those words here. What for ?” Bunn said, and he flew from the wall he was on, to Hikari’s shoulder as if he were frightened.

Chapter 89 Deduction

“I suppose God Manto carved it. Remember the letters, that were carved on a tree in the park, which we saw for the first time, the letters which remained on the swan which that young girl was changed into ? And these letters here, they are in the same forms aren’t they ? When we come across these letters, we always experience strange things, don’t we ?” Hikari said quite confidently.

“But why does God Manto carve the letters ? Why did we find the letters anyway ?” Chidori asked, her voice trembling.

“I guess it’s perhaps that God Manto intended to call us to his world,” Cue said in a solemn philosopher’s tone.

“What does Manto want us for ?” Fanta asked in a faint voice.

“This is mere guesswork, but He wants to tell us something ?” Cue moved his lively eyes

with his beak pointing upward.

“Stop joking. That can’t be true. We’re not about to let an evil god have his eye on us. He has the intention to lock us up in His world !” Gonta shouted.

If exactly what was written in the Legend of Manto was realized, would Hikari and her friends be going toward the world of God Manto ?

Cue, who was good at deducing, thought it over scratching the top of his head with his claws again and again, but he couldn’t make it out.

“Look here, Dia. Isn’t this the people you thought was different from the Legend of Manto ?” Hikari asked, taking the lucky stone out of her pocket.

Dia stared at the stone intently, and he said, “You mustn’t keep the stone the nobleman handed to his son.”

“Can you determine that so conclusively ? An old stranger gave us this stone when we set out on our journey to look for the Casket of Manto. This pebble has the power to protect us secretly. I also think the power of God Manto has caused what is happening around us, as Cue deduced. Even if He is an evil God, what He does is divine nonetheless. So, this pebble may be the one the nobleman in the Legend gave his son.”

“If so, was the old man who gave the pebble a messenger of the evil God ?” Bunn asked, bending one of his antenna.

“Hey there. Stop telling me such an odd thing. I know the gentleman is quite considerate. I know him well because he had taken care of me for a long time since I was a baby bird.” Cue looked displeased.

“Oh, you also were a present from the air, from the old man, weren’t you ?”

“I’m not a present. I was just ordered to go with you and guard you,” Cue rebutted.

Bunn was embarrassed having made many remarks through his carelessness.

“Still, I can’t think that we were drawn into the world of an evil God no matter what because we came across something beautiful. Heartwarming, and touching, as well as having had dreadful and sad experiences.” Saying so, Chidori was confused more and more, and she dropped her eyes.

Chapter 90 The Incantation

“I can tell right now if the pebble is the one in the Legend. Hand it over to me.” Having received the stone, Dia brought it close to the word “Manto” which was carved on the wall.

“The incantation I will tell you was what I read in the Legend of Manto.” Dia put on a solemn look. “What will become of us after this ? I don’t care whether you are an evil god or a good one. Give me an answer if you can. I leave it to you, who answer it, to decide whether you will destroy or save us.”

The basement remained silent as a grave. Nothing happened.

“Dia try to recall what was written in the Legend carefully again. Don’t you remember something else to do ? The continuation was written in the Legend, wasn’t it ? If nothing happens, the Legend will end here, won’t it ?” Hikari said, fingering her hair with her left thumb and little finger incessantly. Out of habit she did that when things didn’t go well.

Staring fixedly, Dia tried to recall the scene in the basement in the Legend.

Excited cries outside were approaching Hikari and the others. Maabaasan’s house seemed to have been completely surrounded.

Picking up the word “Manto” carved on the wall inside the light circle of the flashlight

clearly again, Dia spoke as if he was speaking to himself. “At that time Dia, the nobleman’s son stood in front of the east wall. He recited the incantation gravely, staring at the letters ‘Manto, ’ ” he said. Then he recited the incantation.

Hikari and the others heard the villagers break down the door of the house and bang into it.

“I got it. I forgot to tell the last phrase of the incantation. Oh, God. Please give me power — This is the phrase.” Dia repeated the incantation toward the wall, but still nothing changed.

The villagers noticed the existence of the basement. As they peeled off the floorboard light shone into the basement between the cracks in the boards.

“Dia, try to recall the scene where the boy recited the incantation in the Legend clearly again. The way to recite is important. When you ask God for something, you should pray intently,” Hikari shouted.

Dia closed his eyes and prayed, clasping his hands in front of him.

“No good. Not that way, this way,” Pushing Dia aside, Hikari demonstrated, bowing her head and praying intently.

The villagers jeered, looking down into the basement.

Dia prayed just like Hikari.

“Pray with your whole heart. Leave everything to God. Set your mind on God so intently as not to hear the voices of the crowd,” Hikari encouraged Dia.

Then Dia’s look turned gentle, and his praying voice became mild, too. The others also understood Dia was praying from his heart, having been told to by Hikari. Reciting the incantation, Dia turned the prayer stone toward the letters carved on the wall.

“Arrest all of them ! ”

The prayer stone emitted a strong dazzling light the moment several men burst into the basement.

Chapter 91 The Cave

Hikari and her friends came upon a big cave. It was so pitch – dark inside that they felt as if they were being swallowed by it. A wall of rock stood behind them.

Dia checked the wall carefully, using a flashlight. “The wall which was in front of us is now behind us. We passed through it ! ” he shouted.

Several men who had ripped up the floorboard and jumped down into the basement were left on the opposite side of the wall.

“Just as I expected, we’re experiencing the same things now as the Legend said. It was written that the nobleman’s son, Dia, that’s me, would be able to go through the engraved letters ‘Manto’ on the wall, and go beyond them when filled with light emitted by the prayer pebble with the power of God on it.” Dia had picked up the clue to the riddle, so his voice was full of excitement.

“Where did the Legend say this cave goes ? ” Hikari asked with some impatience.

“I don’t know the rest of the story since the last pages were torn off.”

Hikari and her friends remained silent, staring at the pitch – dark cave.

It seemed there was no doubt that what would happen from now on was something written on the torn – off pages of the Legend of Manto. But advancing without knowing how the Legend ended would be full of danger, as the end of the story as predetermined.

“The letter I received seems to have something to do with the series of incidents,” Nandehmo said. “The letter says I’ll help some people who are on a journey to make other people happy if I

go to the supermarket in the Village of Relaxation, and I will follow the way which leads to love and truth. As my job is counselling with others, on whatever I went to the supermarket anyway, making nothing of the intention of the letter. But I didn't expect it would be a children's group," Nandehmo said slowly, looking back on what had happened to him.

"Who sent the letter ?" Cue asked, like a detective.

"It was a letter with no return address," Nandehmo answered. A long silence reigned.

Dia advanced cautiously, using the flashlight.

"May I tell you what I'm feeling now ?" Chidori said, hesitantly walking forward. The others never dreamed Chidori, who looked timid, would speak at such a time. "As I stared at the darkness of this cave, I realized this is the same as the state of my mind. My inner world used to be a hollow and filled with total darkness, like this cave. There was a period when I was helpless. I couldn't express even a word of my own opinion and I couldn't take action voluntarily, without shrinking and shuddering. But, as I have had various experiences through this journey, I have noticed the existence of something which lights up the darkness of my spirit."

