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第4巻

MARVELOUS! TBS animation

Chapter t1: Haruno Yukinoshita is Plotting Something yet Again

The jazz melody playing in the cafe seemingly became louder. I hadn't even noticed it before. But now I started hearing all those "pam-pam-pam-toosh" being played somewhere inside the cafe. These sounds were too different from the traditional New Year chants, and I couldn't calm myself down though when I sat in place.

My restless eyes that were roaming around the table a moment before now switched to the people sitting down at our table. Yuigahama was looking at them in confusion, her eyes full of worry. The reason of her confusion was located right at the other end of the table. Unlike Yuigahama, Haruno Yukinoshita had a bright smile.

After having accidentally encountered us she wished us happy new yeah, made some polite conversation and moved to our table.

"Been a long time since I've seen Hikigaya-kun and Gahama-chan together!"

"Yeah, what a coincidence!"

"I know right?"

"Mhm!"

I listened to their merry conversation and couldn't shake off the feeling that it all was for show. I felt sweat trickling down my spine from this thought. Wondering why they did that I looked at Haruno-san sitting opposite of me. She noticed my look, smiled knowingly, hmm'ed and slowly squinted. Her eyes now resembled those of a predator who spotted the prey. I felt chills despite the functioning heat.

Averting my eyes from Yuigahama and Haruno-san I noticed Hayato Hayama's awkward look; he tried to smile while carefully giving affirmative responses to the girls and completing his order. So good to be the guy who can read the mood... That meant I too could occupy myself to buy some time, I got it! Superb, I'm impressed! Gotta make a crane or a rabbit from tissues. I was just going to start when I heard the conversation that worried me.

"So date, huh... You're friendly as always. No Yukino-chan this time?" Haruno-san asked

with a smile while playfully nudging Yuigahama.

“Um, we just came to pick Yukinon’s present.”

“Oooh, her birthday’s coming soon. Right.” Haruno-san nodded, then fetched her cellphone and start dialing. Hayama saw that and made a wry smile.

“She’ll probably won’t pick up. She told she wouldn’t come,” Hayama said, seemingly to keep the conversation going.

“Yep. But maybe she changed her mind?” Haruno-san replied and brought the cellphone to her ear. Her eyes squinted and I couldn’t comprehend what she was thinking, but she clearly was having fun.

“If she answers the phone, she’ll most probably come. Come on, pick up the phone, your big sis is being sad here...” Haruno-san pretended to cry. She redialed while staring at her phone. Yuigahama eyed Haruno-san with a strange look. Hayama apparently understood what she thought.

We have a tradition of gathering our families every New Year for a dinner. We’re waiting for the parents right now.”

“Oh... Congratulating everyone is probably hard...” Yuigahama muttered, impressed.

“Not really once you get used to it,” Hayama replied. Right. Especially with those communication skills of yours. Or more like the not-upsetting-anyone skills. But yeah, such things are a matter of habit. Hayama’s people skills were of course high, but going through this several times certainly helped.

And Hayama had plenty of opportunities to attend public events thanks to both school and his parents’ wealth and status. I was his complete opposite. Even though I attend the school I don’t engage in communications with people. My family wasn’t any better: I couldn’t even properly greet the relatives. Probably that’s why Hayama’s words “we’re waiting for parents” grabbed my attention.

“Hey...” I said, not knowing how to start a conversation with him properly. Hayama turned to me and showed he was listening.

“Then we’ll be in you way. Maybe we should go somewhere else?”

“Oh, right,” Yuigahama agreed. But Hayama just shook his head and reassured us with a smile.

“No worries. I’m sure Haruno-san’s glad she has someone to spend time with,” He said and looked at Haruno-san. She was still sitting with the phone by her ear but apparently overheard our conversation since she quietly nodded. Seeing this Hayama turned to us.

“See? Nothing to worry about,” He said hinting for me to agree with him. I didn’t.

“It’s gonna be uncomfortable talking to your parents.”

We just stumbled upon each other. Meeting their parents would be real awkward. Please postpone the meeting until the time we get to know each other better, I mentally replied Irohasu-style and looked at Haruno-san, who now was sitting absentmindedly diagonally from me.

“Don’t worry about it.”

“Even if you say so...” I said and Haruno squinted at me. Hey, I’m not that close with Hayama. Oh god why do I have to go through this?

“Hmmm....” Haruno-san said with a bored tone. Then her face lit up as if she got an idea and she started redialing again. Most probably trying to reach Yukinoshita. It wasn’t too loud inside the shop so I could clearly hear the dial tone. But Yukinoshita didn’t pick and Haruno-san only heard the voice mail announcement instead, so she constantly cut the call and dialed again.

What, another redial? What are you, Hiratsuka-sensei? My god. She had probably inherited this trait from her teacher. If someone had been calling like that to me, my phone battery would have died long ago. Haruno meanwhile dialed the number with the dull eyes, then again, and again, and again.

“Oh?” She said in surprise. Apparently the surprise was genuine. I heard the tired voice coming from the phone.

“Hello...” Yukinoshita said with a sad voice. Haruno-san’s tone, on the contrary, was perky.

“Hey there Yukino-chan! It’s your big sis! Can you come to us?”

“I’m ending the call.”

So fast! Both Yuigahama and Hayama smiled wryly. But Haruno-san seemed to get used to such a reaction, so she immediately replied with a merry voice:

“Oh really?”

“... What is it?”

Haruno-san smiled:

“Imagine that: I’m with Hikigaya-kun right now!”

“Stop lying. What-”

“Hikigaya-kun, here,” Haruno-san said and immediately pushed her phone to me..

“Hey- Wait-”

I looked at the phone, then at Haruno-san, but she hid her hands behind her back and clearly didn’t want to take the phone back. I heard Yuikinoshita’s voice from the receiver; she was calling Haruno-san. Okay, fine, I’ll reply.

“Ummm... hey,” I said, not knowing what exactly to say. Judging by the silence afterwards she was speechless. Then I heard an exhale.

“I’m astonished. What are you doing there?”

I would like to know that myself. Initially I was shopping...

“I was passing by and she caught me,” I said at the evil boss while trying to explain myself. But Yukinoshita stopped me with another sigh.

“Fine, I’m going. Give the phone to my sister.”

“Yah, sorry,” I apologised for some reason, wiped the phone with the tissue and gave it to Haruno-san. She conversed with Yukinoshita for some time and ended the call.

“Yukino-chan is coming!” She said with the satisfied smile. Somehow me and Yuigahama didn’t share her delight. She really liked to make people do what she wanted. Well, I knew that before of course, but seeing it happen before your eyes was really eery.

Hayato Hayama made a sad sigh, as if agreeing with us. He probably was the only one who was used to this trait of hers. Or maybe he gave up already. That tired smile of his wasn’t the one that was formed in one day.

“And what did you buy?” Haruno-san asked putting her phone away and moved closer to Yuigahama. The latter showed her the contents of her bag.

“I, um, bought her the indoors socks...”

“Hm... Oh, yeah, her apartment’s floor’s real cold this time of the year.”

“I know right? I visited her some time ago and the floor was really chilly.”

“Yeah, don’t like the cold either.”

They were chatting just like the normal girls would. Me and Hayama meanwhile didn’t have much to talk about, so we just kept on listening.

“A birthday present...” Hayama muttered and looked at me.

“What did you buy by the way?”

“This and that.”

“Okay,” he replied and turned away and continued listening to whatever Yuigahama and Haruno-san were talking about, saying something on his own from time to time. I instead simply watched the seconds hand on his wrist watch slowly circle. It simply moved in intervals without changing the tempo. After each full revolution it returned to the beginning. But the image the clock hands created together was never the same, even though nothing changed for the second hand. Yet it constantly was in a different position in relation to other hands.

“Maybe I should present her something too. Been a long time since I’ve done that,” Haruno-san noted suddenly while looking at the gift wrap, then threw a glance at Hayama.

“What do you think, Hayato?”

“Yeah...”

Hayama shrugged and turned to the window. Somehow I didn’t think he looked at the street lamps lighting up. I looked at his glass reflection and suddenly had a thought: what had he presented to her in the past?

t1-2

Time passed by uncomfortably slowly. Almost half an hour had passed since the call to Yukinoshita. To reach us from her apartment she'll need some more time. And it was us who called here over so far from her place, and now we couldn't leave. The coffee I've sipped was long gone, and the cloud of steam from the teapot was also no more. Yuigahama was fidgeting on her seat in irritation, throwing glances at the entrance. The only calm person here was Haruno-san. She checked something on her phone, then tapped the screen and showed something to Hayama.

"Check it out."

"Quite cute, yes," Hayama said with a smile. Haruno-san hmm'ed and smiled.

"Such a typical answer from you, Hayato," she replied and Hayama shrugged. I didn't know what she asked him about, but his reply was too polite. But yeah, that indeed was typical of him. Haruno-san immediately lost interest in us, stood up, moved to me and showed her phone screen to me. The screen showed some kind of pajama. Unsaturated pastel colors, some sweets-like thingies; overall it was really cute. Yuigahama looked at it too and whispered "cute". Seemed like Haruno-san had been studied it for some time already. And judging by the current conversation she was going to present it to Yukinoshita.

"What do you say, Hikigaya-kun?" Haruno-san asked. She was now lying on the table, supporting herself with her elbows and dangling the phone in her hand. I couldn't decide what to look for: her phone or her herself. She meanwhile looked me in the eyes. Why would you need such deep cleavage anyway? And your face is too close! Were this some kind of game where I had to stare at the screen, I'd lose it instantly!

