

LI Kotomi

Excerpt from the novel *Solo Dance*

Chapter 1

Death.

Dying.

She looked through the office window down at the glimmering neon cityscape below as she repeated these words, letting them roll over her tongue.

The words felt good on her lips, their sound gentler than the whispering breeze, softer than any carpet in her dreams.

She didn't have a strong inclination towards death, but she had no attachment to living either. While she still had breath in her lungs, she would do her best in life, yet should it ever reach that point where it was no longer bearable, she would choose death without hesitation.

It wasn't clear to her whether this particular way of thinking was strange or not. Maybe everyone had the exact same thoughts, but just didn't voice them.

Take the masses of ant-sized people in the city below. How many of them were heading now to their deaths? One heading to fling themselves from a nearby skyscraper, another on their way to leap in front of a passing train. Or one about to get caught in a horrific traffic accident on the way to a fancy restaurant to celebrate their wedding anniversary. In her opinion, life itself amounted to nothing more than pure chance.

"Why can't the human race just hurry up and wipe itself out?"

She remembered those words she had let slip only yesterday. When speaking Japanese, she wasn't always able to control her mouth, and was prone to accidentally voicing her true thoughts.

It was during lunch in the company cafeteria, where Okabe was happily conversing and debating with her and her fellow colleagues. Okabe, two years her senior and a Tokyo University graduate, was tall and slender, with glasses that made his eyes pop like a lemur's; he was intelligent and was well regarded in their department for his mathematical brain. The conversation had found its way to the subject of money. Apparently, Japan had accrued a national debt that was twice the country's GDP, and with the yen weakening towards an unprecedented low, he was suggesting that it was worth judging investments in dollar terms. Her coworkers were listening intently, but she let Okabe's words wash over her. She was twenty-seven and this real-world conversation shouldn't feel so remote, but she couldn't force herself to get interested. There was an insurmountable wall that prevented her from fully engaging with it. All this talk of a decade from now, two decades from now, seemed like the distant future—hundreds if not thousands of years away. A world in which her existence wouldn't make any difference. That was the true representation of her feelings.

Okabe went on at an unfalteringly quick pace. “A nation would sacrifice its own inhabitants in order to prevent the possibility of ruination. Just think of the war,” he said, “to pay its debts, the government drained the people of all their financial worth. Although Japan is poor, there are still many who are rich.” It was that moment the words slipped out from her lips.

“Why can’t the human race just hurry up and wipe itself out?”

She realized her mistake too late. But Okabe had simply glanced at her before saying, “Good question.” Not a moment later, the clock announced the end of their lunch break, and she breathed a sigh of relief.

It was a childish and thoughtless remark, but at the same time it was also what she felt.

Death leads all of life to an equal end, heals all wounds without bias. It would be a lie to say a small part of her didn’t agree with that.

Maybe her way of thinking was in the minority. After all, it was true that she couldn’t speak easily of the future the way her colleagues did.

Two years ago, during her induction period, there was a seminar on “life planning.” It was a discussion on what kind of life you wanted to lead and what steps you needed to take to get there. The talk eventually moved on to life-threatening risks—accidents, disease—and, with intimidating overtones, suggested risk-management protocols; or, in other words, insurance.

Insurance. If “death” was the word with the most appealing ring to it, then surely “insurance” was the opposite—a concept that was nothing more than the commodification of humanity’s innate fear of future uncertainty. And not only this, but its profits rested on the exclusion of those who would benefit from it the most. This inequality never failed to make her stomach turn.

But it seemed like she was the only one who thought this way. Yuka, sitting next to her, cheerfully asked, “Hey, so which plan are you going for?” With aspirations to get married, have two children, and to have purchased her own property before the age of thirty, Yuka earnestly read over the documents they were given about assets under management. Yuka’s smile was like a cheerful sunflower, petals in full bloom. Unlike Yuka, to her, the future seemed so distant and fragile, like a bubble, ready to pop at any second. Although a bubble may refract the light in a glorious rainbow, defying gravity as it drifts towards the sky, as soon as it bursts, it vanishes without a trace.

“I’m not going to sign up for any of it,” she said simply.