"What's that something ?" Hikari asked, wondering about it.

"I discovered that my soul lit up when I became thankful to God. All of us could manage to make it this far safely, having overcome many difficulties. I have been changed through this journey," Chidori said quietly.

"No matter what trick God manto plays. Chidori can make it an experience like a shining light in the darkness of her soul." Cue was so impressed, his throat vibrated.

Chapter 92 Moans

Dia stopped suddenly,

"What's up ?" Cue asked him.

"There seems to be a spacious room in front of us. A cold and clear wind is coming." After a while Dia's voice echoed in the inner part of the cave.

"Boron, boro ron, boron." La Lahla strummed his mandolin softly. The sound of his mandolin came back as a strong and beautiful echo like that of a huge heavenly instrument.

"I think you'd better not make so much noise," Cue gave a warning.

As Hikari and her friends advanced, the space ahead of them became gradually brighter. Suddenly they were out of the cave, and they found the rocks around them were glittering. They reached a huge limestone cave. Reflecting the light of Dia's flashlight, the stalactites looked as if millions of jewels had been shining all together.

A moan echoed. Everyone stood ready, struck with terror.

"It's a human voice speaking." Gonta's voice became strained. Ever since Hikari and her friends had set out on the journey to look for the Casket of Manto, they could communicate with each other. And in this case, Gonta could only understand the moans as a human language. Gonta continued, "Why, I smell human beings. I'm sure they are nearby. How long have I been longing for this familiar smell ?"

The person who moaned lay behind the stalactites. Both of his legs were tied with thick chains to a huge rock, his clothes were worn out, and his hair and beard had grown wild, so even his features were not clear. The only thing he could do was moan.

"I can understand what your moans mean, but can't you speak any words ?" Gonta spoke to the man.

"How many years have passed since I was shut up in this limestone cave ! During these years

I had nobody to talk to, chained up all alone, so I've forgotten how to speak." Gonta translated the man's moans. "As I spent days having nothing to hear or see in the total darkness, I have become deaf and blind. Yet, I have an amazingly sharp sense of smell, like a hunting dog. I've been aware of your coming here from some distance."

"If I couldn't understand the meaning of your thoughts, you would have been sitting alone in the darkness of the limestone cave forever. Who treated you with more cruelty than capital punishment?" Gonta asked.

"Sir Manto, the King of the Kingdom Manto." The moans showed respect to the King.

"What sort of crime did you commit?" Gonta asked.

"I was loyal to King Manto and his Kingdom, so I assassinated an influential nobleman who stood in opposition to the King. The man was the owner of a mansion which used to be over the basement located on the other side of this cave."

Chapter 93 The Assassin

"That is the nobleman who appears in the Legend of Manto!" Dia shouted.

"If I hadn't assassinated that nobleman, Sir Kanto, he surely would have become the heir of King Peace who died. He was a great person who loved peace and wished for the happiness of the people. But I was very moved by the attitude of the other nobleman, bold Manto, who had an enthusiastic belief in the God of Victory.

Also, thinking back over King Peace's tragic end when his Kingdom was invaded by another country, is there anything you can call truth except to win battles? In order to attempt to restore the Kingdom Manto, the people had to become strong at any cost."

"Then, you mean Manto defeated Kanto and became the King?" Gonta asked.

The man growled, "Right."

"Sir Manto not only assassinated Sir Kanto, but also he exterminated his opponent's clan. At that time a white rock, which the villagers who respect Sir Kanto worshipped as the Peace Prayer Rock, was broken into pieces by Sir Manto's armed forces. The fragments were scattered far and wide to the ends of the fields and beyond the sky. Since then God, whom Sir Manto believed in, because he was thought to bring about victories, came to be called God Manto and has been worshipped by the people."

"The white rock on the other side of the valley is the main fragment of the Prayer Rock, isn't it?" Cue asked, shuddering when hearing the secrets of the Legend which were beginning to be clearer.

The old man's groans became more painful. "Sir Manto was praying fervently to a fragment of the broken Prayer Rock. When I held a dagger aiming at him, I heard the villagers' doubting voices cursing God from one piece of the fragments of rock, as well as their praying voices asking Him for salvation. I said to Sir Kanto, 'The God you believe in is helpless in the face of our armed forces, isn't He? Listen. The villagers are blaming Him.' Then Sir Kanto said, 'God forgives the people for their doubting and betraying him. At that very moment, I stabbed Sir Kanto through the heart with my dagger.'"

Gonta explained those groans, gasping heavily for breath, because he too felt the man's mental pain. "I told Sir Manto the last words of Sir Kanto, 'God forgives you who doubt and curse God.' Having heard the phrase, Sir Manto turned pale and seemed aware of a very serious thing, enough to make him stumble. He shouted, 'Don't tell me such a horrible thing,' and he confined me to this dark cave." The groans turned into a sob. "He is weeping," Gonta said.

quietly, looking above him.

“But why did the nobleman have a fragment of the Prayer Rock ? ” Nandehmo asked.

Hikari and her friends stared at Dia. They wondered how the Legend of Manto explained it.

Chapter 94 The Previous Night

With glaring eyes, Dia related the scene of the assassination in the Legend of Manto as if he were speaking to himself. “The night before the assassin came, was the night when the Prayer Rock of the village had been broken. An old man had appeared in Sir Kanto’s room from somewhere, and had passed the nobleman a pebble, that had been a fragment of the Prayer Rock. And he had told Sir Kanto to protect the pebble and then vanished into the air. I didn’t think this part of the Legend had any special meaning, so I haven’t spoken of it until now.”

“What did the old man look like ? ” Hikari asked inquisitively.

“Mr. La Lahla, won’t you draw a picture just as I tell you ? ” Hikari suggested. She related how the old man looked in detail, the one who had given her and her friends the Prayer Pebble and a myna named Cue when they started their journey.

“Here we go.” With the shout, the painter drew the picture quickly.

“It’s the old man who was drawn in the illustration ! ” Dia shouted.

“I didn’t expect my master would appear in the Legend of Manto. Why did the nobleman tell his son to face the basement wall with a stone ? ” Cue tilted his head wonderingly, though he was flapping his wings happily at the unexpected appearance of his master in the Legend.

“The mystery seems to lie in the scene where Dia faced toward the east wall on which the letters ‘Manto’ were carved, I guess. What secrets are hidden in it ? ” Bunn was thinking about it, too.

Gonta translated what Bunn had said, asking the man in chains what he knew.

“Sir Manto again closed up the cave which he had made his men dig next to the wall of the basement, so that I could sneak into the mansion. Sir Manto thought everything would sink in the darkness of this cave and would never be seen by anyone if he filled up the hole. But now that I have disgraced myself in front of all of you, it seems impossible to bury the secrets of history.”

“Who carved ‘Manto’ on the rock wall when the hole was closed ? ” Kerabaasan asked.

The assassin uttered a long groan of surprise since he realized that the letters were engraved on the wall which he had filled up. Until then, he wasn’t aware of the letters.