"Quite cute, yes," I said averting my eyes from Haruno-san.

"Cynical answer. So you, Hikigaya-kun," Haruno-san proudly smiled and sat back to her seat, placed her order and started fiddling with her phone again. I was getting tired from this conversation. Sighing quietly I closed my eyes and lowered my head. Some time later Yuigahama noticed something and called. I raised my head to look and found Yukinoshita walking briskly to us.

"Yukinon, we're here!" Yuigahama said waving her hand. Yukinoshita noticed us and approached our table.

"Yuigahama-san, you're here too?" she asked in surprise. Oh, yeah, I didn't mentioned

it when we talked.

“Yeah, ummm... Me and Hikki were shopping when we were caught,” Yuigahama said giggling and touched her hair bun. She was apparently in doubt about saying we were shopping for her presents, so the phrase turned out to have a double meaning.

“Shopping... All right.” Yukinoshita replied and started throwing suspicious glances to me and Yuigahama. Feeling pressure from the question unasked Yuigahama started looking at me and Yukinoshita too. They didn’t say anything, just exchanged glances. Silence fell again, even though not for long. I heard only the other patrons talking, cups clicking on saucers, quiet music, waitstaff’s footsteps and Haruno-san’s muffled giggling. So many sounds yet the silence was somehow unnerving.

“Take a seat maybe?” Hayama decided to break the silence. Yuigahama moved on the sofa abruptly.

“S-sit here,” she called pointing to the now free seat.

“Oh, thanks,” Yukinoshita said and obediently put off her coat, carefully folded it and sat down. Then she turned to Yuigahama.

“I apologize for causing you trouble.”

“No, it’s okay,” Yuigahama said waving her hands. Yukinoshita exhaled, seemingly calming down. After that she turned to me and looked somewhere above.

“Hikigaya-kun, umm...”

“No problem, didn’t have anything better to do anyway.”

I didn’t have any plans as to what to do when we were done with the shopping. I even felt relief that we weren’t left alone together. Though I couldn’t say I was glad I’ve encountered these people either. The culprit meanwhile smile provocatively.

“Yukino-chan, you’re late.”

“You called me out of the blue and then you dare ask such questions?” Yukinoshita answered with a dark side glance. Haruno-san only looked at her in amusement. Yuigahama, as if caught between a rock and a hard place, simply tried to smile. No! Stop fighting, o Yukinoshita Sisters!

“But Yukino-chan came here as quickly as she could...” it was said by a kind and lively voice to lighten the mood some. Hearing him address Yukinoshita-like that I turned to

the source of the voice, Hayato Hayama. He realized that he said too much and smiled to smooth it.

Yukinoshita just quietly stared at him. He shrugged.

“Yukinoshita-san, would you like to order something?”

“Black tea, please...” she finally replied. Hayama quickly made an order. When the tea was brought Haruno-san made a long sigh.

“Been so long since we gathered to drink tea like this.”

“Yeah,” Hayama agreed.

Yukinoshita just closed her eyes, the teacup steady in her hands. Conversation stopped abruptly, and Yuigahama tried to resume it.

“Ah, um... Hayato-kun is your acquaintance?”

“Yep! He’s the only child so his parents really spoiled us too. Right, Yukino-chan?”

“Not really for me...”

“Oh come on. Not just his parents, everyone did.”

But neither Haruno-san’s words nor Hayama’s ear-to-ear smile didn’t affect Yukinoshita. Though Haruno-san seemingly was bothered by this at all, as she turned away.

“Been so long time ago. You were little, so when your parents were busy they left you in my care.”

Hearing it Yukinoshita frowned.

“You’re getting things wrong. In fact you just dragged us along wherever you wanted. It was horrible,” Yukinoshita said putting the cup on a saucer and threw a cold look to Haruno-san. Hayama reacted to that.

“Oh, right. That time in the zoo was bad.”

“And the seaside park too. She left us alone, she shook the Ferris wheel pod...”

Their faces become gloomy after they had to remember the dark times. Haruno-san instead only merrily confirmed Yukinoshita’s story.

“Yep, yep, true that. Yukino-chan used to cry a lot.”

“I didn’t. Stop making things up.”

“I dooon’t! Right, Hayato?”

“Hehe. Well, I wouldn’t say...”

Haruno-san recalled stuff, Hayama said something to that, Yukinoshita quietly nodded. Watching them talk about their past, I suddenly realised something. No matter what they said, they did spend considerable time together and experienced things together. An outsider had no place in those memories. Even Yuigahama didn’t try to take part in the conversation, to say nothing about me. I didn’t know what kind of relationships they had in the past, and even if I did nothing would change. All I could do was sip my bitter coffee and quip some neutral phrases from time to time. And imagine some things.

I was asked once: what would have changed had I attended their primary school? What did I answer back then? Deep in the recollections of the past, I suddenly heard the cup being put on the saucer. I turned to the source of the sound and saw Haruno-san, who propped her face with her hands and was now looking at Hayama and Yukinoshita with an unreadable look.

“You were so cute back then. And are so boring now,” Haruno-san’s beautiful shining lips uttered, smiling but with an icy tone. Everyone fell silent. Yukinoshita clenched her fists on the table while Hayama pursed his lips and turned away. Yuigahama looked at me, worried. Seeing the silence Haruno-san smiled.

“But now I have Hikigaya-kun. You couldn’ve cuddled her, you know. Would’ve been fun.” Haruno-san said finishing her phrase. I felt chills down my spine that very instant. She now stared at me, her eyes questioning but dark at the same time.

“Well, nothing physical please...” I said turning away so I wouldn’t drown in Haruno-san’s eyes. She smirked in response.

“That’s why I wanna cuddle you. Cute fluffy Hachiman, come to me,” and with those words she tried to put her hand on my head. I dodged her at the last moment.

“Oh, he ran away,” Haruno-san said kindly, like an elder sister. It was rare for me to see an older smiling beauty like this, so I couldn’t say I didn’t like it. And I didn’t care if this was a real face or a pretense anymore. No person wouldn’t try to be cuter than they were, like Iroha Isshiki. You can’t blame people for that.

What I was really afraid of was Haruno-san's darkness, the glimpses of which I caught. Right now, though, Haruno-san didn't say anything anymore. Instead she smiled and changed the topic.

"On topic of all things physical. You have a marathon at the end of a month, right?"

"Yeah, at the end of the month," Yuigahama answered. Haruno-san was surprised.

"Oh, not in February this year?"

"Yes. The homeroom teacher said they are shifting the schedule this year," Hayama replied calmly. Yukinoshita's face darkened. Oh yeah, you and your lack of stamina. She probably never liked these things.

Now carefree atmosphere was back again. It was all fine and good, but the company of five people having conversation drew attention. Of course we didn't look overly flashy, but we still stood out. Well, they stood out... I felt the stares from behind the entrance. They all were very beautiful people. So beautiful they turned heads while walking down the street. Because of that I got the impression I became even more invisible. I'm a shadow... But the brighter the light, the darker the shadow. I've got nothing better to do, so I'll just stay in the background. Just like Tetsuko Kuroyanagi. Since I didn't take part in their talks I instead sipped my coffee more often, so the cup became empty quickly. Perfect timing! A good reason to stand up.

"Sorry, gotta step out," I quickly said and left. In fact I didn't have anything that urgent to do. In general, when you say "I'm stepping out" in such cafes or restaurants, everyone understands the meaning. So no one will stop you or be in your way. Probably that's why people drink diuretic drink like tea, coffee or alcohol when they gather. They also help smooth the atmosphere, or, to be more precise, to reset it. For example if you happened to attend a banquet and encounter an unpleasant person you can always leave for the bathroom, then return and pick a different table. Maybe we should sell tea, coffee and something else under the mysterious slogan "beverage for traditional conversations", the sales would raise. Or not. Thinking about it all on the way to the exit, I suddenly heard a very alarming phrase.

"Oh, I've got some business too," a merry, perky voice said. All too merry to my taste even, to the point of being a lie. I heard the sound of quick footsteps behind me. She tapped my shoulder and I turned over. It was her.

"Take a walk with a big sis, will you? It won't take long." Haruno Yukinoshita said with a smile and a tilt of her head.

“But I’m, well...” I refused with a frozen smile on my own and started slowly walking to the exit, but her hand was still on my shoulder. Hmmm, I can run away this way! But at the very same moment her hand slid down and grabbed my arm firmly.

“Don’t be so cold. Let’s go on a date, Hachiman,” She whispered in my ear, suddenly drawing closer. Now that was one hell of a killer phrase. I couldn’t muster any resistance whatsoever and simply walked where she guided me, leaving the cafe behind.

Chapter t2: Alas, the Relationship Between Yukinoshita Sisters is Unclear

While we approached the escalator I carefully pulled my hand out of Haruno's grasp which had been there all the time

"So where are we going?" I asked her. Even a question this simple evoked a strange feeling inside me. Maybe because of her pulling me for so long I still felt the words she whispered in my ear still lingering around. That's why I couldn't look at her face while asking the question. I simply was following the clicking of her heels. Haruno in response stopped and half-turned to me. Looking me square in the eye, she smiled.

"Hm? Haven't I told you we're going shopping?"

"No, you didn't."

