

THE SUNLIGHT TRILOGY

白色世紀

* Author Joey Yu, recipient of the inaugural George R. R. Martin Terran Award

* Contracted short story writer for *League of Legends's* canon universe

A catastrophe has left the Earth blanketed in snow, and sunlight is remembered only in legend. Most of humanity has been forced to take refuge underground, but parties of Shade Riders desperately search the harsh alien-infested surface for the relics of Earth's forgotten past - most of all, the legendary Sword of Eternal Light, said to contain the last ray of sunlight.

In the year 2041, a meteor crashes into the Pacific Ocean, altering the face of the Earth forever. Within a decade, the sky is sealed behind an impenetrable wall of steely clouds and perpetual snowfall blankets the world in white. Civilizations perish as all surface plant-life withers to dust. "Sunlight" fades from human memory, becoming a legend from a bygone age, an object of worship for humans who have never witnessed it.

The advent of the sunless era coincides with the arrival of two mysterious life forms: a race of monstrous aliens that roam the endless expanses of snow, and the enigmatic snow spirits that are harnessed by a band of brave humans to fight the aliens.

These are the Shade Riders, the only humans still capable of traversing the frigid surface of the Earth. Using the power of the snow spirits, they glide over the icy terrain on hand-crafted soulboards, carrying intricately carved blades imbued with arcane powers. The Shade Riders explore ancient ruins, locate food sources in the constantly shifting landscape, and fight to protect the last outpost of humanity: Vaiytomo, a cavernous underground city illuminated by glowworms, located in what was once Oceania.



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But humanity's grim fate changes when a young Shade Rider, Lukai, discovers a map of an ancient Earth that is almost unrecognizable – and on the map, the location of an artifact that may contain “the last ray of Sunlight”, saved from the times before the skies closed.

The Sunlight Trilogy is a futuristic fantasy series set in a meticulously crafted world, told through multiple points-of-view by characters who must confront menacing external threats, and the cage of their own beliefs. This is the tale of the heroes of the distant future, the riders of spirit-inhabited boards soaring over an icebound wasteland... this is the tale of *Sunlight*.

Joey Yu 余卓軒

Joey Yu is an award-winning bilingual fantasy and sci-fi author, and co-author of the non-fiction book *Platform Strategy*, which has sold more than 200,000 copies in Asia. He is a contracted English short story writer for *League of Legends's* canon universe. His Mandarin novel *The Mirrored Truth* was a runner-up for the Kadokawa fiction award, while his Mandarin novella *The Locus* received the Taiwan Fantasy Foundation award of excellence. In 2018, Yu received George R. R. Martin's inaugural Terran Award, which funded his participation in the Taos Toolbox master writing class led by Hugo Award winner Nancy Kress. As an English-language screenwriter, Yu was a quarter-finalist at the Austin Film Festival and the Page Awards, and a finalist at the Creative World Awards.

THE SUNLIGHT TRILOGY

By Joey Yu

Translated by Jacqueline Leung

Prologue

Only when he was soaring could Lukai feel any shred of hope for breaking the limits of the world.

The entire world lay beneath his feet. Time seemed to stop. A heavy canopy of clouds filled his vision. The thin air brushed against his cheek like a meek, invisible hand before turning to sharp ice in his lungs.

Lukai inhaled, relishing the moment of silent suspension before gravity pulled him back down, away from the ashen clouds. He fell, quicker and quicker, the ground rushing up to meet him as he spread his arms and braced himself. At the very last second, he relaxed his knees and angled the board under him to land safely on a snowy expanse. The ground burst into a billow of white, which flurried around him as he reemerged and slid down the slope.

Even in the freezing, howling wind, he could hear his two teammates closing in from behind. They were all riding their soulboards, keeping to his right.

“Don’t waste your energy,” one of them said, smiling, his cape flapping in the wind. He had two swords strapped at the waist and a tube-shaped vessel on his back. “Anything can happen on these grounds, we’d best be alert.”

“Captain Ya-huang!” Delight spread across Lukai’s face as he gripped his double-edged spear tighter. “The elders would be so surprised!”