“That reminds me,” said Dia. In the Legend of Manto the old man told the nobleman the following : ‘God Manto cannot conceal the places where He has passed no matter how he tries. He can do nothing to change the fact that he inscribed the letters. That’s because a good God shows the existence of God Manto in order to make the letters a guidepost to conquer the latter evil God. Face the letters, ‘Manto’, holding up the Prayer Stone. The good God will guard you and your people from evil.’ The nobleman heard what the old man said, so he left words to his son to stand in front of the east wall of the basement.” Dia gradually recalled what he had read of the Legend.

Chapter 95 Chains

Gonta translated for the man in chains how the nobleman had received the fragment of the

Prayer Rock.

“When I stabbed Sir Manto, he said he had been notified by a certain person that he would be assassinated. I asked dubiously, ‘Then, why didn’t you run away ?’ He said, smiling, ‘I left it up to God whether I would live or die. I have nothing to worry about even if I die because it’s an act of God.’ I cried, ‘If so, just try and see whether your God will guard will guard you from this stroke of the stagger !’ And I stabbed him. I could take the life of Sir Kanto, but I couldn’t deprive him of his prayer.”

Since the man quaked all over terribly, his chains clattered and the sound echoed in the limestone cave like that of a tambourine. “This cave is a tunnel to lead to Sir Manto’s soul and God Manto’s.” His groaning voice dragged sorrowfully.

Chidori took the man’s hands, and said, “You are sorry for having assassinating Sir Kanto, now several thousand years after the event, aren’t you ? Pray together with me from now on, so you, who used to kill people to win battles may reform yourself.” Chidori prayed so that she might thank God Manto even though she was afraid of Him.

The man in chains conveyed in a moan what he thought, tearing his chest. “I still remember the last words of Sir Kanto because I used to respect him till Sir Manto ordered me to kill him. Could God Manto forgive a person like me who has repented what I did for the Kingdom ?”

The others fell silent when they heard what Gonta translated.

Could they answer the question whether God would redeem the man, though they couldn’t set him free from his chains ?

“If you can’t answer my question, leave here immediately and let me be. The only thing you can do to give solace is to let me sink into the depths of despair quietly.”

After a long silence, Chidori whispered “I can’t imagine what terrible days you have spent as an assassin, but I understand you have suffered enough to be worn out completely. Cheer up ! I’d like you to hear me when I am worried or distressed, for the deeper one’s worries and distresses are, the more one can understand and give a helping hand to those who have worry and distress.”

Chapter 96 Compassion

“Do you expect me, an assassin, to help others ?” the man said as if he scorned himself. “I can kill or hurt people, but I can’t help them.”

“He is weeping again,” Gonta murmured.

“Why are you weeping ?” Chidori asked the man, putting her hand on his.

“Because I feel pity for Sir Kanto whom I stabbed to death, his relatives who were changed, and my family that I parted from because of my confinement here.”

“I think what you really feel is pity for the workings of God Manto,” Chidori said unconsciously.

“What ?” the man groaned.

Gonta, who was translating, stared instinctively at Chidori’s face.

“God Manto is touching your heart now. He wishes to guard you and the people of the Kingdom Manto, and make them happy. He feels pity for you, so He gives you a helping hand. I am so weak and I get lonely easily so it makes me feel God Manto is very tender. His feelings influence you, so you can go to war sacrificing your life and respecting Him, can’t you ?” Chidori whispered to the man.

“God Manto gave you compassionate feelings originally, didn’t He ?” Hikari agreed with Chidori’s opinion.

Gonta eagerly conveyed their words to the man.

The man sighed deeply. "The fear of crossing swords with my enemies stuck to my mind like cold ice, but it is melting away. I'm getting over my fatigue which was caused by running dizzily around battlefields. Something heavy which has distressed me and has compelled me to keep on enduring is getting lighter. Why ?"

The prayer pebble began to shine in Hikari's pocket.

Hikari and her friends exchanged glances because the stone never shone without someone's prayer.

"You are praying, aren't you ?" Cue spoke to the man in chains.

"I prayed to God Manto that He might forgive me for feeling pity for Sir Kanto, his clan, and the many enemies I killed in wars, I feel very peaceful now."

For some reason or other, everyone began to pray around the man in chains.

The prayer pebble increased its brightness, so the limestone cave was filled with a pearly – colored light in every nook and cranny.

"I feel as if I had a lamp in my heart because of your encouraging words. Well ! I can see myself wrapped in a soft light," the man in chains gave a cry of joy.

Chapter 97 The Inner World

Having shaken off the hair which covered his face, he looked around. Tears brimming in his eyes glistened, reflecting the light of the stone.

"Oh, my ! Aren't you Mr. X ?" Maabaasan yelled in shrill surprise.

He surely was Mr. X. Why was he here ?

"It's impossible that you should know me. It has been at least several thousand years since I was confined. I have dimly perceived many years passing, by touching a stalactite pillar which drips underground water built day by day in the darkness."

"Still, the two persons are as alike as two peas in a pod. I just want to place you and Mr. X side by side and see them together." Kerabaasan was almost laughing, but she turned very serious. "May I ask a question ? Your name is Maron, if I'm not wrong ?"

"Why do you know my name ?"

"Say, Maabaasan. Remember how when we secretly chatted over tea at your home, we shook with laughter speaking ill of Mr. X without reserve. I mean, when we said he had sleek cheeks which look cold as ice. Well, Mr. Maron, excuse me. I'm not speaking of you, but Mr. X. Maabaasan, you said at that time his ancestor was a nobleman and was named Maron, didn't you ?"

Maron, the assassin, smiled wryly.

"Do you mean that Mr. X is related to me ? If it's true, I'm honored to meet acquaintances of a person of my clan living several thousand years later. Is it possible ?"

"As you say, it's a strange story. But I think there's another strange thing. I'm speaking of you, Mr. Maron. Although you say you've been confined here for several thousands years, I wonder who kept bringing meals for you ?" Kerabaasan said, casting a furtive glance at the innermost part of the cave.

After a short silence Maron slowly shook his head. That meant he had not been eating ? Surely, he would have died of hunger long ago.

"Probably I am physically dead. The figure that exists here is my wish for God, living and taking this figure, that is, the wish for God to guard the people from foreign invaders."

“That applies to us, too. Since we started this journey, we have only had a meal at Nakisona Jiisama’s house. We came into the inner world where we on’t need to eat,” Bunn said quietly.

The others remained silent.

“Dia. It seems to me that the vicinity of the wall of the basement holds the key to this mysterious event. Won’t you recall once again the last part of the Legend yo read, that is, what was written before the page which had been torn off ? ” Cue said, pointing his beak toward the sky. Although the sky could not be seen, as it was blocked by the rocks of the cave, his beak looked as if it had pierced the rocks, and was asking a question of Heaven.

Chapter 98 The Door to the Kingdom of God

Dia stared at Maron, for that part of the Legend was composed of Maron’s words.

“Who was the certain person who told Sir Kanto that I would kill him ? ” Maron was seized with an intense suspicion.

“In the Legend an old man appeared like smoke in Kanto’s bedroom, and when he handed him a fragment of the Prayer Rock, he told it to the nobleman,” Dia said, recalling the Legend with his eyes closed.

“Oh, my ! How could the old man know such a thing ? ” Maabaasan asked.