You have talked about a date! A date! Girls, please don't play with the simpleton guys' hearts like that. Though, whatever Haruno-san had told earlier, it won't change a thing. Even now she wasn't listening to me, instead walking forward while humming some tune and finally hopping on the escalator. She then spun around; the hem of her skirt flapped and settled back again. I barely managed to come to my senses after that when Haruno beckoned me.

"The shop we need is on the floor below. I've decided what to buy already so it won't take much time," Haruno-san noted with a mischievous smile. Looking at her appearance and behaviour I wouldn't ever think this girl was older than me. I was aware she wasn't the one to let your guard down around, but as I looked at this smile, I felt that constant sense of anxiety slowly fade away.

"Well that's not the issue here..." I noticed, not meaning anything in particular, and stepped on the escalator behind Haruno-san. We slowly descended to the floor below. Haruno-san hopped off and confidently went forward. The crowd was huge due to NEW Year sales, but Haruno-san seemingly plowed through it. Who is she, Moses? Though I partially understood what all those people felt while getting out of her way. Had I met such a person in other circumstances I'd stepped out of the way into the shadow too. Or maybe they were just delighted by the grace of her gait. Not me though: I've seen the edge of her inner darkness. Beauty is one of the method of subjugation too, or maybe more like intimidation. Add in the self-confidence and you get a devilish whip of a

winged tiger. Everyone in her way simply withers.

Maybe this was the answer to a question of why Haruno Yukinoshita is always alone. Though maybe she does have friends. Yeah, now that I think about it, I remember seeing her with someone when we first met, and when we met at the donuts shop she seemed to wait for someone. Hiratsuka-sensei, her former teacher, told about her having many acquaintances at school. But even still...

I concluded that she just liked solitude more. She had outstanding looks, cunning mind, not to mention her family... She could get anything a human would need while being completely alone-- that looked a whole lot like what I had wished. That also looked like Yukino Yukinoshita's lifestyle as I've seen it long time ago. That's why, probably, the Haruno-san I see is an illusion. Because even if she's lonely she can't strive for her loneliness voluntarily. Her affection for her sister Yukino Yukinoshita was a sure proof to that. I could easily remember how she stubbornly kept dialing Yukinoshita's number today, or how she always clung to her all this time. There was no doubt about it: Haruno-san simply couldn't ignore Yukinoshita's existence. This is a proof that she can't help but reach out to Yukinoshita and, ergo, can't strive for loneliness. Of course, I don't know her motives. This affection is too strong for a simple love to a sibling or a relative.

I had a younger sister too, but I wouldn't go out of my way just to tease her or intrude her love life... hm... Actually I would. I do that all the time. I constantly annoy her when she's at home, poke my nose into her exams and erase all the filthy bugs approaching her. It's a normal behaviour of an older brother towards his younger sister. Does that work for an older sister too? Does that mean Haruno-san's behaviour is also a norm? That's what I was thinking about with a frown on my face while following Haruno-san. At that moment she stopped.

"This one," and Haruno-san pointed at a shop's entrance. Everything inside was so fluffy and pastel-colored... This shop stood out even on the floor dedicated to stuff for women. Peeking inside I saw the indoors clothes and swimming accessories. Upon closer look I also noticed the socks, blankets, bathrobes and evening gowns, hair bands... Their design strongly reminded of ice cream and various sweets. Only girls inside. Judging by the overall feel a guy like me should not trespass...

"Umm, I'll wait," I said wiping the sweat from my forehead. Haruno-san smiled:

"Hey!" she shoved me in. Taking two steps I found myself inside. Aaagh! Any moment now a female store clerk would come to me and sternly ask "are you searching for something?", scaring me with her forced smile. I'll reply with just "no, nothing" mimicking some actress I've borrowed it from, start hating myself for it and sweat

profusely. Then the clerk will notice my sweaty forehead and exclaim “Oh my, you’re so sweaty! Is the heat too high?”; and with these words, made of 80% disgust and 20% care, she’ll give me a tissue. I started sweating even more while anticipating this turn of events. I wish she’d just give me some Bufferin [one of the trademark names for the aspirin] instead of that care. Right now.

But all this is only for the guys, more specifically the guys who live in the shadows. Women are another matter. This is their floor, so no need for them to be shy around here. Guys who have girlfriends and are used to entertainment of all kinds wouldn’t be alien here either.

Haruno-san confidently walked further into the store, obviously knowing what to do. I just followed her with my eyes while uttering sounds like those of a sea lion. Or maybe some sort of ancient chant, on such a proficient level that I should learn about its grammar and syntax more.

Haruno-san probably found me not following her strange. Turning to me she understood everything instantly.

“Don’t worry, they have men’s wear as well,” she said, then stood beside me and dragged forward. Well, if she does that much for me, I can’t afford being a coward anymore. Not to mention going hand in hand with Haruno-san was even more embarrassing. I pried myself away and followed her in small steps.

Only women... God. I turned on the invisibility mode. Haruno-san meanwhile seemed to search for something specific while humming some tune along the way. Grabbing an item of clothes she put it to her chest and turned to em.

“Hey look, the fabric’s so thick,” she said smiling. That took me by surprise: Haruno-san looked now very childlike and innocent.

“Well, that’s the material they used.”

We roamed around the store while exchanging meaningless phrases like that. I still wasn’t used to this place, so I moved slowly and carefully. But Haruno-san was a step and a half behind and constantly talking, so I didn’t feel any discomfort. Though just so you know, being with Haruno-san is not comfortable at all! Even though I was glad the clerks and customers didn’t pierce me with their looks.

We approached a corner with slightly different goods. Haruno-san immediately took one of them.

“Hey, look, it’s for men.”

In her hands was something like a white-gray striped pajama with a hood. The ends of the strings were finished with pompons, so this pajama of sorts looked cute. I reluctantly took it. A price tag caught my eye, surprising me.

“Whoah, expensive!”

I rechecked the price once more. Then once more again. It’s just a pajama, why a five-digit number then? In summer you can just sleep in pants and T-shirt, and in winter there’s always a sweater and a dotera [male padded kimono]... I just stood there, shocked by the world of fashion; Haruno-san couldn’t help but laugh.

“Yeah, you’re a guy, guys aren’t interested in this. But the reviews for this store are good. How about trying it on after all?”

“Well...” I uttered in displeasure after imagining myself in this cute pajama. No way it would suit me. Though it’s a pajama, you’re not supposed to show those to other people, so suiting or not wasn’t an issue here. There’s another one, way more serious.

I felt the consciousness of the 11th grade student shouting inside me. This way the girls will start hitting on me, and I’ll look like a popular guy! Bad! Very bad! Girls are really knowledgeable in all these clothes brands. Though my displeasure probably showed on my face since Haruno-san smiled again.

“Hikigaya-kun, you don’t try to hide your disgust at such moments. I’m impressed.”

“I’m an honest person.”

“The same can be said about me.”

Haruno-san countered my words without a hitch. I looked at her: charming smile adorned her face.

“Paired clothes is really attractive, don’t you think?” She seductively whispered in my ear. Her hot breath tickled my neck. I perfectly understood that she was just teasing, but my cheeks still felt warm. I didn’t even dare look at her face. Satisfied with my reaction, she leaned back.

“I’ll get some paired clothes for Yukino-chan and myself,” she added in a sing-song voice. I relaxed and breathed out.

“I think you as her sister would look better in that paired clothes than me.”

“Too attractive is also not good, the effect is reversed then. I’m attractive as it is,” Haruno-san answered ironically, as if anticipating my reactions. This was an empty meaningless conversation, but Haruno-san seemed to enjoy even that. Looking in her eyes I noticed sadistic glimmer. Nnno, I don’t like her after all. But then her look got darker.

“Though we used to wear paired clothes a lot,” she said quietly, as if bringing up old memories.

“Unexpected,” I said honestly.

“Why? It’s simple. Nothing surprising in the fact our parents bought us paired clothes,” Haruno-san said not smiling anymore, just looking at the clothes on racks. But it wasn’t the fact Yukinoshita sisters used to wear paired clothes that surprised me. Even I was sometimes dressed up similarly to Komachi to parents’ whims and pleasure. Their family may have the same habits. What’s more, the desire to look at the beautiful sisters in identical clothes was natural.

What surprised me was different. It was how Haruno Yukinoshita said that. It wasn’t adoration or tenderness that she expressed when remembering those memories. It was something else entirely. Something like a feeling of loneliness, as if speaking of something distant, lost forever. I didn’t know why I heard that desperation born of separation in her voice. I just felt that way. For now Haruno-san was beyond my comprehension. I probably won’t ever understand her at all.

I can’t even understand the feelings of people I’m relatively close with. Haruno Yukinoshita can get closer to me all she wants, but that still doesn’t let me understand her. For now she simply searched for the already chosen clothes, pretending she didn’t understand what I meant.

“Yup, this one after all,” Haruno-san said and draped the clothes item over her white blouse. It was light gray costume with pinkish polka dots. Haruno-san gently raised the collar up to her nose, and looked at me with pleading eyes.

“How is it?”

“Doesn’t look like your sister, but I think it’s fine.”

Haruno-san cutely pouted and intently stared at me. Eh? What’s wrong with her? Does she have such crafty methods in her arsenal? Her fortified outpost looked too perfect. Had I not known who she was I’d fallen immediately. And wouldn’t have regretted it one bit! Such was Haruno Yukinoshita.

