



Oregairu Volume R

Chapter 1

[For a short while, in this warm room]

A strong wind swept through the area, taking the scent of the sea with it. The wind traveled from the mountains, towards the sea. The cold air that came at the end of January cooled my burning cheeks.

The marathon had come to an end, and the awards ceremony that I had only a brief glimpse of has ended as well. Yuigahama and I began to make our way back to the school from our current location, Kaihin Park.

If I had been my old usual self, I wouldn't be doing things like watching the awards ceremony come to an end with Hayama's complete victory; I would probably have gone straight home without anyone interfering. I wouldn't even have felt a single bit of emotion.

However, I wasn't able to do that today.

I had done something stupid during the marathon and hence gotten myself injured during it. Then I had received treatment from Yuigahama as well. Going along with this flow of events, I now found myself taking her arm.

With the two of us nestled close together, we walked along the path that led us right back to school.

Looking at her would make me embarrassed. Thus, my eyes constantly shifted left and right, looking here and there. I carried the slightly heavy first aid box in my hand. I readjusted my grip on the black plastic handle of it and let me gaze drift off to the roadside trees.

The sight of the leaves falling from the tips of the branches cast a bleak image in my mind.

My sweat-stained shirt robbed me of my warmth.

The cold wintry air ripped through us, and my ear that had turned a bright red felt a stinging pain.

Touching my lips with the tip of my tongue, I could tell that it was all thanks to this wind that my skin had become parched. The midwinter air was warning all of my five senses of its coldness. Despite that being the case, there was the traces of heat, in a place where no one can see, where no one can touch.

All of a sudden, I found myself swallowing my saliva quietly, probably because of the drifting sweet smell of the person beside me that had found its way into my nose.

We continued on walking in this somewhat uneasy silence. The only sounds that reached my ears was that of troubled breaths. Whether it came from her or me, I had no idea. At the moment when the timing of these breaths coincided with one another, we looked at each other directly.

"Ahaha....."

Yuigahama let out a shy laugh to hide her embarrassment. If I could, I would love to laugh as well, so as to make light of the current situation I was in. However, it's a pity that I didn't possess such a skill.

Strange..... I had heard that laughing was something that anyone could do.....

Even so, I had to say something, even if it was totally useless compared to a smile. I opened my mouth to speak in order to divert our attention away from this weird setting.

"Erm, you know, that....."

An incomprehensible murmur escaped me, and Yuigahama's expression quickly morphed into one of surprise. She began to exert just a little more force into grabbing my arm and I could see her nervousness as she waited for me to continue. I could feel the warmth from her transmitting across the fabric of my clothes.

Feeling her warmth so clearly now, the words that I had wanted to say vanished from my mind.

".....Today, sure is cold."

That is why, I only said the things that I now thought. Even so, those words were as pointless as I had thought they were.

"Uh, i... indeed."

Towards my meaningless murmur, as though troubled by what she should reply, Yuigahama only managed to utter out several vague words of agreement.

However, it seemed like she was exhausted from gripping onto the sleeves of my shirt so strongly, her grip began to slacken slightly.

On that note, our conversation came to a close.

Once again, silence.

What reached my ears was not the lack of sound, but rather, the lack of speech.

Amidst the faint breathing, I couldn't tell if there was any sort of emotion hidden within it. What I did know, was that there was an overly loud noise reverberating within me in a rhythmic pattern.

Just when I wondered uneasily if Yuigahama could hear it, the northern wind raged blast us again.

The cold air that invaded my body from the neckline and the sleeves caused my whole body to freeze against my will.

"Cold....."

A complaint from me leaked out in the form of a murmur. Thereupon, Yuigahama voiced her strong agreement as well.

"Sure is. Hyaaa! The wind, cold!"

Yuigahama's body was visibly shaking, and then she steeled herself, and took about half a step in the direction of the driveway. That is to say, she took a step in my direction, shortening the distance between us.

"Scuse me? Could you stop using me as a windbreaker?"

"But, it's cold....."

As she said it, she looked up at me with an expression that resembled that of a puppy outside a supermarket. When she gave me that sort of face, it was really hard to put some distance between us. There was nothing I could do besides giving in to her whim reluctantly with a groan.

".....Well, it is cold after all."

"Un, because it is cold."

Giving me a completely serious look at first, Yuigahama smiled all of a sudden.

As a matter of fact, today really was cold.

I am guessing that today's temperature was no different from yesterday.

However, it was much colder than I thought.

That was probably because, I could only truly appreciate the frostiness after I had felt the warmth.

.....Well, because it is cold after all.

Guess it can't be helped that we are walking like this then.

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The distance that we walked like that was not really long in particular. It didn't take more than a few minutes to walk from Kaihin Park to the school. Yet, this distance felt extremely long to me. It was probably because the fatigue from running the marathon had surpassed my expectations. Or perhaps, it was because of the injury I had sustained during the marathon meet. Though I did indeed received some form of simple medical treatment for it, there was still a slight tinge of pain. In order to not further aggravate the wound, I dragged my feet slowly along.

No matter which is the reason, we did drag ourselves along at a fairly slow pace.

However, it wasn't just that alone.

In fact, the biggest reason for our slow pace was probably due to the fact that I wasn't used to having someone take my arm at all.

This seemed to be the same for the person holding my arm as well. Yuigahama walked timidly along with me.

Along the way, I could see the few occasional students going to and fro, as well as feel the occasional glances that were thrown our way. There was of course, a reason for their reaction.

Normally, there would be no one who would pay me any attention. This was especially true whenever I take a walk outside. I wouldn't pique the interests of anyone at all.

Come to think of it, there were plenty of people who walked alone in the streets of a city. As such, there wouldn't be people who would harbor the thought of "That guy's a loner!" when they come across such people.

There were loads of people who were out alone. Such is but a portion of what one would see in their everyday lives. In other words, even if we were to enter their field of vision, as long as their attention was not focused on us from the start, there would be no reason for them to take notice of us.

However, this all changes if the individual were marked out by signs like "School" or "Uniform".

This is because of the fact that middle school students or high school students are predefined as "herd animals", spending time alone in the classroom or attending school functions alone will automatically generate some form of unease.

Within confined places like the school or classroom, if you are going to be alone, then by definition, you will be established as a loner.

Whether it's a stereotype or a form of prejudice, as long as you fall outside of the normal definition, you won't have any way of shaking off the loner label on you.

In the savannah, when a gazelle that has strayed off from the herd, what we are most worried about is that they will fall prey to carnivores, since they are by and by, herd animals. That is something that is obvious to anyone.

If you didn't have such knowledge, if you saw a gazelle moving about alone, you would probably think of nothing but "Ah! A gazelle! Or maybe, it's an impala!" By the way, you can differentiate between a gazelle and an impala by their asses. This is a bit of trivia for you.

Anyway, as long as something doesn't conform to their usual expectation or their providence, they will feel uncomfortable by the mere sight of it.

If we were to apply such a logic to the current situation, that would be the sight of me and Yuigahama walking side by side, each of us being so close to one another. In particular, it was Yuigahama Yui who drew the attention of others.

The lightly-dyed peach color of her brown hair, her innocent as well as well-arranged facial features. Then, there is her cheerfulness and friendly smile, as well as body proportions that would attract the envy of plenty of people. Speaking of which, she was one who regularly interacted with stand-out characters like Hayama and Miura on a daily basis, which also contributed greatly to her popularity within the school community.

Hence, towards the unfamiliar guy that was by her side, they couldn't help but be curious, looking back at him several times.

Furthermore, given that there was now the rumors of Hayama going out with a certain so and so or how said person was involved in a spat with Miura and similar rumors, it was certainly obvious that there were people who harbored either good or bad feelings towards her.

However, even when she was in a state where she would easily attract the curious glances of others, she still walked together with me. Seeing us like this, people would probably stop saying rumors such as how Yuigahama was going out with Hayama.

I think that we have achieved what Miura Yumiko asked of us. My goal will also most likely be achieved, that is, the ridiculous rumors surrounding Hayama Hayato would probably dissipate in the near future as well.

Yet.

I had a premonition that this will give rise to some sort of new problem as well. Probably, there may be someone who starts mouthing off about how I was going out with Yuigahama and the like. Just like that time, during the fireworks when we met Sagami Minami.

In any case however, that was because we were seen together during such a special event. In this case, this was just an ordinary school function, not to mention the fact that she was just looking after an injured person. Surely, it won't cause her any trouble..... Right? Well, I don't know anymore..... Hmmm.

Whilst my thoughts swam about in my head, I continued to drag my feet onwards unsteadily like some zombie. There was of course, the rotten look in my eyes, but I was unable to come out with any logical sentences. Groans of frustration, "Ahhh..." and cries of regret, "Whyyyyy" kept blending with one another countless times in my heart. In fact, it had gotten to the level whereby those internal screams have started to sound like the Full House opening song, "Ah- Ah- Ah- Ah- Ah- , whatever happened to predictability! Milkman, paperboy! Evening TV! Ah- Ah!!!!!"

Though I drowned in my own anguish, my feet continued to move on it owns accord.

We had come quite a huge distance from Kaihin Park, and were approaching the last stretch towards the school building's main gate. All that was left was to cross the pedestrian crossing and we would arrive at the school. The number of students that I could see began to increase as well.

With the school building in sight, I could feel my pace quicken for some reason. Yuigahama looked up at me with a slight wonder but nevertheless quickened hers to match mine as well. Interestingly, although Yuigahama didn't seem like she wanted to say anything, she suddenly tilted her small neck as though thinking of something and a soft "Ah" escaped from her.

And then, she took yet another half a step towards me, as though trying to stealthily sneak into my shadow. With her hands cupped around her lips, she whispered into my ear in a small voice.

".....It's a little embarrassing isn't it?"

She said so with a shy bashful laugh, to which I found myself lost for words.

The problem is that, such a cute sentence struck the depths of my heart like a truck. I toyed with several sentences in my head, trying to string some frivolous rebuttal, thinking about this and that, but in the end, I found myself thinking about what she said to me just now.

It was slightly embarrassing. Truth be told, there was something embarrassing about all of this. It was probably because I was sensitive to other's gazes.

However, there was an ever larger reason behind it.

Being together with me, I wondered if that will give her some unpleasant memory. From the very beginning, I had never been able to erase away the unease that this caused. She was much stronger than I thought she ever was. If that wasn't the case, she wouldn't have dared to try this sort of method to disperse the rumor. That is why, my worry was surely unfounded. Even so, I still couldn't convince myself despite being able to understand it.

That was overconfidence of my overly self-aware self. In the first place, there was no one who would want to be friends with Hikigaya Hachiman. Whether I was alone or with anyone, there was probably no one who cared. If I was by myself, I could find a clear explanation to all this. It would be great if I could shut out all these excessive thoughts and the looks that people gave. However, I wasn't able to isolate any of them.

At the time that it weighed on my mind, there was a definitely sense of connection and relation. I am disgusted with myself for taking relief at this. My nature of acknowledging the possibility that this may end up forcing a bad memory on her, yet nevertheless trying to overlook this and deem all is fine was cowardly and pathetic of me as well.

In the end, ever since I became aware of the connections between people, I myself have always been wary of how others look and perceive me.

It was as though, I was just like that someone.

I stole a glance at Yuigahama and cleared my throat.

I noticed that we had already arrived at a place somewhere near the entrance. From here on, it would be the school compound. Taking my arm and supporting me would make me stand out all the more as compared to if she did it outside. Having helped me all the way here was more than enough.

".....Hey, it's really okay now."

"I see."

With that answer and a slight nod of her head, Yuigahama still did not relinquish her hold on me.

You.... Is this really okay.....

Without making a noise, I changed my shoes. Whilst doing so, Yuigahama continued to hold on to my arm to

support me. I could feel a tingling pain coursing through the wound that was not at my feet.

Yuigahama, whilst using me as her support, changed her shoes as well and then walked away from the entrance, towards the special building's corridor.

Just as I thought she was about to proceed in the direction of the classroom, Yuigahama give a series of light tugs on my sleeve.

"Ah, that, we have to return that."

Saying so, she pointed her fingers towards the first-aid kit in my hand.

"That's true..... I will do it real fast and come back."

Readjusting my grip on the heavy wooden first-aid kit, I began to make my way towards the special building. Thereupon, for some reason, Yuigahama followed me as well.

"I am going as well. Yukinon is probably still at the infirmary."

"That so? Then, can I pass it to you to return it?"

To think that she would go along with me just to return a first-aid kit, when there's no need for two people to do it in the first place. I made my request with the mindset of a corporate slave that was hell-bent on cost management.

".....Y, Yes. Th, That's fine but."

Yuigahama pulled away from me a little. As she said it, her smile looked forced and extremely reluctant.

"I'm just kidding..... I have to talk to Yukinoshita regarding today's affairs as well. Let's go return it together."

"Then, that's good."

With a sullen voice, she gave my arm a push.

Well, it's just as she said.

Things that one borrow has to be returned. That is not just limited to material goods, but words and thoughts. As well as warmth.

Someday, I will properly return it to her. That's why, it should be fine for me to rely on her now. Although this was probably just an excuse by me.

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The school compound seemed deserted, and felt even colder than the wide open space just now. There were probably plenty of students still at the marathon area or probably just spending the time freely as they please.

I walked slowly down the corridor that was devoid of human life.

The windows frame made a rattling sound as the wind blew fiercely against them. Although the sound was indeed dreary, there was also the draft that had crept in from somewhere along the corridor and were now creeping about my feet along it as well.

"We are probably making her wait....."

Yuigahama uttered her worries uneasily and quickened her pace, trying to get me to hurry up as well. Naturally, since my arms was now being grabbed by her, I had no choice but to match her pace as well. Whether or not Yukinoshita was still in the infirmary was somewhat questionable.

If it was Yuigahama, she would probably be like Hachiko, waiting for someone to return. I wonder about Yukinoshita's case however..... Nah, the heating in the school wouldn't be operating since the entire school population left the school, thus leaving the school in a cold state. Hence, she would probably be comfortably basking in the sun by the verandah like a cat.

We soon arrived at the infirmary and knocked on the door.

"Come in."

A familiar voice responded to our knocks.

As I opened the door, I thought to myself that she had far exceeded my expectations as she was still actually waiting right there on the other side of the door. I saw Yukinoshita as soon as the door opened wide enough.

She was seated on a chair, still clad in her sports attire. She looked at me with a puzzled expression.

"Hikigaya-kun?"

"Sup."

Then, she seemed to have spotted someone behind me, tilted her head to try and have a look. Thereupon, the hand that was clutching my arm swiftly left it.

"Yahello! Yukinon"

"Yuigahama-san, you are here as well....."

Her voice seemed to have a trace of surprise in it. Looking at her closely, she appeared dumbfounded and shocked. Both mine and Yuigahama's figures were reflected in her transparent, glass-like eyes. Upon seeing that it was the two of us, Yukinoshita lips let out a surprisingly innocent, silent sigh.

"Sorry for being late!"

Not knowing what to make of Yukinoshita's expression at all, Yuigahama entered the infirmary whilst apologizing loudly. Then, she walked directly in front of her and sat down. Yukinoshita came to her senses immediately, shook her head slightly and smiled at Yuigahama.

"It's no problem really."

Her voice was not any different from the usual. It was clear and fluid.

As I listened to their conversation, I searched for where the first-aid kit should be placed. I wandered around the infirmary, and saw a gaping empty place within the medicine cabinet close to the wall. There was no mistake, this should be the place where the first-aid kit was kept.

Opening the door to it, I stood on tiptoe, extended my back lightly and pushed the first-aid kit inside. Once more, a stinging pain ran down the wound.

Ouch! I let slip a small cry of agony which caused Yukinoshita to make a puzzled face.