“Kanto thought of the old man as a essenger of God. Having heard about the possibility of assassination, he nodde calmly and said, ‘Don’t trouble yourself about me because I leave my life totally to the good God who can realize peace.’ However, could He forgive the assassin and save him from his unhappy life ? ’ Kanto asked. The old man just answered, ‘It depends on the assassin’s prayer and on yours,’ and the old man disappeared. Well, I remember ! ” Dia raised his voice. “Just before Kanto was stabbed by a dagger, he prayed to God for the assassin and himself, toward the fragment of the Prayer Rock. In the description of that part there was a phrase which I can’t forget.” Dia recited the next passage as if he were reading aloud.

“I pray to the good God that He may save the assassin and the evil God who handles him. I’m praying that my life and the assassin’s sword may push open the door to the Kingdom of God.”

“The door to the Kingdom of God ! ” Bunn said with a dreamy look.

“I wonder if the wall is equal to the door ? ” Fanta said, as if he had found the answer to a difficult question.

“If you infuse your prayer into the prayer pebble with all your heart and point it at the word ‘Manto’, God will grant the voice of your prayer and provide a way to the Kingdom of Heaven.” Dia recited in a low voice. That’s a passage from the Legend of Manto which slept in the corner of his memory.

“If the wall, on which the word ‘Manto’ is inscribed, is the door to the Kingdom of God, this rocky cave is the road to the Kingdom. But let’s see. King Manto made this cave in order to assassinate Kanto. Oh, no. I’m getting confused somehow.” Cue screamed in a cacophonous voice. He irritatingly scratched his head with hs claws again and again.

Maron carefully looked at a small medal hanging on Dia’s chest. He asked, “How did you get that medal ? ”

“From my father. This has been handed down from generation to generation in my family, and it is the custom that the oldest son inherits the medal.”

It was a round golden medal with a design of a dove spreading its great wings.

“Would you show me the back of the medal ? ” the man asked.

Dia did as he was told.

Letters were distinctively inscribed : XPZ RLO.

“Oh ! ” Maron said and prostrated himself on the ground, quaking all over. “I’m sure you are Dia, the son of Sir Kanto.”

Manto failed to capture Kanto’s only son, Dia, when he destroyed the Kanto clan.

Chapter 99 The Medal

“The medal you have now belongs to the Royal Family of Peace, and the letters on the medal were ancient letters which signify the heir to the throne. And the figure of the dove is modeled on the heraldic shield of the Peace Royal Family,” Maron said, gasping.

The Kingdom of Manto used to be called The Kingdom of Peace. Just before the kingdom was completely destroyed by a foreign nation, king Peace had a premonition that he would lose his life in a great war that would occur soon. The King had no children, so he decided to designate Kanto’s son Dia, who was a relative, to succeed to the throne. He handed Dia this medal which only a successor to the throne could possess. Manto, who belonged to another clan of the Royal family, had designs on the throne.

Maron had strict orders to attack the Kanto clan and rob them of the medal, but he couldn’t discover the whereabouts of Dia who had the medal.

“Well. There were two more who slipped through my fingers.” Maron continued. “Dia’s mother and sister, Dahlia. I think they probably passed away in the confusion of the war...”

“I have a sister with the same name, too,” Dia said.

“Could she possibly be a girl with round eyes and chestnut – colored hair ? ” asked Maron.

“My sister looks like that,” Dia answered.

“Where is she ? ”

“She is still missing, and she is wanted by the committee.”

“Then, was your dead father called Kanto ? ” Hikari asked, with a somewhat pale face.

Dia nodded.

“I feel as if I were hearing the Legend of Manto being read aloud.” Bunn’s wings trembled faintly.

“Now I infer as follows. Suppose God Manto knows everything, then He possibly manipulates us by conveying something such as showing us the basement pit which had been dug in order to go through on the purpose of assassinating Sir Kanto, as an entrance to the part of the Legend of manto that was written on the page which was torn off ? ” Cue said loudly.

Hikari and her friends heard the chains fall off.

The chains came off Maron’s legs. He became a bat and hung on the ceiling of the limestone cave.

“How did I manage to slip out of the chains ? ” Maron shouted.

“You became a bat. Can’t you see what happened to you ? ” Kerabaasan held her hand over her mouth, almost unable to contain herself, and burst out laughing.

“A bat ? That reminds me — I’d been thinking that I’d rather become a bat than be a human being if I were to keep on living here in confinement, and staring at darkness.”

“God Manto made you what you wished to be,” Nandehmo said and knelt in prayer.

Chapter 100 The Back Cover

“Honestly speaking, I wanted to get out of here as a human being. God Manto, please forgive the frailty of my heart. Let me regain a human figure, and let me get out of here.”

“Even God Manto couldn’t do it now, for becoming a bat is what you kept wishing for, for any years,” Cue said restlessly, walking around on the stalactic cave floor.

“Try to pray to God Manto earnestly from now on, without abandoning yourself. If yo don’t ask Him sincerely, I’m sure you’ll become what you don’t really want to be again,” Hikari said with all her heart.

“I’ll try to pray once again. God Manto, I ...” but Maron became unable to speak in human language any more.

The battery of Dia’s flashlight was failing, so it only gave off dim light.

“The flashlight will go out in a few minutes.” Fanta was half weeping.

The bat stared with his red shining eyes and fluttered to an inner part of the limestone cave.

“When a black bird, which has been set free from its chains, leads you along the stream of darkness, there will be a circle of light that will bring you to a bright future,” Dia solemnly recited a passage.

“What does that phrase mean ? ” Kerabaasan asked in round – eyed wonder.

“Was it written in the Legend ? ” Maabaasan asked, gaping at Dia.

“No, it wasn’t. The passage was written by someone on the inside page of the back cover of the Legend.” Dia was lost in thought. He said the phrase he recited seemed to have been written on the back cover of the Legend of manto with a trembling hand. And he told the others that he could barely read the letters since they had been written in an awful scrawl.

“Probably the owner of the book tried to protect it desperately, and he scribbled the passage on the robbed page by exerting his last strength. The person wanted to show the phrase,” Cue said. He seemed to consider what sort of person the former owner of the book had been.

“I can’t walk any more. I’ll wait here.” Maabaasansat down determinedly.

“If you stay here, you’ll die. Let’s turn back even if we may be transformed.” Kerabaasan pulled her friend’s hand.

“Turning back now is to surrender to Manto. We prayed to God, so I’m sure we’re filled with the power of God, though we are so tired of walking. Thinking this will make us feel vigorous,” Gonta said loudly, trying to encourage Maabaasan to walk.

“We have come into the world of the Legend. So, I’ve got a feeling that we’ll be blotted out by a huge power beyond our imagination — I guess that’s the power of the God Manto — if we try to struggle to turn aside from His plan. The only way left open to us is to follow the plan that must have been written on the page which was torn away,” Bunn said, halting in the air with a low buzz.

“Being led by the bird ... just following what was written in the back cover ..., let’s go in the direction where the bird flew to.” Dia made up his mind.

The flashlight went out. Hikari and the others became unable to advance any farther in the darkness. They came together around Nandehmo. They all knew what they had to do without saying a word.

Chapter 101 Moonlight

Everyone prayed toward the stone which Hikari held up high, calming themselves down. The pebble shone a pearly color, brightly lighting up the inside of the limestone cave.

As they went into the inner part where the bat had flown to, they found the clear spring water of a brook, flowing soundlessly.