Their mission had lasted two whole months and no one would expect that they’d bring home such a prize. Ya-huang placed a black-gloved hand on the vessel and nodded, sharing another smile.

“Don’t get too excited just yet. We still have two days before reaching home,” Li-yin, a young woman, pointed out as she got closer. Her dark gray hair blew in the wind, her soulboard riling up wavelets of snow as she glided past.

The sky remained overcast as always. Thick clouds gathered into a still, convoluted mass, sealing the entire world. On the ground, a blanket of velvety snow stretched toward the horizon, exuding a menacing aura that forced the earth into slumber. Amid the frozen plains, they were but three small figures scrawling tracks in the snow as they advanced. Even though they all wore capes, wind slipped through the seams of their clothes like icy needles, piercing their skin and causing them to pull the fabric tighter to themselves.

In the distance, Lukai saw a nameless city from the Old World nestled between two peaks, deserted and forgotten by time. They travelled on, and soon the ruin vanished out of sight.

How much more treasure can we find in all these ruins? Lukai wondered. They'd planned to excavate a few more sites for silver, but it was more important to bring the artifact back to base, which was why Ya-huang decided against detours.

"What's wrong, Li-yin?" Lukai asked, shouting over the wind so he could be heard. Li-yin was staring behind them, strands of dark hair whipping against her face. It took a while before she turned around again.

"Do you believe Sunlight actually exists?" she suddenly asked.

Lukai frowned and looked up reflexively at the sealed sky above them. The world had been like this, unchanged, for his entire life – nothing but clouds extending from one edge of the horizon to the other. It was said that the clouds and persistent snowfall had been here for centuries; blue sky and nourishing Sunlight belonged to legends of the Old World.

"I don't know," Lukai said. "But since the elders say so, it must. Why ask all of a sudden?"

"It just came to mind. What if..." Li-yin hesitated, then continued, "what if the treasures we've found are nothing more than hearsay and don't prove anything, what happens then? People will just be even more disappointed."

At that, Ya-huang cast a sidelong glance at her from the flank.

Lukai looked down at the snow rippling from the sides of his soulboard. A moment later, he smiled and answered confidently. "No point overthinking, we'll just have to see what the elders decide. As Shade Riders, we have our own responsibilities, so leave these questions to the Old World researchers."

Li-yin nodded and Ya-huang smiled again. He said, "I'm sure the research center will also be surprised. We're bringing extraordinary findings from this expedition."

In this age so unfavorable to human survival, only a special minority – Shade Riders, those who could control soulboards – were able to leave the protection of their underground bases and venture into the deathly white world.

This expedition was all the more special with Ya-huang leading the team himself. He was older and more experienced than Lukai, and was one of the few Shade Riders who was a dual-wielding swordsman. Ya-huang had spent the past few years training a younger generation of Shade Riders, earning the respect of many. To be one of the two Shade Riders Ya-huang was bringing on this mission was an exceptional opportunity and honor for Lukai. He hoped he could one day be an outstanding Shade Rider just like Ya-huang and lead his own team.

"The wind is starting to die down," Ya-huang said, observing the terrain in front of them.

"So we're on the right track." Lukai understood Ya-huang's observation. The headwind in this area was weakening. Caused by a difference in temperature and air density, the headwind was dissipating as the temperature plunged without the influence of warmer ocean currents. The cold made the air denser, levelling the atmospheric imbalance. This meant they were indeed leaving a coastline they couldn't see and heading inland toward the icy continent.

"Let's make our way to the valley over there and rest once we reach the other side," Ya-huang ordered, and the three glided down a wide slope.



The artifact they found was an extraordinary map from the Old World. They'd covered it in thin transparent film as Lukai held it carefully in black leather gloves. The map was special because it showed many parts of the continent, delineated in white, which Lukai had never even visited. Even Ya-huang believed no one in Vaiytomo had ever come across anything like this.

"Everyone will be shocked once they lay their eyes on it." Snow drifted into his line of vision and Lukai squinted his eyes at the map. They were resting on a gentler plane along the spur.

Li-yin leaned over, coughing dryly before she said, "Other than this map, we also found another treasure that's even more astonishing. The elders may—" She suddenly stopped talking.

"What?" Lukai raised his head and noticed the unease on her face.