"Hikigaya-kun is..... injured?"

Taking a quick glance at my leg, Yukinoshita's eyes narrowed her eyes in pity.

"Ah, just a little."

I didn't mention anything about how it was caused by me falling and tripping on my own feet. That would've been totally uncool. I mean, like look, saying that sort of thing sounded exactly like what victims of domestic violence would say.

"You're wrong! This, is really the result of me tripping!" That is definitely something they would say.

I have absolutely no wish to get her excessively worried over whether I was some victim of domestic violence.

Thus, all I said was that vague reply as I closed the door to the medicine cabinet.

As I turned my head, I caught sight of Yukinoshita looking in concern at my feet.

"Did you attend to your injury yourself?"

"Ah, no....."

She fixed her eyes upon the slightly unshapely knot of my bandage, to which I opened my mouth to try and come up with some explanation. Yuigahama let out a slightly exaggerated laugh.

"A, as I thought, I should just re-wrap the bandage! I, I am really bad at this. I really couldn't do it nicely after all....."

Seeing her look so unconfident as she played with her bun of hair, Yukinoshita gave a calm smile and shook her head. Then, she spoke in a gentle voice.

"No, I think it's more than enough."

"Excuse me? But I am the one who's injured."

Why on earth did Yukinoshita decide for me the state of my injuries? You know, my neighborhood's doctor's helper would've gotten real mad if he knew of what you just did. If you answer, "I think I may've a cold," when asked about your medical condition, he would've have probably chewed you out with something like, "That's for me to decide. In the first place, a cold is not even an illness. Understand?" Anyway, I wasn't really injured that badly. As long as I don't quickly extend my feet or crouch, there won't be any pain. Hence, I have to exercise caution when I sit myself down on a stool.....

I pulled a nearby chair towards me, and sat down slowly. Thereupon, as though having waited for me to seat down first, Yukinoshita began to speak slowly.

"It seems that you ran with Hayama-kun but..... were there any developments?"

".....Well, I think the problem is more or less settled."

Hayama Hayato's victory and the unexpected awards ceremony. As a result of Hayama's comment during it, most of the rumors surrounding Hayama Hayato should've been wiped away.

Well, that was my brief summary of what went on during the marathon meet. Sometimes, Yuigahama would supplement my explanation with her chatter and hand gestures as well. Yukinoshita would also nod her head every now and then at appropriate moments to show that she was following our story. After giving a near complete recount of what happened, I let out a huge sigh.

".....Well, it lacked immediate effect but I think the alternative plan certainly had its effects."

I couldn't think of any other way to put it in words, hence I just came up with this somewhat ambiguous conclusion. Thereupon, Yukinoshita placed her hands to her mouth for a brief moment, seemingly thinking of something before slowly lowering her hand.

"I see..... You couldn't get rid of it completely but I think it's good enough. Thank you."

"Don't thank me, thank Hayama. I didn't really do anything."

"Hmm, indeed. But still, thank you all the same."

Saying that, she smiled lightly.

Well, if you put it that way then I will gracefully accept it.

However, the truth is, it's wasn't like I was trying to be humble or anything. I really didn't do anything after all. All I ever did was have a superficial conversation with him and then trip myself up literally. To be frank, I truly did absolutely nothing besides that.

All the tangible actions were done by Hayama, and Yuigahama as well. As of now, I am still not sure about what kind of impression her actions will leave on those who saw it, but at the very least, Yuigahama's position in the rumors surrounding Hayama Hayato should definitely change.

Still, as to whether that was a good thing or a bad thing for Yuigahama, I can't really be bothered.

Owing to this tinge of unease within me, I found my eyes subconsciously looking in Yuigahama's direction. Thereupon, Yuigahama stealthily looked away and fumbled around with her bun of hair. Then, for just one fleeting moment, I saw her look my way again with moist eyes. Because of this eye contact that I made, I couldn't help but remember the journey just a while ago, making me feel uneasy.

The silence continued on, punctuated only by the sounds of the heater fan spinning and the soft hum of the humidifier. In the midst of this wordless silence, an unexpected soft sigh disturbed the peace.

"I wonder if this sort of solution will work. What about..... Yuigahama?"

Yukinoshita looked over at her with concerned eyes, to which Yuigahama clenched both her hands tightly and leaned forward.

"I, I am completely fine! I don't really care so much about what others say!"

"Care so much..... That means, you do care, right?"

"Ah, no, it's not like that! I totally don't care!"

In light of Yukinoshita's slightly troubled expression, Yuigahama shook her hands whilst quickly re-explaining herself in a panic. Then, she inhaled a little, to try and regain her breathing and then placed her hand on her knee.

"Umm, hey..... For me, I have given it some proper thought, so to speak....., Hence, I will be fine."

She looked directly at Yukinoshita as she said that. She spoke it with some difficulty, faltering at times, not to mention how terribly crude it sounded. However, it is also precisely why it meant that there wasn't any pretense in those words and that it sounded sincere.

The sun was now setting. The afterglow from the sun gradually dyed the white infirmary a scarlet red. Yukinoshita look shyly at Yuigahama's serious expression that was illuminated by the faint sunlight.

"I see..... Then, that is fine."

Yukinoshita's lips broke out into a smile, a smile more delicate than I had ever imagined possible. A beautiful smile that brought about a heart-wrenching pain to those who saw it. Seeing her smile like that, both Yuigahama and I swallowed our breaths.

"Shall we make our way from here then?"

After posing her question, she got up from the chair in silence and Yuigahama nodded her head in reply.

"We should. Ah, I remember. It's a good time for that since everyone's here."

She seemed to have thought of something as she clapped her hands all of a sudden. She cleared her throat and spoke with a very serious expression.

"We need to tell Yumiko today about her request, right? But there's a party after this and Yumiko is heading directly there. What should we do?"

In contrast to Yuigahama who spoke in a hurry, Yukinoshita placed her hand to her chin and began thinking.

"...Then on our way home, it seems we'll have to go to Miura-san and speak with her."

"Sounds right."

"At least say you're going to the party!" Yuigahama shrieked in sorrow.

Yukinoshita and I exchanged looks. We were both used to this pattern. We both nodded and spoke simultaneously.

"Alright, if we can go, we'll go."

"Yes, we'll decide on the flow of things."

"In the end, you guys aren't just going to go, you know!?"

After letting out an exhausted sigh, she calmly opened her mouth.

"Okay, well, but, compared to before, I guess it's better..." said Yuigahama, and she relocated her stool with casters next to Yukinoshita.

"Okay, then let's all go together...! Everyone... together." She repeated her mutters and moved her body closer to Yukinoshita.

"...So stuffy." Yukinoshita frowned as if the heating in front of her was the cause.

But she didn't forcibly pull Yuigahama off her and stayed as is. Yuigahama didn't seem intent on moving from here, either. In front of the heater, she began making a comfortable, happy face.

I'm pretty sure the school nurse is going to come back eventually and chase us out ...

Well, until then, I guess I'll stay here in this warm room, too.

Chapter 2

[Nevertheless, Hikigaya Hachiman rejects him.]

Once the sun had completely set, the temperatures plummeted and the winds grew fiercer. As we walked the path along the public park towards the station from school, the leafless trees shook from the northern winds.

I adjusted the collars of my coat and buried the lower half of my face into my scarf. Walking ahead of me was Yukinoshita, Yuigahama, and Miura. Today's after-school club activities were suspended so we could make a report on the consultation we accepted from Miura and we accompanied her on the way to the after-party.

Along the way, our conversation, or more like, just Yuigahama talking alone, was focused solely on the outline of the events that transpired. After hearing her, Miura gave a deep nod, burying her face into her muffler.

"I see....."

Miura's tartan scarf and proud curly hair fluttered with the wind as she muttered and Yuigahama, anxiously fiddled with the bun of her hair.

"Yup, that's why I think it is fine now. Probably."

Hearing such a vague reply from her, Miura kicked the ground with her loafers so as to get a better grip on them and looked up at the sky blankly.

"Well, if this is going to be how it turns out, there's no helping it since it's Hayato. I feel, a little better."

She stopped, lifted her heels as if stretching her back and crossed her hands together at her back. I couldn't see what expression she had from behind. However, I had the feeling her eyes were as clear as the winter sky.

"Heh, actually, whoever is the subject of Hayama's speech will be in a tough spot."

"Hikki, shush!" Yuigahama nudged me with her elbow as if chiding me.

Miura moved just her neck and glared at me. "Huh? I don't need to hear that from you, Hikio."

"R-Right..."

Waah... Miura-tan, you're sooo scary... Miura glared at me for a moment, but eventually suppressed her sharp look and took another step. With a small voice as if making a rebuttal to me, she mumbled.

"It's just... well... see, even including the annoying stuff," said Miura, turning around as if making a spin. The hems of her coat and her glossy blonde hair lightly danced.

"I guess it's okay, after all."

Her body still turning in motion, she wore a slightly embarrassed grin.

I couldn't help but be in awe when she said that with such a nice smile. To think you could state it so simply. It's so simplistic, so concise and so straightforward. But it was precisely because of that that it showed her pure yearning.

For a short while, I watched that smile in a daze. When she noticed my gaze, Miura retracted her smile and briskly began walking in displeasure.

"Oh... with just that, it's okay. So it was that simple..."

When I turned around to the muttering voice, Yuigahama was squeezing the bosom of her coat. Standing next to her, Yukinoshita was looking at Miura with a stunned expression.

However, it might not have been something to be surprised around. Even during the field trip, Miura had grasped Hayama and

Ebina-san's intentions. Perhaps, those soft emotions she had could even be called genuine... Don't forget Miura-san was a holder of mother qualities, too!

Miura turned back noticing that we were at a stand-still.

"Yui, erm, I am sorry for a lot of things. But also ,thank you."

She faced Yuigahama and lightly tapped her shoulders. Then, she rotated just her neck and gave me a look.

"Ahh, Hikio as well."

She doesn't even care... I was being treated like a complete supplement, not to mention my name isn't Hikio. Well, that's fine too.

"Also... Yukinoshita-san? You... um, you know, it's like..."

Miura shifted her gaze from me to Yukinoshita. She chewed her words anxiously, but eventually looking determined, she glared at Yukinoshita directly and abruptly bowed her head.

"Sorry."

Yukinoshita blinked with a blank expression, but after breathing out with a small smile, she flicked away her hair at her shoulders with her mitten-covered hands.

"It doesn't bother me. Rather, I'd like to praise your audacity being so direct with me during that argument."

"Tch, what's with that ego? That kind of pissed me off... I totally apologized for nothing."

Their words seemed hostile, but both of their voices were soft.

Yuigahama looked at them with anxiety, but unable to hold it in any longer, jumped at Yukinoshita and Miura.

"Okay! Then let's all go to the after-party."

"I..."

Held by Yuigahama, Yukinoshita twisted her body as if trying to turn down the invitation. Miura, who was in Yuigahama's arms as well, glanced at Yukinoshita before asking.

"Why don't you come, too?"

"...I suppose so. Just for a little then."

Her hesitation lasted for only a moment. Yukinoshita formed a small smile and answered. Miura immediately averted her face.

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The location for the after-party that we relocated to was a fancy and hip looking store, an English-styled pub. In there, the students who had arrived before us were revolving around Hayama's group and Isshiki, frolicking noisily.

Judging from their liveliness, it looked more like Hayama's victory celebration than an after-party. Including Hayama's group, Isshiki, Totsuka and his group, and for some reason, Zaimokuza was in there.

Upon entering the store, Miura promptly went to Hayama. Yuigahama was perplexed at what to do, but when Yukinoshita nodded to her, she made a reluctant smile and went after Miura.

With the two of us remaining, Yukinoshita and I briefly ordered our drinks and I leaned against the end of the bar counter. I sighed deeply, wondering if I could let out all the day's fatigue to the beat of the music.

Then, as though in response to my sigh, Yukinoshita let slipped a chuckle.

"Thank you for your work."

"Mm, yeah."

Hearing my answer, Yukinoshita took a place next to me and leaned against the bar counter as well. She was probably slightly tired out or maybe slightly nervous about the place's atmosphere. In any case, she was somewhat more subdued than usual.

We weren't accustomed to this kind of boisterous atmosphere, but it's Yukinoshita and me. I'd say watching them from the corner was just about the perfect distance for the both of us.

I gulped down the dry tasting ginger ale. At the same time, Yukinoshita who had her glass raised to her lips let out a short sigh.

"In the end, it was all thanks to you and Yuigahama....."

"No, like I said, it's really thanks to Yuigahama. I did nothing."

"I did have your help. Always, in fact. That much I know....."

I could feel the finality in her tone had a certain ring of loneliness in it and I couldn't help but look at her. To which, I saw her glancing over at Yuigahama's table affectionately. However, there was a somewhat faraway look in her eyes. Her eyes was a deep blue color, and seemed not to be just looking at the scenes inside the bar or the people, but something else altogether.

That dream-like figure of her standing captivated my attention and then, she quietly raised her champagne glass.

"That's why....."

Saying that, Yukinoshita smiled lightly and shook the champagne glass about in her hand. The golden-yellow bubbles of the elder flower soda burst and a smell resembling muscatel grapes floated about.

She didn't continue her sentence. No doubt, there were words that she had weaved in her heart, but without making a sound, without saying it, it would not reach me.

Like her, I didn't speak at all. I just raised my glass of brown ginger ale high into the air and brought it together with her glass.

In what should be a noisy shop, the ice-like glass rang out gently. A sound that was clear, fluid and not distorted. A sound that could convey my feelings that I couldn't yet ascribe a form to, or give a definition to them. Just like the silent popping bubbles, it was just this one time, and with a beautiful reverberation, the sound vanished. The sound of our glass touching filled my ears for just that one fleeting moment.

Before long, the loud noises of people partying came back to my ears.

Yukinoshita and I continued without saying a word like always. Except that this time, I found myself raising the glass to drink from it, so as to dislodge something that I felt was stuck deep down in my throat.

For a moment longer, we continued watching everyone silently, but as if noticing our gaze, Hayama who had went around made his way to us. Going through the formalities as the leading actor sure seems tough...

"Hey there... Thanks for coming."

Yukinoshita shook her head indicating it's not a big deal and I nodded in agreement. As I thought about whether it'd be better to congratulate him, Hayama quietly lowered his head.

"Sorry... for all the trouble I've caused you... Like that rumor... and other things."

Yukinoshita choked on her voice in bewilderment. But that was only for an instant as she quickly assumed a firm attitude and reiterated what she had stated in the club room.

"It wasn't that big of a deal. It's a trivial matter compared to back then."

"Back then, huh?" Hayama muttered with a shameful expression.

Seeing that, Yukinoshita's expression grew cloudy as well.

"...I understand it somewhat now. I'm sure we could've handled the situation a lot better. That's why I believe I caused you trouble as well... I'm sorry."

This time, Yukinoshita bowed her head. When she lifted her head, with eyes that looked nostalgically into the far past, she added, "But I'm grateful that you were looking out for me."

Hayama's expression was filled with surprise. Taken aback, he made a fixed gaze at Yukinoshita. "...You've changed a little."

"I wonder about that. There are just a lot of things different now from back then," said Yukinoshita, and she moved her gaze towards Yuigahama. Then, she glanced at me.

Feeling restless from having heard something I wasn't supposed to, I instinctively averted my eyes.

Yukinoshita breathed out as if smiling and turned to Hayama. "You shouldn't let the past tie you down anymore... There's no need to force yourself to chase after someone."

"...That clearly includes me too," I said.

Hayama smiled, somehow triumphantly.

Walking up from behind Hayama was Yuigahama. Intoxicated by the lively atmosphere in the store, Yuigahama wrapped herself around Yukinoshita's arm.

"Yukinon, the food's here! There's, like, a lot of chicken! They're all super whole roasted!"