“This is the source of the brook flowing in front of my house,” La Lahla said and folded his hands in prayer toward the current.

“ ‘If you go along the stream of the darkness ...’ now I began to understand the meaning of the enigmatic words left on the back cover.” Hikari seemed to realize something.

Following the description of *the Legend of Manto*, Hikari and her friends went along the winding stream. The brook flowed farther and farther into the cave, and then it went under a rock ledge behind a large stalactite. No one could follow it farther.

The light of the prayer pebble gradually weakened.

“Look.” Hikari said after she climbed up the rock ledge. A clear circle of light was seen on the smooth face of the rock at Hikari’s feet. That was a silhouette of the heraldic shield of Peace Royal Family, with the design of a dove spreading its wings. The slate seemed to have been carved as an openwork.

“This stalactite column stretches upward and it is jagged like some stairways, so we can manage to climb it. The problem is that slate with the openwork which blocks the entrance above us.” Dia bit his lip.

“Everyone, hide yourself behind a rock in case of danger.” Hikari picked up a stone and threw it at the slate, after she had swung her arm several times just as she did when she played dodgeball. The stone hit and smashed the slate to pieces. A chilly wind suddenly came down on Hikari and her friends. Hikari rubbed the tip of her nose. It was her habit when things worked out.

The bat went outside first. Then, Cue and Bunn flew out. As Dia was used to tree climbing, he ran nimbly up the stalactite column. The others climbed it fearfully.

“Don’t be scared. Your strength to climb up step by step is the power of God. See, you don’t have to be afraid because God supports you.” At the rear Nandehmo encouraged the others who were climbing.

The earth was steeped in dazzlingly bright moonlight. Strong winds were blowing. Hikari and her friends found themselves on the top of a mountain. They saw a European – style castle with a dizzying precipice in the background. The desert beyond the valley, on which Hikari and her friends had come walking, spread like an ocean as far as they could see. There was a gentle hill up to the castle. On the hill an old man and an old woman were flying a kite. The kite was floating, almost remaining stationary above them.

Hikari and the others walked on soft green grass toward the two of them.

“Oh, my ! You can see Nakisona Jiisama and Baasama, can’t you ? They look happy as if they were children, don’t they ? ”

“Oh ! We are in the world of a legend. Those two must be their ancestors. What good terms they are on, in that their ancestors were a married couple, too ! ” Kerabaasan couldn’t help laughing, so the two noticed Hikari and her friends.

Chapter 102 Kite – flying

“Why are you flying a kite at night ? ” Hikari asked.

“we aren’t flying the kite for pleasure.” The old man blinked his eyes. “When the Kingdom

Peace was destroyed by a hostile country, the prince Manto of the present King Manto was attacked and killed by enemy soldiers when he was flying a kite around here. As King Manto can't forget the prince, he misses his son, so he flies a kite like this on the day the prince was killed." The old man wiped his tears.

"Even King Manto is able to be tender when it comes to his child," Fanta said, watching the kite.

"Be sure not to tell anyone else of the King's secret grief held in the depth of his heart because we, who are assigned kite – flying, are the only ones who are supposed to know it," the old woman whispered.

Then, Kerabaasan turned looking somewhat fierce. "I don't sympathize with King Manto. I would slap him if he were here."

"Oh, my ! What rough words ! But I understand well how you feel ! Can you imagine what bitter experiences we've had under the King ? " Maabaasan's suppressed anger also seemed to pour out.

Those were the last voices of Maabaasan and Kerabaasan that Hikari and the others heard. The former became a horse, and the latter a cow.

"Oh, no ! The Legend says one who has entered the world of the Legend of Manto shouldn't insult Manto, I remember. Manto is the King and fortune – teller who is relied on the most by God Manto. We are in the sacred place of God Manto, you know." Dia said.

Having heard Dia's story, the horse neighed sadly, and the cow moaned ruefully.

The old man and his wife folded their hands in prayer and closed their eyes.

"Aren't there any methods to make Maabaasan and Kerabaasan regain their former figures ? Please help them !" Chidori said sobbing.

"They are happy as they are now — a horse and a cow." Then the old man said an unexpected thing.

"God Manto changed their figures for pity's sake, so don't you think it is a sacrilege to complain about it ? " The old woman seemed to be grateful to God Manto.

"I understand your dissatisfaction well. I felt the same as you do when I was young. But isn't it your selfishness ? We can live a peaceful life every day, and are assigned the noble post of flying a kite like this to console the King. I just can't help feeling thankful," the old man said, and smiled.

"If you pray to God for yourself, you'll come to desert people in trouble. The two were more unwilling to be changed than to die," Gonta shouted.

"Won't you try to sympathize with these two old ladies ? It suits the intention of God that you are concerned about others and attend to them warmly, doesn't it ? " Hikari looked the old couple in the face.

"But as God Manto does so ..." The old man started to say more, but he held his tongue, casting his eyes down.

Chapter 103 The Horse and the Cow

"Why don't you ask God why He does so ? " Dia gave a wry smile which he made when he did something spiteful.

"The King is the only person who can speak with God," The old man said somewhat earnestly.

"Be careful. Don't speak ill of Manto," Dia whispered into the others' ears. No one could imagine what would happen.

“No
Matter what kind of god he is, he never does wrong. Those who were changed might have the causes in themselves.” Although Hikari said so to avoid danger, she was startled at what she had herself said.

“It’s too cruel for you to say that to Maabaasan and Kerabaasan, for what you said now makes you admit that God Manto transforms people, and also, looking for the Casket of Manto on this journey loses its meaning,” Chidori said, looking at Hikari sadly.

Hikari froze, holding her hand over her mouth.

Chidori quietly asked the old man and his wife, “Can you worship the God who makes Maabaasan and Kerabaasan feel sad ? ”

The old couple stood at a loss in front of the horse and the cow.

“I’m sure God Manto has mercy, pity, tenderness, and warmth ...” Chidori faltered, unable to find words to console and encourage the couple any more.

Hikari followed her friend, saying, “King Manto is deeply hurt by having lost his son. I’d like to see him and console him.”

Next Nandehmo followed Hikari, “If you didn’t fly a kite, His Royal Highness would live his life bearing gloomy intense feelings, without healing his grief. I think you have experienced that in having a friend you can speak to and smile with makes you feel relieved. Your small acts of kindness and just a little tenderness make the others feel something precious and wonderful, doesn’t it ? Now, if we think so, we can’t sit still here. Won’t you carry us to the castle by means of the kite ? ”

The old man and his wife exchanged glances. After thinking it over for some time the old man spoke, “Our reason for living has been to console Sir Manto by flying a kite here only one day a year.”

Chapter 104 Farewell

“Still, I feel something is missing, never to have seen His Royal Highness,” the old woman said, staring at the castle.

“We’ll see King Manto and convey how you two feel about him,” Fanta said encouragingly.

Since everyone promised them, the old couple became convinced.

La Lahla decided to stay with Maabaasan, the horse, and Kerabaasan, the cow. As the landscape around him was beautiful and he felt like he was able to get along with the couple, he would have a great time playing his mandolin and drawing pictures while looking after the poor horse and cow, he said.

La Lahla quietly played a plaintive farewell song.