Ya-huang's expression also changed. He looked at the top, eyes sweeping across the white ridges set against the ash-gray sky.

"Ah!" Lukai finally sensed it. The snow at the top was whirling in unnatural directions. They knew what this was a sign of – a strange wind was blowing up above them.

"This area has always been safe," Li-yin said, hesitant.

"Where there's snow, there's danger." Ya-huang retrieved the map from Lukai and quickly rolled it back into the tube-shaped vessel before unsheathing the two swords on his sides. Li-yin also unfastened the double-edged spear from her back and Lukai readied himself, brandishing his weapon in his hands. Like Li-yin, he wielded a double-edged spear – a long wooden shaft scored in silver, with spearheads embedded on both ends. The two shared a look, worry evident in their eyes.

Wind and snow blew into their faces, the cold air even more biting. At a signal from Ya-huang, the three Shade Riders moved into a triangular formation, making their way upward. At the top, heavy gusts made it difficult for them to see and every gasp of air felt like knives in the throat. They pulled their capes closer, crossing the snow-covered mountain ridge and heading into white fog.

"Stay close!" Ya-huang cried, maneuvering his soulboard to speed up. The fog obscured their surroundings as the wind tore at their bodies like a hand trying to topple everything off balance. Still the three Shade Riders held onto their weapons as they rode their soulboards steadily through the snow.

"Here they come." Ya-huang pointed his sword to two o'clock.

As expected, several pale figures appeared amid the falling snow and quickly surrounded the team.

"Hunters, here?" Lukai's gaze hardened at the sight of the creatures.

Li-yin's soulboard was the first to emit a faint glow, her spear also glowing iridescent. One by one their weapons shone like a rainbow, bright colors shimmering amid the white surroundings.

A terrifying roar sounded ahead and a Hunter pounced into view. Its body was deathly white and looked like it was formed with chunks of hard snow. It was double the height of an average human, rows of rib-like spikes protruding from its broad back.

The Hunter extended its huge claws and swiped at them. Ya-huang immediately skidded to a stop and backflipped to avoid the blow, swords extended to cut off the creature's arms.

Lukai and Li-yin went from the sides, slicing the body in two with their spears. The Hunter immediately exploded and dissipated into snow.

"More incoming!" Ya-huang cried.

More Hunters leaped into the fray. They had no heads or necks, their chests torn open by large, grotesque mouths that gaped to show ice-blue tusks. Misshapen white protrusions on their backs stood against the wind. Their claws, six on each of their front limbs, also gleamed a menacing blue.

Lukai protected Ya-huang's left rear flank, guarding his third of their formation. He kept gliding, swinging his spear in time with the movement of his soulboard and blocking the Hunters' advances as Ya-huang led them through the mob like an arrowhead. The three Shade Riders slashed the Hunters' bodies open, causing them to disintegrate into snow.

"Oh no!" Ya-huang realized they were travelling toward the heart of a bowl-shaped valley where countless Hunters swarmed in from all sides. He raised his swords, then Li-yin positioned herself behind him and Lukai moved to the rear, the three forming one straight line as they plunged into the enemy.

The wind pulled away the hood of Ya-huang's cape, revealing his long black hair. He spun with practiced ease, cutting down the monsters in front of him with his swords. Li-yin followed with a spear point before Lukai dealt a finishing blow. This was how they advanced up the slope, fighting their way out of the tight space, though the situation was dire. Hunters collapsed on the trio from all sides like a closing fan, with more and more crowding before them.

Lukai heard a shriek of pain in the distance, but couldn't discern whether it came from the wind or the enemy. He also thought he heard Ya-huang cry out and stared ahead, eyes wide, but only saw the remnant iridescent streaks of Ya-huang's swords dancing in the snow.

Finally the three of them broke through the assault, going past a ridge and speeding down its steep decline. The Hunters cried out in rage behind them, their roars terrifying to the core. Still the Shade Riders accelerated, leaving the enemy far behind.

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"Ya-huang! How—"

It was only when they reached the end of the slope that Lukai and Li-yin discovered the long trail of blood. Ya-huang was injured, his right thigh punctured by two ice shafts. Blood geysered from the wound, dyeing his soulboard red. Ya-huang pulled out the shafts from his leg and moaned, kneeling in pain.