“I meant it suiting me. Even its size wouldn’t fit Yukino-chan,” Haruno-san said and touched her chest. Yukinoshita sisters have one distinctive trait: they both can speak without words. Saying things that cruel-- that’s so Harunon. Hey, your little sis is worried about that too! Never ever say this to her! Promise your big bro! Okay, fine, I was asked to provide feedback, so provide feedback I will. This probably was the reason I had been brought here.

“Well... You know it yourself,” was all I could say. Haruno Yukinoshita has peerless appearance. That’s why everything she demonstrated looked very pretty in all the places. But the problem was... Seemed like those words of mine weren’t enough, and those pretty eyes reflected the steel will underneath, clearly demanding me to continue.

“Look very pretty,” I said averting my eyes under Haruno-san’s look. She nodded in satisfaction.

“Oh good. I’ll buy this one then,” Haruno-san said. She quickly put off everything she had tried on and nimbly folded them all, adding to it the costume of the same design, just snow-white.

“I’ll go to the cashier,” she quickly said and left. I was left alone without the Harunon-barrier that guarded me from the customers and clerks, so I quickly moved to the men’s wear corner. Maybe here I won’t be bothered...

... But then I immediately spotted a costume with the same design Haruno-san had recommended me earlier. Black, huh. Alright, okay, hm... Just a color change and a different impression entirely. Maybe this one will even look semi-decent on me. Hm, hm... The moment I reached for that costume-

“Sorry for the wait,” I heard the perky voice from behind me and quickly lowered my hand.

“That was fast,” I said calmly; Haruno-san looked at me with an apologetic look.

“Wrapping will take some more time, sorry,” she said and pointed to the chairs located in the middle of the floor. Seemed like it was some kind of a recreation zone. Apparently she suggested we wait there until the gift-wrapping is done. Haruno-san took her clothes and went to those chairs. And without Haruno-san here I felt very uncomfortable, so I obediently followed her. I unfolded one of the chairs and sat beside Haruno-san. She meanwhile opened the bag with her purchase and started checking the inside while purring something to herself.

“How about you? Have you made a choice already?” She said not looking away from the

package.

“Ah? Oh, I’ve bought the present some time ago.”

The question seemed out of left field, but judging by context she was asking about Yukinoshita’s present. But Haruno-san shook her head no while smiling, then slowly turned to me while looking square in the eye. It’s how snake turns its head while tracking the target.

“Not that. I meant you three,” She clarified and I froze. Her black eyes were clear and bright, but I didn’t see the bottom in them; it’s like they trapped my soul. If I try to learn about her motives, explain the question, I’m going to end up in a state where I won’t be able not to answer. That meant I could only do one thing. I opened my mouth and uttered without a pause:

“Us three? I usually don’t express my opinion in groups. That’s how it was during the summer trip and the school trip too. This looks noble.”

“I like your mannerisms,” Haruno-san replied and smiled charmingly. Tension in the air had disappeared somewhat, but her eyes were still dark, and I knew for sure this wasn’t the end.

“I don’t really care who you choose. But you don’t think it’ll end just like that, do you? It’s unnatural.”

She didn’t say anything concrete but I still understood what she meant. Haruno Yukinoshita had just shoved an undeniable truth into my face. I myself knew that truth. It’s your usual, not really outstanding, common truth. But if you just looked at it as a bystander you won’t see anything at all. So I pretended I didn’t see anything.

“‘Unnatural’ is synonymous to ‘artificial’. Almost everything we deal with is man-made and thus artificial. And accepting this artificiality is, you know...”

The indifferent observer listening to the ramblings of the bystander just smiled, and her laughter stopped them.

“You said it’s not what you would call genuine, right? What’s genuine then?”

Soft voice. Cold look. Wet eyes. Raw breath. She muttered not a reproach and not an important question. But not a single person is able to answer that. Several seconds passed, or maybe minutes; I finally came to my senses and heard the music playing on this floor. We kept quiet all this time. Suddenly I heard someone’s steps approaching us

from the side. It's the store clerk finally brought the beautifully wrapped gift. Noticing it Haruno-san perkily stood up and brightly smiled.

“Alas, time's up. End of a date. Let's go back,” Haruno-san said and went for her present. I still sat there.

t2-2

On our way back to the cafe neither me nor Haruno-san said a word. She probably had already said everything she wanted. There was no answer for the stated question, so that question's left hanging now. Instead... no, no "instead". It's just upon returning to her seat Haruno-san now was her usual energetic self.

"Here, Yukino-chan, happy birthday. Big sis chose very carefully," Haruno-san approached Yukinoshita and handed her the present.

"Sister... What's this all of a sudden?"

Yukinoshita had no reasons not to accept the birthday present yet she still was confused. Yuigahama too saw the gift wrap, and her eyes sparkled.

"Aah, it's from that store! Everything's so cute there!"

"Yep! Smart girl Gahama-chan, as expected. Cute things for my cute little sister! Let her feel my love," Haruno-san proudly said while pointing to Yuigahama. Yukinoshita followed their conversation, then took a closer look to the present.

"Love?.. Though come to think about it, it is indeed cute..." Yukinoshita quietly said and nodded. Seemed like she liked it. She carefully placed the wrap on her knees and opened it.

"Thank you."

"You're welcome."

Haruno-san looked at Yukinoshita's reddened cheeks and smiled in satisfaction. I tried to predict this, but turned out the world had been painted pink with all the kindness and tenderness. Yurinoshita sisters, I would like so much if you always stayed this way. I wasn't the only one enjoying this moment of happiness. Hayato Hayama also watched them all this time with gentle eyes. Then he seemed to notice something as he reached somewhere under the table, took his cellphone and checked it. Apparently he got mail.

"Haruno-san, it's time," he whispered.

"Oh, already?" Haruno-san said rolling the sleeve of her blouse and checking the small watch wrapped around her slim pale wrist. Seemed like they had to go meet the parents. It also meant we had to say goodbye now. I won't survive a "come with us". I'm not ready to meet Hayama's parents. A chance to flee!

“Well, we gotta go too.”

“Yep,” Yuigahama agreed. Haruno-san and Hayama also decided it was appropriate time to say their goodbyes and nodded.

“Oh...” Yukinoshita muttered absentmindedly. Me and Yuigahama on one side and Haruno-san and Hayama on the other looked at her in wonder. Haruno-san then stared at her intently.

“Yukino-chan, what do you plan to do?”

“What do you mean?”

“The meeting. You coming or not? We’ll celebrate your birthday too. Though I’m done for today so I don’t care,” Haruno-san said, her voice cold. And here she so desperately tried to reach her hours earlier. I don’t think handing the present was all Haruno-san wanted to do, but Yukinoshita did have a choice.

“Well...” Yukinoshita said, unable to choose, and hesitantly looked at Yuigahama and me. Yuigahama showed a puzzled smile.

“Ah, don’t mind us.”

“Yeah. We’re going home anyway.”

“Alright,” Yukinoshita replied indecisively and lowered her eyes. Yuigahama stopped smiling, but then remembered something and immediately reached for the bag under her arm.

“Oh, right! Here, take it. Even though it’s kinda early, your birthday only tomorrow and all,” Yuigahama said and handed Yukinoshita the bag with the presents. Well, if Yuigahama can do it, so can I.

“Congratulations,” I said.

“Th-thanks,” Yukinoshita froze for a second, but then thanked us while holding her presents to her chest and smiling. Looking at her Yuigahama couldn’t help but smile too.

“I’ll buy something sweet tomorrow, so we’ll celebrate at school too, okay?” Yuigahama added, probably out of politeness; she apparently too thought that just saying goodbye to friends in this situation is akin to shooing them. I think I should behave accordingly too.

“Bye,” I said raising my hand; Yukinoshita smiled again. Seemed like Yuigahama’s politeness was enough for us both since Yukinoshita hesitantly raised her hand in response.

“Yes, See you later.”

“Later!” Yuigahama perkily waved her hand.

“Goodbye,” Haruno-san said to Yuigahama while raising from her seat.

“Bye!”

“See you at school.”

Haruno-san broadly waved to us, Hayama calmly smiled; me and Yuigahama exited the shop.

The elevator was not far away from here. No one else headed to it, so the silence was only interrupted by the sounds of our steps.

“Hey, what do you think I should take tomorrow? Chocolate cake? Or maybe cupcakes?” Yuigahama asked stopping at the elevator call button.

“Just take whatever you like,” I asked; Yuigahama snorted in annoyance.

“Hikki, think properly about it too. I like both so I can’t decide. Hmmm, how about a half of both?”

“What is it, pizza? You don’t divide such things.”

By the way, does she really think we could eat the whole cake? Seriously? Well, if it was tasty then whatever. Though we really ought to pick something before we returned home.

A reached the call buttons. A triangle pointing up and a triangle pointing down. My hand stopped, hesitating to push any of the buttons. To select the right road forward... For that I pushed one of the buttons.

Chapter t3: Naturally, Iroha Isshiki Doesn't Forget About the Landmine

The first three days of the new years had passed, and the whole New Year fuss had died down. My parents, who were previously resting, went to work again and became busy as usual. Komachi started seriously studying for exams. Because of it me and Kamakura were left to our devices. But relaxing atmosphere doesn't mean relaxed mind for me. Leisure instills a sense of dread in the hearts of people. When you're constantly busy you don't have time to ponders about such things. When you've got nothing to do, you can't help but start thinking about your aimless future and become depressed.