However, the reaction to her comment was weak. I, Yukinoshita and Hayama as well looked at her with wry smiles.

"Eh?....."

She had probably noticed that the mood here was a sharp contrast to the liveliness at the table she was at. Yuigahama quickly corrected her seating posture and gave an embarrassed laugh to cover up her faux pas. Then, Hayama smiled tenderly as he sighed.

"I am sorry for what happened Yui. It probably was unpleasant for you."

"Ah, uh, no, nothing of that sort!"

Hearing Yuigahama say that, Hayama lowered his head sincerely.

"I see. Thank you..... for helping me out."

"It's, nothing....."

Yuigahama appeared somewhat puzzled by Hayama's sudden docile change. Well, in any case, with this word of thanks, I think this matter has ended peacefully at last. Sighing in relief, I took another mouthful of the ginger ale. Thereupon, Hayama looked up, and cracked a smile in my direction.

"Hikigaya as well, thank you."

He shot me a warm look as though he saw something pleasant..... I was at a loss for words, and found myself unintentionally coughing as though having just choked on something. His meaningful smile as though he had seen though something in me, was strangely welcoming. It is during this sort of time, where I think that this guy is just being his usual annoying self.

Being exposed to this lukewarm look of his was somewhat unsettling. Eventually, I looked away diagonally, and I heard a small cough.

"..... Y, Yukinon! Let's go! Roasted chicken!"

With that she moved towards Yukino and grabbed her sleeve tightly and pulled at her excitedly. Seeing her actions, Yukinoshita let slip a chuckle.

".....Alright, let's go. To take the chicken." [1]

She's just like a two to five year kid who enjoys making lame puns..... As I was thinking of whether I should follow it up with let's go as a trio, [2] Hayama tapped me lightly.

"Can I, talk with you for a bit.....?"

"Definitely a no."

Ignoring my reflexive answer, Hayama smiled gently at Yuigahama and Yukinoshita that were ahead of us, to urge them to go on without us. At this, Yuigahama nodded her head in reply.

"Then, we will be waiting over there!"

And just like that, she forcibly dragged Yukinoshita along with her. As Hayama watched the figure of Yukinoshita being pulled along by Yuigahama, he shook his glass. Thereupon, I could hear the sound of ice hitting the glass.

"She has changed a little..... You as well."

".....Huh?"

Hayama looked at me with a somewhat lonely yet stern smile. His words were somewhat unexpected and so all I could manage to come up with was my stupid reply. However, Hayama didn't seem to expect much of a reply from me anyway. He gently tilted the glass that was gradually becoming warmer as the ice cubes melted.

He downed the contents of the glass with a bitter look and said, "The only one who hasn't changed is me," in a solemn murmur.

Stealing a glance at his expression, and though his features were as handsome as always, the pupils of his eyes were terribly gloomy. However, perhaps it wasn't that bad since his eyes didn't turn rotten or turbid. Such a self-deprecating statement came rushing out from his mouth.

"I wonder. If you think that someone has changed, wouldn't that mean that you yourself have changed? Although I wouldn't really know"

"Is that so?"

"Like I said, I wouldn't know."

It was a somewhat non-committal response from me. However, Hayama bit his lip lightly as he stared at me, his gaze never once leaving me.

Up until now, Hayama as well as I, had always been averting our eyes, looking away, being evasive with our words. However, at the very least, I have stopped looking away.

That's why, even though it was somewhat perverse, somewhat twisted, there were words that ought to be said back to him. As I drained the contents of my glass bit by bit, I shrugged my shoulders, and what should've been a sigh turned to words that I spat out.

"When the people around you change, you would change your way of doing things to match them. If that's the case, then wouldn't that imply you have changed as well?Well, in the end, it's bound to happen anyway."

Hearing me say that, Hayama blinked several times. Then, his lips slackened into a wry, cynical smile.

"What a bothersome way to put it. You really are a detestable guy."

When Yuigahama and the others arrived at their seats, Miura and Isshiki waved their hands at Hayama. They were probably telling him to hurry on over. Hayama lightly waved back and just as he was about to head back, he went "ah" as if recalling something and resumed his original position and spoke to me.

"Right. I forgot to tell you something."

"Huh?"

"When you said that you couldn't avert your eyes from 'that', what did you mean?"

Whether it was the fault of the indirect lighting, or where he chose to stand, I did not know. However, owing to the poor back lighting, I couldn't make out Hayama's expression as he asked me that question. Yet, I could tell from his voice that he wasn't trying to test my patience, nor did he actually know anything, that it was nothing but a genuine question that had crossed his mind.

It was probably because he wanted to know whether my answer was an answer that he had never chosen, or maybe, an answer that he would choose one day. If that's the case, I can decide on what I ought to say.

"Pretend you didn't hear that.At the very least, I am different from you."

"Is that so....."

With that short answer, Hayama combed his hair upwards and shrugged his shoulders lightly. Thereupon, at that moment, I saw him looking to the side like he had often done.

It was the exact same expression that I had last seen at the marathon meet.

He gave an answer that I couldn't give, a possibility that I didn't fully believe which I saw in my dreams, and

a somewhat lonely smile that left me behind.

Hayama would surely do it to his very best. If his surroundings change, then he would change skillfully to match the change as well. In order for everything to not change, he himself will change. In that way, Hayama would continue to answer people's expectations. From this point on, he'd do so with his own will.

That's why, I'll be the only one who doesn't deny it. I need to show that there's someone who isn't forcing expectations.

It's because he felt that brazen rejection alone was what it meant to truly understand and that cold indifference itself was kindness. To him, the affirmation of those who didn't understand him were nothing but shackles to him.

"I also forgot to tell you something..... I hate you too," I said as I turned my face away.

Hayama looked at me in wonder for a moment, but suddenly laughed.

"I see. That might be the first time I was told that face-to-face."

Hayama suppressed his laughter and stated in satisfaction. This time, however, he took a step forward from the bar counter.

"But even so... I won't choose anything. I want to believe that's the best way."

He added, "It's just self-gratification for me" and smiled, going back to where he was originally. But I couldn't smile.

If the answer that Hayama Hayato gave was criticized as insincere, then surely, that individual would give a satisfying answer. He'd definitely give an answer that's different from Hayama Hayato's. He has to.

I gulped down the ginger ale I had in my hand and looked towards where everyone was sitting.

A prickling bitterness remained in the depths of my throat.

Chapter 3

[Every now and then, something would stir from Isshiki Iroha's naive estimates.]

A short period of time passed after the marathon meet, and soon, it was already February. Due to the cold, the volume of activity had decreased and as a result, I felt that each day was really quite short. Each day was just waking up, going to school, returning home and sleeping. Repeating this set of actions five times and a week would pass.

Be that as it may, though I live each day so dully, something was bound to crop up. Just like that other day, where a bunch of things happened. After much confusion, I found myself getting involved in creating a free newspaper, going out with Isshiki along with various other stuff but that will be another story. [TL: Vol 10.5 obviously]

In fact, even if no one badgers me to do, I felt that I will make an unsolicited remark about that. If ever a chance presents itself, I will be sure to talk about it. Should enough time pass for me to reminisce about my past, I will probably talk about it with Komachi's grandson.

Though that is quite far off in the future, but if I get such a chance when I grow old, I will probably be doing it on a somewhat sunny day, with Komachi's grandson by the veranda.

"Yosh, Komachi-sonny."

"It's not Komachi. I am Komachi's grandson, Magomachi." [3]

"Oh, I see. Well then, Komachi-sonny."

"Well, calling me Komachi is fine. Is anything the matter, Hachiman grandpa."

"Ya see boy, when I was young, I was quite famous. Ya know why? 'Cause I went out with a sly and cute kouhai! And also, what the heck has happened to today's youth? They really can't make it!"

"Does grandpa hate youngsters?"

"I don't hate them one bit. After all, they are the ones who pay my pension."

"What an absolutely horrible reason....."

"Still, they really can't make it! When I was young, I went out with a sly and cute kouhai, ya know!"

"Grandpa, that's like, the 101th time you have said that. Go propose to her already. Grandpa keeps repeating this over and over again. Didn't you do anything else when you were young?" [4]

"Ouch, that hurt! That asides, is the meal ready yet?"

"Grandpa, that was last week!"

"Well, I wish that I can eat your cooking every day."

.....Yea, I would like to have this sort of heartwarming conversations with Komachi's grandson. Any offspring of Komachi would be absolutely cute! However, if it comes to the time when Komachi has grandsons and the like, then it would mean, that the long awaited day of practical iPS cells usage [5] has come! Onii-chan will never allow something like marriage to happen!

It's probably the coldness of the winter that has got me indulging in these pointless thoughts. Come to think of it, when I overheard of things like whether suicide rates were related to stuff like coldness and daylight hours, it was surprisingly persuasive during this period of time. Well, if I am doing nothing all day long, arriving at this kind of ridiculous thoughts isn't really all that unusual.

Just like today, for example.

From the windows of the classroom, I could see gloomy grey clouds hanging over the sky. Just that alone was enough to make me feel as though the atmosphere had sunk somewhat.

The winter chill was still as harsh as ever and every time the arid north wind blew by, the glass windows of the classroom would rattle.

By the time short homeroom for the rest of the day had ended, the temperatures plunged even further. My seat, close to the hallway, unfortunately didn't receive much heating and small breezes would slip in through the unnoticeable gaps of the doors. When they brushed against the nape of my neck, I shuddered.

However, I looked over at the windows and the sun was still elevated high in the sky. The length of the afternoon had progressively gotten longer

But there's also the saying: "If winter comes, can spring be far behind?" [6]

It was after school and the atmosphere of a small fraction of the class was already showing steady signs of

the upcoming spring.

A little less than a month to go and that would mark the awakening of insects [7] on the calendar.

Thanks to the effective heating in the classroom, my classmates had suddenly become animated, just earlier than was to be expected if we followed the calendar.

A single group occupying the area near the window was incredibly lively in spirit. Like every other day, I could hear their loud, conspicuous voices as usual.

"Man, I could go for something sweet any time today," Tobe said, flapping the ends of his hair. Oooka and Yamato hit their knees as though they knew what Tobe was talking about and pointed at him.

"You got that right."

"Totally."

Then, the three exchanged gazes.

"You know what I mean.....? Better chocolate than never, yeah?"

Tobe said, being pointlessly dramatic. The three of them made triumphant looks and shot glances over at the girls... Mmm, I thought we were nearing spring, but it still feels like we're in the middle of winter!

But Miura's reaction was far more callous and cold compared to their trite act.

"...Ha?"

After a small click of her tongue, she gave the idiot trio an apathetic look that shut them up. Yuigahama and Ebina-san made a stiff smile.

"Oh yeah, it's about that time of the year, huh...?" Hayama said, taking the middle ground between the two groups. Oooka and Yamato nodded their heads.

"You've got it good Hayato-kun, but we're pretty screwed."

"True."

Oooka stated solemnly while Yamato nodded in assertion. His words certainly did make it sound like it was a serious problem. Still, this opportunistic virgin's jealousy is so garbage that it's kind of wonderful... I thought. Then, Tobe made a giddy smirk while patting Hayama's shoulder.

"Nah, Hayato-kun usually doesn't accept anything."

"Are you kidding!? What a waste!"

Oooka shouted causing Hayama to make a strained laugh. I see, he likely chose that route so he could avoid unnecessary trouble.

However, for girls that were in love with him, they might not be so eager to accept that. The head of that pack, Miura, was listening in on their conversation in silence while facing away from them with a disinterested expression.

Watching her, Yuigahama went "ah" and spoke.

"But hey, it's kinda scary getting things from people you don't know." Yuigahama nodded her head to show she could sympathize with him.

Following her, Ebina-san struck out her hand with a serious look and stopped the conversation. "Wait. If he won't accept anything that means... he'll take them instead. So the one getting taken would be Hikitani-kun?"

The moment she finished, Miura flicked her head. What the hell is she saying with that serious look of hers...? Miura took out a pocket tissue and pressed it on Ebina-san.

"Ebina, your nose is bleeding."

"Oh, thanks, thanks."

Ebina-san held back her suspicious laughter as she blew her nose and Miura showed a soft smile. Being immediately next to the heating as well as various other factors, all the individuals gathered over there looked rather warm.

No, they weren't the only ones. The entire classroom was enveloped by the same warmth. The giddy mood wasn't limited only to the idiot trio of Tobe and the other two, but other groups spread out in the classroom. Officially, Valentine's Day was coming very soon.

In other words, it's the day you received chocolate from your mom and little sister.

Valentine's Day was a day full of blessed love, but that understanding wasn't without problems. Considering how the event came to be, it's actually a day when blood was shed. Originally started from a saint, it's also the day a struggle occurred between gangs. Besides, someone from Chiba wouldn't even think twice about chocolate because they'd think about Bobby4 instead.

But it didn't matter what the opinions of someone like me had, it's impossible to overturn the general understanding of the event. In fact, if I were to preach the event as a conspiracy of the current confectionary industry, I'd easily be branded a heretic.

Valentine's Day had already firmly taken root in the culture of Japan. Christmas was more or less similar in that regard. Eventually, Halloween might even get adapted to Japanese customs, too. The summer festival, the Bon Festival dance, or the graveyard visits during the spring or fall equinoxes weren't all that much different.

Basically, it's an issue of whether you liked them or hated them. No one's questioning that they're orthodox or blasphemous. If you're going to reject them, whether it's Christmas or Valentine's Day, you should just scream, "I hate them!"

Since Komachi would slyly give me chocolate every year, I didn't hate Valentine's Day all that much. As a matter of fact, since I loved Komachi so much as her older brother, I was anxiously waiting for the day to come.

I wonder what kind of expensive chocolate she's going to force out of me as a return gift this year... As I engrossed myself in happy thoughts about wasting money on my little sister, the class grew boisterous.

"God, I'm not going to make it!"

"It's okay, you still have time! Just keep going! Don't give up!"

I casually looked over and a caste of girls sitting at different seats, either the second or third group from the top, was knitting some kind of muffler or sweater. It's almost like I was listening to a conversation between a light novelist and his editor. Look, normally, you're not going to make it. It's almost Valentine's Day and your progress is only at about ten percent. Rather than putting effort into making it on time for the deadline, it'd be more productive and realistic to try to extend it instead!

As it turns out, I wasn't the only one watching that heartbreaking exchange.

Miura was twirling her hair with her fingers and breathed out.

“...Well, handmade things might be too pushy? Makes sense why you wouldn't accept them.”

After listlessly saying those words, a faint sigh came from a different direction.

“Pushy... I guess so...” Yuigahama rubbed the bun of her peach-colored hair with her thin fingers that stretched out of her slightly loose cardigan. She then made a troubled, but embarrassed smile.

After seeing that smile, something suddenly came to mind from some time ago.

—Handmade, huh?

Just who was she making those cookies for? As I thought that, I looked towards her and our eyes met. Yuigahama and I averted our faces away in reaction.

“Well, it's the feelings that count, not what you get.”

Hayama's voice had a strained ring to it.

“You got that right! Nah, but see? I'm totally all over that, you know what I mean?” Tobe immediately hit his knees and expressed his agreement. Diagonally from him, Ebina-san crossed her arms and slid her gaze to the side.

“But you can't screw up with handmade chocolate or else you'll get exposed. And since it doesn't cost that much to begin with, that's kind of off-putting. Wouldn't it be easier to just buy premade ones instead?”

“Yeah, totally!”

As soon as Ebina-san finished, Tobe changed his opinion... Come on, you could at least try a little harder. Amidst the guy and girls' cheerful laughter, I could hear Miura's disinterested voice, “...Mmhmm, handmade, huh?”

Then, she shot a glance over at Yuigahama.