“Ya-huang!” Lukai hurried over to his captain’s side in alarm. The shafts were claws, each the thickness of a human arm.

“W-what should we do?” Li-yin asked in panic as she stared at Ya-huang’s mangled leg. The flesh of his thigh looked like it’d been forcefully pulled out, red and viscous with blood foaming on the surface. Around them, a ring of deep red slush formed in the snow while the wind howled in their direction.

Ya-huang focused hard for several seconds to observe the extent of the damage and decided against first aid. Instead, he removed the tube-shaped vessel and handed it to Lukai.

“Hold on to it, it’s our hope,” he said, staring deeply at Lukai.

Lukai couldn’t hide his shock. “You...what are you saying—” He tore off his clothes at once, heedless of the cold, and scrambled to feel his inner pockets. “I, when we trained – this is how you treat it, it’ll be fine—”

He managed to pull out two strips of cloth, but it was clear they didn’t have time to follow protocol – Hunters were already appearing on the ridge behind them.

Li-yin gritted her teeth and said, “Hurry up, Lukai! I’ll find us a path.” She sped off immediately.

Lukai tied the cloth tightly around Ya-huang’s thigh. “Captain, you led us through the mob of monsters....” He was fumbling over his words, panicking at how quickly the fabric got soaked in red.

“Don’t panic,” Ya-huang said.

Lukai took a deep breath and continued wrapping the second layer. Though young, he was experienced in battle and no stranger to injury; he’d even seen his comrades die before his eyes. He wasn’t nervous because of Ya-huang’s wound, but his reaction – he understood why Ya-huang wanted to hand over the vessel first.

Should Ya-huang’s condition worsen, Lukai must bring this Old World treasure back to Vaiytomo at all costs. His mind went blank; he couldn’t fathom Ya-huang ever leaving them in a place so close to home.

Li-yin shouted from afar; enemies were drawing near from the other end.

“Can you move?” Lukai scrambled to his feet.

“Let’s go.” Ya-huang patted him on the shoulder and the two raced toward Li-yin.

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“This way—” Li-yin said, her voice raised. She’d returned from scouting and was pointing ahead. They were on a perilously rocky peak covered in snow, the shattering roar of the Hunters audible in the distance. It’d probably take them no longer than a few minutes to get to where they stood. “There’s a cliff there, maybe we could lose them.”

Ya-huang nodded. “Follow me.”

At his command, the three of them headed downslope once more. Lukai monitored Ya-huang's condition with worry, but the wound seemed to look worse than it was. Ya-huang wasn't slowing down one bit, allowing Lukai to breathe a sigh of relief.

A crowd of huge, pale figures followed them like an avalanche, their descent heralded by deafening cries.

A fault lay across the land before the Shade Riders. It must be the cliff Li-yin mentioned. The cliff was flanked by gentler slopes leading toward the bottom, but those were longer curves, and the team would probably get caught in an encroaching onslaught of monsters if they slid down there. To escape, they must brave the cliff.

"Get ready!" Ya-huang shouted determinedly, bracing his body for the jump. Lukai and Li-yin also prepared themselves, about to use their momentum to travel down the cliff.

They lifted their bodies as the cliff closed in—

Yet Ya-huang turned at the last second, his soulboard kicking up a wave of snow.

"Ya—" Lukai and Li-yin screamed as they flew past their captain, missing him by a hair.

Blood spurted from Ya-huang's injured thigh, aggravated by his abrupt turn, creating a puddle where he stood. The other two were in midair, staring with wide eyes at Ya-huang's silhouette standing at the edge of the cliff. They fell, the monsters' bellowing drowning out their cries.

Ya-huang gripped his swords as the Hunters came toward him. He knew his leg wouldn't hold up – even the slightest move was agonizing. His only option was to keep his balance and let his soulboard control his lower body as he used his weapons to fulfill his final mission as a Shade Rider.

