

# Child of Light

At the centre of the town of Okagawa is a banyan tree: one weathered enough to have known the locals' ancestors, yet recent enough to have known but a week of life.

As the sun rises and adults trod out for daily commutes to the metro, children gather around the tree, whispering and calling out to it as if it were a friend.

"Do you wanna meet my parents?" asks a schoolboy, a wide grin plastered across his face.

The tree remains still and silent, yet he nods and hops as if it replied.

As Okagawa's river courses just behind, the children dart between both, spending the Sunday morning and afternoon feeding the koi fish inhabiting the waters, then confessing secrets and gossip to the tree.

Smiles cross the town elders who stroll by, some picking up their grandchildren as the day goes on, yet their simple, flowing robes render them almost invisible in a village so dotted by nature. To stand out is to remind everyone in Okagawa of one's status as a complete outsider.

Yet, there she is: a young woman in an outfit thick and formal, befitting not of a quaint hamlet like this, but more of the colleges in the metro.

Empty-handed, she leans back by a red wooden post, the paper lantern above highlighting her amidst the sunset, yet nobody pays her any mind: not the children by the tree, nor the elders walking free.

Wind glides from the horizon, through the tree's leaves, then across the town, a single dried leaf flowing into the woman's hands. She stumbles but catches it, leaving it on the ground as she balances herself, taking care to avoid dirt staining her skirt.

From all around, parents return from work, taking their children with them as Okagawa's streets fall quieter and quieter.

The woman rushes to catch up with some of these children, trying to prod about how they'd spoken with the tree, but not one replies. None even so much as glance at her—not one look from a child, adult, or elder in this village.

With the sun sinking far too low to share any more light, evening settles over Okagawa, leaving two figures spotlighted by the nighttime gleam: the woman, and another person, donning the robes and sandals typical of the locals.

Hair obscuring their face, they rise from a rock by the river, marching to the tree with a bouquet of white flowers in their hand.

"Child of light..." they say, planting the bouquet on the grass as they kneel and tap the tree.

"I'm glad you're happy. I'm glad we can still speak despite everything."

From behind watches the woman, seated on the same rock the local was on. She raises a leg and rests her elbow on her knee as the local continues.

"The road to peace is one without end for the rest of us, but I'm glad you no longer have to follow that avenue. What have you been telling the children though?"

The tree appears silent.

"...Just how I remember it too, yes? Hopefully I can come back tomorrow... you're still in our hearts, alright?"

With a bow and a minute of silence, the local ambles off into the village, leaving behind only the flowers they'd brought.

The woman smirks at the sight, and though still carrying nothing, she hops off the rock and approaches the tree much like how they did, but more casually, swaying and stretching as she knocks on its bark.

"Child of Light, can you hear me?"

For a while, the shrill wind is all that lingers, blowing her cardigan's collar enough that she has to fold it again.

Then comes a voice: much like a deeper version of her own, yet emanating and echoing from within this very tree.

"Mitsuko? Since when have you sought me out?"

"I didn't expect that to work—are you really that easy to contact now?"

"Communication between us two never ceases, have you realised that?"

"You can cut the cryptic stuff, I just want to talk tonight."

"Has your mind been one with peace and rest, free from torment and life's jest?"

She gazes down at her arms as she waves them.

"Well, freedom's always a nice feeling, isn't it? If that's what you were asking from me..."

"The end of a battle for freedom; a triumph secured for us both."

"I don't know if I'd call it a triumph though... It's more like- imagine this: your family arranges two men for you to marry, both terrible and problematic, so you choose to run away! You *win*, but everything you leave behind steals from that victory, doesn't it?"

"Those left behind? Is our conference today in relation to that?"

Mitsuko leans back on the tree as the wind around Okagawa slows, then halts.

"How do you want me to call you by the way-?"

"Shiori, a name we chose together years ago, remember?"

"Not really... But I guess that fits you. More than mine fits me anyways."

"After a lifetime of being forsaken by the light, how does it feel to be one leap beyond it?"

She tilts her head to her side to look at the tree, or rather, Shiori.

"You know, I don't really get you again, but it's nice to not feel so stuck inside my own body... and that's putting it *mildly*."

"When others stared at you, do you believe they saw a fish in its tank? A hapless animal unable to communicate how it yearns for the freedom it once knew?"

Despite the wind's absence, a single, long branch above Mitsuko continues swaying, more limp and withered than the rest of the tree. Its end droops as all the fish in the river scuttle away, leaving behind only clean waters.

"Eh, less like a fish, more like flowers. Do you want this bouquet by the way?"