“What's Yui going to do?”

“.....Eh? Me?”

Yuigahama's big eyes blinked in surprise. She was probably surprised at Miura's sudden question. I say so because even though I was sitting far away from the two of them, my eyes were now turning black and white for some reason. Black and white, just like the program Black-White Unjash that was created by Chiba TV station!

[7: Comedic duo. Duo's group name is Unjash. アンジャッシュ. Very popular comedians.]

“I..... well, in particular for me, you know..... umm, that!”

“Ohhhh.....”

As Yuigahama vehemently tried to fight back with some vague response, Miura too, issued an equally vague response in reply.

The reply sounded very much like, “Ohhh..... You are my producer?” [8]

In response to her reply, Yuigahama nodded her head, and pretended nothing has happened. However, her cheeks were flushed a bright red.

.....And for some reason, my face began to grow hot as well. Thus, I looked away from them quickly. I felt as though they might be talking about me or something. I was so embarrassed by my over self-consciousness that I started sweating. The reason why Miura was able to give that quick reply, was probably because she had seen that scene during the marathon meet a few days ago.

I wonder just what impact this will have on the environment around her. With this alone weighing on my mind, I snuck a timid glance in the direction of Yuigahama's group.

However, what was taking place over there was the usual, everyday sight.

Oooka and Yamato were cheerfully making comments like, "Who ya givin' it to?" Meanwhile, Hayama had a gentle smile on him, trying to stop their teasing in his own gentle way. Tobe tugged at the ends of his hair whilst turning his head slightly, his eyes glancing briefly in my direction. As though trying to obstruct his line of sight, Ebina-san let out a really rotten laugh, pushed her spectacles up and snuggled up to Yuigahama imperiously.

"Well, Yui has a huge task of giving chocolates to us, right?"

"Uh, right. Giving, chocolates! To Yumiko! To Ebina as well!"

Yuigahama pulled Ebina-san and Miura into a sound hug. Watching the three girls snuggle up to each other so intimately, Tobe went, "Ehhh!" and ogled at the trio.

Having observed them discreetly from start till end, I felt relieved.

Right now, by what I can see happening within this classroom, it seems like I could finally welcome the end of this whole affair. That is, the rumors surrounding Hayama Hayato before and after the marathon meet, the suffering inflicted upon Yukinoshita Yukino and Yuigahama Yui as well as the unease that Miura Yumiko had.

.....Yet, once again, an unease began to brew within me once more because of the actions she took that day.

That much was the truth and so, I averted my eyes yet again and left my seat.

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The air permeating the hallway leading to the special building was frigid and parched. I felt my lips crack and my body stiffen.

Condensation was visible on the glass windows of the classroom, but not the hallway which had a clear look into the school courtyard. It was filled with shedding trees and bare beds of flowers, a dusty and dark brown spectacle of winter unlike one seen in the northern parts of Japan.

The lack of anything wintry made it superfluously cold. Feeling the difference in warmth from the classroom I was in earlier, I lifted up the muffler wrapped around my neck. I walked along, grumbling from behind my muffler about how cold it was when I heard the light pitter patter of footsteps coming from behind.

I turned around and my shoulder received a light shock. I was met with a glum look from Yuigahama.

"Why'd you leave first...?"

"You didn't say anything about leaving together..." I said unpleasantly, not having an idea of why she took that attitude.

Yuigahama's mouth dropped open and she gently brushed her hair in embarrassment.

"...Oh, I totally thought you were waiting for me. You stayed in class for a while, so..."

"That's not really....."

While speaking, I gave some thought to the reason why I stayed behind. It's true that Yuigahama had invited me to head to club together several times. Perhaps that's why I found myself waiting with the assumption that she'd come over to talk to me.

But another proper reason came to mind.

"How should I say this, uh, I just wanted to see how Hayama and Miura were doing."

"Ahh, right. I think they're good now. Thank goodness."

Yuigahama let out a small breath and weakly nodded. She then proceeded a few steps ahead of me in the empty hallway and twisted her body.

"It's kinda nice, you know? I'm sure everyone's thinking about all kinds of stuff, but it's like they're trying to live their lives as much as they can now while cherishing it..."

She stated each word in emphasis, wearing a gentle smile on her expression.

"Yeah, I guess. We're probably having the best time of our lives right now."

"Ohh, you're unusually positive..."

"When you recall the past, you want to die from regret and when you think about the future, you get depressed from anxiety. So by elimination, our time now is pure bliss."

"You were being negative, after all!" Yuigahama dropped her shoulders with a sullen look. She then briskly walked ahead and voiced her complaints. "There you go again with that stuff... Can't you read the mood?"

"Mood, huh...?"

Like what kind of mood?

For example, the mood on Valentine's Day?

I suppose I could understand in that case. Occasionally, I'd learn from the masses, take in the mood, and play it off. Then, I'd just brush it all off with a simple "just following the flow". Doing that made you want to have expectations, be spoiled, lose yourself, and wait.

But I don't think that's something you should do.

One should take that step forward rather than just wait. Regardless of the answer and conclusion awaiting you, do it without deception and incredulity and leave the regrets for afterwards.

That's why, I took in the mood and decided to ask now.

"By the way..."

I squeezed out those words with a hoarse voice and Yuigahama turned around. Her inclined head and her eyes urged me to go on. Seeing her straight-on was somewhat dazzling that I slightly averted my face.

"...Do you have a day you're free soon? I want to thank you for the other day....."

"The other day?"

Yuigahama tilted her hand, looking surprised.Come on! Yuigahama-san baka! You blockhead! I am not going to say anything more!

"For treating my injuries, and er, other stuff as well."

She struck her feet lightly against the floor and said, "I see," as understanding dawned upon her. Yuigahama looked somewhat flustered as she prattled on and waved her hands about, hurriedly retrieving her cellphone to take a look. Then, she placed her hands against her bun of hair and stroked it into a disheveled mess.

"Huh? U-Um, yeah, I do... I think," Yuigahama said.

Casually, she averted her eyes and that peach colored hair flowed along with the turning of her head. The setting sun that streamed into the corridor dyed her cheeks and hair a scarlet red.

The sky corridor that connected the school compound and the special building were short. The sound of people's footsteps and talking rang out from afar. The time that I spent facing her in silence didn't continue for long.

".....As long as you are free. I am always free."

I said all that very quickly and stopped myself at this point, before going on ahead of her. I heard what sounded like a troubled reply from behind me, but soon, that changed to the sound of footsteps following me from behind.

Thanking her for that day. In other words, just simple etiquette, decorum and social obligation. Once again, this was probably just another excuse.

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Energetically opening the door, we entered the room and was enveloped by an air of coziness.

There were far more people in the classroom, yet strangely enough, I found it more comfortable here. Though, that could've been just a side effect of the sunlight that easily penetrated this clubroom in the special building.

With the gentle sunlight pouring on to her, sitting at her usual seat was Yukinoshita Yukino.

She lifted up her face from the paperback in her hand, quietly brushed her hair upwards, and softly smiled. "Hello."

"Sup."

"Yahallo, Yukinon."

Yuigahama responded with a raised hand while I returned a casual greeting and we proceeded to take our respective seats.

Without anyone decreeing so, without anyone forcing me to, and without anyone having qualms about me sitting there, I had decided that in the space that should have been there, that this would be my seat, the place where I belonged.

And that alone was reason enough for me to feel pangs of discomfort from the presence I wasn't accustomed to seeing.

"Senpai, you're so sloooooow."

"And why are you here again...?"

Laying on the desk while indignantly kicking her feet was this school's resident Student Council President, Isshiki Iroha. Her gestures, whether it's her intentional sullen look or the way she was averting her face, were all so sly... No, but seriously, I can't believe she got here earlier than Yuigahama and me. Is she trying to be as swift as some kind of breeze? [9]

"I asked her if she had some business here, but she wanted to wait for you two to come. So, she's been here ever since,"

Yukinoshita said, mixed with a sigh. She then deliberately sent an even colder glance to her. Despite that, she didn't forget to be hospitable and had prepared some tea for her. There's just so many ways of being hospitable that I want to start a Collection [10]!

As for the aforementioned Isshiki, she wasn't concerned with Yukinoshita's ice gaze. She turned towards me, placed her hand to her mouth, and whispered secretively.

"Yukinoshita-senpai had such a nice smile when I got here, but she got really bummed out right after... She's been acting like that the entire time."

Ahh, really now... Well, duh, every time Isshiki shows up, she's always accompanied with nothing worthwhile, hahaha. No seriously, why are you even here? I thought. Then, there was a weak cough.

"...Isshiki-san?"

Upon looking, Yukinoshita had a broad smile. Uh oh, it's that smile! The one that Yukinon makes when she's being scary!

"Y-Yesss! I'm so sorry, I really do have some business here!"

Isshiki ran behind me and pushed me forward, as though it was her conditioned reflex to cower away from that smile. Hey, stop it, that smile scares the hell out of me too, you know.

"W-Well, let's calm down. Iroha-chan, are you here for the Student Council?" Yuigahama mediated and waved at her to come back.

With a nonchalant face going "Yui-senpai, you're so nice!" she returned to her original location.

I gave her an inquisitive look asking what she needed to which she flapped her hand. "The thing is, it feels like I have a lot more free time than I thought I would or something?"

"Huh?"

Going on with her nonsense yet again..... I looked at her apathetically but Isshiki didn't seem to notice me looking at her in such a manner. She placed her index finger to her chin and cutely tilted her head.

"There's like no school events around this time of the year and the VP's taking care of all the small stuff for me. All I have left is just to stamp our year-end report."

You don't say. I wasn't familiar with what the work of the Student Council entailed, but surprisingly, that's the kind of things they're involved in, huh? The third years were well into their testing season while the school administration was occupied with the school entrance exams for new students. Anyone would have nothing to do because of that.

"That's why, when there isn't anything going on, I put the Student Council on break."

Ohhh, a manager from a white company... Coincidentally, this club that forced us to gather in this room even when there wasn't any work to do was undoubtedly a black company! [11]

And speaking of our resident black company manager, she nodded her head, moving her hand to her chin.

"Don't you have club to attend to as well?"

Yukinoshita asked, slanting her head to the side.

Isshiki cheeks blushed slightly as if from embarrassment and she sweetly averted her face.

".....It's really cold at the Soccer Club nowadays."

That's something to be ashamed about, not embarrassed. Yukinoshita pressed her hand against her temple in an attempt to hold back a headache while Yuigahama forcibly laughed.

"A-Ahaha... So, what did you need?" Yuigahama asked.

Then, Isshiki cleared her throat and turned her body towards me. "So senpai, I don't really care, but do you like sweets?"

"If you're talking about Hayama, I'm sure he'll be happy to eat whatever you give him."

I understood Isshiki's general behavior all too well. I took the initiative and answered causing her to inflate her cheeks from boredom. Listening to her, Yuigahama seemed to recall something.

"Oh, but it sounds like Hayato-kun's not accepting any chocolate, though."

"Ehhh, why's that?"

"...Wh-Who knows?" Yuigahama inclined her head in confusion.

Then, Yukinoshita let out a brief sigh. "It's obviously because of the disputes that will ensue. During elementary, the classroom the follow day would see sparks flying all over the place..."

"...Ahh."

"...Ahhhh, I think I can see that."

Isshiki and Yuigahama nodded. Yep, yep, I totally can see that, too.

I could easily imagine a huge commotion in the classroom next day where the girls would hold a "So Exciting Women Only Witch Trials of Absentia! Don't Forget the Betrayals, Too!" [12] Conversations between girls were mostly about insulting other girls (self-research).

How scary, I thought. Isshiki, who had been living her life being subjected to resentment from the underworld—I mean, the society of girls, let out a shallow sigh.

"Fine, I'll just have to make do with you, senpai. So, do you like sweet things?"

"That's one bizarre way of asking me..."

How do you expect an honest answer out of me when it's the same question from earlier? That feeling of being treated like a supplement and her apathy was out of this world. As those thoughts ran through my mind, a chair rocked. I looked over and Yuigahama was leaning forward.

"Hikki likes them a lot!"

"That's true."

On the other hand, Yukinoshita made an overbearing smile with a patronizing chuckle for one reason or another. Pressured by their behavior, Isshiki muddled her words.

"It's kinda weird how you both answered for him, but... that's good to hear!"

"Right... Wait, what is?"

"I've been wondering how sweet I should make my chocolates, you see. People have their preferences, right?" Isshiki continued, ignoring my question.

Yukinoshita tilted her head. "How sweet... Isshiki-san, are you planning to make them on your own?"

"Now that's a surprise..." I said.

Then, Isshiki made a resentful look. "Why's that? I'm good at making sweets, you know."

"Dang, that must be nice. I wanna learn how to make them too, but I'm just so bad at it..."

Isshiki puffed out her small chest while Yuigahama ducked in her shoulders and hunched over in contrast. Hmm, that's funny, the chest that's puffing out looks a lot smaller... Is the perspective off or something? In any case, I'll go ahead and request that be fixed for the Blu-Rays!

Anyway, in Yuigahama's case, she was nowhere near the level of being just bad, but whatever. It's a trivial problem in light of her chest.

"Yui-senpai, cooking is all about being sincere. When you're making something by hand, your feelings of kindness and sympathy are what's important. The shortcut to improvement is to consider the person you're cooking for."

Isshiki gently patted the depressed Yuigahama's shoulders to comfort her and she then erected a finger. With a peaceful smile, she encouraged her.

"After all, we're dealing with boys here who know absolutely nothing about handmade sweets. So, handmade chocolates are a piece of cake. It doesn't cost much to make a lot and you can add your finishing touches by customizing each one to your liking. The boys will be all over them."

"Your sympathy's gone far beyond the horizon... Even your kindness was purely for your wallet."

"It's more problematic because that way of thinking isn't wrong in the least as well..."

"It doesn't make me happy at all..."

Met with all that feedback, even Isshiki found herself taking a step back. She then forcibly changed the topic as if trying to brush off the topic while groaning.

"Well, that was actually a joke. It's what senpai would say... That being said, I'd like some references for making obligatory chocolate. So senpai, what kind of sweets do you like?"

"What kind, huh...? I guess this."

What I took out was, of course, MAX COFFEE. Why, you ask? It's because it's special to me.

As soon as I placed the can on the table, the three of them focused their stares on me.

Um, what's with those skeptical looks...? There isn't a person in Chiba who'd get upset from receiving this as a sweet. At least, that's what I wanted to say, but everyone's faces looked considerably doubtful...

Yuigahama stared at the can and whispered. "...I bet even I can make that."

"Like hell you can. Quit screwing around and stop looking down on MAX COFFEE. If you're thinking you can just dump condensed milk and sugar into coffee, you're quite mistaken. No, seriously, don't even bother."

"He's actually getting angry!?"

Obviously. It's a completely different beast from just putting condensed milk in coffee. In fact, putting coffee in condensed milk would be more convincing to me. You couldn't achieve that sticky sweetness through normal means. It wasn't something amateurs should stick their heads into.

Isshiki placed the tip of her finger on her lips to think and opened her mouth.

"Actually, that would put me over my budget."

"I don't know exactly how much you plan on making, but you're under a rather severe budget if you're limiting yourself to less than 130 yen a piece..." Yukinoshita said in disbelief, rubbing her temple. That, however, wasn't a concern.

"No problem. MAX COFFEE is cheaper if you pick the right store and buy it in bulk."

"Jeez Hikki, just how into it are you...?"

"It's what happens when you don't get many opportunities to drink sweet stuff. I'm always having to drink bitter stuff, after all." I snorted bitterly.

Then, Yukinoshita brushed aside her hair along her shoulders and wore a tenacious smile. "Bitter things aren't something you drink, but something you experience."