In the instant before the Hunters leaped at him, Ya-huang closed his eyes. Even though he wouldn't see it for himself, he believed from the bottom of his heart that the treasure they found was of monumental importance to human civilization. In a time of humanity against the world, people needed hope to keep living courageously. Ya-huang wasn't giving up – no, he was handing over the treasure to the next generation of Shade Riders. He knew Lukai would complete their mission. He had it in him to become an excellent captain one day.

Now, Ya-huang only needed to bring several dozen of the enemy with him as he died.

He reopened his eyes and consciousness flowed back into his body. The monsters were close, howling right by his ear, surrounding him with flashing claws and tusks. He swung his swords and they radiated a strong light.

Like an exploding tornado, Ya-huang slashed at the Hunters, his swords leaving trails of light in their wake, flickering amid the pallid throng. He cut open the monsters' gaping mouths and broke rows of their icy tusks. Pairs of razor-sharp claws raked across Ya-huang's skin, splattering blood everywhere, but that didn't stop him. He was no longer aware of time passing, only that his body, numb from blood loss, had gone beyond its limit for pain.

A Hunter pounced at him from behind, but Ya-huang stabbed it and drew his sword across its body, creating a shower of ice shards. Another managed to dig its claws into Ya-huang's abdomen, flinging him away with tremendous strength.

Ya-huang rolled across the field of snow, staining the ground with his blood. Hunters towered over him, blocking his vision and growling as if to sneer at his downfall. He lay on the ground, panting, his mouth full of snow. His body had stopped listening to him – his legs were shaking so much it was difficult to even stand on the soulboard.

With difficulty, he propped himself up with his swords.

“Come...” Ya-huang knew this was the last moment of his life. He would strike a final blow before he fell. Rainbow light started shining from the center of his soulboard.

Large claws struck his head, bowling him over face-first into the snow. He moaned in agony.

“You...little...” He rose again, feeling increasingly faint. He could only see the drifting snow and the blood seeping into his eyes. “I’ll get you...” Then he plummeted to the ground, too weak to stand on his soulboard. “Get...” His eyes fell shut, his consciousness slipping away. The Hunters closed in to deal their last blow.

“You’ve got to be kidding me.”

A pair of strong arms grabbed Ya-huang by the waist. Ya-huang opened his eyes in surprise only to see Lukai’s face.

“Lukai, take him away!” Li-yin raced past her teammates and approached the enemy like a gust of wind. Raising her spear, she plunged it straight into a Hunter’s mouth.

Supporting Ya-huang, Lukai set their soulboards side by side and made their descent down one of the gentler slopes. “Soaring Shadow, we’re going to bring your master back to Vaiyotomo,” Lukai said to Ya-huang’s soulboard.

Still perturbed, Ya-huang made a noise of protest, struggling with his words. “Danger...I said it’s...dangerous...”

“Captain, save your breath,” Lukai said softly, his expression firm as they travelled down the slope.

In no time, Li-yin caught up to them, a few new cuts across her chest. “There’s too many of them. We’ve got to think of a plan.”

“Look!” Lukai noticed an unnatural dip in the snowy terrain up ahead, so large it extended to both ends of their vision. It was a fault covered loosely by the never-ending snowfall; the snow looked like it could tumble anytime.

Going full speed ahead, Lukai held on to Ya-huang and quickly crossed the fault.

“I’ll handle it here, keep going!” Once she’d also crossed, Li-yin turned and stayed along the edge.

The Hunters sprinted toward them, with a few already entering the sunken area. Li-yin’s soulboard shone dimly, its whirl of iridescence growing increasingly stronger. Then she twisted her body, her soulboard sweeping up the snow around her and releasing a dazzling wave of light. Countless shimmering ribbons gathered and jumped into life, resembling the rush of a cheetah.

Light pierced the ground, creating a deep, black hole. Cracks split across the hollow and with a slack, rumbling noise, a large fissure emerged. Some of the creatures were caught in the

breakage. They shrieked as they fell together with sheets of snow, but most halted in their tracks at the opposite edge, unable to give chase.

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“We’ve stopped them for the time being,” Li-yin said, sliding up to Lukai, “but we should still make haste, they might find a detour and catch up to us again.”

Lukai looked at Ya-huang, who he was supporting on his shoulder.

“The treasure...” Ya-huang mumbled weakly.

