

Shimada. The African Symphony

The giant turtle was trudging along her neverending savanna toward the ancient tree Babadjayd.

Sharp spurs protruded from her hind legs, which she used for moving earth, digging cool hollows to escape the relentless heat. Those same spurs were meant to carve nests for her eggs, so that savanna could get a dozen or so tiny turtles. But in all her years, she had never managed to become a mother-turtle. She was moving slowly, as if afraid to disturb the slumber of this land, exhausted by drought, by dispiriting expectation of rain.

The turtle had no need to hurry up. She had been living so long that she had outlived her fears and joys, her awe and delight. At a daytime she was stifling; at night she gazed sleeplessly at the sky, stretching out her wrinkled neck – long as a spyglass.

The giant turtle had hatched from an egg beside a baobab named Babadjayd, and her first journey had been toward its roots. Back then, they called her Crooked Bark, for her shell was ugly from birth – lumpy and pitted like the bark of an ancient tree.

Crooked Bark was still tiny when she felt someone lift her by the shell, tearing her from the earth. She gulped a breath of air and retracted her head deep into the darkness of her own body. Suspended in the air, she kicked her legs a few times, hoping to find something solid beneath her: a root, a stone – anything. But realizing the ground was far below, she tucked in her limbs, turning herself into a pebble. At once, the unseen hands released her, and she found herself in a dim, stifling place – the bottom of a sack. She bumped against something hard and timidly poked out her head. Three other little turtles were there with her. Terrified, they didn't even dare open their eyes. The sack swayed left and right, as if they had been swallowed by a great beast, and now it was moving on – perhaps for water, perhaps to capture more victims. The turtle was insufferably afraid. But there was no escape, only waiting.

Crooked Bark didn't know how much time she spent without light, without food, without the familiar air of her savanna. She had begun to get used to the darkness and the heavy drowse when suddenly, she was lifted again by her shell and carried elsewhere – a place with light, even with some food: vegetables and torn lettuce leaves. But whatever she had done, she could never walk more than ten turtle steps before hitting an invisible barrier. She pecked it with her beak, scratched it with her claws, but this place would not let her go. Defeated, she would return to the vegetables and reluctantly take a bite of cucumber or avocado skin.

At first, Crooked Bark wasn't alone – she shared this closed place with those three unfortunate turtles. They had grown used to living together, walking in circles, crunching on the same cucumber, until one by one, they were taken away. Sometimes Crooked Bark heard the shrieks of a brightly colored parrot; other times, she watched as the slow chameleon in the neighboring closed place swallowed a cricket whole.

The rare animal shop *Midori no Neko* stood on the outskirts of Tokyo, in Setagaya Ward, not far from the Carrot Tower. It was here that the little turtles had been brought from the African savanna. Three of them were quickly sold, but Crooked Bark remained: no one wanted her. Until one day, everything changed.

On January 5th, Haruto was heading home early – he had been fired. *Don't even come back*, they told him. He walked slowly through the park, and it seemed to him that the shivering birds were screeching, *Haruto, you're a failure!* As if someone had carved into the trees with a knife: *Haruto, you couldn't cut it!* As if the sky had written with airplane smoke: *Haruto, you're done for!* And no one – *no one* – remembered of his own little holiday. His birthday. No calls, no cards, no well-wishes.

To shake off the gloom, he decided to stop by the rare animal shop near the Carrot Tower. He had no intention of buying a pet – his final paycheck had been meager, and what little he had would soon be handed over to the spiteful Mrs. Fukuda, from whom he rented a closet-sized room more fit for a dog than a man. Sometimes he *felt* like a stray, huddling under the eaves of someone else's house. So no, he wouldn't spend money – not this time. He just wanted to see the beautiful creatures at *Midori no Neko*. Colorful feathers, sharp fangs, soft fur, gleaming scales... One could spend all day long there and never get bored!

But when Haruto saw the lone turtle with the crooked shell in the empty tank, he thought how sad she must feel – in a foreign land, in this unwelcoming glass box, in winter, without sunlight, under the lifeless glow of a lamp. And he reached for his wallet.

'Unbelievable! Exactly what I got paid today!' he marveled, handing the money to the shop owner.

'And that's the discounted price!' the man said pompously. *'Actually... well, it's an expensive breed. From Africa!'*

'Really? Where exactly?'

'Right here.' The owner tapped a spot on the map hanging on the wall. *'They told me she lived somewhere in the center of savanna.'*

Haruto leaned in, memorizing the name of the country, though at that moment, he couldn't imagine ever leaving Japan.

'But how will I pay Fukuda-san now?' The thought flickered and vanished. *'Ah, never mind. Today's my birthday! Today, I celebrate!'*

Haruto lifted the turtle from the tank – she was heavier than he expected. In her eyes there was an African sunlight. On her shell there were patterns of wind and sand, the face of a newborn planet that did not yet know it would be home to animals and people.

'Shimada!' Haruto said so loudly that the shop owner turned.

'What do you mean?'

'I'll name her Shimada! My little island!'