“Really? Are you sure?” Yuka said. The disbelief in Yuka’s voice was unmistakable, but she didn’t push the matter any further.

In truth, she wouldn’t have been able to join a company-sponsored insurance plan even if she wanted to. To make up for its cheap price, it had an incredibly high barrier to entry. With her

history of mental health–related hospitalization and antidepressant prescriptions, she wasn't eligible. In order to avoid any unwanted questions, she didn't dare mention that, though.

Yuka turned instead to her left. "How about you, Erika? Which plan are you going to choose?"

Erika smiled awkwardly and replied, "None, I think. I'm not even sure I can after what happened with my leg. I'll have to talk to my doctor first . . ."

"Oh, right. Of course, sorry," Yuka said, awkwardly.

Erika had had an accident during her first year of university which had permanently injured her leg. She knew that she shouldn't give any unwanted sympathy to Erika, but she couldn't help feeling a pang not only of pain but also of pity as she watched her coworker dragging her leg while she walked. After all, she felt a sort of kinship with her. And despite the guilt she felt for feeling this way, she and Erika had an easy friendship.

Erika was an awkward sort and not good at speaking in front of a crowd. The day they were placed in the same department, all new employees had to say a little something about themselves. Erika had stuttered and stammered until she managed to mutter a small "It's a pleasure to work with you" before giving up.

Her own introduction, which happened right afterwards, couldn't have been more different.

"Hello everyone, my name is Chō Norie. I'm from Taiwan, and sorry to ruin your stereotypes but I hate bubble tea and pineapple cake," she'd said, finishing off her bold self-introduction by trying to get a few laughs. Of course, she had refrained from talking about her being a lesbian, about the incident, about her mental illness, about how she had come to Japan in order to escape from Taiwan, about how Norie was a name she'd made up to sound more Japanese.

It was something she had overlooked during their first meeting, but she soon came to notice Erika's mental strength. One occasion that stayed in her mind was when an old man had joined Erika in the company lift, pointed at her leg and said "Must be tough," at which Erika merely smiled and shook her head. "Not at all, there are many far worse off than me," she'd said.

She was amazed at Erika's choice of words, even they were only said to prevent any further questioning. Erika had sounded like she fully accepted the injury and the pain that came with it—but what would happen when Erika encountered something that was simply too painful to bear? Surely people can't just accept every single painful thing that comes their way? Surely it's not so wrong to hide away from a pain you can't accept?

These questions came to her lips as she watched the other her in the glass window, hovering out over the cityscape. Her other self simply opened and closed her mouth, floating silently in the

nothingness. She reached out her hand towards the glass and her other self moved closer too, until their palms were touching. The glass spread its coolness through her body. The clouds that floated over the mass of office buildings seemed nothing more than masses of turbid ash. She sighed. The warmth clouded the glass, obscuring her other face.

Chapter 2

No matter how far she traced the threads of memory, she couldn't place the exact moment when that vast darkness had seeped over her, nor identify its source.

She was from a rural area of Changhua, Taiwan, but her family weren't particularly poor, and she hadn't suffered any violence or anything at home. She was raised in the most normal of families—her father sold bikes, her mother was a teacher at the nearby preschool. With two working parents, she had a somewhat affluent youth, always being given books on fairy tales and famous historical figures. A bookworm from a young age, she spent her breaks and time after school working through these books, finger tracing between the Chinese characters and their transcribed sounds—these memories lived with her even now. Her tendency to avoid conversation led her classmates and teachers to look at her with suspicion.

"I'm a little worried about Yingmei. She always has this frown on her face," her homeroom teacher said once, unaware that she was listening from outside the door. Yingmei—she who greets the plum blossoms—was her given name, chosen because of her January birthday.

From the day that she became aware of the world around her, she had the faint realization she was different to her peers. Every time she read another fairy tale where the princess and prince find each other she felt strongly that something wasn't quite right with the story. Rather than imagining herself as one of these passive princesses, she imagined herself as Dorothy, on an exciting adventure with the beautiful Good Witch of the North. The way she felt was clearly different from the other kids around her.