“Don’t worry.” Lukai shifted the vessel so Ya-huang could see it. He knew his captain wouldn’t take his mind off their mission even with his body covered in wounds. “We’ll bring it home to the elders safely.”

At that, Ya-huang closed his eyes and lost consciousness. Lukai held him tightly and let their soulboards lead the way while Li-yin travelled alongside. Their eyes met and he smiled at her. Concern for Ya-huang showed clearly on her face, yet she paid no attention at all to the lacerations on her chest. She nodded to Lukai, then raced ahead to scout the terrain.

Snow flurried around them and the sky remained blanketed by a heavy layer of cloud. Lukai looked down at the vessel he’d been carrying for so long. He knew the two treasures inside were important clues from the Old World, answers to the hope of the human race with the power to dispel all their speculation about their own history.

Lukai was a Shade Rider. He had comrades at Vaiytomo who would also be called to missions in this white world. Gripping the container tightly, he muttered, “This time, we’ll see the world for what it is.”

According to legend, in the twenty-first century of the Old World, a meteorite suddenly breached Earth’s atmosphere and fell into the middle of the Pacific Ocean. The force of impact caused monumental changes to tectonic structure and sea levels. In the span of several years, thick clouds gathered in the sky, bringing eternal snow and sealing the planet. As the world descended to sub-zero temperatures, civilizations died out one after the other, along with entire ecosystems.

From then on, the world entered an “Ice Age” and Earth turned into a white planet. There was still day and night, though during the day, everything was engulfed in obscurity, while the night sky remained dark as always.

And so, “Sunlight” also became a mythical existence—

Part 1

EPISODE 01 Surging Blossom

Holding a string of glowing cans in her hand, Aistar made her way alone through the narrow cave.

The crude tunnel was pitch black and seemed to go on forever, but the flickering light from the cans was enough for Aistar to see the outlines of rocks on both sides, letting her bound forward quickly.

She reached the end, her strung cans clanging against each other. The cans were filled with glowing Titiwa bugs. She raised the cans and looked up, the dim light revealing a few stalactites. Aistar grabbed a stalactite with one hand as she climbed up the natural stone wall, then leaped into another tunnel and quickened her pace.

“Joan!” she cried, seeing a few bundles of light ahead, also emitted by the insects, arranged in rows on the ground to illuminate a path. The path led to an entrance covered by a wide curtain. A middle-aged man with a thick beard poked his head out, his goggles reflecting the light around him.

“Good morning!” Aistar flashed a smile and jiggled the cans in her hand.

“Ah, you’re here so early. Come on in.” Joan pushed his goggles up his forehead and parted the curtain so the girl could squeeze under his arm. This cave was his home and studio. The lights strung around the space were already dimming. Other than a stone bed in the corner, wooden crates and containers filled the room. Stacked on top of them were dishes of all sizes filled with some kind of solid material.

“This many! You made all these recently?” Aistar gasped, inspecting a glass bowl the size of her palm.

“The three elders have been meeting more frequently, so the researchers are working even harder. If I don’t make as many as I do, we won’t even have enough to use,” he said. “What about you, do you have any assigned missions?”

Aistar shook her head, weight settling in her heart. She turned around. “Can I light this?”

Joan stroked his beard in silence for a while. He opened his curtain to check the surrounding darkness and pulled it shut, making sure to cover the entrance fully. Aistar tingled with excitement as Joan came to her side and took the small glass bowl from her hands. He struck two dull-looking pieces of stone several times, making tapping noises inside the bowl.

Soon an orange flame was ignited, quivering with life.

The small room was bright in an instant, corners that were once dark rippling with light and shadow. The young girl drew closer, the flame illuminating her heart-shaped face and curious eyes.

Most residents of Vaiytomo wore fleece coats all the time, but Aistar wasn’t afraid of the cold and instead wore a two-layered dress that bared her thighs. Her knee-high boots didn’t quite match her outfit, but let her move around in the caves as she liked. Around her neck hung a crystal necklace, and her bright green hair flowing behind her back was decorated with bands of seashells in different colors. Her bangs covered a part of her face, but it did little to hide her sparking emerald eyes. Fascinated by the small candle, Aistar watched with delight. Seeing her reaction, Joan also smiled.