"Yeah, yeah, whatever. But the pain I have to deal with doesn't change. In that case, I just want to live the rest of my life drinking sweet juices."

"It sounds like what you're tasting aren't bitter things, but life itself..." Yukinoshita let out a profound sigh.

No, no, it's exactly as you said. I'm totally tasting everything bitter, even life. So based on the aforementioned, life was equal to everything bitter, so life was pain! I thought with these pointless ideas running through my mind.

Isshiki sneered. "Right. I really don't care, though."

How mean. Isshiki gulped down the rest of her tea, placed her paper cup down, and turned towards me.

"I wanted to hear your thoughts on the basics of obligatory chocolate."

"Obligatory chocolate, huh...?"

I sifted through my memories for that. Unfortunately, I had no experience of receiving any, so I didn't have much to say.

As though those thoughts showed on my face, Isshiki made an unpleasant snicker.

"Ohh, senpai, you're the type to not get any, huh? But don't boys usually compete over who gets the most chocolate? Won't that hurt your pride as a boy if you don't get anything?"

"Uh, it's not like I need them... When was Valentine's Day a sport?"

There's nothing simpler and clearer than determining the winner by number, but the rules were all over the place.

Especially the incoming successive offside traps called obligatory chocolate! It was clearly a red card in that simulation. So, what's an offside trap? Here I am, not knowing a single thing about the rules of soccer.

I rambled on, saying one thing after the other. Isshiki seemed to have taken my ramblings as a bluff and didn't even bother to listen. She then sighed in disbelief while sending me a strangely warm gaze. "I guess there's no helping you. In that case..."

"You don't need to be concerned for him."

Isshiki was then interrupted by Yukinoshita. She smoothly lifted her hair and wore a composed smile while Isshiki's mouth hung open in contrast.

"Huh...? Don't tell me, Yukinoshita-senpai, you're going to—"

Yukinoshita didn't let her finish speaking and softly chuckled. "Because Hikigaya-kun doesn't have any friends he could compete with."

"Oh, that makes sense."

I found myself nodding in conjunction with Isshiki, and we somehow looked like a couple of hens in a hen house. Riiight, that totally makes sense. Just when I felt I was kind of convinced by her argument, Yuigahama who was sitting on the side, puffed her cheeks.

"I don't think you need to worry... Besides, Hikki will get chocolate... right?" She said and sent me a reserved glance.

I nodded back with a small smile.

"Wha...? You mean..."

Isshiki alternated glances between Yuigahama and me. When her eyes that trembled as though from bewilderment crashed with mine, I instinctively let out a proud laugh.

"Hmph, you got that right... I have Komachi, after all!"

And that's exactly why I'll get chocolate! I'm so glad to have a little sister! As long you have a little sister, you're good!

However, Isshiki tilted her head while blinking in confusion.

"Huh? Komachi...? Who's that? Is that rice?"

"No."

What, was the staple food at the Isshiki household Akitakomachi rice or something? Heck, just give me some rice from JA-Ugo [13] or the collaboration rice they have. Then again, please get out there, JA-Chiba.

"Oh, Komachi-chan is Hikki's little sister." Yuigahama explained.

Isshiki made a completely apathetic face and let out a flat voice.

"You have a sister, senpai?"

I do. She's a world-level little sister. As a matter of fact, she's the world's little sister.

I triumphantly answered and Isshiki stared at me suspiciously. She glared at me, her eyes narrowed as much as possible, and cocked her head to the side.

"...Siscon?"

"No stupid, obviously not," I said, but the reactions from my surrounding were cold.

"...Um, I'm not too sure if I can deny that," Yuigahama said. Yukinoshita then looked down with a pensive face. Oh come on, help me out here.

Irohasu nodded her head convincingly to their responses. Then, she erected her index finger, moved it to her chin, and tilted her head with a perky smile.

"Senpai, you really do like younger girls."

"No, not really."

Older, younger, it didn't matter. I was the type that ultimately found most people hard to deal with.

I brushed her off and Isshiki clicked her tongue.

"Then..."

Isshiki coughed to check her throat, sent me a single upwards glance, and immediately looked away.

She tightly gripped one hand at the bosom of her uniform while the other weakly trembled and adjusted her skirt. With moist eyes, the breaths she let out were hot.

Then, she spoke in fragments.

"Do you hate... younger girls?"

I..... do not! Yeah! If you had to ask, I absolutely loved them!

With a confident look, Yuigahama briefly sighed and looked at Isshiki.

"You know what, the way you're asking really is the problem..."

"...Yeah, I guess."

Yep, I can agree with that. Though, I was finally starting to get used to it now. Isshiki didn't find that pleasing and looked at me with resentful eyes.

That attitude caused me to make a bitter smile.

Isshiki, her behavior, and her speech were charming, but there were several reasons why her actions didn't affect me all that much in the present. Had I been myself from long ago, I'd lose my wits within the instant, no doubt about it. There's just one big reason amongst them all, however, and that was simple.

"As long as I have my little sister, I like them either way, older or younger."

"That sounds like a disease far worse than being a siscon or someone into younger girls!"

Yuigahama's tragic scream reverberated in the room and Isshiki nodded in agreement with disgust. Now you just made me imagine what a slightly older Komachi would look like. I looked around the room hoping for someone else to agree with me and Yukinoshita was tilting her head with a complicated face and crossed arms.

"The problem is what qualifies someone as younger. Their school year? Birthday? Are they considered

younger if their birthday is only a little later.....? The definition's rather vague. I believe we should sort that out first, don't you think?" Yukinoshita said, blabbering on.

Yuigahama clapped her hands. "Oh, but hey, Hikki seems like he'd be compatible with an older girl, for sure...! I think, definitely."

She squeezed her fist, putting a lot of strength into it. But I certainly didn't have that obsession, yes.

".....That's not really applicable here. If we're talking about a year gap, it's not that big of a deal."

Like mainly from an income perspective! The important thing was that they could take care of me. And in regards to that, Komachi was perfect. She possessed the talent to become a top breeder.

Isshiki moaned. "Ehh, are you sure? Does Hayama-senpai think that way, too?"

"No idea."

"But senpai, you said that being younger is an advantage, right?"

"Yeah, I guess I did..... If anything, you are born in the month of April so you're less than a year apart from me. So you don't feel all that much younger than me, anyway."

It's only after I took a couple of steps back that I could feel the gap between us. If we're talking about the age gap from like Komachi or Haruno-san, that was obvious. Hiratsuka-sensei, that'd be... yeah. Isshiki's really only about eight months away from me and three months from Yukinoshita. I thought. Isshiki didn't seem to be on the same page as I was and blinked at me in surprise.

"What...?"

"Oh, no... I was just a bit surprised."

When I spoke to her, she fiddled with her front bangs and tried to play it off. On the other hand, Yuigahama at the side nosily moved her chair back to make some distance from me.

"How the heck do you know her birthday!? That's scary! You're creepy, Hikki... No, seriously..."

"...You seem rather informed." Yukinoshita smiled firmly. Though it's closer to the smile of Nikkari Aoe [14] than just a pleasant smile, so there was a transparent feeling of pressure oozing from it.

"No, Isshiki mentioned it the other day with her pointlessly sly appeal..."

"Did you say pointless!? I-It's not! Actually, I'm not the one being sly, it's you, senpai!"

Isshiki jumped up from her chair and pointed her finger at me. Actually, I'm not the one being sly, you're the one normally being sly, Isshiki...

"I have an amazing memory, that's why... Anyway, if you're done here, go back to your Student Council or Soccer Club already," I said.

Isshiki pouted in outrage while reluctantly making her way out of the room. Good grief, this girl's acting like that again. Yeah, yeah, you're sly, so sly.

Yukinoshita, Yuigahama, and I smiled wryly as we watched her leave. Then, the Service Club's door, right in front of where she was heading, was knocked upon.

Chapter 4

[All of a sudden, a request pours in for the Service Club.]

After a gentle knock, our eyes were locked onto the lightly knocked door for a few moments.

Isshiki was about to leave the room, but after glancing back and forth between us and the door, she quietly returned to her seat. Well, I can only imagine how awkward it'd be to meet eyes with the visitors on the way out.

Before long, festive voices came from the other side of the thin wall.

"It's not like we need their help..."

"It's fine, it's fine. Besides, I don't really know all that much, either."

The voices consisted of a familiar blunt speaker and a tone that, while amiable, seemed forceful.

There was a knock at the door again, only this time it came across rhythmically.

"Come in," Yukinoshita answered, and the door slowly opened. Appearing within the opening was Ebina-san's face.

"Hallo, hallo! Do you guys have a minute?"

"Hina? Oh, sure, come in, come in!" Yuigahama motioned her in with her hand, and Ebina-san returned a nod. Indeed, the quicker you enter, the less wind makes it inside. My seat is the closest to the door, after all...

"Excuse us for the intrusion," Ebina-san said in polite greeting as she entered. Following wordlessly behind her, with a gloomy expression and averted eyes, was Miura.

"What can we do for you?" Yukinoshita asked.

Miura's mouth distorted as she shot a glance at Isshiki. "And why's she here?"

"Oh, you know, that's exactly what I wanted to say... or something!" Isshiki shot back a smile as Miura twirled her hair with a displeased glare.

Oh, what a bizarre atmosphere... I thought. Her perception must have been similar, as Yuigahama came in to mediate. "Ummm, does having more people here make it harder for you to talk?"

"No, not really..." Miura answered, her attitude still curt. This certainly didn't look like she'd be able to talk about anything with ease.

"We can always make Isshiki leave if you want," I offered.

"Huh!? Why!?"

It's not like you're a member of the club or anything... You being here as if it's a given is the abnormality, you know?

"Now, now, Yumiko. Just think about what you want to talk about, see. If you don't get too specific, it should be fine. Right?"

Ebina-san patted Miura's shoulder to calm her down.

Yuigahama tossed a smile in Isshiki's direction, "Now, now, see, Iroha-chan might have some good ideas too."

Isshiki clearly wasn't pleased with being treated like an outsider, but I slowly inclined my head to Yuigahama, who answered with a relieved smile.

"Let's start from the top then," Yukinoshita said, restarting the conversation.

Miura eyed Isshiki for a moment longer, but eventually removed her glare. She fiddled with her hair as though looking for split ends, then opened her mouth to speak.

"...Well, you know? I was kinda thinking about making chocolate... Um, we have exams and all next year... So this is kinda like our last time or something."

She quietly trailed off with a voice dripping with shame and embarrassment. Her cheeks gradually reddened as she spoke.

However, there was some lingering loneliness in her words, though that very well might be something I perceived of my own accord.

Next year, around this time of the season, we weren't obligated to attend school. It also happened to be right in the middle of the testing season, with exams for private universities being held during this time as well.

Therefore, this was going to be the last Valentine's Day of our high school life. The event would probably have a completely different meaning to us later in our lives.

"...So like, I figured I'd give it a go or something," Miura continued as she twirled her hair, trying to hide her blush.

The words that came out of her mouth as her hair danced around her fingers were certainly agreeable to some extent. Because we were not yet adults, the words that came out of her mouth as her hair danced around her fingers were certainly agreeable to some extent. They were words that only we would understand.

To those whom it may be concern, it was without a doubt the last Valentine's Day of their lives.

That said, there weren't many here who could sympathize with her. Isshiki still had another year left, which meant it didn't feel all that real to her. Her mouth was open as though she didn't find it to be that big of a deal while

Yukinoshita was thinking of something with her hand placed to her chin.

Yuigahama, however, inflated her cheeks. She narrowed her eyes and gave Miura a stern look.

"...Yumiko, didn't you say handmade chocolate would be too pushy?"

"...W-Well—" Miura was at a loss for words, quietly trying to avert her eyes. But Yuigahama followed her gaze in a manner that wouldn't allow her to run away.

Ebina-san soothed Yuigahama who was groaning in displeasure. "Now, now, what's the problem? I think making chocolate would be good, too."

"Huh? You're gonna do it too, Hina?" Yuigahama asked, surprised.

"Yep. Well, it's more like I'll be accompanying Yumiko or something like that. It wouldn't hurt to learn myself,

anyway.”

“Ohh, that’s kinda surprising...”

“Really? Like, if I learn, it’d come in handy for goodies at like comiket,” Ebina-san went on. In watching the two converse, I was overcome by a sense of discomfort.

“Oh ho...?”

...Goodies? Goodies, huh? Hmmm? I looked at Ebina-san, finding her words strange, and she turned her head towards me. A glance from beyond the lenses of her glasses questioned me as if asking if there was something wrong. I shook my head in response.

Often, handmade things, either as goodies or presents, were used as formality to maintain a sense of distance outside of friendships. Ebina-san should be aware of this, yet she still sought to know the process of making obligatory chocolate.

In other words, it indicates she’s thinking about someone, even if only a little...

...Way to go, Tobe. You’re actually making some progress here. Then again, I don’t even know if it’s Tobe that she wants to give chocolate to because it could be for a complete stranger for all that we know. I mean, seriously, who’s Tobe?

With those thoughts running rampant in my mind, a slight warmth began filling my heart as I watched Ebina-san. Then, her eyebrows twitched. She let out a rotten snicker and her glasses sparkled.

“Yeah, you definitely gotta go with handmade chocolate! I think you should try giving Hayato-kun some bro-chocolate, Hikitani-kun!”

“Yeah right, I’m not doing that...”

Alright, Ebina-san isn’t changing anytime soon... in more ways than one. Anyway, what did she say just now? Bro-choco? Tomo-choco? What the heck is that? Chibi Maruko’s grandfather? [15]

“It’s not like he’s accepting any, right?”

“You’re in the clear if you’re a guy!”

The idea’s already out of the question from the start.

We had to listen to Ebina-san, though... After all, the person who’d normally stop her was making a troubled face, still fiddling with her hair.

In the meantime, I ignored Ebina-san, who kept going on about bro-choco and homo-choco.

Sitting next to her, Isshiki crossed her arms and groaned. “That’s true. Now it’s much harder for us since he’s already declared he isn’t accepting anything.”

Yep—wait, no, the problem isn’t that, but that we’re both guys here... Hold on, on second thought, he seems like he’d happily accept chocolate from guys since they wouldn’t cause him any trouble... But you know what!? There’d clearly be other kinds of trouble from that instead! And that’s the kind of development that would score zero points with me!

“What should we do...?”

“Haa... Like totally.”

When Isshiki's and Miura's sighs overlapped, they lifted their faces. Their gazes clashed as if fireworks were on the verge of being lit...

Oh man, talk about scary...

X

X

X

I went down to the first floor to use the vending machine in front of the school store, where I purchased a can of MAX COFFEE with a click. [16]

I let out a profound sigh as I took the can.

As a guy, I couldn't help but shrink in my seat while bearing witness to the ongoing battle between Isshiki and Miura as they silently exchanged sparks. I was tucking in my shoulders so much that I was starting to resemble Slenderman of the Western urban legends.

I got up to clean my hands. Afterwards, I made my way back to the clubroom, sipping my can of coffee to energize my exhausted body. As I climbed the stairs, I spotted an individual loitering around in front of the clubroom door.

She made restless glances periodically, accompanied by the alternating flops and bounces of her blue hair styled in a ponytail.

"...Huh, what're you doing?" I ended up calling out to her, finding her to be too suspicious. Her ponytail jumped and she faced me in a frightful manner.

She was behaving so cautiously that she resembled a mountain cat. I had to the urge to click my tongue and use my coffee as bait, but this wasn't the time to be acting so lax while trying to feed a wild animal.

What I should be doing is trying to name her, not lure her in! Umm, let's see... Kawa-something should be good. Heeeey, Kawa-something-san. I called her internally, asking her what she needed in the process.

"Do you need something?"