It was when she moved up to the fourth grade and the classes were shuffled around that she met Shi Danchen and finally understood the meaning behind this constant, faint unease. Danchen, so pale, always had a vague expression, her emotions guarded, her movements so helpless that it seemed she might vanish into thin air at any moment. The black pupils of her eyes were cast in an almost indigo shimmer, bringing to mind the image of a quiet lake illuminated by the moon. Even when Danchen would appear in her dreams many decades later, although her features grew more unclear with every passing year, those eyes would always remain fresh in her memory.

She was drawn to Danchen the moment she saw those eyes. Though she was too young to understand the meaning of love in even its most basic sense, she knew that squirming, roiling wave of emotion in her chest was the same one felt between those fairy-tale princes and princesses.

She spent her days watching Danchen but never managed to exchange a word with her.

It was on an autumn day a year later, during the ceremony to celebrate moving up into fifth grade, that their teacher announced Danchen's death. Danchen had been riding on the back of her

mother's motorcycle on the way to a piano lesson during the summer holidays when she and her mother collided with a dump truck carrying stone. The teacher ordered a three-minute silence for the class, and as her fellow students quieted down, her own mind was racing. Just where would Danchen go now that she was dead? And what about her body? She tried to imagine Danchen's pale, near-blue face in eternal rest.

A few days later, their teacher took the whole class to offer up incense at the hospital. A black-and-white photograph of Danchen hung at the end of the corridor leading to the mortuary, and the students lined themselves up in two rows in silence as the teacher offered up the incense on their behalf. She stared up at Danchen's photograph and Danchen stared back with a soft and melancholic smile on her lips. Danchen was beautiful. She let out a sigh.

"I wish we could see Danchen again," her classmate said after school.

"Right? I mean, I'd love to see her again, even if it's just her dead body."

It was through the glares of her classmates, stood together in a circle, that she realized her blunder. Looking back on that moment, she saw how insensitive her remark was, but at the time she was simply stating what was on her mind. She wasn't yet old enough to know she shouldn't talk about death, and any idea of what a horrific state a body might be in after being crushed by a dump truck was beyond her wildest imagination. It didn't matter whether she was alive or dead—to her, Danchen was simply beautiful.

Her memories of Danchen froze that day, never to be revised. Time would never move again for Danchen. But for her, time marched forward regardless.

She saw Danchen in a dream. She knew it was a dream the instant it began, even from inside it. Danchen still had the same peaceful yet melancholic smile on her lips, and those eyes, basked in sorrow, were staring straight into her soul. *Ah, what sadness*, she thought. But she didn't know where this sadness came from. Was this Danchen's sadness, or was it her own? It was then that she noticed Danchen was fading further away. No, that wasn't it. Danchen wasn't moving away—she was. She and Danchen were standing in a river, yet as she was herself pushed further away by the current, Danchen stayed there quietly, watching her struggle in the water.

She awoke to a violent jolt and sounds of chaos from all around. The very heavens and earth were shaking. Danchen was gone. Outside, the night was still dark, the only source of light came from the faint glow of her room's security light. The paintings on her wall were on the floor. Her wooden bookcase had toppled over, spilling its contents, history books and world literature. She heard glass smashing. A distant shriek. The bustling of her neighbours. The wail of an ambulance. *How much better would it be if the world ended, right here and now*, she thought, her mind still

foggy. Soon the security light blinked out. She closed her eyes. A faint moisture tickled her eyelids. Danchen's face floated again in the darkness.

When she opened her eyes, she was being carried by her father. Her two-year-old brother was in her mother's arms. They were outside the house. Dawn had not yet broken. In the faint ochre glow of the streetlamps, she could make out the silhouettes of her neighbours. The clamour showed no sign of quietening. Children were crying—a boy, a girl. The sound of the radio. She tilted her head back and stared up at the night sky. The moon gave off a gentle glow, almost full, except for a sliver of darkness.

It was then that she finally understood: *I'll never see Danchen again.*

Chapter 3

“So, was that when you realized, Xiaohui? That you only liked women?”

This was Sho’s first reaction when she laid bare the events of the night of that great earthquake and her memories of Danchen.