“I think that’s enough,” Joan said. “You make me break rules every time you visit.” He blew out the candle, and the room fell back into darkness. A few seconds later, the soft glimmer of

insects in the cans around them became visible again. Aistar let out a satisfied sigh and straightened her back reluctantly.

Joan stacked up the holders filled with wax. He opened a crate on the side and picked out a few empty bowls in preparation for his day's work. "I hear two more entrances have been sealed on the East side?"

"Yes, we don't have enough Shade Riders." Standing on tiptoe, Aistar retrieved a can in which Titiwa bugs no longer shone. She changed it to a new can which cast light upon the room again.

Joan huffed indignantly and said, "Wouldn't we solve our manpower shortage if the elders stopped arguing?"

"It can't be helped, the elders sent many Shade Riders off to missions this time." Aistar replaced another two cans with new ones and looked around.

"They should assign you to something as well." Joan seemingly wanted to comfort her, but received no response. So he gave her a used can and said, "One more here."

Aistar took it and gave Joan a new one. Now the room was properly lit, looking brighter than before, and they could make out the shapes of furniture. But the light emitted by the Titiwa bugs was still quite dim compared to the candle flame.

"Fan-meng said that in the Old World, the Titiwa bugs weren't as bright as they are now, so they were often overlooked." She looked at the insects crawling up the glass and tried to imagine what kind of world that must have been. In Vaiytomo, Titiwa bugs were an essential source of light for human beings.

"People from the Old World don't need inserts. Legend has it that they wielded powerful magic," Joan said.

"You're right." Aistar stared at the insects in contemplation. "When it isn't needed, their power will naturally disappear."

Joan inhaled sharply. "Aistar—"

"Joan, do you still need this?" She stood and shook the cans she was holding. One of them was still shining.

"No, take them with you. I know you're familiar with the path, but please be careful anyway. Oh yes." Joan turned and took out a stack of candles from a box. "These are already filled with wax, do bring them to Fan-meng for me."

"Will do." Aistar smiled and held them against herself with one hand. "I'll get going then!"

She left, making her way through Joan's courtyard, which was filled with iron racks and pots for boiling wax. Holding her light, Aistar skipped into the familiar darkness.

Soon she was travelling slowly down an underground canal on a boat, her paddling echoing softly around her. Rows of Titiwa lights lining the embankment made it clear she had reached Becky's garden, a farm for all kinds of white, leafy vegetables. Suddenly, a moving silhouette blocked the light – someone was working in the farm early in the morning.

"Hi, Becky!" Aistar waved to the figure on the shore.

The person stilled and promptly came over in the dark. "Aistar! Good morning!" Even though they couldn't really see each other, Aistar could easily discern Becky's thin figure, which looked at odds with the oversized apron she wore around her waist.

"Morning, any luck with the vegetables?" Aistar asked as she stood up from the boat.

"Half of them wilted almost instantly, I'm not sure why. I've got to plant some more next time."

Aistar frowned, perplexed, but knew she couldn't be of much help, so she held up her last shining can and asked, "Do you need one of these?"

"I'm good, thanks, I've got enough to last a week!"

Aistar waved Becky goodbye and continued rowing her boat down one side of the canal. In the dark, her paddle hit several wooden stakes, causing splashes along the way. Upon reaching a rundown pier, she quickly disembarked and moored the boat with a linen rope. Then she hung her last shining can on a nail on the cave wall and stepped into a tunnel entrance nearby.

Total darkness encapsulated her. It was so dark that it didn't matter whether she opened or closed her eyes, but Aistar didn't slow her pace in the slightest. She knew every inch of Vaiytomo – it had over three hundred caves and thousands of tunnels, and she had loved exploring them all. She ran quickly, feeling her way along the wall with one hand, the echo of her footfalls mixing with the jangle of seashells in her hair. Every turn, climb, and jump was like second nature to her.

Finally, Aistar saw the exit, a serene light at the end of the dark.