"There is a time for it to be positioned appropriately. That time is yet to come."

"Anyways, as I was saying, it was more like I was *these* chrysanthemums. My family, friends, all of them still saw me on the outside the same way I was before I was 17. Of course, you don't know what this flower is saying, right?"

"This one may only know what you too know."

"Exactly- Wait no what did you just say?"

"This one may only know what you too know."

Above the horizon, the moon ceases to move, frozen alongside all the stars.

"...I guess that makes sense, but I think you know more about me than I do myself—like you were the one by my side after Katsuro decided I was too much of a waste of his time and effort."

"The mind will claim to forget what scars it the deepest, yet he was only the first of many, was he not?"

"Hikari and Takako stuck around—You think I was in any place to ask for more than them? Like everyone else gave up when they realised I was hopeless, and Hikari was always going on about looking after their family, so for them to still be here..."

*"That* is their house, is it not?"

Mitsuko turns to stare at one of the houses on the other side of the river, its arched, tiled roof providing its porch with shade even from the harshest sunlight.

There on a bench rests the local from earlier, their gaze still frozen at the tree, as if they had ceased moving along with the moon.

"Yeah it is, but it's blurrier than I remember..."

In seconds, the house, alongside the entire street opposite the river, fade out, leaving only a clear, lush meadow where they stood.

"S-Shiori, is this some kind of habit of yours you've never told me about? Messing with this world?"

"Is your presence right now not proof enough of that?"

"Oh nonsense, I know this is still me—but what about those houses? Could you always just wave them away like that?"

"The bloodiest wounds require the greatest attention, but time for healing has become limitless, as you well know."

"I mean, that's very literal if you can pause time right now."

"If you wish to witness that, then please, observe."

Soon too do the remaining homes of Okagawa fizzle into air, transforming the area into the plains it had intertwined itself with.

The nighttime sky shifts from a cold hue of blue and black to a warmer one of purple.

Beneath Mitsuko, the ground sinks and morphs as an updraft lifts and strings her afloat, Shiori's branches oscillating at first, then dissolving into a flurry of light, streaming upwards in a spiral and vanishing.

Waves of gold streak across the purple sky, and from them sail an array of orbs, assembling a bridge of light that finally lets Mitsuko down once more.

The path twirls ahead and upwards, converging upon a large, red sphere with a hole through it. Its hue is striking and bright, much like Mitsuko's own bow tie.

She paces forward, her steps airy and silent.

In contrast, the orbs of light flowing in then out of the red sphere echo and whiz as they speed by, entering slowly, but emerging much, much faster.

As Mitsuko ascends the path to the sphere, Shiori's voice returns, echoing through the sky as if the former was now inside the tree.

"The light in this realm is impermanent, as you would expect. They linger not within our sight, nor within the cranium."

"You mean this red sphere thing?"

"Its name is irrelevant. It is already immobile. It will someday wither, alongside nearly none of the light it once enjoyed."

Halting, Mitsuko trembles, waving her arms again as she gazes up at the sphere.

Another orb eases into it, then stays inside for a while, but as minutes tick by, it begins to emerge from the other end.

"The brightest lights leave behind the darkest spaces upon their loss. Do you feel that shadow takes too much from you?"

"I-I don't really get that... just the first thing you said. Literally speaking, that's what would happen if the sun went out, no?"

"Do you mean to say the sun in your life has vanished?"

"...I prefer 'left', but it's not one sun. Just like these lights: there was a time that they kept coming, and now..."

Mitsuko glances up as the last two orbs traverse into the sphere, remaining inside even as the realm falls stagnant.

"They've stopped. You know, just like the people I knew. They stopped coming in a lot of ways."

"Do you believe your life would have been better had these lights never entered it?"

"No...? I mean let me take you literally: living in 'darkness' forever would've been just as bad."

"But the pain would have been nullified, would it not? Would it not have hurt you less to have lived eternally in darkness, never knowing there was a way to be rid of it?"

"No- again, no, I don't think I could live like that... I just *don't*."

The floor of light encircles the sphere like a stage, allowing Mitsuko to come closer.

She rests a hand on the sphere's surface, images flashing across her mind as she does so.

From a childhood of walking home with friends after school, to accepting honours at the very top of her class, to weeks drifting mentally on a cold bed, then to nothing: a void that continues to darken itself despite the absence of light.

She weeps for a moment, her smile unable to hold back her tears, even as Shiori remains ever-silent.

Glancing up, another two orbs of light enter and remain within the sphere, and as she wipes her cheeks, Mitsuko leans back, stumbling to the opposite side of the sphere.