The two of them were in Lilith, a bar in Shinjuku’s Ni-chōme area. Xiaohui—from her Chinese name, Jihui—was her username for Chinese LGBT websites, and Rie—from the Japanese version of her name, Norie—was for Japanese ones.

“Not ‘only’ women, just that I liked women,” she said, correcting Sho.

Sho was also from Taiwan, this nickname being a play on her real name—her name was Li Shurou, and the Chinese character for *shu* was pronounced *sho* in Japanese. Her name could have been made into a typical Chinese nickname by adding *xiao* to it, but unfortunately Xiaoshu sounded the same as “old man,” so Sho tended to avoid it. She and Sho were the same age, but unlike her, Sho hadn’t come to Japan immediately after university and had worked in Taiwan for a few years instead. This was still only her second year in Japan and she was attending language school while also trying to find a job. In her early days here, Sho had posted a thread on a Taiwanese lesbian forum titled “Looking for like-minded friends in Tokyo!” which is how the two of them met.

“Same difference, right?”

“No way. When you say ‘only’ it makes it sound like a negative thing.”

“You really do sweat the small stuff,” Sho said with a smirk before taking a sip of her golden beer. “That pickiness is very Japanese of you.”

“Excuse me, I’m not at all picky, thank you. I’m just being precise in my wording,” she laughed back.

Sho’s laid-back, relaxed, and almost sloppy attitude was completely at odds with her own tendency to overthink the smallest things. Sho’s careless behaviour was often a source of frustration and despair for her, but she always felt better when they were together.

Ni-chōme was lively on a Friday night, and with the cooler days ahead as September came to a close, Tokyo was in the perfect temperate zone between its muggy summers and skin-bitingly cold winters. It was eleven o’clock and the low thump-thump of club music reverberated from the bars and venues nearby, numerous gay couples walked the streets side by side, and long queues of eager customers were waiting to enter the popular spots.

In Lilith, too, upbeat music was playing out over the speakers, and twenty to thirty other customers were crammed into the small room. They were a number of ages—from

twentysomethings to those in their forties—and although the majority were Japanese, there were also other Chinese speakers as well as a few white women chatting together in English. Lilith was essentially a women-only bar, but there were a large number of customers who looked androgynous. In the corner, a young woman, probably a university student, with long, straight black hair was getting ready to sing karaoke. The up-tempo Western music that had been playing faded out as the first melodies of Takako Matsu's Japanese cover of "Let It Go" began to play.

"You complain about Japanese people, so why did you come to Japan in the first place?" she asked Sho.

Japanese people had asked her this tedious question a million times before, but now she was redirecting it at Sho. She had been wondering why Sho continued to stay in Japan for a while now. Although other countries were beginning to acknowledge the existence of an LGBT community in recent years, Japan still lived up to its negative reputation of being a "queer desert." Not only that, on a personal level Sho was still finding it hard to integrate into Japanese society despite having lived in Tokyo for a year and a half already. Whenever they met, she always had some gripe—that Japanese people were too stubborn, too fussy, always focusing on petty little details, too conformist and group-minded.

"I didn't really think about it too much. A friend asked me to come, so I did."

"What? As if. Give me a proper answer."

Sho never talked about her personal life with any seriousness and had a tendency to avoid answering questions. She let out a frustrated sigh and furrowed her brow in thought before finally answering.

"You wouldn't know unless you've had a job there, but I couldn't see a future for myself in Taiwan. I couldn't see myself having any dreams, let alone making them come true. All I was doing was joining the sea of motorbikes as I headed to work, working myself to the bone, earning enough not to die of starvation, and just about making it through life."

Sho took another swig of beer. Waiting for Sho to continue, she raised her glass of Kahlúa and milk to her lips. In the corner, the student had reached the chorus of "Let It Go." Sho went on, "Even now, whenever I think of the sky in Taipei, all I can see in my head is a suffocating mass of grey clouds. One day, on the way to work, I was waiting at the traffic lights when I looked up and thought: Do I really have to spend the next two or three decades looking up at this same sky?"

Sho's eyes glittered with both the fear of a lifeless, unchanging future and the desire to effect some change.