Emerging from the narrow tunnel, she arrived at Vaiytomo's center: Hades, a huge underground cave where countless tunnels met. Millions of Titiwa bugs on the ceiling formed dense, shining constellations. They latched onto dark stalactites, making them resemble towers protruding from an ocean of light. Below, amid stalagmites, stood manmade buildings. The entire cave was shrouded in a cold light that imbued it with a hazy, dreamlike atmosphere.

Aistar descended the outer edge of Hades, going quickly down the uneven steps as River Styx meandered below her, small boats drifting slowly over its surface. The black water reflected the insects shimmering above, while dull white vegetation grew all around.

This was the heart of Vaiytomo's civilization. The morning horn had sounded not long ago and people were beginning to start their day amid the chiming of bells that followed. This was Aistar's favorite part of the day: travelling along roads and caves, watching Vaiytomo slowly rise from sleep. She woke earlier than anyone else and helped people kick start their mornings, something that brought her moments of satisfaction.

She walked past two connected buildings where the sound of rushing water could be heard. It was the distillery, filtering water from River Styx for drinking. She saw Aunt Lane's plump figure at the gate as the woman ordered people to hurry up, her loud commands audible even from a distance.

"Aistar!" Aunt Lane spotted her and came over. "You're right on time, dear, this is for you." She shoved two metal water bottles at the young girl.

“W-wait!” Aistar scrambled to rearrange the items she was holding, nearly dropping her candles and empty Titiwa can in the process. “Aunt Lane, it’s fine, I don’t need—”

“Oh no, just take them, they’re from a few days ago and aren’t that clean.” Aunt Lane smiled widely. “You’re a healthy child. If you don’t drink this, I’m not sure who will!”

Unable to respond, Aistar pouted and mumbled her thanks before excusing herself, making a point to ignore Aunt Lane’s hearty laughter behind her back.

Afterward, Aistar went past several pastures beneath large rock pillars where cattle were kept. She watched them step on wet soil, their pale bodies moving quietly. A few centuries ago, the inhabitants of Vaiytomo had only succeeded in raising snow foxes, but now they were able to farm more species including weasels and downy snow pheasants. Aistar spotted Toby, the old ranch owner, leaning against the fence.

“Morning, sir. These are for you!” Aistar handed him the two metal water bottles.

“G’morning. What’s this?” Toby’s voice was hoarse, his half-blind eyes trembling.

Smiling sweetly, Aistar said, “Delicious water. Aunt Lane told me to bring this to you.” Biting her tongue, she left before she could be caught.

The path was already busy with residents, all clad in shawls made of cloth and hide. She reached the other end of Hades, handing her cluster of extinguished cans over to a Titiwa can collector. The residents always asked her, why was she, a Shade Rider, so enthusiastic about helping out with menial tasks?

Aistar would break out a bright smile and say, “What’s so bad about staying in Vaiytomo? It’s so dangerous outside!” But in truth, she’d stored her soulboard away under her bed a long time ago and had never touched it since.

Fan-meng’s research center was still closed at this hour, so Aistar took a detour deep inside the cave toward the Sun Temple. As was her custom every morning, Aistar kneeled and prayed to the “Sunlight” she had never seen in her life.

Once done with her prayers, Aistar started making her way to the research center. Yet, as she passed the area she lived in, an indescribable feeling rose in her chest, drawing her attention toward her home. Following her instincts, she returned to her round, compact house with its single, caverned room. Aistar stepped into the middle, her long hair and seashells flowing behind her.

She stopped by her bed, putting down her stack of candles, and stood, contemplating in silence.

Finally she bit her lip and dragged out a long box from under her bed. When she opened it, her soulboard inside was emanating an extraordinary iridescence.

“What?” Aistar stared at it in shock. Her soulboard was made with a long, narrow piece of wood with a snowflake-shaped embossment in the center that looked like six arrows shooting outward. Aistar couldn’t remember the last time she rode it, and so was all the more confused about why it shone so radiantly now – she’d never even summoned her snow spirit.

“This...what’s happening?” Aistar lifted a pale arm to touch her soulboard and the light intensified, wrapping itself around her wrist as it hovered in the air. Aistar blinked, her emerald eyes filled with confusion, as she tried to make sense of this strange feeling in her heart.

“What...are you trying to tell me?”