“Be sure to come back,” the old woman said softly.

“When we see you next time let’s laugh merrily, shall we ? ” The old man said, shaking hands with each of the party.

The horse and the cow still remained depressed.

At first Dia got on the kite. He fixed his arms and legs on the projections of its skeleton, and he tied himself to the kite with a rope.

The kite jerked into the sky from the cliff, against which strong winds were blowing.

“Halloo ! Take hold of the string ! ” the old man yelled to La Lahla. The couple and La Lahla were likely to be pulled up into the sky because of the momentum of the kite. At length, they managed to pull down the kite on the castle, winding the string around a tree beside them. Bunn

slipped into Hikari's pocket, and he flew up with her. Cue was watching over the castle, flying round and round above it.

When they flew up riding on the kite, a strong wind blew, so they were unable to open their eyes.

"If you pray aloud, shouting, you will not have to submit to the strong wind, you'll be full of fight, and you'll become composed," Cue said to everyone before each of his friends's got on the kite. Borne by a strong wind, the kite flew up, making a buzzing sound. The string was about to break.

Then the kite on which Fanta was riding came over the castle. At the moment he thought, 'Thank God,' a strong wind blew violently and the kite turned upside down. Fanta fell as the string that was tied around him broke off.

"Oh !" Everyone who was waiting for Fanta on the castle couldn't speak a word for some time after that.

Hikari and Chidori hugged each other, and they began to cry. But Fanta, who must have lain dead covered with blood, was not to be found anywhere.

When Hikari and the others were looking for him on the castle, they heard Bunn speak. They found a venthole near some stone stairs that led into the castle. Bunn was on the edge of the hole.

"Fanta seems to have fallen into this hole," Bunn said. He went into the hole to investigate it. The hole was connected with rooms here and there in the castle like branches of a tree, and it led to the hall where King Manto stayed. Since the hole had a gradual slope, just as you would slide down a skiing slope, Fanta made a soft landing on the floor of the hall, of all places onto the cushion stuffed with peacock feathers on the huge throne of King Manto.

Chapter 105 The Castle

"Soldiers are coming," Gonta told the others.

"Lie down, and keep still, everyone," Cue said. He flew to the end of the castle roof. Soldiers came with lances.

"A strange fellow fell from the sky. Check every corner of the castle roof for any other suspicious person !"

No sooner had the captain shouted this than the soldiers hear the same voice from another irection. "His Royal Highness is calling you. Come together, everyone."

"What's that ?" the captain said.

Hikari and her friends went downstairs while the soldiers ran in the direction of the voice. From the castle passages, many rooms stretched in all directions. Bunn worked busily. Flying around at full speed, he led the others to the hall where King Manto was.

They came to a spacious passage. At the end was a heavy door on which the herald of a large bat was inscribed, and soldiers stood guard.

Hikari and her friends became transfixed. Bunn looked for a passage through which they could approach without being found out by the soldiers, but he couldn't find any.

Then, they heard a faint ting – a – ling. After a short time they heard its sound again. "Ting. Ting – a – ling – a – ling."

So Bunn went to see what it was. He came back and said, "A white cat is playing in a hall. And a golden bell tied around its neck is ringing."

"Oh, was it only a cat ? Stay away from it," Gonta said, watching out for the soldiers.

"Through the bell sound, I understand what the cat says." Cue was back, listening to the

sound, perching on some armor on display near his friends before they recognized him.

“Ah – huh. I wonder if there is something interesting. As for this castle, it’s made of cold hard stones. On top of that, it’s dim because there’s no sunlight. So I don’t even feel like taking a walk. What a disgusting castle !” Cue understood the bell sound as a muttering.

Hikari and the others went in the direction of the sound. They saw a white cat with thick fur walking with a mincing gait.

“It is disappointing that there’s nobody to look at my beautiful figures,” the ting – a – ling meant.

Then the cat noticed Hikari and her friends, and she let out a cute meow, “Oh, dear. I welcome you all.”

Hikari and the others also understood what the cat said. The cat seemed to be on the same wave length with them.

“It’s my first time to welcome guests since I came to the castle. Now, won’t you come to my room ?” she said. The white cat was King Manto’s pet.

“This is King Manto’s bedroom. King caresses me as his own child. I always cry, recalling my home village though he strokes me gently. I was living in a certain peaceful village that had a high mountain and a deep valley. I used to play with my friend Dahlia under a wisteria trellis.”

“What ? Dahlia ! Do you know Dahlia ?” Dia said trembling all over.

Chapter 106 The White Cat

“Who are you ?” The cat stared with her golden eyes wide open at Dia.

“I’m Dahlia’s brother. Was my younger sister killed ?” he asked.

The eyes of the white cat were brimming with tears. Then she stop showing off, and her tone of voice became that of a lovely girl. “Dahlia ran away with her mother, crossing over the valley using a monkey bridge. Although a monkey erased her name and her mother’s, Dahlia’s was deciphered because it remained slightly, not completely erased, I heard. The judge of the committee handed out the list as it was to the chairperson of the Parliament. The chairperson read it out to King manto at the shrine on the mountain, and the King prayed to the God Manto. So, perhaps Dahlia was transformed.”

“It was not long after we started this journey when we met a girl and her mother by a river. The girl had been changed into a swan. That reminds me. Dia’s eyes are just like the mother’s, aren’t they ? Look. Don’t you think his eyelashes resemble hers very much when he casts down his eyes ?” Hikari said, gazing steadily at Dia.

“When we parted from her, she sang muttering, ‘I’ll be a flower that blooms on the riverbank, waiting for your return, ’” Chidori looked away from Dia out of pity.

“Oh ! That must be my mother. She always sang a song to console herself when she was sad,” Dia said moaning.

“I was changed into a cat on a charge of having seen the Legend of Manto which Dahlia showed me. And God Manto brought me to the world of the Legend for the purpose of consoling King Manto who gets lonely easily. I wonder how you could manage to come here without help !”

“I read the Legend of Manto, so I knew the secrets needed to enter the world of the Legend. Well, not the Legend. I mean the world of God Manto’s mind,” Dia said blinking his long – lashed eyes.

“Just have a look from here. You can see King Manto.” The cat leaped on a cord with a white

tassel in the corner of the room. A part of a wall opened a little, noiselessly. It was a hidden door. Looking through the opening, Hikari and her friends found the next room was the hall. They saw the back of King Manto on the throne. Fanta stood stiffly in front of King Manto.

“Fanta. Why were you saved ? Were you saved by the power of the God you believe in ? ” the King asked.

“I don’t know,” Fanta said in a trembling voice.

“Some people are lucky, others not. It’s mysterious to think about. There were some who died in their first battle, some who survived even if they had been left alone in the middle of enemies, and some who lost their lives while they were very young. The power of each person’s life was destined at birth by God,” the King said.

An old woman with a long cane spoke in a hoarse voice to him, “Could you stop grieving over your dear son, Your Highness ? You won many battles and built up the strongest country in the world. Set your mind at easy by waging war and winning it.”

Chapter 107 The Fortune – teller

“That is the King’s alter ego who lives in him. Sometimes she appears outside of him like that,taking the figure of a fortune – teller. She has an almighty magical power,” the cat said, her ears drooping fearfully.