Upon hearing the question, Kawa-something-san let out a relieved sigh. She then proceeded to motion me over to the end of the hallway with her hand. Oh, that's right, her name is Kawasaki Saki-san. I knew that.

While sending glances towards the clubroom, she asked, "D-Do you have a second?"

"Uh, why not go inside? It's cold out here."

From what I could tell, she had some business with the Service Club. Knowing that, I honestly just wanted to get in the heated room as soon as possible. But Kawasaki paused to think and then frantically shook her hands.

"Huh...? Wait, here is fine! I'm fine here! I just had something to ask Yukinoshita, that's all..."
Why don't you just ask her directly then...?

"Yukinoshita's inside if you need her. So just go in already. It's cold here, and I'll get sick."

The hallway of the special building was filled with a fridity that might've been caused by windows being left open to air out some of the classrooms. Chills ran up my body, starting from my feet. The windows rattled in response to the wind blowing in, which sounded like they were shivering in reaction to the wind as well.

"I'm... not all that cold or anything..." Kawasaki said, turning her face away from me.

Well, you might be okay with it, but I'm not... There'd be problems if I were to get sick because of this.

Spreading the cold to Komachi, or trying to recover from it, would invite all kinds of issues.

On another note, as a citizen of Chiba, the best way to cure a cold would be to consume as much garlic as possible, doused with a ton of spices. After that, a warm can of MAX COFFEE and some sleep would do the trick. And the following day, you'd find yourself in the hospital. And that's why I think we should stay cooped in at home in order to avoid catching a cold.

The Kawasaki home was also no stranger to housing a test-taking student. Should the younger Kawasaki brother, Taishi, catch a cold and end up infecting Komachi, I may have to dirty my hands with sins and blood...

"Just go in," I coarsely stated, my voice growing sharp due to my hostility towards the poisonous insect called Taishi for daring to approach my Komachi.

Kawasaki caved in. "I-If you say so..."

As long you understand. I'd like to lower the chances of Komachi getting potentially sick and all.

"Well, can't have you getting sick either," I said, opening the door. I nodded to her, urging her to enter.

Appearing dazed, she looked back.

"...O-Okay," she said, answering with a voice in contrast to her intimidating appearance and walking reluctantly inside.

She looks like a delinquent at a glance, but she's really just an honest, good girl you'd find anywhere. I thought as I followed her into the room.

"Welcome back, Hikki... Huh, Saki?"

Yuigahama turned towards us with a curious look, twisting her upper body and cocking her head to the side.

"Ah, yeah..."

With her awkward response, Kawasaki became the center of attention in the room.

Yukinoshita blinked at her in question while Isshiki slightly shrunk in fear. No, no, Kawa-something-san might look scary, but she really isn't, okay?

Ebina-san, on the other hand, ecstatically shouted out to her. "Oh, hey there, Saki-Saki. Hallo, hallo!"

"Don't call me Saki-Saki." Kawasaki snarled.

To cool her down, Yuigahama extended a chair to her. "It's pretty rare to see you stop by here, Saki... Then again, this is the first time, isn't it?"

They've must gotten pretty friendly after the field trip for her to be calling her Saki now. I just couldn't keep my tears from flowing knowing that Kawa-something Saki-san was finally able to have someone recall her real name, Saki. Lately, I've been feeling so emotional that even the weekly Precures standing their ground was enough to make me bawl.

Yep, yep, girls getting along is a wonderful thing. Very, I thought as my body warmed up. Meanwhile, Yukinoshita prepared some tea in a paper cup and inquired, "So, what do you need from us today?"

"Th-Thanks... Um..."

Though Kawasaki ignited the conversation, she wasn't quite able to continue. Oh yeah, she mentioned how she wanted to talk to Yukinoshita about something. Kawasaki groaned, unsure of how to proceed. She was

interrupted by the sound of nails tapping on the table next to her.

From that direction, Miura had a displeased look. Kawasaki, however, wasn't very appreciative of her attitude and stared her down, Miura doing the same thing right back.

"Excuse me, who says we're done with my issues?"

"Ha? You're just drinking tea, aren't you?"

I take back what I said earlier. Kawasaki-san is super scary...

Miura and Kawasaki stared daggers into each other, neither of them giving an inch. Terrible chemistry between the two of you as always, huh...? Watching the two caused Isshiki to freeze up.

In that unbending space, Ebina-san interjected. "Okay, okay, calm down. Saki-Saki, you're here to talk about something, right? If you don't mind, we'd like to listen, too."

"I believe we're the ones that'll be helping..."

"Anyway, talk to us, hm?" Ebina-san asked, apparently not lending an ear at all to Yukinoshita's grumbling.

Kawasaki shot glances at Yukinoshita, Yuigahama, and then me. She sighed and spoke.

"Well, I had some questions about making chocolate..."

The instant she asked, Miura guffawed. "What, you're also gonna give someone chocolate? That's hilarious."

"Ah?"

"Ha?"

The two, once again, ferociously exchanged glares.

"...Don't lump me together with you. I'll have you know I'm not interested at all in what you want to do with them."

"Ha?"

"Ah?"

...Stop it! Please get along!

After watching their quarrel, Yukinoshita sighed and shook her head. Your "how deplorable" face doesn't mean much considering you're just like them most of the time... Oh, but, recently, the Yukinon with the jagged heart [17] cutting knife that hurts everyone hasn't been in action that much.

Isshiki mumbled, watching the two girls who wouldn't back down from each other. "Senpai, your acquaintances really are all weird people..."

"Ha?"

"Ah?"

Assaulted by their glares, Isshiki immediately retreated behind me. Remember what I said about stepping on landmines...? You're acting like a dumb cat, you know... And besides, I'm just as scared of these two as you are!

Anyway, let's move the conversation forward since that's the only way to be freed from their hostility.

"So, what's this about chocolate?"

"My little sister heard some things about Valentine's Day at her nursery, and now she wants to make some... Do you know anything small that little kids can make?"

"Anything small that little kids can make..." Yukinoshita nodded, repeating what she heard.

Ebina-san tilted her head. "Weren't you good at household chores, Saki-Saki?"

Oh yeah, Kawasaki takes care of her house quite a bit since both her parents are busy, as well as her having a lot of siblings. I do recall seeing her with shopping bags with a long green onion sticking out of one of them. So that means she should be good at cooking, too. I looked at her and she turned her face away in awkwardness.

"...Um, the things I make are kinda plain. I don't think kids would like them."

"If you don't mind telling us, what exactly are you proficient at, Kawasaki-san?" Yukinoshita asked, only to be followed with a silence.

With a stutter, Kawasaki answered, "S-S..."

S... Sweets? That sounds like something kids would enjoy. Back when I was younger, there was a time when I fought with Komachi over the Santa Claus sweet on top of the Christmas cake... Though at the time, we ended up finding out that it wasn't all that tasty. Komachi and I stopped eating it and left it up to our dad to throw it away.

But what she wanted to say wasn't what it seemed. Everyone looked at her, waiting for her to continue.

"S-Simmered potato balls..."

...It's plain.

The room was silenced by her answer that was so unimaginably plain. Everyone's responses had been so blunt that she started shedding tears, apparently a sign of how embarrassing it was for her.

Realizing that, Yuigahama made a determined face and tried to soothe Kawasaki with an energetic voice.

"That sounds great! I can't even cook! You're totally amazing in my book! Right, Yukinon!?"

When asked, Yukinoshita nodded her head in earnest. "That's true. Potato balls remind me of cat balls, so it's rather cute don't you think?"

"Isn't that follow-up kinda weird!?" Yuigahama turned around with a bewildered face. "You're totally right, you can't even call that a follow-up."

What the heck are cat balls, anyway...? Are you perhaps talking about how cats curl into a ball when they sleep? And when you roll them around, they give you this incredibly displeased look? Okay, sure, even I think that's pretty cute, even if only for a little. But long-haired cats are like mops and attract a lot of dust, so be careful there!

Anyway, let's stop thinking about cats and focus on Kawasaki. Then again, that weird follow-up by Yukinoshita embarrassed her even more that she was shaking like a baby kitten that was just given away. I'm so sorry that she doesn't know how to make feel people better...

As compensation, if you could even call it that, I coughed once and added, "Well, if you're able to cook those, you should be good."

"Oh, that's true. It is plain, though..." Isshiki repeated after me and answered. Although she looked confused, she wasn't acting disrespectful or derisive.

"Yep, that's totally something Saki-Saki would make, too!" Ebina-san erected her index finger, flashing an Ebi-Ebi smile.

Kawasaki started squirming this time, clearly finding all the praise uncomfortable, when suddenly she stopped. I followed her gaze; it was directed at Miura, seemingly concerned what she might end up saying.

Miura, however, took a fixed look at her and looked away in disinterest. With a small voice, she whispered as though speaking to no one in particular, "So you can cook."

"Huh? Oh, yeah, I can..."

"Hmmm..."

As she twirled her hair with the tip of her fingers, her voice was slightly tinged with respect. I imagine Miura-san couldn't quite cook herself, either... As a maiden, it might've been a skillset she aspired to have.

"If Kawasaki-san is able to cook, I suppose all we'll need is to pitch a menu of suggestions." Contemplating, Yukinoshita placed her hand to her chin and tilted her head.

"D-Don't forget me! I wanna know, too! If kids can do it, so can I!" Yuigahama energetically raised her hand.

Yukinoshita sadly lowered her eyes. "...I wouldn't be so sure of that."

"You're being way too honest, Yukinon!"

"Actually, she didn't say that it'd be impossible, so she's being considerate, if anything."

"Just how hopeless do you two think I am!?"

You're just not self-aware enough... When it came to Yuigahama, neither menus nor the process of cooking were the problems. It's her habitual need to throw in her ideas of hidden flavors that made things worse. The thing she made long ago with Yukinoshita had turned into something edible at the end, after all. Well, it's not like there weren't problems with Yukinoshita's teaching either...

"Hey, what about me?"

"Right, right, let us in on this, too!"

Miura and Ebina, looking tired of Kawasaki's side of the story, spoke up in displeasure while Isshiki raised her hand slightly.

"Oh, I'd like to participate for reference."

Seeing them, Yukinoshita sighed.

"I don't mind..." She said, sending me a glance.

"...Well, go ahead and see what you can come up with. They're the ones who'll be doing the work, anyway."

"That's true... You're right; I'll put something appropriate together, so I'd like to have some of your time if you don't mind..."

Yukinoshita looked at Kawasaki, Ebina-san, and then Miura. The three of them nodded back in agreement.

It had been a short while since Miura's group had left the club room. The room returned to its peaceful quiet state at last and Yukinoshita let out a quiet sigh.

"Somehow, today feels especially tiring....."

As we sip the newly brewed black tea, we finally managed to calm ourselves down.

"To have four people in one day, that's like, our highest record ever, right?" Yuigahama asked casually. Well, counting Isshiki as one of those who had consultations with us was kind of strange but even without her, business today really was thriving.

This empty room that resembled a storage room could actually turn into such a bustling place. The chairs that were here originally, were put haphazardly, and were facing random directions. But, since some time ago, they had begun to form a sort of distorted circle around a long table that had a tea-set on top.

The clubroom had changed a lot since the past.

The warm air, tea-set and blankets, the paperbacks that had accumulated. The number of chairs as well as the placement of various objects. The intensity of the sun shining in and the coats hanging on the wall.

The room that had been the color of frost, had turned into a hue of warmth following the end of spring.

It wasn't clear at all whether this was due to the changing of the seasons, or maybe some other reasons behind it.

The air around us was inducing us into a slumber, making us feel quite uneasy, and so I looked outside the window reflexively.

According to the weather report, there will a massive cold wave these few days, and so right now, a strong wind had already begun blowing.

The sound of the glass rattling and the girls' talking intertwined with one another, reaching my ears distinctly.

"But, it really is quite troubling."

Hearing Yukinoshita, who was now crossing her arms, murmur that; Isshiki, who had her arms crossed as well, looked serious as she sighed.

"Yes, Miura-Senpai showing her seriousness there is indeed a little troubling."

"What I meant was the amount of request....."

Smiling wryly at the exchange between the two, Yuigahama began to speak.

"But then, I think I kind of understand how Hayato-kun is feeling....."

Hayama's feelings..... No, I don't really understand him..... I looked at Yuigahama questioningly, asking her for the intention of that line. Yuigahama thought for a while, and then spoke once more.

"Ah, you see....., how should I put it..... Just as I thought, I still can't really say it openly, or maybe I just read too much into things....."

This sort of worry was really like her. Hearing her, Isshiki nodded her head

"Ah, that is so like Yui-Senpai. So kind."

"Is that, so....., ahaha..... Just like me, huh....."

Yuigahama laughed awkwardly at Isshiki's words, and had a slightly dejected look on her face.

She was probably shy from being praised. It's probably just that. Or rather, she was the same as Hayama Hayato. Because they were both kind, they were probably suffering from being too concerned about others.

Thinking about it, Yuigahama was on very good things with Hayama, Miura as well as Isshiki. Her trouble with getting caught between the three of them had already surfaced during the ride to Destiny Land, and it was all the more obvious now.

'Ah, such a huge problem.....' It was very easy for an outsider to make such a comment. However, I was unable to do so.

I had a hard time understanding why someone would keep worrying about the relationships between others. However, I had the same feeling as her. That feeling of wanting to obtain a conclusion.

Probably, Yukinoshita felt the same way as well. I could tell from Yukinoshita's expression that she was quite concerned over Yuigahama's dark mood.

For example, if I could obtain the same conclusion as Hayama, then perhaps everything I have done up till now was a waste of effort.

Hayama Hayato, who has chosen to live up to everybody's expectation, has decided to fulfill it flawlessly. To undertake the greatest compromise without compromise. Dedicating himself to using such a measure to prolong such a life.

There was nothing as sincere as this insincerity.

For such a [kind] person, there wasn't much that an [unkind] person could do. The most they could do was to engage in monologue, or to repeat the same thing over and over again.

"..... Well, isn't it enough to just use an excuse? Some sort of official reason to convince Hayama."

"Huh?"

Isshiki seemed to have no idea what I was talking at all and the upper half of her body followed her head's movements and tilted to the side, whilst looking my way. Although this action of hers was very cute, but her answer was really annoying, Isshiki.....

"Just as long as you get him into a position whereby he's forced to accept it, or rather, whereby he can accept it naturally."

Hearing my follow-up, the corners of Isshiki's mouth curled upwards, a queer expression that didn't really seem to suggest that she understood it completely. Then, Yukinoshita placed the tea cup and cup holder to one side and with her eyes, told me to be quiet.

"That is to say, it's fine as long as there is an excuse? If you were to give him in a closed environment, Hayama-kun wouldn't be troubled by it."

"That's right, closed, that thing."

Actually whether it was closed or worst or QP [18], it doesn't matter. The important point was that Hayama doesn't have to worry about how others looked at him, that all we needed to do was not damage his public image.

Though I have said so much, Isshiki and Yuigahama still did not seem to understand and remained tilting

their heads. Yuigahama was still muttering "Cu-ro-se-to.....?" Erm, what exactly is a closet environment? Doraemon's living environment? [19]

"For example..... Don't mention Valentine's Day. Just get him to taste it. Something like that, I don't have an exact idea."

"So it's like that..... It would be okay as long as everyone makes (the chocolates) together?"

Yuigahama inhaled a deep breath as she spoke, her expression suggested that she was quite relieved. Un, I think that it would be best if you understood it without much trouble.

"Well, something like that. Whether it's Isshiki or Miura, as long you make it with Hayama and get him to test its taste, that guy will have no way of rejecting you."

"I see..... I understand the gist of it now! I just have to drag him to a place whereby no one will interfere with us?"

"Although you aren't wrong, but please note how you say it....."

Hearing me chide Isshiki, Yukinoshita let slipped a chuckle.