Here it is: the other end of the hole, yet the four lights remain inside unmoving.

Though her mouth is still, her eyes scurry about, as if they wished to use the tears as a slide to leave this body.

As the same images flash through Mitsuko's mind, the gleam of the realm goes out one by one, like a wave of darkness enveloping everything from the path of lights to the golden skies.

All that remains is the sphere, its hue paler, but the lights within it remaining as is.

And Mitsuko can't help but laugh.

This sphere, or cranium, degrading second by second—is this a cruel joke from Shiori?

Is this Shiori letting her experience a death worse than her actual passing?

Oh, perhaps this too was beyond believability. To think, a talking tree that knows more about her than herself? But if she could be present and conscious here even after death, then why would she doubt that all of this could be happening?

Once Mitsuko's scrubbed off her tears, she tries to reach for the sphere once more, but alas, it shrivels up, now rough, stiff, and colourless.

It rolls and drifts long into the void, Mitsuko unable to follow as a force holds her back.

"Cast out into the void, yet held in the scorching light to the very last second. Fate remains the same for it does not know what resilience is, only results."

"I-I hate that... There's a reason... I- They wouldn't let me, they *knew* I was suffering, but no one was allowed to just- you know, let me rest? Give me some peace after six years? I don't think I was asking for much!"

Before Shiori could respond, beige tiles emerge from where the sphere was, with a smoothness it would've envied.

Like the lights from earlier, blocks and panels fold and shift to transform this void into a hallway, one lit so harshly like it was the antithesis of human joy.

Doors fill in holes in the walls, and soon signs follow, labelling the facility as an Intensive Care Unit.

A single door creaks open, and a cart lined with empty trays rolls out, its wheels squeaking across the floor as a familiar voice returns.

"In your mind, this room is vivid, is it not?"

"No- it's more like a blank, but I-I know what it *is*. I spent three weeks there remember?"

"What about the days before and after?"

"Before: also a blur. After: you already know that, don't you?"

"...Come closer, a light from the cranium has remained."

"A- Well, you mean in *that* room?"

"Light in this realm lingers only for the moment it is remembered. You will remember yourself forever, as with the light inside."

"So if I go in there, you'll stop weaving poems—got it."

Indeed, Shiori falls silent once more, yet as Mitsuko nears the ICU Ward's door, she quivers again, breathing slowing then thumping like a rough stream's waters.

She hangs her arms in front of her and waves them about, using her elbow to nudge the door itself open.

On the other side however, all that stands is another hallway.

Hospital beds line both walls, with white, concrete walls and beige tiles nearly hiding the orb of light at the centre of the hall.

Mitsuko stretches, then paces forward, biting her lip and approaching the glow. The closer she steps, however, the further back the light slips, until it darts off left through a junction.

She fixes her shoe and bolts after it, but in the lustre's path are no signs at all of its direction.

To her left and to her right are nothing but winding corridors lined with hospital beds: some with mannequins tucked in, others covered in leaves and soil.

Yet as Mitsuko traverses these corridors, so too do these beds transform, with chains and ropes tearing through the tiles to lock these furniture down.

She smirks at the beds as she ambles by, but her body trembles at the sight, especially as the restraints appear tighter and tighter further into the complex.

Every time she catches a glimpse of the light, it flees once more, and with each appearance, it seems to flash dimmer and dimmer.

With a turn to the left, a single leaf trickles down onto Mitsuko's hair, stopping her where she stands. Her eyes shoot upwards and land upon another bed, dangling from more chains and ropes on the ceiling with leaves growing all over it.

A shrill scream clamours from somewhere behind and jolts Mitsuko, and as her breathing speeds up, she sprints through the hall of hanging beds.

The screams inch closer and closer. She doesn't turn back, doesn't check if something is even pursuing her, for wherever she is, she knows she is likely safe beyond death.

Shifting right, the labyrinth terminates, though the screeching continues to echo, now becoming more and more distant as Mitsuko inches towards the final room.

In the middle of the concrete chamber is another bound hospital bed, dead leaves sprinkling onto the ground from the ceiling. The orb of light, though faint, rests to the bed's side, flickering like a wilting flower.

Mitsuko's breath sinks, her eyes falling upon the bed, then on the light, and though she reaches out for it, it vanishes the moment her hand nears.

"You still remember yourself, as you have always wanted. Yet for one bequeathed the title of the Child of Light, your life has been one devoid of such gleam."

"Well, I *know* that- I-I'm here right now for a reason... and that light disappeared for a reason too, didn't it?"

"I only know what you too know. Perhaps you believe this light to be a memory slipping out of your reach? An undelivered, longing speech?"