“I swore that I would never repeat the tragedies of defeat. I’ve been praying to God in order to strengthen the country.”

“How honorable you are to have devoted everything to God ! ” the fortune – teller said proudly.

“I knew excessively seeking money or material goods corrupts the country and its people. If they become unable to restrain their boundless greed, they will want everything or envy others. Finally they will become mentally ill, and the country will be defeated in war,” the King said.

“You’re right. As a mind is weak and mean, you cannot be too careful of it,” the fortune – teller said hate – fully.

“I won’t complain or lose my temper. And if something makes me feel depressed, I’ ll leave it in the hands of God, and call up my courage to stand up and fight,” the King said.

“Right. King Manto is great. God Manto is the supreme truth in the universe, and His power has no end,” the fortune – teller said.

“But I wonder what brings this agony to me ? Why am I worried ? ” The king gasped.

“The people of the Kingdom Manto brave whatever difficulty and agony comes to them. They are willing to endure agony for others and the country. Distressed people are insolent and seek pleasure. But you don’t have to worry because I transformed all of them by praying to God manto, Your Highness,” the fortune – teller said with narrowed eyes consoling the King.

“Well, I don’t think so. I feel like I’m gradually becoming uneasy, my heart and body colder, and I’m losing power. The warmth of people is disappearing. As I stared at the boundless desert fading into the dusk, alone by the castle window, I became doubtful, wondering what makes me feel like this, though I’d been thinking that I believed in God more than anybody and that God had relied on me the most. And I came to think my prayer lacked something.”

“How honorable to say so, Your highness ! You’re humble to God to the end. Pray more and more.” The fortune – teller’s voice sounded just like a squeak of a rusted gearwheel.

“But my chilly loneliness is endless no matter how I pray to win wars. Besides, the people should be living, praying to God. And why did you transform so many people ? And how many

victories do you mean I have to win to protect the country and its people ? ” the King asked.

“Just pray, Your Highness. If your prayer is not enough, you will have hesitations in your mind. Apologize to God for it, and wish for victories more and more.” The fortune – teller said, and she struck the marbled floor severely with her cane.

Behind the hidden door, Hikari whispered to the others. “If you learn to forgive others’ insincerity, to accept those who have different opinions from yours, and to make way for others, wars won’t occur.”

“Peace should come if you yield to others to make them happy so that those whom you dislike will be like a beautiful tree,” Chidori agreed with her friend.

“How cruel for that fortune – teller to transform the troublesome people in order to win victories ! ” Gonta’s mouth turned down.

Chapter 108 King Manto

“Who is speaking ill of me ? ” The fortune – teller glared at the hidden door, slanting her scarlet – flaring eyes.

“That face is exactly like the face of the chairperson of the parliament, for I’ve seen his face appear in a newspaper once,” Nandehmo let out a loud voice in spite of himself.

The cat pulled the cord which she had been holding, the moment she was startled.

The door opened wide noiselessly, and Hikari and the others were caught immediately.

“You are Dia, Hikari, Chidori, Gonta ...” Looking at their faces one by one, King Manto guessed their names exactly.

“You look exactly like the judge of the village. Why do you know our names ? ” Dia said glaring at the King.

One of the soldiers was going to stab Dia with his lance.

The King restrained the soldier by raising his hand.

The soldier said, “The King is before you. Mind your language.” He struck Dia down on the floor. What a surprise ! The soldier was the policeman who caught Tamago and took him to the committee.

“I know what you have done entirely,” the King said after he drew a deep sigh. He looked exhausted, but his eyes were flaring scarlet just like those of the judge.

Nandehmo stepped forward and began to speak, “Your Highness, at first sight of this castle, I knew that you had invited us, I feel honored to have been asked to guide the party from Japan, though I am merely a citizen and I don’t believe in the God of Manto.” Nandehmosaid that he had been asked to help a party on a journey by a means of letter without the name of the sender on it. He realized just now at last that King Manto was the sender of the letter, judging from the fact the castle was watermarked on the letter paper and that a heraldic emblem of a bat, which belonged to the Royal Manto Family was stamped on the letter. So, he guessed the party meant Hikari and her friends.

“Oh, Nandehmo. Do you mean you still show respect to me that way ? You are the last person who can’t say, ‘I won’t forgive the others.’ Your thoughts deserves a grave offense against the spirit of Manto. I devised a scheme with the intention to let you have the bitterest experience. I transformed your wife and daughter into sheep and exiled them beyond the valley. Still, you’ll say you forgive me ? ” King Manto staggered, covering his face with his hands.

Pointing the end of his long cane at Nandehmo’s face, the fortune – teller said, “Having listened to King Manto’s wish, I ordered a wolf to take the life of your wife at first. Still, you

wouldn't blame me at all. So, I even ordered the wolf to tear your lovely daughter to death at last."

Hikari was startled and said to the fortune – teller, "You mean the lamb that we buried on the hill ? "

The fortune – teller nodded to Hikari.

Chapter 109 The Heart to Love the Others

"You say you still can't curse me ? " the fortune – teller spoke to Nandehmo regretfully, trembling all over.

"I'll forgive you no matter what you do. I think it is when you learn to forgive others that you can thank God and enjoy your life in divine protection. When you learn to forgive others, you can intently pray to God for something. I guess I can give up my selfish ego and put myself in the other person's shoes. And I feel like God will give me the power to sacrifice myself and to endure hardships," Nandehmo said quietly.

"If you speak more, I will transform you. Look. Deep down. You wish to become a sheep in spite of what you say. You must have been bearing a hatred for me inwardly, missing your family," the fortune – teller lowered her voice much more, and she pined with her cane at the marbled floor where Nandehmo stood.

A ram was reflected there instead of his figure.

Nandehmo smiled sadly, looking at Hikari and her friends with his moist eyes just like those of sheep.

King Manto was reflected on the marbled floor as the one fierce side of the face which was drawn on the cover of the Legend of Manto.

"I've been praying to God for victories, and I've been instilling that spirit in the people. I've taught them that only winning wars brings about honor and happiness. However, as I won more and more wars, I came to feel an emptiness keenly enough to wish to go to the end of the desert by myself and die. I made the people, whom I thought I must have made happy through successive wars, shiver. So they experienced grief losing their blood relatives and friends. Finally, many people became afraid of not only me but the God I worship, calling Him God Manto." King Manto's face which looked just like the judge's was drawn with tension. "Dia, the throne I gained by killing your father and by destroying your clan has been as miserable as I have told you. I must have been judged by a tremendous invisible power. Now I hate myself because of what I've done. How empty it is to win victory by making people sad and distressed ! I feel like my neighborhood is going to be frozen by the grief of the defeated people."

"If you concede this to people of other countries, you'll feel warm. Kindness and tenderness make you feel relieved Everything will show you its natural beautiful face just as a hard bud opens into a flower," Chidori said in spite of herself, feeling sorry for King Manto.

"If you learn to love others voluntarily, you'll be loved, too. I think you don't have to make war any more," Hikari added.

"How disgusting ! Your Royal Highness, did you go mad listening to such people ? How deplorable ! Where is your belief in God Manto and your manliness which only aims at victories ? " the fortune – teller pressed the King for an answer.