Ah, I don't want neither to go to school nor go to work. Such were the thoughts that visit me during the short winter vacation. It's as if these thoughts make a hint: the time of leisure always comes to an end. In fact, we all know that this time never lasts long. And since you have so little time, your mind becomes burdened with a task of wasting it. I wonder if that's how it is for NEETs who suddenly realize their parents are getting old? Such thoughts I was thinking while lying on the floor and scratching the cat's fluffy belly. But the true strength was in being able to withstand that burden! I'm a real unemployed guy. Sometimes they say "time to show what you're capable of", mister unemployed ranobe writer. In other words, "ranobe writer" = "unemployed". QED. Or Spiral, if you prefer.

Today the school starts. Because of the mesed up daily rhythm I was in a hurry this morning. After washing my face, wetting and combing my hair and checking my look in the mirror I felt cold morning air washing away the remainder of my drowsiness.

All right, let's do our best today too!

t3-2

After the first day after vacation the class was noisier than usual. Overly excited students greeted each other and wished happy new year. Probably their excitement to meet each other was combined with one from the New Year.

Even after the classes had ended the excitement was still there. Many of the students stayed in the classroom, probably to discuss all sorts of things. Hayato Hayama and Yumiko Miura's group was especially outstanding. They always were the noisiest, but today they outdid themselves. Ooka, Tobe and Yamato, as usual, were chatting about various stuff, while Hayama was sitting near the window and looked outside, his head resting on his hand. Sometimes, as if remembering about their existence, he said something to keep the conversation going and smiled. The girls, on the other hand, appeared to not be interested in guys' talk and were chatting about something other. Though one of them didn't talk at all. She simply was sitting fully leaning on the chair and twirling her hair with a miffed expression. Though time after time she threw condescending glances at Ooka and others. Maybe Ooka was scared of her scorn, or maybe just decided to switch the topic, but, as if remembering something, he coughed and asked:

“By the way, Hayato-kun, is it true you're going out with Yukinoshita-san?”

“What?” Miura reacted without fully realizing what he had just said. So probably was I. What the hell was he talking about? That just... plain can't happen... right? Or can it? Upon hearing the question everybody froze. Too bad time can't freeze like that.

“Say what?!” Miura jumped up, her chair rumbling loudly behind. Everyone fell silent and turned to her. It's as if the whole classroom was submerged into water-- so quiet it was.

“N-nah, no way it can happen!” Yuigahama quickly said, sensitive to the atmosphere in class. Ebina-san agreed. There also was one more person speaking:

“Exactly. I heard that...” Yamato said, slowly and calmly, the Yamato no one usually noticed despite his height and physique. Everyone waited for him to continue, but he just fell silent. Instead he decided to turn his eyes to Yuigahama. The rest of the class followed suit.

“Wha?.. Me?.. She asked, shuddering. Maybe I shuddered too. The hell's Yamato blabbering about? That just plain can't happen... or can it? Throwing a glance at Yuigahama's direction I notice another person also looking at her.

“Yu... Yui? Eh?..” Seemingly having spent all the air in her lungs, Miura didn’t shout anymore, only opened and closed her mouth like a fish. Yuigahama and Hayama looked at each other.

“No-no-no-no-no! No way! Ain’t happening! I mean, I’m... Anyway, no!” Yuigahama defended herself while swaying her hands.

“Yes, Yui’s correct,” Hayama said calmly; that shifted everyone’s attention to him. Class fell silent yet again. So his words were clearly heard by everyone.

“Where did you get this irresponsible information from?” Hayama asked and looked at Ooka and Yamato; both shivered under his stare. Hayama always was detached, so now that he said it head-on, they stumbled, not knowing what to say. A drop of sweat appeared on Yamato’s forehead. But Hayama’s look clearly said “spit it”. I’ve seen that face of his once. It was in late autumn, at the double date with Orimoto and her friend. Under the pressure of this look Ooka started haltingly explaining himself:

“N-no one. It’s just... rumors... that you were seen together in Chiba during winter holiday.”

“Yeah. Heard that too,” Yamato confirmed. Hayama sighed lightly; the corner of his mouth raised slightly.

“Oh, got it now. I’m sorry, but it wasn’t that much of a rare event. Just family business and met Yui by accident.”

“Y-yeah! Exactly!” Yuigahama eagerly confirmed Hayama’s words. He just smiled and nodded:

“Besides, no way it can happen. Right, Tobe?” Hayama asked with his usual smile, tapping Ooka’s shoulder.

“Y-yeah, totally no way.”

“All right?” Hayama asked, as if to assure himself, and looked to Ooka and Yamato.

“Yeah, no way! I thought so myself!”

“Shouldn’t have said it in the first place then,” Hayama said and jokingly touched Ooka’s face with his fist. Everyone could clearly see the boys were joking, and the class settled down again. Hayama took his bag and stood up:

“To the club?”

“Yeah, ‘bout time.”

“Let’s go then,” He said calmly. Ooka and Yamato followed Tobe and said goodbye to the girls, then left. Miura wordlessly followed them with her eyes. She was still sitting there, biting her lip, her fingers grabbing her hair motionlessly. Yuigahama carefully put her hand on Miura’s shoulder and seriously looked into her face:

“It’s true, someone got mistaken. There were others with us too.”

“R-really?” Miura worriedly asked. Yuigahama just smiled:

“Yep. I was out shopping that day and met Yukinon’s sister by accident. Her and Hayato-kun’s families are actually friends, so they wanted to celebrate New Year together. Yukinon was just called there.”

What’s with this silly explanation? Like explaining things to a little girl. Ebina-san summed it up:

“I see. So someone accidentally saw them meeting for family business and the rumors spreaded.”

“Yeah, probably.”

“You three really stand out, so it’s easy to notice you.”

I finished listening, stood up and exited the classroom.

t3-3

Even the corridor was noisier than usual. Winter vacation had just ended, so everyone made a fuss over that. The students even gathered in the club wing.

“Hey, you heard? About Hayama-kun.”

“Yeah, heard that! Believe that, for real.”

I heard that all from the girls passing by. Maybe, as Ebina-san noted in classroom, they’ve heard some bits and pieces, assembled them as they pleased and spreaded them further. Thing is, it didn’t concern me in any way, but every time I heard that I felt an unpleasant sensation. It probably was the disdain for the people who I don’t even know who still were spreading those rumors. Though there probably wasn’t any evil intent in their actions. Maybe it was because those concerned the two people constantly on the tip of everyone’s tongue that this info was even juicier. So everyone naturally started gossiping about it without even checking the source. They mindlessly spread the rumors no one even could confirm. And if someone’s got caught on that, they could always disclaim responsibility by saying “it’s just a rumor”. Usually they always tried to grab as much attention as possible, but as soon as it all goes south they prefer to blend into the crowd. I really disliked that. I’d rather hear shit about myself eye-to-eye.

Thinking about that I heard perky footsteps behind, seemingly trying to catch up to me. That couldn’t be anyone else but Yuigahama. I slowed down a bit so she could approach me. Yuigahama hit my thigh with her bag.

“You left without me again.”

“Well, you were talking about something.”

Besides, I didn’t promise to wait for you to go to the club. Though I did make such promise all the way back in December. Apparently Yuigahama thought it was still valid.

“Hey, did you... hear our conversation?”

You were really standing out as you were, even without Miura shouting. I think the whole class heard it.

“T-There wasn’t anything! Honest!” Yuigahama quickly said taking several steps ahead and looking me in the eye. You don’t have to persuade me like that, you know.

“I’ve been there and seen everything. You forgot or something?”

“I didn’t... It’s just... not about that.”

“Rumors are rumors. A fiction.”

“Yeah, but...” Yuigahama said and stopped. Moment later she raised her face..

“But you know... One day it may become true for Yukinon and Hayato-kun... and me too...”

I tried to imagine that and failed. Yukinoshita was one thing, but Hayama dating someone specific was impossible to visualize. Yuigahama on the other hand was easy to imagine. She’s really popular with boys, according to Tobe. Besides, when we helped organizing the Sports Festival, I constantly saw other boys cling to her. Can’t think I like to think about it all though. So I tried to wrap the conversation up.

“Don’t know, just... Don’t talk about it in club, okay?”

“Hm? Why?” Yuigahama frowned and looked at me.

“She’ll get angry, you know.”

“Oh, right!”

That’s knowing someone for a year to you. I could easily imagine an angry Yukinoshita. She really would be mad when she learns about those irresponsible rumors. Me and Yuigahama looked at each other, nodded and opened the clubroom door for the first time since long ago.

t3-4

The clubroom was already warm. Sighing, I took my usual seat. Yuigahama's cake was already on the table, cut into slices.

"Happy birthday!"

"Congrats."

"Happy birthday, Yukinoshita-senpai!"

Yukinoshita appeared to be flustered by our words.

"T-thank you... Should I prepare the tea?" She asked and started brewing the black tea. Along with the sound of tableware clinking I heard the familiar surprised voice.

"Yukinoshita-senpai, so your birthday is January 3rd, huh... By the way, mine's on April 15th, senpai."

"Didn't even ask."

The hell was she doing here anyway? She lightly tilted her head, her flaxen hair swaying. Her cardigan's sleeves showed underneath the well-worn school uniform. In her small hand was a fork, as if she wanted something. Iroha Isshiki was in our club as if it was normal. She had one of the four slices and a paper cup full of tea. You're really good at adapting. Are you from TOKIO or something? She would probably survive on an inhabited island.