"Neither of those maybe, but... 'bequeathed'? Heh- my parents always said they named me this because they knew I would be a lucky child. See how wrong they were?"

"So the matter is about them? How you wish they would have left you alone so you could have escaped the pain sooner?"

Mitsuko freezes.

"That's a lie- no no, I *appreciated* how much they tried to keep me around. How much they wanted me to still be with them, how badly they regretted passing this down—it's not their fault, it wasn't mine, but karma had other plans, don't you think? Please, their efforts *did not* bother me, I love them! I would—"

"You would let them die too if it meant finding eternal peace with them?"

"N-No! No... I just hope they haven't been in too much pain."

She pauses, and this time, Shiori does not respond.

"All I wanted was to live a normal life, and even that I couldn't get. I just hope my parents... I hope they'll find peace even without me—if they let it progress to the end stages as they wanted, they wouldn't mourn losing *me*, they'd mourn my body's cremation... I would've been gone *long* before that, yet there wouldn't be a legal way to put me to rest then."

"Peace. You chose death to find peace, yet now you want a different kind of peace, is that correct?"

"Kinda... I got peace for myself, I got that, but for everyone else?"

She waves her arms and paces around the chamber, her shoes crackling against the leaves.

"I came to Okagawa because I knew Hikari still lived here... so you can imagine my surprise when I found that banyan tree again."

""Surprise'?"

"Yeah, you've really chosen the most ironic way to make yourself known to me."

"My emergence was not my choice. Whoever planted the tree, perhaps Hikari, brought me here; separated me from you for the first time."

"Hmm... You know, that's why I left them alone earlier. I know Katsuro never came to my funeral, so while Hikari calls me nothing more than a friend, it was them who left the most flowers... *after* my family."

Mitsuko holds her neck for a moment.

"I just hope they don't regret helping me with it all..."

"That I am unable to answer. I know only what you too know, but I can explain to you far more than you could explain yourself."

"Well- then can't we- or I mean, can't I go talk with them?"

"Tomorrow. They return every day and speak with us once the children have left, so would you care to join me for the night?"

Like before, another gust of wind rises, lifting Mitsuko into the air.

First sinks the bed, submerging alongside its restraints as if the leaves concealed a bottomless sea.

As with the hospital's emergence, the chamber's walls fold once more, but rather than strand Mitsuko in another void, they instead fall apart to reveal a vast plain: the very meadow Okagawa rested on.

Here to her left is the river, and further ahead is the banyan tree, though the buildings of Okagawa remain absent.

Indeed, even the grass and sky appear darker and duller, with the only vibrant foliage leading towards the tree.

Mitsuko looks at her arms again as she paces towards it.

"Shiori?" she calls out.

Her voice echoes all around, yet this time, there is no response.

She tries again, but even as she nears the tree, Shiori is silent.

Then she glances down at its foot, scanning what laid just in front of her now: Grass and leaves, but in their usual, lush greens; rocks and soil, in their usual rich hues.

But just by its roots is something else: Mitsuko, or rather, her body.

She appears just like her, but with her hair looser, and her outfit more formal.

This other Mitsuko lies on her back with her hands on her chest, clutching onto a white chrysanthemum. Though lifeless, her face is clean and peaceful, a faint smile radiating as much as the flower she holds.

She gazes down at the body, rubbing her eyes for a moment as she too bears that same grin.

"So Shiori... this is what you meant when you asked me to join you? When I wake up, will we be the same once more, or will the afterlife find more surprises for us?"

Shiori doesn't respond.

"So I'm the one weaving poems now, eh? That's alright, I have all the time I've ever wanted."

Sniffling, Mitsuko sits next to Shiori's, or perhaps her own, body, brushing the hair with her hands as she continues.

"This is what I wore at my high school's graduation... You know, when it first developed the year before, I thought my illness was just from my lack of sleep—I wish I retained that kind of innocence."

She moves down to her hands, adjusting the fingers and moving the left hand over her right as she tries to keep the flower in place.

"I know you can hear me Shiori, but even if we'll just become one and the same again, I love being able to talk to you like this... I don't know if any of this is even real, but look at me: dead but still alive in a way. Maybe I should've listened to my parents' rituals more, might've-"

One of the tree's branches creaks, much louder than Mitsuko's soft speech. It's the same branch that earlier appeared withered and weighed, except this time, it dangles above Mitsuko and Shiori, a noose tied from it.

Mitsuko stands to gaze up at it, and after a few moments, returns a giggle, kneeling again and looking Shiori in her face.