"However, the main point is indeed as such. As expected of a genius who specializes in disappearing from the public eye and unfair tactics."

"Un, you need to take notice of how you speak too."

Sometimes, you do need to put further thought into how you extend your praise to others. As I was thinking of that, Yuigahama slapped her thigh and stood up.

"Then, let's all do it. Us together, I mean....."

"All?....."

"Yup, everyone! Something like chocolate fondue! Seems as fun as a chocopa!"

"Cho, copa.....? Eh, what?"

Probably because this was her first time hearing such a word, Yukinoshita tilted her head in bewilderment. Well, according to my deductions from everything that Yuigahama has ever said till now, chocopa could either be an abbreviation for a chocolate party or a party for making chocolate fondue. I was close to reaching the 2nd level of the Gahama language. I could probably score a high mark in the YUEIC. [20] Whatever the case, it's going to be a party anyway right? This girl..... Man, Yuigahama is seriously one of those party people who go, Juice, party, YEAH! [21]

Yukinoshita was still confused at this point, but Isshiki nodded her head with an "Ohh" in admiration.

"In other words, we are going to be doing something like an event, right?!"

"Yup! Exactly! Everyone will be able to help one another if we do something like that!"

Yuigahama leaned forward in excitement whilst Isshiki turned her neck with a puzzled expression.

"O, okay..... I see....."

Hearing Yuigahama's answer, Isshiki's expression suggested that she wasn't all that convinced. She shot a glance in my direction.

"Is that okay with you, Senpai?"

A tone that was no different from normal. However, just her calm, serious expression of her eyes alone seemed to suggest that she was able to peer into the deepest part of my heart. This was different from the usual Isshiki that always appeared indifferent. Though her question was short, she gazed at me for a long time. Her closed mouth showed no signs of a smile.

".....At the very least, we can fulfill all the request at one go. When you think about its effectiveness, I don't think it's all that bad."

However, in order to not make a mistake. Just for this reason alone, I had carefully searched for the words to say.

"Well, the problem isn't with that right?"

With a sigh and a short abrupt laugh, Isshiki seemed to have lost all interest in me and followed up my answer with a trifle reply. Then, she crossed her arms once more and twitched her neck.

Feeling uneasy at that response, Yuigahama fiddled about with her bun of hair and said, "S, Something feels wrong, I think....."

Cutting off Yui's words at this point, Isshiki smiled pleasantly, and asked the forbidden question to her.

"No, nothing's wrong in particular..... Come to think of it, can Yui-senpai cook?"

"Eh?"

To my surprise however, Yuigahama made a weird sound, "Gi,gi,gi" that sounded like some rusty tin plaything, and turned her face away slowly.

"I, I will try my best....."

Averting her eyes, Yuigahama muttered her resolve in a small voice. Seeing her like this, Yukinoshita gave a small smile.

"Since I am the one doing the teaching, it won't be a problem, even for Yuigahama-san."

"Oh, is that so?"

Her words seemed to be suggesting something and hearing Isshiki's reply, Yukinoshita narrowed her eyes all of a sudden.

"Ara, are you perhaps unhappy with me doing the teaching?"

"Ah! No! I know that Yukinoshita-senpai is very good at cooking....."

Being on the receiving end of the cold stare, Isshiki jumped in fright and shook her hands in a flurry to deny it. Then, she snuck a stealthy glance at Yukinoshita. After that, she snuck another glance at both me and Yuigahama. Yukinoshita smiled at her small animal-like actions.

"Well then, there's no problem then right?"

And with that matter-of-fact conclusion by Yukinoshita, it would appear that Yukinoshita was the one who was doing all the work. Obviously, the girls who had come and made the request most likely had no cooking skills at all. Thus, the workload that we would have would most likely be huge as well. Thinking of this point, a tinge of unease swept across me.

"It seems like a huge bother, are you really sure it's fine?"

Hearing it, Yukinoshita quietly closed her eyes, and a gentle smile appeared on her lips.

"There's nothing that I can't do. I only do what I can do....."

A gentle voice, as well as a nostalgic tone.

Whatever was reflected behind her closed eyelids, I did not know. However, it was probably a scenery that was both heart-warming and beautiful. Whilst thinking of this, I also thought that her voice was pure and beautiful, a transient one in which one could not reach out to.

"I, see....."

Isshiki looked downwards and said what appeared to be an answer to Yukinoshita's words. The faint sunset glow illuminated Yukinoshita's side profile. Her concealed eyes and flickering eyelashes, as well as her flowing fringe. As a result of the light, her expression was one of considerable loneliness.

Catching hold of this sight, Isshiki raised her head and called out to her. Then just like her usual normal self, she flashed a cheerful, insolent smile. One that soon evolved into a broad grin.

"When you put it that way, it will be a huge help! Anyway, doesn't this feel like an event whereby Yukino-senpai and I will be doing the teaching to all those people who have gathered here today to fulfill their request!"

"Yes..... Wait, what?"

Hearing Isshiki addressing her in a way she was not used to, she looked over at Isshiki again and again. To which, Isshiki grinned broadly.

"Let's work hard together, Yukino-senpai!"

Seems like, I didn't hear it wrongly. Isshiki moved her chair closer and closer to Yukinoshita. She grabbed Yukinoshita's hand, who seemed to be thinking of something at the moment, and with a slight tilt of her head, looked at Yukinoshita in a pleading manner with upturned eyes. Then with an "ehehe", she smiled at her.

"O, Okay..... I don't really mind that..... Also, the way you address me....."

This was so typical of the Yukinoshita who was familiar with, and still weak to things like skin ship and body contact. As always, Yukinoshita didn't have much resistance to skin ship and body contact. Throw in a sweet pleading voice, and Yukinoshita would fall for it, hook, line and sinker. Although the difference between this gesture of hers and Yuigahama's was just like the difference between something natural and cultivated, the exceptional effectiveness that both had on Yukinoshita didn't seem to change.

"I understand. I will think about how to make the event proceed smoothly."

Yukinoshita cleared her throat, placed her hand to her cheeks and began to think. Isshiki, who was sitting to her side, suddenly picked up her phone and made a call.

"Ah, Vice-president? I need you to help me write a proposal. Something along the lines of a cooking class event. Something like that. Huh? No, just make something that I can put up on the noticeboard of a community center. Also....."

Despite the obviously troubled voice that could be heard on the other end of the line, Isshiki tutted and began to give her instructions. Also, what's with this 'community center' thing..... Didn't this girl the other day say something like, "If we don't do this real fast, we are going to hit the deadline!"

"Ne ne, Yukinon, what about me?"

Yuigahama too, shifted her chair closer and closer to Yukinoshita, asking her what she should do. Hearing that question, Yukinoshita thought for a little bit before replying.

"As for Yuigahama-San....."

Then, she placed her hand on Yuigahama's shoulders, and began talking to her in a gentle voice as though talking to a small child.

"I will do it together with you."

"You don't trust me at all!?"

"Just kidding."

With a light-hearted laugh, Yukinoshita grabbed Yuigahama's shoulders tightly.

"Of course, I will teach you what you need to know but, I hope you won't think about trying to help others. Hopefully, you won't be trying to aid them with verbal instructions or literally helping them. Okay?"

Having such a honest and direct statement said to her, having her thoughts thrust onto her, Yuigahama made a gulping motion with her throat, as though overpowered by Yukinoshita's strong will. Well, it's going to be extra effort to help others anyway, Gahama-san.....

"I, I understand. I will give it my all."

She nodded her head, giving herself some encouragement. Yuigahama clenched her hands that was in front of her chests lightly, as if to say, "I will do my best just like every other day!" [22] As though knowing full well how bad her cooking abilities were, Yuigahama's expression was a little stiff, and peeked at Yukinoshita uneasily.

As though understanding the reason behind it all, Yukinoshita slid her hands down, and stroked Yuigahama's shoulders gently.

"Yes, do your best."

Yukinoshita narrowed her slightly moist eyes that seemed to be sparkling. Yuigahama saw her expression and was somewhat shocked by it. She gripped the hand that was stroking her shoulder, and nodded slowly.

"I will....."

Hearing her answer, Yukinoshita reluctantly removed her hand from Yuigahama's shoulders. Thereupon, Yukinoshita clasped her hands together, not wanting to let the residual heat escape from them.

No one was allowed to intervene in their exchange.

The words that they exchanged. There was no way to interpret it.

People who were watching them from the sidelines, would probably see their exchange as one of innocent childishness. To be able to derive some sort of unease out of it was surely the bad habit of a cynical person.

Even though I knew it, I kept staring at the two of them. Perhaps, I thought that the present state of the two of them just seemed so beautiful, that perhaps I was just fascinated by the two of them.

Staring at them with a dazed look was probably bad manners. Yuigahama probably felt uneasy and so,

turned her body about and glanced at me.

"Umm, what will..... Hikki do?"

Being asked such a question, I immediately entered a state of confusion. I immediately shook my head lightly, and opened my mouth to say something random.

"What will I do..... Ah..... Well, I have no experience on cooking or baking."

I shrugged my shoulders as I replied, to which Yukinoshita gave a little chuckle.

"It doesn't matter. You just need to taste it and give us your opinion."

I think I have heard those words somewhere before. But the tone used back then and now was different. Yuigahama, who was sitting next to her seemed to have remembered something as well and let out a laugh.

"..... Leave it to me. I specialize in that field."

As I recalled the answer that I had given that time, I said as such. The three of us looked at one another, and broke into a hearty laugh.

Isshiki, who was still in the midst of her call glanced at the three of us, probably because she noticed our laughter.

Her gaze was asking us why were we laughing and to that, I answered by shaking my head, telling her it was nothing.

There is really no proper explanation for this sort of thing. There were some things whose importance could only be understood through the passage of time as well as the shared memories of it.

Isshiki shook her head lightly at my actions, and before long, finished her conversation with the Vice-President and ended up the call at long last.

"Okay, alright, yes, thanks for your trouble."

The Vice President on the other end seemed to be on the verge of tears, but Isshiki just ignored it and hung up the call. Having completed her call, she stood up, looking refreshed.

"Well, that settles it. Leave the trivial details to my side. Shall we discuss the finer details then?"

"Yes, let's do it."

As she answered, she brought out the black tea that has just been re-heated. Then, she added two sticks of sugar. Thereupon, Isshiki gave her thanks and took it from her calmly. Oh, Yukinoshita's concern for her was amazing, but Isshiki was just as amazing for being trained to this standard.

"So, firstly, about the schedule and venue....."

As she said it, she began jotting down in her notepad several dates without hesitation.

"It isn't held on Valentine's Day?"

She had wanted to give chocolates to Hayama Hayato through any means, and so I had willfully decided that she would definitely hold the event on that day.

However, contrary to my expectations, it was held several days before that. It seemed as though Yukinoshita had realized this as well, and she removed her gaze from the note pad and looked in my direction.

"Is it because there is an entrance exam on that day, so you couldn't get a teacher to supervise the event?"

"Ah, yes. Also, on that day, it's a school holiday."

Isshiki nodded her head in reply to Yuigahama who had muttered an "Oh" after she was convinced by the answer.

"Well, that would be one of the reasons. I wouldn't really know, but there might be those who actually have plans on that day as well."

Isshiki gave her explanation quickly and snuck a glance in my direction. It was as though she was trying to ask me if her way of putting it was thorny or whether it was alright or whether she should say something else. However, she quickly removed her gaze from me, and continued her explanation solemnly.

"The materials and utensils will be gathered by the student council so there's no issue on that front. Aprons and stuff like that are quite troublesome so I think that people will have to prepare those themselves."

With her hand supporting her jaw, Yukinoshita who had been listening attentively all this while looked up all of a sudden.

"That sounds about alright. Could you let me take a look at the utensils list later? I want to confirm the details to ensure that nothing has been left out."

"Most certainly!"

Isshiki's reply was a little strange, I wasn't sure whether she had really understood what Yukinoshita had meant. She spun her pen round and round as though it was some magic wand, and muttering, "That sounds about right," and looked towards her memo pad once more for confirmation.

"Ah, right. Yukino-senpai, I want to ask you about the menu. Shouldn't we prepare a few choices in advance? Otherwise there's no way we can preorder it~"

As she was asking Yukinoshita, Isshiki began searching on Google on her smartphone. Swipe, swipe, flick, flick. She placed the phone closely to Yukinoshita as well, wanting to show her what she was doing. Whilst watching her, Yukinoshita tilted her head in contemplation.

"There are so many to choose from, which would be the best..... Chocolate gateau or Sachertorte, or maybe chocolate truffle..... Cookies are a possible option as well. All the same, we can't only have chocolate on the menu. There will be beginners there as well, so we have to take into consideration the difficulty level too....."Indeed, even though it was chocolate-flavored snacks, there were still many types of it. Regarding this, I wasn't too sure about the details, so I shan't comment much on it.

However, there will always be those fearless people who choose to speak without having any knowledge of the matter. Yuigahama was such a person. She hands raised high in the air, and as though unable to wait for her name to be called, leaned her body forward and began to speak.

"Ah, yup! Something like chocolate fondue!"

"Well, I guess everyone can have fun playing together~. This sort of event is possible. But, because it's an event held in the cooking room so....."

Although it was a little difficult to bring herself to say it, she still managed to make a cross with her fingers. Yuigahama saw it and hung her head dejectedly.

Then, Yukinoshita who have been watching those two nodded her head.

"If that's the case, then I think it's still better to teach some common food items..... Something that's quite pretty and also simple..... Ah, this one....."

Yukinoshita who had been looking at the smartphone, nudged Isshiki's arm. At this, Isshiki replied to acknowledge her.

"I see, the hand-made cookies?"

"Yes. There's no need to measure out anything, and it looks simple too."

"Ah, if that's the case, then I think I can do that."

The instant Yuigahama said that, words just wouldn't come out of me. No, you, what, are you saying.....

"....."

"Don't just keep quiet!"

My silence and Yuigahama's cries of anguish overlapped with one another. As soon as that voice died down, an extremely kind voice gently sounded out. Yukinoshita patted Yuigahama's shoulders gently and kindly.

"Yuigahama-san, I think that it would be better for you to put your efforts in the wrapping, don't you think so?"

"Don't worry about me!"

Then, came the sound of Yuigahama's cries of 'Uwaaa'. Well not really, the taste is important, but I guess its appearance is also somewhat equally important, right?

However, the details of the request given to us were kind of difficult to fulfill.

We were in for a rough time trying to complete it, but that couldn't be helped at all.

The thing most suited for obligatory chocolates. Something that one could give to a romantic interest without feeling shy or embarrassed. Something that once learnt, would be convenient in the future as well as something that would interest a child who was making it.

An even more difficult criteria to fulfill was, that something that Yukinoshita had been muttering away incoherently since just now.

"Something that even Yuigahama-san can make..... Something that even Yuigahama-san can make....."

"That's too much, Yukinon!"

Yuigahama, who had begun wailing, had begun to move closer to Yukinoshita. Then, despite being bothered by how Yuigahama was now hugging her, she cocked her head and in Isshiki's memo pad, began to start writing about the necessary ingredients and amounts. All this while, Yuigahama remained hugging her, and took a peek from under her arms.

Then, Yuigahama laughed happily.

Yukinoshita, who seemed to think that Yuigahama was laughing at her, looked at her with displeasure.

".....What's the problem?"

"Ah, nothing at all..... I just thought that, this is so nostalgic."

Yuigahama had at first tried to wave her hands hurriedly to try and smooth things over, but as she lowered her hands gently, she had said those words in a mellow tone.

As to what she felt nostalgic about, I knew the answer. Maybe Yukinoshita too.

".....Indeed."

Yukinoshita answered simply. However, her gaze in response, continued to capture Yuigahama in her pupils long after she was done talking.