"What are you doing here?"

"Eh? Well, you know. There's really nothing to do in student council this time of year."

"What do you mean 'nothing'? There's always something to do. Not that I know the details. Then, I don't know, go to your club. You're still manager there, did you forget?" I said. Isshiki tapped my shoulder.

"Eh, what's the big deal? Oh! I came here to pick things I've left here before Christmas."

"You just made that up, didn't you."

Such a convenient excuse that was.

"Hm..."

Yukinoshita sighed while Yuigahama showed a strained smile. Damn you, Irohasu... We all understood everything but Isshiki still behaved like nothing happened. Like a Keroyon or something. May as well put her near the drug store. Still, she felt uncomfortable under our stares, so she started blowing the already lukewarm tea to distract us.

“Ah, by the way!” Isshiki suddenly switched the topic while smiling widely.

“Is it true Hayama-senpai is going out with Yukinoshita-senpai or Yui-senpai?”

“Uogh!” Yuigahama shouted.

“...Excuse me?” Yukinoshita abruptly said. Damn. How can Isshiki step on landmines with such a calm expression. What are you, from Hurt Locker? Not to mention a four-seam fastball without any warnings. With you as a pitcher any game would be over soon. And if anyone learns about your fastball you’ll become famous very fast. Though, it’s Iroha Isshiki I’m talking about. No doubt she’d done that on purpose. And she came here specifically to check if the rumors were true or not.

“Iroha-chan, you know...” Yuigahama started explaining.

“Isshiki-san...” ... but was immediately stopped by a scary cold voice. I looked at her. Her smile was like northern lights, her eyes were forged from ice caps. Isshiki clearly saw that and now was shivering. Even her voice was shivering.

“Y-Yes?” Isshiki managed to reply and immediately hid behind me, only peeking from behind my shoulder. Hey, stop using people as shield, you! Yukinoshita’s killer stare was directed at Isshiki.

“There is no way it can happen, don’t you think?”

“O-of course! I thought so too!”

“Yeah! No way!” Yuigahama eagerly confirmed.

“No-no, Yui-senpai, in your case it totally can happen,” Isshiki said waving her hands..

“Why?!” Yuigahama cried. What do you mean why?.. Well, take your looks for example. Looks is a scary thing! Seriously. While I was thinking about it, Isshiki again started saying something to a miffed Yuigahama and still mad Yukinoshita while swaying her hands all the while.

“Well... I knew from the start that neither Yui-senpai nor Yukinoshita-senpai don’t go

out with him. But I'm still interested in those rumors."

"Rumors?" Yukinoshita asked looking at me and Yuigahama.

"Yeah, people talk about stuff," I said.

"I was surprised too. You know, about us going out? Remember we met back then? Seems like someone has seen us and jumped to conclusions."

"I see. The usual gossip of the lowly trash."

Oh come on. Others' love life is always a favourite topic for any high school student. Add to that the fact that Hayama, Yuigahama and Yukinoshita are very noticeable people who everyone wants to discuss even more. Isshiki had a crush on Hayama, so it was only natural for her to check the rumor. I looked at her. Isshiki seemed to be in doubt, tilting her head and thinking about something.

"But that's real bad."

"Indeed. It's very inconvenient for those who perpetuate the rumors."

"Ah, no, that's not what I'm talkin about," Isshiki carefully said. Yukinoshita tilted her head.

"What, then?" She asked. Isshiki lifted her finger.

"It's kinda strange, but until now there weren't any rumors about Hayama-senpai's love life."

"True," Yuigahama noted, looking at the ceiling as if pondering some idea. Ah, got it. I indeed didn't remember ever hearing about this aspect of Hayama's life. Though it's not like I would really know about any aspect of his life. Not that anyone makes reports to me specifically about that or something. So all I can do is suspect. May as well google with Kokkuri-san.

"So many girls are worried about those rumors," Isshiki muttered crossing her hands. Yep, no one ever gossiped about Hayato Hayama dating anyone. Hayato Hayama... It honestly wouldn't be strange if he did date. His good-natured behaviour attracts girls. And I think many of them were afraid of such developments. And now, not thanks to the gossiping, the possibility of him going out was now obvious to everyone. I wonder how his closest environment would change regarding that.

"Rumors... He's really unlucky..." Yukinoshita muttered to no one in particular. I saw

ripples in her teacup.

“Oh come on! Don’t worry about that! They’ll die down eventually! You know what they say, all the rumors only last 49 days!” Yuigahama tried to console her.

“It’ actually 75 days.”

What, someone’s died recently?

“Anyway, let’s not dwell on it!” Yuigahama exclaimed for Yukinoshita’s sake. Indeed, everything we could do was just keep quiet. Fighting those who feel delight in spreading the rumors was meaningless. One just needed to crawl into a dark place and shut up. That was the only way to counter the negative misunderstandings and the tendencies to mock someone. Any attempts to persuade them otherwise while you’re red from shame would only agitate them further, because all they really want is entertainment. Besides, if anyone tried to defend the bullied person, they’d become the target themselves. This game always has a loser, like in rock-paper-scissors. A person could be criticized even for doing nothing, but in any case the damage will be minimal. Yukinoshita apparently knew it too, as she nodded:

“All right.”

“Would be nice,” Isshiki’s words were similar, but their meaning was slightly different. You start worrying me, so don’t do that anymore. I looked at Isshiki. She was simply drinking tea, like some granny on a veranda. She doesn’t plan to stay here until she gets some work in student council, now does she?

Chapter 4: The Person With a Real Request Arrives Late

Having checked the life and behaviour of a certain Hayato Hayama I've noticed one thing. Generally Iroha Isshiki's concerns turned out true. She said that the rumors could change the Hayama's immediate environment, and change they did. Everyone constantly blabbered about those rumors in every class and in the corridor, to no end. Hayama and Yukinoshita were standing out, truly they were. They both could take pride in that. I've also noticed that even during the breaks my classmates kept sending looks at Hayama and Mirua, and even at Yuigahama. Right now I was hearing the conversation held by the girls behind my seat.

"Wonder how much of that is true?"

"Me too. Maybe they are going out after all."

"I've asked one girl from Class E and she said no way."

"Yeah she wouldn't bug them 'bout that. What a kind girl."

They didn't say anything concrete, mentioned neither Hayama himself or anyone he was supposed to go out with, but it was still clear for me. These rumors had no grounds, not to mention any roots or stalks. But they did give fruits in their own way. That's why those rumors were so fun to discuss. Seventeen year old girls liked to chat, even loved to, and talking about celebrities was the best of them all. The girls whose names I didn't even know meanwhile continued their conversation.

"Huh. Never thought that Yukinoshita would fall for a pretty face."

"Totally. I mean, they don't even know each other, so they only go for looks, right?"

"But then Hayama-kun is in for a pretty face too?"

"Isn't he?"

The girls laughed. Though they conversed quietly, so that Hayama and his friends wouldn't hear.

It all was getting on my nerves. Hate it, honestly.

It's like some kind of an unpleasant sound, akin to insects buzzing or clock ticking in the middle of a night. You can't help but click your tongue in irritation. Even me, an entirely unrelated person, was irritated. People who the rumors were about probably were too. All the crap people tell each other, as if it's a bad joke, was all just their guesses, assumptions and fantasies mixed with jealousy. Very few of them did have any evil intents. If you try to debunk those rumors earnestly, they'll just tell you to not take it all too seriously.

I knew all this not because I simply imagined these things. I realized this because I knew these girls. All this time Hayato Hayama and Yukino Yukinoshita had been living in a world where they received a lot of attention and expectations from those around them, and also a dose of envy and disappointment along with those. The institution made for watching over the teenagers we call school was truly a prison. Popular people are shoved under the spotlight while others start watching over them without even being asked to, from a position of good will and curiosity. And sometimes the crowd punishes them. It's like a never-ending Stanford prison experiment. No one ever asked all these people to interfere, and yet they still did it out of sense of duty. And in the middle of this crowd, all this time, was Yui Yuigahama.

The nameless security guards behind my back meanwhile were still talking. But then a new sound was added, a sound of something hard hitting the desk. The voices fell silent. I looked at the source of the hitting. It was Miura: she crossed her legs and was drumming her nails on the desk. Her face was turned to Yuigahama, but her eyes were directed at me. Her appearance was only overpowering if you looked at her face but her scary look would get to me even from the side. Scary. Three times scarier than usual. It wasn't me she stared at, but I still turned away. Hayama, who was sitting across her, made a strained smile. They both probably didn't hear the girls' conversation, but the atmosphere in the class said it all anyway. One could feel their intentions or interest without listening to anything. Miura had just used the same way of communication to tell them she wasn't pleased, at all. The girls apparently found it difficult to stay in the class, so they both rose up from their seats and passed me on their way to the exit. Moving the rumors committee to the toilet, probably.

"Damn, that was scary! Did she hear us or something?"

"Dunno. Wonder what she's thinking about all this? She's Yuigahama-san's friend and all."

"Yeah, don't want it to turn into a battlefield."

"And you say that with a smile. Cool."