"Did you put that up there? I'm kinda surprised you remember the exact branch, I just chose the nearest one to the bench... W-Well, no, Hikari helped choose it for us... and... Wait-"

She brushes her hand across Shiori's neck, but it appears clean and unmarked.

"That's odd, but maybe for the best... I remember clicking on images once of the people who hung themselves in the forests—they weren't found for days, so their necks were... *beyond* deformed. I don't remember checking during our funeral but whoever cleaned us up did a great job!"

As the rope sways above her, Mitsuko moves to her left, fixing Shiori's skirt, then her socks, then shoes, next to which several more chrysanthemums lay. She picks them up and places them around the body, but keeps one for herself.

Standing again, Mitsuko grins, her eyes watery.

"You're looking great, Shiori! After everything we went through, I'm glad we can have a moment this peaceful... even if it's somewhere like this."

Clenching the flower, Mitsuko takes a breath, wipes her face, then lies next to Shiori, assuming the same position and flashing the same smile.

With her eyes closed, she falls just as still as her double, the skies around the meadow shifting back into their familiar blue and black hue.

The river follows, its waters flowing northward once more, and as Okagawa's buildings return, the noose on the tree fades away, though that one branch remains battered.

It's another normal midnight in Okagawa: no Shiori, no Mitsuko, just the bouquet of flowers Hikari had left beneath the banyan tree, minus two flowers, which seem to have disappeared as well.

Some elders pass by, some adults come to the river to collect water, but in a time of slumber, tranquility dominates, with the hours ticking by, first to 2:00 AM, then 3:00 AM, then 4:00 AM...

By sunrise, household pets emerge and the children return. Though they surround the tree again, they take care not to disturb Hikari's bouquet.

"Child of light," each one of them calls in succession, but whether or not Mitsuko or anyone else responds, only they know.

As the sun trails higher, the kids leave, switching into their uniforms and scattering to attend school, but like yesterday, their departure opens an opportunity for someone else: Hikari.

Same plain robes as yesterday, they approach empty-handed this time, but their face and eyes flash redder than the sunlit horizon, at least when their hair shows it.

They kneel and repeat the same call the children used, checking the chrysanthemums they left. A faint smile crosses them when they count the remaining flowers, but their breathing roughens up, and they drop the bunch as they break down into a sob.

Then a hand taps their back.

Though their vision is clouded by tears, they turn around anyways, and there she stands: Mitsuko, with her black hair, cardigan, skirt. She appears corporeal despite her death the previous week.

"Hello—it's alright, I'm still here!"

"Y-You- You- M-"

"It's alright, it's alright, please—has it been bothering you? You know, our last day at the park?"

"Kind of- I-I'm just-You're here! You're actually here- please please- It's been one week, my family thinks I'm being ridiculous, but in our class, our school, your town- it was always you on top of everyone and everything-Do you know how empty it's been since you've left!"

Mitsuko grins, shifting her own eyes away as she rubs one.

"Do you wanna have a seat? Just here, by the tree?"

"Sure sure... C-Can we just catch up for a while? Whatever you've been up to, how you're feeling- you know!"

Mitsuko and Hikari settle side by side beneath the tree, much like how she had slept next to Shiori the night before.

"I want to know first... *You* planted this tree, right?"

"Yeah- just didn't think it'd grow so fast... and I took that as the sign you hadn't forgotten us... especially because of *that* branch!"

"Heh, is it bad I think it's reassuring nowadays?"

"You- r-really-?"

"It was either I cut my life there... or I lose myself eventually, then die bedridden, stripped of movement and memories. Think about it like this: if I wilted away in a hospital, I don't think I'd remember you or my family anymore."

Hikari reaches for Mitsuko's shoulder and manages to touch it.

"So... You actually exist in some kind of physical form or- or am I going- a-are you just in my head...?"

"I show up a week after I died and you think I'm a hallucination? It's fine though, I'm still not sure *what* I am right now... but I stopped that disease before the worst came. You know what that means?"

"Yeah?"

"I'm still myself! I died as myself, and I get to move on just like this."

"M-Move... Please- please don't move on from all of us—your family, Takako, me, our class- I don't know how they'd react if they saw you like this, but I can promise you it would give them so much peace!"

"Don't worry, I have all the time I'll ever need to think about peace now... and it starts with you, you know?"

"I-It- Me-?"

Laughing, Mitsuko rests her head on Hikari's shoulder.

“Even if we’ll never have another game of shogi, or another shot of sake, or another cherry-picking afternoon... Here we are anyways, like I’ve shamed the universe into giving me a second, indefinite chance to remind everyone I’ve been better off now.”