"As I waited for the light to turn green, I looked over at the street corner and saw a Yoshinoya restaurant. And I thought, I know, I'll go to Japan. I told the girl I was dating at the time

and, naturally, she flipped out. She cried buckets, holding on to me as she begged me not to leave her. She almost convinced me—I mean, I had no money, I couldn't even speak Japanese. But my mind was set. It was as if the desire to leave that island for somewhere new had planted its roots in my heart and wouldn't let go. I broke up with her, quit my job, borrowed some money, left, and here we are today."

Sho gave a bitter smile as she drained her glass before immediately ordering another.

Finished with her Kahlúa and milk, she ordered a cassis and orange juice. Depending on how you looked at it, Sho's resolute decision could seem spur-of-the-moment and irresponsible, but it also said something about her individuality, her own inherent freedoms, her refusal to bow down to the logic of others. In all honesty, she was jealous of that side of Sho. Although she herself had made a number of decisions in her life up till now, they weren't the culmination of an inherent desire to be free, merely the most logical solution at a given juncture. In many ways, it felt as if she were some kind of puppet, being pulled towards whatever came next by some unknown force.

The last notes of "Let It Go" faded out, and the bar erupted into applause. Sho grabbed the karaoke remote and reserved a song for herself, "The Thorn Bird," by the Taiwanese group F.I.R. It was typical of Sho to pointedly choose a Chinese song despite the majority of the bar being Japanese, and she admired this confident side to her.

As the song began, the atmosphere of the bar immediately soured, but Sho began to sing, a huge smile on her lips, with no regard for anyone else's opinion. She sat there, listening to her friend belt out the words.

*Just like the thorn bird's destiny
Tragedy and bravery entwined
Let's choose to bloom a glittering end
In exchange for our lives*

Chapter 4

The great earthquake of September 21, 1999, that shook Taiwan to its core also took away part of her soul.

Whenever she closed her eyes, Danchen's face would silently appear before her. Whenever she sank into the world of dreams, Danchen's faint smile would be floating in the dark. Even when she was awake and outside, the white flowers that bloomed at the end of the road had the same sweet scent as Danchen—the smell of death; the last vestiges of the deceased. The truth of Danchen's death thrust before her, she clung as best she could to her memories. She felt that as long as she was able to do so, then the sky would be able to remain blue, the world would be able to remain full of colour.

Yet, as the monsoon season set in, her memories started to fade. Danchen's face appeared now only as a fuzzy silhouette. Apart from those two mournful eyes, Danchen's face became nothing more than a blur of dust, threatening to blow away with a sudden gust of wind. Soon that dust too lost its colour, turning into nothing more than lifeless ash. Not long after, the world around her followed, painted over in a dull monochrome.

She couldn't remember when the crying started, when it became just another part of her everyday routine, as regular as dinner. Tears would well out of her eyes without warning. She couldn't focus on her homework or her studies, and her grades plummeted—taking her from top of the class straight down to the bottom. After her first period came, Danchen started to appear in her dreams as a bloodied corpse and she would awake to find herself screaming. When her parents went out, they would return to find her with a red marker pen in hand, the walls covered in scribbles, or with a Boy Scouts' rope coiled around her neck. Horrified by her strange behaviour, they sought help from any source they could find. They were scared that maybe their daughter's soul had slipped from her body due to the shock of the earthquake and so they first took her to a temple. They performed purification rites to remedy her condition, forcing her to drink a mixture of burned prayer papers and water. But seeing no change, her parents next decided to seek the aid of Western science, and she began counselling at a youth mental health centre.

These fortnightly counselling sessions soon became intolerable, as the counselling room would remind her of the stark mortuary. *They could never possibly understand my pain*, she thought, and so she spent each session in silence. *I loved Danchen, but now Danchen is gone*. She didn't know what she could possibly do to make herself say these words out loud. Her counsellor would try to pry into her heart, searching for the cause of her abnormality, and yet the questions that came out of his mouth were laughably off the mark. Her parents tried to offer some direction, but comments

like “she started acting like this after the earthquake” only served to mislead and cause the counsellor to think that her behaviour was due to the traumatic experience of the quake.