I lied on the desk, pretending not to hear them talk. Otherwise I would've stare at Miura's clique again. Ripples that started on the pond's surface would disappear eventually. But, then again, there also was that butterfly effect theory. And so I endured through this break while listening to the cold wind hitting the window.

t4-2

The wind was still strong even after the classes had ended. It was the strong wind coming to us from Kanto plains. The wet air mass coming from the sea was being stopped by the mountain ridge starting in Ou region, so all we got was this dry wind. And this dry cold wind was knocking at the glass of the classroom's window at the corridor side. But inside-- inside was warm and moist. And the main source of this was steam coming from the teapot's nose.

"And what are you doing here again?" I asked Isshiki, who was holding a paper cup with both hands. Hearing my question she put it in on the desk. Then Icchiki straightened her collar, smoothed her skirt and combed her forelocks.

"I need to talk to you today," she said with a serious tone. But due to her "fixing" her collar I could see her collarbone, her disturbing of the skirt led to unneeded attention, and her newly-combed forelocks accentuated the innocent expression in her eyes. So no, she didn't look serious to me at all. She managed to distract me for a moment, but my spirit is strong, so I turned away from Isshiki with a nagging feeling in my chest.

"I'm not helping the student council anymore."

"I see..." Isshiki said, slightly miffed. Was it me or did someone click her tongue? I was just me, right, Irohasu? Suddenly Yukinoshita who watched our exchange, coughed.

"You didn't plan to make us work for the student council on your way here, now did you?" she asked, smiling. But I felt unspoken pressure in her smile. Her words were so simple yet I felt chills running down my spine. Isshiki instantly corrected herself.

"Of course, I was kidding! I'm working properly!"

"So what did you want?" Yukinoshita asked and sighed looking at Isshiki's behaviour. The latter put her finger on the chin and started speaking, as if thinking aloud.

"Recently the girls started to make passes at Hayama-senpai more often."

"What do you mean by 'making passes'?"

"Well, confess to him, basically. Or maybe just to show off or check stuff," Isshiki replied to Yuigahama in a neutral tone. ответила Иссики Юигахаме нейтральным тоном. I remembered things I've seen yesterday. But of course I wouldn't be able to tell that to Yukinoshita and Yuigahama конечно, Юкиносите и Юигахаме я это

рассказать не смогу, since their thoughts were very far away from now.

“What do you mean check?” Yukinoshita asked.

“And how can you show off?..” Yuigahama added. They both looked at Isshiki with doubt. After coughing and straightening up Isshiki turned to me together with the chair. Making short but heated exhale she looked at me, her eyes shimmering.

“Senpai... do you... have a girlfriend?” She asked with a trembling voice and pink cheeks. Isshiki’s unexpectedly thin white hand underneath the unbuttoned sleeve was gripping the collar ribbon. Thanks to the folds on the fabric I could see the movement beneath her blouse. Her moist eyes were fluttering gently. Due to this unexpected sight my heart started beating faster; I swallowed some air to calm it down.

“N-no...” I clumsily uttered. The clubroom fell silent. I was quiet; so were Yukinoshita and Yuigahama. In this silence Isshiki finally showed her true smile.

“Something like that.”

“And w-what’s the difference? Hey, Hikki?”

Well... can’t say you managed to show herself. Yeah... Oh come on, who am I kidding! She did it excellently! Bravo, Isshiki!

“Hikki?..” Yuigahama called me and I turned to the voice.

“And why are you quiet?” Yukinoshita asked with a wide smile. Stop that, your smile scares me.

“Well, ummm... I understand Hayama’s situation now, ahem, yeah, perfectly understand.”

So the girls check out if the rumors are true and, if they’re lucky enough, confess to him. And even if they don’t they still get closer to Hayama. Somehow reminds me of a bonus disk with an additional character route. And probably nothing else. Anyway, this is one of the consequences of those damn rumors.

“So what did you want to talk?” I asked. Isshiki made a pompous snort.

“I want to get ahead of the competition.”

“Hmm...” I dispassionately muttered, my amazement and surprised increasing one and a half times over.

She's quite stubborn if she hadn't given up yet, that girl. Isshiki thought I was expecting some elaboration, so she started speaking again.

"This whole situation is a good opportunity for me. Usually everyone just confesses and that's it, right? Besides, Hayama-senpai is probably tired of all those confessions. So I'll really stand out among them and will be a cheese in a mousetrap-- err, I mean music to the ears."

Nah, it's too late to correct yourself. And music to the ears? You're that music to the ears? Well, Isshiki does have that attractiveness of a young maiden, but... That's not the point. I don't really care about anything between her and Hayama, so I didn't bother listening to the end. I simply checked if the others did. Hm, turned out they did, with very serious faces.

"A cheese..."

"A mousetrap..."

After parroting her, Yukinoshita and Yuigahama looked at Isshiki with earnest expressions. Their behaviour was overly serious for some reason. I even felt chills for a moment. Danger in the air, I feel it. But Isshiki didn't notice their looks-- she was looking at the window. Probably and the boys playing soccer in the schoolyard.

"So I thought that maybe we could go out somewhere, relax and all."

One side of Isshiki's face was illuminated by the sun rays. Her image was somewhat worried, yet gentle. She said it with her usual tone, playfully, but I thought she did care about Hayama after all. Nice scheme, really. I think any guy's heart would skip a beat if you show this side of yours to them.

"Not a bad idea," I said smiling; Isshiki's face lit up.

"Yeah! I just don't know where to go."

"I think you can think something out yourself."

You've got the wrong people to ask that, I'm telling you. Yuigahama may have some opportunities to obtain such information from her friends, but neither me nor Yukinoshita had any idea about where to go out and relax. After hearing me out Isshiki pouted:

"I've already tried everything I knew. That's why I need new ideas."

“Oh.”

You move really fast, girl! Maybe you are from TOKIO after all. I’m pleasantly surprised. Yuigahama put her finger on the chin and tilted her head.

“So you want to know a relaxing place where one can forget their troubles or something like that, right?”

“Put it simply, yeah, something like that,” Isshiki nodded. Yukinoshita took a sigh.

“Why not, then?” she said like an older sister. Isshiki smiled too, since during such moments Yukinoshita became more open.

“Thank you very much! Senpai, what do you think?”

“Just the right person to ask.”

I didn’t have a single idea. Maybe Destinyland was an option to consider, but on second thought the person who was rejected there wouldn’t return back. Even though I don’t know Hayama, but he would pretend to have fun wherever he’s dragged to. As to how he actually feels, I didn’t know. While I thought about it Yuigahama moved closer, together with her chair.

“Hikki, you have any ideas? Just for a reference, you know...”

“I’m not Hayama,” I said. Yukinoshita smiled:

“Indeed. Different as night and day.”

“That’s what I said.”

“Yeah.”

Even though Yukinoshita was laughing at me, I wasn’t angry, because it’s a fact. I think my personal stats were decent but incomparable to Hayama. Maybe our key difference was that small fries constantly think highly of themselves. No really, I’m a small fry, can’t get any smaller... But girls do like them too! I should think positive!

Yukinoshita coughed, turned away from me and continued:

“But if you’re his antipode, your opinion would still be valuable. If we take an antipode of your opinion we may end up with something useful.”

“That’s not certain.”

Strange logic. Kinda reminds me of Papa Bakabon. I wanted to argue further, but Yukinoshita and Yuigahama were looking at me expectantly. Don’t stare at me with such serious faces, or I’ll say something strange...

“I’ll think about it,” I managed to utter just to let those stares off me. I heard a sigh, a cross between satisfaction and disappointment.

“Think properly about it, then,” Isshiki said with a happy smile. That’s easy for you to say! I barely think about myself, how can I also think about you? I’d like to ask this question. Oh well, I’ll give it a thought.

Anyway, Isshiki’s attitude towards Hayama had also changed because of the rumors. Hayama’s immediate surroundings continued to change. Well, what about other concerned parties? Yuigahama was in the same class with me, so I more or less understood her. Fortunately she had understanding Miura and Ebina-san, so no problem here. But as for the other person, I didn’t know.

“By the way, Yukinoshita, did anything change because of the rumors?”

“Me? Well, people rarely approach my classroom, so...”

Right, Yukinoshita’s Class J of International Affairs was located at the end of the corridor, with 90% of it being girls. So the atmosphere in her class was different, and most students try not to disturb them. Maybe that’s why Yukinoshita had it better than Hayama. Though I don’t think that was enough to shield her from the rumors completely. Yukinoshita took a deep sigh.

“Some of them do talk behind my back, but this is how it always was,. So I can’t say if anything changed.”

“Ah, I totally understand that! People constantly talk about those who stand out too much!”

No, Isshiki, that’s not your case... Yukinoshita nodded to her and muttered:

“It’s just not so malicious as it was before.”

That “before” of hers clinged to me. The past I don’t know about. Or the past she doesn’t talk about. The past that’s linked to him. But do I have the right to ask her about it? I think me, being a bystander, really couldn’t do that. Do I have a right to ask about

things she doesn't talk about? I meekly tried to ask but at this moment someone knocked at the door two or three times. Everyone looked at the door and the opportunity was lost. The door opened without invitation.

"You free?" she asked, her voice angry and irritated. The girl looked inside the room, and her golden locks swayed in strange manner. It was Yumiko Miura standing at the doorframe.

"Yumiko? What happened?" Yuigahama asked.

"Need to talk."

"Oh. Then come in," Yuigahama replied. Miura nodded and entered the room while throwing a suspicious glare at Isshiki.