Chapter 110 The King's Tears

“Oh, I, the one who has a reputation for braveness, has never shown my weakness to you like this. I have inwardly betrayed you, my alter ego, who has been living in my mind and has been serving God Manto at the risk of your life. In spite of your powerful presence, and although I also believe strongly in God Manto, there is a corner in my heart which longs for tenderness and peace,” King Manto said, his face twisted in agony.

“My other self ! ” The fortune – teller shouted, shivering all over from grief, “What you have said is against the spirit of Manto which battles for the purpose of leading us to victory at any cost. You’ve been cultivating Manto’s spirit in the people, haven’t you ? What has made you so irresolute ? ”

“My firm belief in God Manto remains the same even now. But I came to understand that I cannot heal my distress by the spirit of Manto which is my own, after I lost my son, the prince. What heals my broken heart ? I set up a journey of children living in another world to the world of Manto that I live in.” King Manto pressed his long sword inlaid with jewelry on his face, and his shoulders trembled. His voice was not heard, but he was certainly weeping.

“Oh, King Manto is shedding tears.” The fortune – teller who was the alter ego of King Manto, and the soldiers, too, were so amazed that it made them excited, and they surrounded him at a distance as if they were watching for something horrible.

“Well, how did you look at our trip, Your Royal Highness ? ” Hikari said touching the end of the sword softly.

“I could feel the world which I’ve been dreaming of for many years, where there are tender, loving others. I will ask questions of the good God whom you believe in from now on, though I will keep believing in God Manto,” King Manto said with a very peaceful expression. He bore the same calm expression on the other side of the face drawn on the cover of the Legend of Manto.

“Mmm... I cannot forgive His Royal Highness like this, in other words, myself. I have to destroy those who have aroused God Manto’s wrath. By praying to Him, I’ve transformed people who were against the teachings of God Manto. Now, what figure should I transform you into so that you can atone for your grave sin ? ” the fortune – teller screamed.

“Wait a minutes.” Hikari glared at her. “It is important for you to be beaten and to feel chagrin. If you haven’t had such an experience, you won’t understand how sad the others feel or how distressed they are. Since you take no account of your sadness and distress, you are apt to be spiteful. You cannot be happy without making the others pleased and happy. What on earth have you sacrificed for other people ? It is your weakness that you don’t know how to lose.

Chapter 111 God Manto

“How impudent ! My pride will never admit to the logic of a child like you. I’m praying to God so that He may transform you children together with King Manto, so get ready for it.” The fortune – teller began to utter some incantation raising her long cane aloft.

King Manto drew his sword and slashed the fortune – teller with a single stroke of the sword. His alter ego cried out at the top of her voice, and vanished in an instant.

“Although she believed that winning victories produces happiness, she went back into my mind when she lost the power which God had given her just because I was suspicious of it. Now,

let me give you a token of my gratitude for awakening me to what I really am. You may ask me for whatever you like,” the King said.

“Then, could you let people who were transformed by the fortune – teller, your alter ego in your mind, regain their former figures ? ” Hikari said, kneeling before the King.

“I will try to pray to God for it, making every possible effort. I don’t want to let the others know that I’ve been longing for tenderness. Dia, wouldn’t you agree to burn the last copy of the Legend of Manto which I took away from you ? ” the King said.

Dia nodded.

The King took out the book and threw it into a fireplace. The book flared up and burned to ashes.

“I’ve won,” Dia said with sparkling eyes after he sat on the throne. A loud laughter rose shaking the whole castle.

“Ha – ha ... You can’t see my figure no matter where you look.”

“Who are you ? ” Dia shouted.

“I am God Manto whom King Manto, no, the fortune – teller living in his mind believed in. All incidents which you have experienced so far since you started the journey, are the manifestation of my mental workings. Listen, King Manto, villagers, and children. All that you have thought and done corresponds to the true mental state of King Manto. My mental workings are just like yours, aren’t they ? ”

Everyone remained silent, exchanging glances because it was true.

“It’s not surprising, for I’m living in your minds.” God Manto said.

“What on earth was your motive in making us go on such a journey, though you appear as an evil god in the Legend of God ? Though I may not look so, I am an ambassador who was sent from God in order to guard the children,” Cue said, perching on Hikari’s shoulder.

God Manto laughed in a low voice after a short silence, and he said, “To let you know the world of God Manto. But, watching your journey, I sensed that my glory was declining. Now I have lost the fortune – teller who believed in me the most and King Manto. And I have come to recognize myself that tenderness and warmth exist in me, that is, the God of victory. I may not be the supreme God but merely one living in one part of the world of the good God who raises all and makes them happy.”

“Then, you mean the world of God Manto belongs to that of the good God ? ” Cue ruffled his feathers, for, if so, God Manto lurks even in the world of God.

Chapter 112 The Casket of Manto

“I invited you to my world in order to let you know me. But as a conclusion, letting you understand it resulted in helping you to discover what the good God is.” God Manto groaned painfully. “I have finally opened the lid of the Casket of Manto which only I can open.”

“I can find no such a casket,” Gonta said, looking around.

“It’s invisible. The words I said now are those God Manto shouldn’t utter himself, so I’ve kept them in the Casket in the depth of my heart. I tried to make myself confident that I am the most powerful God in the universe by putting the happiness of those I had transformed, responding to King Manto’s prayer, into the casket. But all my designs came to an end. I will let people who were transformed regain their former figures. You may also go home to where you were before you started your journey.”

The unexpected remarks threw the whole castle into an uproar.

Maron, who had been transformed into a bat, regained the figure of a human being, and stood beside Hikari and her friends before they were aware of it. He said he had seen what had occurred as he hung on the ceiling of the hall.

The one horrible side of King Manto, which had been reflected on the marble floor, became gentle, and finally it began to disappear. The figure of the sheep Nandehmo disappeared, too. Nothing was reflected in its place.

The castle began to quake. Hikari and her friends prayed in a circle. The Prayer Stone began to shine brightly in Hikari's hand. The castle was disappearing.

"Even after you part, this journey will be relived in each of you so that you will know the intentions God had in each incident." The voice of the God Manto echoed around them, and the area around Hikari and the others turned into the universe studded with a multitude of stars. They formed a line, hand in hand, and they flew like a shooting star toward the end of the space.

"What's the matter with you, Hikari ?"

Hiari heard Chidori's voice close to her ear. She found herself leaning against a tree in the lot of the housing complex. Chidori was staring at her in the face.

"We came back at last." Hikari timidly stroked the letters 'Manto' carved on the tree.

"You've been sleeing like a log. I sat here by your side, staring at your face while you slept. I'm sorry to have made you uneasy about me. When the leaves of the tree trembled in the breeze, and sunbeams streamed through the leaves, you screamed out as if you had had a nightmare. So I woke you up."

Hikari stared at the blue sky above the treetops, as her hair was stroked by Chidori. Tears streamed down her cheeks, her eyes were dazzled by the bright light.

"Oh, my dear. What is making you sad, Hikari ?" Chidori asked wiping off the tears with her little finger.

"Nothing. I just feel happy being with you like this, for I feel very peaceful. Look. The trees rustle, and the sky is clear, and filled with bright light. We live in such a beautiful world."

Stroking Hikari's hair, Chidori listened to her friend with her big moist eyes.

The End