'Ah', the owner nodded. *'Good name.'* He was just glad to finally sell this last turtle and free up the tank for the new lizard arriving soon.

Haruto carried his tiny treasure home, thinking how much less lonely his cramped room would feel now. And how much happier Shimada would be. Because now they were together – a man and a turtle. Crooked Bark – now Shimada – wondered where she was being taken, but for some reason, she wasn't afraid anymore. She stretched out her neck, ready for a new, unknown life.

'Happy birthday to me!' said Haruto, smiling at the turtle.

He let Shimada roam freely, even sleep on his thin futon, which he rolled up each morning to save space. Every day, he sliced a cucumber, took a piece for himself, and gave the rest to his silent companion. The turtle ate it all, loudly smacking her beak, and Haruto smiled when he caught the food sliding down her long neck. The turtle – in her turn – noticed that his eyes looked like those of a serval.

Shimada liked her new home. It wasn't as warm as the savanna, but at least it wasn't as cramped as the glass box.

Two days passed peacefully. On the third, rent was due.

'Fukuda-san, please, just a few more days! I'll get the money'

'No, Haruto. I can't wait. Pay today, or leave tomorrow! I need a responsible tenant!'

And so, the young man and the turtle found themselves on the street. Of course, Haruto was upset: nowhere to return to at night, no job yet. But he never once regretted spending his last yen on that rare African turtle.

The whole night they had been sitting on a park bench. That winter was mild, but as the sun set, the wind brought a biting chill. Haruto held Shimada close to keep her warm – and somehow, he felt warmer too, as if her shell radiated sunlight, not just heat but a soft glow.

No matter how hard he tried, by dawn, Haruto was freezing: his fingers went blue with cold, his feet became numb, his body was shuddering with chills. To keep his thoughts from icing over, he tapped on Shimada's shell: «*Tap-tap-tap-tap-tap*», and hummed what came to him – first softly, then louder. From the silence of the empty park, from the rhythm of fingers on the African turtle's shell, from the despair and hope, the music was born. Like a heartbeat – the first sound – before the child's first cry.

Lost in the moment, with his eyes closed, Haruto didn't notice the tall man in a hat, a ring glinting on his slim finger.

'Who's that you've got there?' he asked.

Haruto startled, stood up.

'This is my turtle, Shimada, sir.'

'Isn't it cold out here?'

'She is, sir. But we've nowhere else to go. I lost my home.'

'Homeless, but musicfull,' the stranger mused. *'You should love music, singing like that in the middle of the park? Shouldn't you?'*

'I don't know, sir. I suppose. I've never sung before. That... melody... I just made it up. Sorry if I disturbed you!'

Haruto grabbed his bag, ready to leave – anywhere, just away from the park. *‘All that’s missing is this guy to call the cops and say I’m causing a disturbance,’* he thought. *‘Then Shimada will really regret ending up with me.’*

‘Wait, wait!’ The man held up a hand. *‘My name’s Akira. I was thinking... since you’ve got no place to stay... How would you like to live at our music school? We’ve been looking for someone to clean the classrooms, keep things in order... Kanda district...’*

‘To live at school?’ Haruto blinked.

‘Exactly. There’s a small caretaker’s room. A bed, a window... The last guy left for Osaka. So we are searching another one. Say yes! You love music, don’t you?’

Haruto didn’t quite understand the connection – he’d never thought much about music. Since his parents died, he’d worked odd jobs: a gardener, a shop assistant, a vegetable stand helper – always struggling, always fired. His last job, unloading parcels at the post office, ended when he dropped a heavy box. And now, at a cold dawn, in the park, a stranger was offering him work *and* shelter? It felt unreal, like in a movie, like in a story where the impossible is real.

Nevertheless, he had no time to ponder – his hands were numb and Shimada had tucked her head in from the cold. If he refused, who knew when they’d next be warm, when they’d have a home?

‘Thank you, Akira-san,’ Haruto said. *‘But I’ve got my turtle. I won’t go without her.’*

‘Don’t worry about that. Turtles are welcome. As long as they keep silence.’ He smiled. *‘And... it seems to be your musical instrument. Well, come at noon. Say Akira Takamoto sent you.’*

The man tipped his hat, the ring flashed, and he was gone.

Haruto hugged Shimada tighter, and the turtle felt his heart beating – fast, joyful.

So their new life at the music school began.

Haruto swept floors, dusted pianos, trimmed hedges, and every time he heard singing or the sound of instruments – flutes, violins, others he didn’t know the names of – he paused. He mesmerized. Then he’d return to his room, feed Shimada, stroke her shell, and tap out rhythms: *tap-tap-tap-tap*, humming newborn melodies.

He'd never thought about music before, but now he caught rhythms everywhere – in emptiness, in random sounds: a door closing, a water sloshing in a bucket, a piano pedal creaking (he sometimes pressed it when no one was looking). Everything had a voice, a story that could become a melody. And those melodies filled his head more and more.