Not one person even considered it might be about Danchen. To begin with, the number of people who truly worried about her were so few. Before all this, she had been a quiet child who spent her breaks and time between lessons sitting alone reading at her desk. She never went out to play with her classmates, and she always walked home alone. She often thought that the only reason she never got bullied was because her presence was too negligible to warrant it.

Along came the turn of the century, and the next two years passed by in a flash, as if someone had pressed the fast-forward button on her life. She had few memories of that time, and found herself finishing elementary school at the bottom of her class. She didn't bother to attend the school's graduation ceremony, but still they posted her out a commemorative album, as if to force her to accept the fact that her elementary school life was over. She decided to open it one July afternoon, the hot air buzzing with a cacophony of cicada cries, and flicked through its matte pages, only six of its hundred-plus pages dedicated to her class. Apart from the obligatory school photos, she was only in one other photo. She stared at the group of her classmates alongside her, struggling to put names to those faces she had known so well. It was hard to believe that they had been together for three whole years.

A photo of Danchen and three other students caused the breath to stop in her throat. They were in their classroom, Danchen sitting at the organ and the other students standing around it. And all four pairs of eyes were staring at her. This wasn't just because they were looking at the camera; she remembered now—she was the one who had taken this photo.

It was during a music lesson in fourth grade. Their teacher had found out that Danchen could play the piano and so asked her to play a piece for the class. They only had an organ in the music room, but still Danchen's skillful playing captured her heart, if not the hearts of the entire class. During break time afterwards, one of her classmates happened to have a camera and so asked Danchen if it was all right to take a photo to remember the day by. Two others wanted to be in it as well, so they agreed the four of them should be in the photograph. The group asked her to take it, with no reason other than she had been sitting closest to the organ.

If her memory served her correctly, Danchen played a movement from Mozart's Requiem that day. She had read about Mozart long ago and the stories surrounding the Requiem. Apparently, it was an unfinished work which had been commissioned by a mysterious man not long before Mozart passed away. The legend went that this man was the Grim Reaper. Aware of Mozart's imminent death, he had come to request Mozart to write a requiem for himself.

Why did Danchen choose to play this piece that day? Perhaps Danchen had chosen it because she could sense something bad would befall her soon.

As she stared at the photograph, she felt streaks of warmth running down her cheeks. *Crying again*, she thought, wiping away the tears, *stupid illness*—and as this thought ran across her mind, she was struck by a strange feeling. An unfamiliar force was bubbling from the depths of her heart, suddenly swallowing her emotions whole. She wept. Not her usual sucking sobs, but great wailing cries. She buried her face in her bed sheets, unfazed that they gradually grew soaked by those unrelenting tears.

If the Requiem was Mozart's parting gift to himself, something that he could bring with him to the other side, then what about Danchen? Had she managed to take something with her? She doubted it. After all, Danchen's death had been too swift to allow her to prepare anything to bring with her to that other realm. These thoughts came over her as she wept. If that was the case, then she wanted to create something for Danchen and ease her soul. She was no musician, so she couldn't write any music: all she had were words.

She wasn't sure how long she had been crying—one hour, two? Having exhausted her tears, she stood up and sat at her desk, pulled out a paper and pen, and began to write.

It was a poem containing her thoughts to Danchen and her feelings upon her passing.

於是有一天我會想起，想起那：

在開始前便已結束的故事

未曾碰觸便已失溫的側臉

不及掬起便已流乾的血液

大河奔向海洋，群鳥回歸山林

流光殞墜，餘下一縷鎮魂的琴音

One day I will remember

Your story that ended before it began

Your face that lost all warmth before I could touch it

Your hardened blood that I failed to scoop into my hands

Just as the river runs towards the sea, the birds flock to the forest

Light flows onward; the way you left behind a pacifying melody for your soul

Solo Dance – Li Kotomi

Without her noticing, the sun was beginning to set and the cicadas' cries had ceased, swathing her room in silence. The sun was casting a blood-red glow through the window as her shadow grew longer. The shadow was pitch black. Like Danchen's eyes. She realized in that moment that in order to keep living she needed to keep looking at and keep chasing this colour.

It was strange how writing about death had allowed her to keep living.

Translated from the Japanese by Arthur Reiji Morris