"Well, I got some stuff unfinished at the student council, so I gotta go," Isshiki immediately took the hint and left.

"Bye-bye!" She said and closed the door. Yuigahama looked at it, then offered a chair to Miura. She sat across the desk.

"So what do you want to talk?"

"Yeah... well... What was it?.." Miura carefully uttered word after word, uneasily turning aside. Then she made a deep sigh and looked straight at Yukinoshita with a sharp stare full of hostility. She immediately asked:

"Is there anything between you and Hayato?"

Judging by her tone and look she came to talk about the rumors. Those irresponsible rumors weren't just limited to our classroom-- the whole school knew about them. Back when Isshiki came with this question on the club's very first work day after the vacation, I should have understood she wouldn't be the only one to check the rumors. Yumiko Miura was closer than anybody to Hayato Hayama. And she wouldn't let those rumors slide.

Afterword

Hello everyone, Watari Wataru here. The a-series goes on slowly, and we've already reached the Volume t. And so here's the fourth author's afterword."a", "n", "o" and now "t". You get it already, don't you? I think everyone knows the answer already. Now all you can wait for the continuation.

But even knowing the right answer you can't always give an honest reply to the question. When I was still a student, I never thought about if the answer was right or wrong, and simply filled in the blanks as I pleased. Now I think it was the best way to earn the bonus points. But if the answers were wrong... well, yeah, answering was a hefty task. Even knowing the answer is right you still hesitate before writing it down-- you don't want to risk after all. But the exam time is limited so you have to write something in any case.

Anyways, here's oregairu.t. By the way, I've written about speeding up the narration pace to make it in time, but I couldn't do it this time. Hey... I really won't make it at this rate. That damn Watari Wataru, constantly saying "I'll definitely make it in time! This time for sure Ahaha!"! Baka! Liar! Maggot! flukeworm! It's not Wataru Watari, it's TKU or something! [some Japanese TV channel, no idea what he meant]

So yeah, time certainly flies, and not just for the manuscript deadlines. It's been three months since anime had ended. A lot of time had passed, and I already start forgetting the finer details. And also my forehead's even more prominent now. And so that it won't get bigger any further... I mean, so that I won't forget the details of the anime, instead of using a notebook I've increased the number of pages here. Here I'll share my personal opinion about episodes 6-7 as a viewer, reader and original creator. Personal, I said! So no one can tell if these opinions are right or not. Okay, you got your shields ready! Reedi, rettsu go! [was written in English originally]

Episode six, "The Committee Works Well, but Doesn't Move Forward." From the very beginning we are treated by a ball of sunshine named Totsuka. Hachiman, what's with this behaviour? Don't you have any respect at all? Or maybe you're simply not ready yet. I'd really like to discipline Hachiman but he seemed to be lost in thoughts about something, so I let him be. Same's about Yui who purposefully approached him and said "let's go to the club together". She'd said this many times but this time quality and quantity of the meaning in these words differed. And while Hachiman did promise to go with her, he waited in a place where he couldn't be seen. Seems like he's still sane. His self-esteem, or, more likely, his impression of others' esteem of him, is low. Though, if

we talk about his self-esteem, he does acknowledge his skills. But how it all is seen by other people is still unknown, so he can't get a right answer. Had he turned up in the beginning of this series of events, he would've understood.

Then in the club awaits Yukino's weak silent smile, superficial talks and unused tea set. By the way the tea set appears in the opening and I'd be glad if you rewatched it. Everything's in its place in the club, but the clubroom's still changed. And the closed door is opened by Iroha Isshiki. This Irohasu is so Irohasu! But Yukino listened to her request with a cold smile, like that of a porcelain doll. And her words "alright, fine" are not an agreement, just an acceptance. And Hachiman rejected Iroha's request precisely because he felt that. Iroha looked so cute when being chased out of the clubroom! Irohasu! By the way, this "I'd feel ashamed if my friends see us going home together"... Hachiman, how old are you?

And so the the event preparation started. Iroha stepped into that increased distance between him and the girls. It's Irohasu's time. And Hachiman turned on his "big brother mode" when he took her bags at the convenience store, dammit. Eh? What's that? Are they going out?

And finally, the main character of the second season, Tamanawa, appears. Apparently he's the best dancer in the "committee" show. Guaranteed "Dancer in the Dark" in the future [yes, the von Trier's movie]. Kaihin High has such self-conscious students! And his hand movement really piss off. I have some pleasant memories about the discussion at the recording studio about the meaning of that "self-conscious". Here we also meet the rest of the student council. You've already seen this unremarkable secretary girl. So nice and pure while in reality... that's how you started thinking, right? So yeah, people hadn't accepted Iroha yet. Seems like the main reason is the age different. Iroha is younger than them, but in the end they decided to go easy on her. Communication skills can get handy in the future, but the irony is, going easy on someone only distances people. The situation in the club is about the same. While, one the other hand, Hachiman communicates with Iroha right, so they get to better understand each other. Even though Hachiman himself will notice it way later.

Also this Orimoto-san in the end was such a cutie. Yes, a bright cheerful girl who can just talk to you. I think I'm falling in love... Okay, it's just nostalgic ramblings of an old man, so we switch to episode seven "And yet Everything in the Club is as Usual." For the time being the situation in the club hadn't changed, so the Christmas card with some detergent was a breather. Turns out Komachi is good at drawing! Such a sweetie! Want one for myself. A brother and a sister who love each other... Even I want to say "I love you" like him, but all I can say is "please love me". Next up were the phrases like "going to the club?". There was way more of this phrase in the light novel. Well, you know...

Even when you do the same thing over and over, your emotions can change every time, reflecting changes in the relationships. Yeah, well... I really need more jokes, serious.

Seems like Iroha got her psyche damaged a bit, and Hachiman who looked for her stumbled upon Hayato Hayama at the schoolyard. Last time they talked during the double date with Orimoto. Hayama tries to look cheerful so as not to bring up that conversation. Eternally cheerful look of Hayato Hayama actually scares. Hachiman decided they don't understand each other but tries not to show it to Hayama, who's unable to understand that. Probably that's why cold words appear in his speech. This also means that Hayama is a person who Hachiman can't ignore. Even though Hachiman gets his feelings from time to time, it's still hard for him to fully comprehend Hayama. Same goes for Hayama: he can understand Hachiman's feelings, but not the way of thought. That phrase "you're unable to refuse when being begged" that he said Hachiman in the face, that phrase hit hard. During that double date Hayama tried to get closer to Hachiman, to understand him, that much is true. The words he had said back then, "I help because someone asked me to help" struck some chord inside me. He remembered it, he acted according to it, and...

Well, let's leave it at that. You like how Hachiman took the bags from Iroha at the convenience store, didn't you? Didn't you? Me, the author, showed it well too, but looking at this scene in the anime I fully understand how the acting helps. Though I still thought they were flirting with each other.

One of the highlights of this episode is the appearance of the beautiful Rumi-Rumi, Rumi Tsurumi. I don't know if it's related at all, but the very first volume mentioned one Tsurumi-sensei.[it did. Beginning of the Chapter 3], All because Wataru Watari assigns names out of left field again. Sorry.

Since the last meeting with Hachiman she became way prettier, for which she gets a lot of Wataru Watari Points. She's really beautiful now, don't you think? Grade schoolers are really the best!

Okay, we got to see Rumi and others, now on to the meeting. It's going nowhere. Everyone's supposed to smile to each other, but the thing is, they all can't. And then, like an oasis in the desert, appears Totsuka. But looking at it all you realize the oasis won't help here. Emotions are a cold rain... Let him be the ray of sunshine in the dark for now.

Hachiman walk with Iroha in the rain and meets Orimoto. When being asked about the past again Orimoto evaded the direct answer. "Well, that's a thing of the past". Maybe this change is the result of Hayama's actions.

The rain is bound to stop, and everything is bound to end, so Hachiman will have to face the things he'd run away from. Not deceiving, but not telling the truth either - this is how their meeting turned out. "Tried to do it on my own, tried to understand," - those are Yukino's words about her past self. She also asked if he needed permission. Seemed like she wanted to confirm something when asking this question. If Hachiman had answered something else, then... except there's no point in thinking about things that didn't happen. "If this is enough to break everything, it was this fragile from the very start." Hachiman couldn't reply anything to that. Maybe they hadn't lost their common beliefs yet, so this question simply dissolved in the evening sky. Anyway, listen to my impressions next time too, all right?

Acknowledgements.

Ponkan8-kami.KMC, KMC! You're a god again! I adore Komachi, and you, Ponkan, even more. Thanks as usual! Keep up the good work!

Executive editor Amano-san, ahahaha! Sorry. Thanks a lot. And I'm going to enjoy the free time I have now, ahahaha!

Director Oikawa and the rest of the anime staff! Thank you for everything. We're close to the finishing line, let's work on!

Takuya Egushi, Hachiman's seiyuu, and the other voice actors! The story is reaching its climax in a handful of episodes! Thank you for your excellent acting, I feel your souls you've put into this work! Our collective work over this title isn't over, so let's work together!

And finally, to viewers and readers. Thanks for your steady support. I'll work hard on the main and a-series till the end. Count on your support. I will be really happy if you stay with us till the end.

The free space is almost over and so I put my pen here. See you!

It's August, and the adults like sweet things too. Just like me, sitting with a can of MAX Coffee in a middle of the night.

Wataru Watari.

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