At first, Haruto just opened piano lids and pressed pedals – right, left, middle – then closed them. But once, late at night, when the school was empty, he brought Shimada in her box, sat at the piano, and explored the keys, learning their sounds, memorizing them. He picked out simple tunes – first familiar ones, then his own. Night after night, he played, and the piano listened to him. Not everything worked, but he kept trying, telling the piano those melodies born in his head.

One day, he mustered courage and played for his fellow Satoshi, who told the others. A word about the composing janitor spread too fast. At long last, the rumor had come on the school director: he listened to Haruto's playing and made him a student. So a new chapter began.

Haruto studied, and Shimada grew, her shell expanded: its bumps rising higher, its pits deepening. On warm days, she was basking in the school garden, stretching her head and limbs toward the sun. On cold days, she was hiding under the tables, crunching emerald leaves or russet apples. She feared nothing now: with Haruto, she was safe, as if cradled in the egg before birth.

As Shimada's shell grew, so did Haruto's fame. First it was one person who loved his music, then two, then a class, a school, a city, a country... Posters with his name were hanging all over Tokyo. His compositions filled grand concert halls, and soon, everyone knew the famous composer who was seen in the streets with his turtle, Shimada. She had grown so large that her shell reached Haruto's knee, and when he walked she was lumbering beside him, stretching her neck from her carved-shell collar. He fed her the juiciest, rarest fruits and bathed her twice a week in warm water.

Their favorite season was *hanami* – cherry blossom time. Every March, they visited the East Gardens of the Imperial Palace: they weren't that crowded as the other places. Year after year, they welcomed spring there, and whenever a pink-white petal landed on Shimada's shell, Haruto made a wish. His own superstition. Maybe his wishes were too simple, or maybe there was magic in the ritual but they always came true.

Many more cherry blossoms bloomed and fell. Haruto and Shimada moved homes again and again, each larger and brighter than the last one. Cities around the world invited Haruto to play, and Shimada was always there – flying on planes, sailing on ships, riding trains and cars. She listened to music in concert halls, quietly munching cucumbers in her custom-made travel crate. She appeared in photos with Haruto, and those photos spread worldwide. People flocked to see the famous turtle, tapping her shell three times for luck.

But Shimada cared nothing for fame. She just liked that with Haruto, it was warm, safe, and there was always something to crunch. Moreover, she was never lonely. She thought it would last forever. A turtle's "forever" can really last too long and slow.

However, one day, Haruto grew old. He could no longer lift her – she was too heavy, he was too weak. So he sat before her and said:

'Listen, my sister, Turtle Shimada-san... soon, we must part. But first, I will write my greatest music. I'll call it the 'African Symphony.'

He wanted to compose it in Africa – Shimada's homeland, to feel the savanna's sun, its wind, its scorching earth. And so, the turtle returned to where she was born.

Breathing in the familiar, long-forgotten air, Shimada stirred. As if someone had drawn a vast circle and finally connected the lines. As if she had never been taken away, as if she had only dreamed a strange, long dream. But she hadn't been dreaming. Haruto was still there – listening to the music of her land, talking to those born there, standing on hotel balconies watching clouds, and – as he had years ago – tapping rhythms on her shell. Then playing the piano, writing, playing again. Every hotel had a piano for him.

'I'll give wings to this melody, Shimada! It will fly over your vast savanna, over deserts, mountains, plains, even oceans! Then it will return to our East Garden and embrace me.'

Three moons waxed and waned. Then Haruto stroked her shell and said:

'It's ready. You'll hear it first, Shimada-san.'

And he played for her, singing softly, while in his mind, an orchestra swelled – playful flutes, brooding cellos, solemn oboes.

Guests stepped onto their balconies to listen to this strange melody. Some of them frowned, shut windows, returned to their business – for these ones, work would always matter more than music. Some of them paused: they heard familiar sounds in that melody. Still others dove into Haruto's music as if into the warm water, swimming far from land to the most beautiful island in the world – a shelter from storms, enemies and sorrows. When Haruto finished, some listeners sighed in relief, some clapped, some returned from that imaginary island to ordinary life – but now, it seemed to be a little different.

'Well, that's it,' Haruto said. 'Today, I'll book a ticket home. And tomorrow, Shimada-san, I'll return you to the savanna. Because you still have time... and I don't. I won't leave you alone in Tokyo, in strangers' hands. I don't want you to be scared or hurt.'

They drove deep into the savanna. The turtle recognized her homeland, and beneath her shell, the forgotten joy was glowing. At last, they stopped. Haruto set her down, sliced cucumber and mango, stroked her head, tapped her shell – stronger than ever.

'Thank you, my sister, Shimada-san. If I hadn't seen you, hadn't spent my last money... maybe I'd still be in that tiny room, never knowing I could create music. Go on, now. Let the warm earth cradle your feet. And keep you safe, Shimada-san.'

Haruto got in the car, shut the door, and drove away. At the sound, a hornbill perched on an acacia branch flapped his black wings. The turtle finished her cucumber and walked toward the baobab named Babadjayd.

'Crooked Bark has returned!' whispered the acacia.

'Crooked Bark has returned!' echoed the earth.

And the restless wind carried this news across the whole savanna.