After a while, Yuigahama chuckled sheepishly, and deliberately shifted her chair to get closer to Yukinoshita. In the end, the two ended up sitting next to each other, directly opposite me.

".....Isn't it?"

Then, as though she was confirming something, she spoke that in a soft voice. Looking at her tilt her head, looking my way with a faraway look in her eyes; I couldn't help but break into a smile at that cherubic expression of hers.

"I guess so."

I replied just as simply, and shifted my gaze away.

One year has clearly not passed, yet, why did that feel like it had happened such a long time ago, that it could evoke such nostalgic feelings. In that room where everything has yet to begin, in that instant in time where everything started to move.

"Iroha-chan, thank you."

"Eh, ah, yes, erm no, you're, you're welcome?"

Having been suddenly thanked by Yuigahama, Isshiki seemed to be at a loss, and tilted her head to one side. Was it because this action was so comical that Yuigahama started to giggle? Then, after stopping her giggling fit, she sighed contentedly.

"Although this year is about to come to a close, I am glad that there's such a fun event near the end."

"Although this year hasn't started for long."

"To be more precise, this school year."

Yukinoshita and I spoke unanimously, to which Yuigahama puffed out her cheeks.

Even Iroha too was taken aback by us and muttered "Uwa, the two of them are so nitpicky."

But thinking that this exchange of words between us signaled the end of the conversation, she gazed at us and sighed a long breath, said, "Let's call it a day," and stood up.

"Thank you for the tea. Then, sorry for the trouble."

"Ah, un. Thank you in advance for the help you will render on the actual day itself."

"Then, see you again. I will do my best to come up with an estimation."

Hearing both Yuigahama and Yukinoshita's parting words, Isshiki bowed and left the room.

Just like that, the three of us were left behind. The feeling of nostalgia that struck us now was even more real than what we had felt previously.

However, this nostalgia that we felt, it was probably because a lot of things have changed since then. It was also probably because somewhere, sometime, our identity had been lost. Perhaps, it was because we knew that it was no longer possible to obtain the same thing once more.

That's why, it was nostalgic.

If it did indeed begin to change, then, surely, there will be a day where everything will come to an end.

Yuigahama, who was smiling so purely, as well as Yukinoshita who was looking at her. The two of them were engaging in empty conversations.

Although it was just this sight, yet strangely enough, I felt so contented.

Chapter 5

[Anywhere in this world, a boy's heart would waver at the sight of a girl doing her best]

A few days have passed since that hectic consultation.

During this period of time, the Service club did not do anything in particular. All we did were to give a few advice here and there to Isshiki who came by from time to time.

On the other hand, Isshiki herself seemed to be carrying out her work diligently. Even when school has ended, of the several occasions that I saw her, most of the time she was rushing here and there from place to place.

Incidentally, the vice-president would also be carrying a large stack of documents, looking downcast. Also, I would frequently catch a glimpse of Secretary-chan urging him. "Who do you think I am, give me some work to do vice-pres." Hello people, seems like Secretary-chan is someone who generally treats all guys harshly.

Anyway, since today was the actual day of the event, all the members of the student council were busy working as usual. It was totally different from the Christmas event back then. Therefore, I am going to take my time going to you, community center! Although I did come here once during Christmas, nothing much would have changed in this short period of time. What did change however, was the sound of Isshiki barking out orders as well as the sound of complains of the Vice-president as he submitted to her orders anyway. The exchange of the two rang out noisily, making it seem like the place was overflowing with energy.

Yukinoshita, Yuigahama and I exchanged looks and laughed as we acknowledged our Kouhai's growth pleasantly.

Following Isshiki's voice, we found our way to the entrance, and I could see the members of the student council bustling here and there, following Isshiki's lead in preparing for the event. Ho ho, it seems like there's nothing I can do to help. Though this was perfectly fine, my innate Onii-chan traits caused me to feel somewhat lonely as I felt that Irohasu wouldn't rely on me anymore.

Although I think that, I did wonder what sort of people would come to this event today..... Our job only extended to helping out till the day of the event. I had no understanding of the nature of the event.

Miura and Ebina-san who came to consult us, as well as Kawasaki, said they would definitely be coming as well. Other than them, Hayama, who was in charge of taste-testing would probably bring along..... As I was thinking of all this, a familiar figure appeared from within the community center.

Yuigahama who noticed the figure waved her hands in a grand manner.

"Ah, it's Hina and the rest. Yahello!"

"Hello hello. I will be in your care today."

Ebina-san ran towards her. The person who was running beside her, was Tobe.

"Hello!"

"Cheerios!"

What's up with that greeting, was he some kind of sausage? [23] He was more pumped up than usual, probably due to the event. As I was thinking that Tobe was just as annoying as always, Miura, who had followed behind them, seemed much quieter than the others.

Miura glanced occasionally at the existence at her side, and at times readjusted her bag position and at other times, played with her hair. She seemed unable to calm herself down.

Well, that can't be helped. After all, she's going to be giving that guy chocolates to eat later.

Although I had no idea what she said to be able to invite him, Miura seemed to have succeeded at inviting Hayama out to this event.

Anyway, she has gotten past the first stage. Now, all Miura needed to do was to make her own chocolates and that would settle her request. I couldn't help feeling relieved and so, picked up the can of MAX coffee at the bottom of the stairs, and drank from it slowly. Then, came the sound of hurried footsteps.

At the next instant, Isshiki came into my line of sight.

"Ah, Hayama-senpai! Thank you for coming today."

Saying that, Isshiki immediately went to stand beside Hayama. Even though Miura gave Isshiki a sharp glare, Isshiki warded off that glare with a radiant smile of her own. Ah ah, a new obstacle for Miura has appeared.....

"Ya, Iroha.Umm, was it really a good idea for me to come here? I have never learnt how to make sweets, so I don't think I would be of much use."

Hayama, who was now trapped between Miura and Isshiki had a troubled smile on his face. Thereupon, Miura struck his shoulders lightly.

"Is there a need to worry over some things? I mean, it's more than sufficient for Hayato to just give his opinions....."

"Exactly that-. Well then, we will leave the taste-testing to you!"

Both Miura and Isshiki tried to refrain Hayama from leaving, or perhaps it could be said that they were trying to lure him in with their shy and bashful voices. Hayama, smiled his usual invigorating yet bittersweet smile.

"Anyway, let's go on in and prepare."

"Indeed."

Both Yukinoshita and Yuigahama nodded their heads at each other as though confirming something, and Ebina and the rest followed behind them tightly into the cooking room. Hayama too, whilst still trapped tightly between Miura and Isshiki, and followed behind as well.

As I laughed to myself thinking, "That guy is in some serious trouble,ahaha," along with some other pointless thoughts, I followed them from behind as well. Indeed, just some other pointless thoughts.

Because, no matter what Hikigaya Hachiman does, there is no way that he will choose like Hayama Hayato.

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Opening the ingredient box that we got from the vendor, and hearing people bustle around as they make preparations for this and that, it gave off the atmosphere that the event had already started. This was especially so for the student council president, as well as the people who were helping Isshiki Iroha, the one who instigated today's event.

Following Isshiki's orders, Tobe and I, as well as the Vice President moved the heavy boxes into the cooking room, which suddenly livened up at our arrival.

Opening up the boxes filled with ingredients, Yuigahama who had zero interests in normal cooking let out a loud exclamation of "Waaaa!" On the other hand, Yukinoshita, who usually made things like sweets or other dishes, remained unmoved. Quickly, she began to set about distributing the workload.

Anyway, the boxes contained all sorts of stuff like chocolates, sugar, baking powder and other cooking ingredients. The guys, or rather, Tobe, the Vice-president and me continued to toil on without stopping. Amongst the three of us, Tobe was shaking his hair about incessantly, seemingly in good spirits.

"As expected, events like these really get you pumped up. Ah, Irohasu seems to be quite the student council president now."

"Yes duh, I AM the student council president. However, I still do my job as a manager normally too. When the weather's warmer, I will go and attend club activities." (TL: If you forget, she's the soccer-club's manager.)

No, go and attend it even if the weather's cold, those club activities.....

Hearing Isshiki's cheerful response, Tobe laughed as he gave a thumbs up and winked. He's really getting on my nerves.

Then, after opening the boxes without much of a hitch, we retrieved the chocolate mix and other ingredients that were going to become the main food ingredients of today.

Looking at them, Tobe seemed to have thought of something as he murmured.

"Ah, the chocolates look really delicious. I really want to have a taste." [24]

"Huh?"

Even though Isshiki was now speaking to him in a cold voice and looking at him as such, Tobe didn't seem to mind in the least. On the contrary, he took a small breath, and his face tensed up as though having decided on something.

Then, he stood up and took a good look at his surroundings, before waving his hands at us indicating for us to gather.

"What? Some secret you want to tell us?"

"It's not really convenient to say it now....."

Yuigahama suddenly stuck her head into the group, a look of interest on her face. Yukinoshita was also somehow dragged here unwillingly by Yuigahama. Then, the formation now was that of a circle. Don't tell me, that with this formation, we were going to fire our engines and take off? [25]

Once again, Tobe played with his hair at the nape of his neck and curled his hair with his fingers. Although

he seemed to have his misgivings, he still opened his mouth shyly to speak. Oi, this isn't cute at all.

"Ah, no, how do I put it? Isn't today supposed to be about making chocolates. Then, after thinking about it, I thought it was possible for me to do something on my part.....What do you guys think?"

What do you mean by what do we think. This is not some kind of CM about that rice bean snack..... We are not the mothers here. [26]

Anyway, whenever you tried to hit on her, you would either get blocked or she would evade you. If you are really serious, you should be even more low-profile. What's up with your 'If a little push won't do it then I will just shove you to the ground' sort of behavior..... Such an extreme sort of guy was so rare that it sets my heart racing just to see one!

However, I seemed to be the only person who was moved by this. The girls' reactions were extremely slow.

".....Ah, anyway, that is to say you want to appeal to her so that you can get some chocolates?"

Seeing that no one had any response, I had no choice but to be the one who summarized whatever he had said. With a swish, Tobe pointed his finger at me directly.

"That's what I mean! Well, the gist of it is like that anyway?"

Hearing that, Isshiki gave a look of disgust.

"Although I don't know who you are targeting, but I feel that it would definitely work contrary to what you believe will happen. Trying to show off your appeal to get chocolates is fundamentally disgusting. Better to be low-profile."

"Oh, oh....."

Irohasu was so sharp..... Tobe had nothing better to say in return, and so began to search around for a person who could resolve this awkwardness.

Then, Yukinoshita answered his expectation. With her hands at her jaws, she cocked her head, and came out with a conclusion after giving it some serious thought.

"But, what Isshiki-san just said makes sense as well..... If one could always see this energetic guy whining here and there, it would indeed be quite depressing."

"....."

Tobe was completely speechless after having his plans being flat out rejected. Then, why was Irohasu saying "I know right" sweetly to Yukinoshita-san as she leaned against her shoulder.....

Just as I was thinking 'this response was too pitiful', Yuigahama groaned.

"A, Un..... But, if the other party were to make it seem like they don't want it at all then that would be a problem as well....."

"Wouldn't it!?"

His mood seemed to have changed all a sudden, and with his vigor restored, he snapped his fingers. Then, in response to that, Isshiki's harsh voice came again.

"No, no, no, what Yuigahama-senpai meant was those situations in which the other party had already intended to give away chocolates. Hence, Tobe-senpai's situation is different."

"Is that so....."

Having had so many 'No' thrown in his face, accompanied by the waving of their hands, even Tobe seemed dejected.

However, the possibility of it happening was not zero. Although there weren't clear evidence of that, Ebina-san showing up at this event to make chocolates was sufficient proof that she had changed a little. Of course, this might be only because she was accompanying Miura here, but I had no idea of the exact reason.

It was because of such vague situations that I felt that this event would really be effective.

"Well, if (she) made it with her best efforts, then letting someone taste it for (her) wouldn't be that much of a problem, although I aren't really sure of that. Anyway, let's just move this over there first."

Saying that, I pushed the rest of the boxes to Tobe. Originally, Tobe was still in shock but after realizing the logic in what I said, smacked his palm fiercely.

"Yes! That would be it!"

Looking refreshed and after pointing his finger at me once more, he picked up the boxes and hurriedly began moving towards Ebina-san and friends' cooking table. This guy, even his reactions were getting on my nerves, although he wasn't really a bad guy.

However, where exactly is Tobe's hometown..... He's seriously going overboard with the 'That would be it!' (TL: Tobe likes to spam the phrase Dabe, which is a word in some dialects that translates roughly to That (would be) it. Well, something like that.)

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After that, the preparations for the cooking event proceeded on, and it gradually became a good time.

Isshiki and Yukinoshita, as well as Yuigahama seemed to be having some sort of discussion. I didn't have anything that I wanted to say, nor did I have anything to do. Thus, I just stood there listening to their conversation.

Then, amidst the voices from their discussion, a great deal of noise could be heard coming from outside the door.

Glancing at my watch, it seems like now would be the time where the people would start arriving.

That voice, sounded like it came from Kawasomething-san.....but the number of voices were really too numerous. Or perhaps there were a lot of people named Kawasomething but I just didn't know it? If that's the case then I can still accept the fact that I don't remember her name.

Well then, exactly what sort of Kawasomething-San came here today, Kawashima, Kawaguchi, Kawagoe, Kawanakajima, Sendaisendai..... I stared at the door, so as to be ready to react to whichever Kawasomething-San that would come through it.

Then, the door burst open.

And the person that stood there, was Tamasomething-San.

"Yo, Iroha-chan. Ah, wonderful. As expected, the event last time received a lot of good reputation. In order to further our PARTNERSHIP, I took up this OFFER as a chance to continue our ALLIANCE activities."

"So it is. Thanks for your work."

Isshiki brushed him aside just like that, not bothering one bit about the long introduction he just made.

Kaihinsougou High school student council president, Tamanawa.....

That strong jab still existed whenever I bumped into him..... If he had that golden left arm that could spin at high speeds, he would surely become an outstanding talent in the world. [27]

In fact, not only Tamanawa, even his friends were here as well. They were probably also from the student council. I have seen that crowd of people that were now streaming into the cooking room at the last Christmas event. Also, I think I kind of remember that annoying hairpin and that irritating producer.

"This sort of opportunity is a BUSINESS CHANCE. Perhaps we can start a scheme that accumulates capital through CROWD FUNDING."

"That, I AGREE."

"If we can create a METHOD whereby we could give back some INCENTIVE, we might be able to make it into the EARLY ADAPTOR category."

"In FLEA MARKETS in AMERICA, kids usually hone their business sense through selling LEMONADE. This is NEARLY like that, isn't it?"

"Yes indeed, that is also a CASE STUDY."

In the context of their conversation, even a word like lemonade could sound like they have high self-awareness. Unbelievable.

If these guys were talking about lifeguards and milk and coffee, would it sound like that as well?

"I totally have no idea of what they are saying as usual."

I murmured subconsciously, and Yukinoshita sighed a little.

"It's just that your self-awareness is really low. Your pupils are open and your lips are turning purple, even the response from you is shallow when talking to you."

"I think you meant my level of consciousness." [28]

Come to think of it, if your pupils remain open, doesn't it mean that you are already dead..... However, those fellows really haven't changed one bit..... Well, humans won't change so easily anyway. Rather, they wouldn't become like this if they could've just given up after one or two setbacks. Although if you thought about it from another angle, you would have some respect for him as that would mean that they stuck through with their principles till the very end.

Un un, no matter what, I still hope that Tamanawa-san and his friends could stay this way. As I thought about this, someone stuck their head out from behind the crowd of people.

"Ah, Hikigaya-kun. You really did come!"

"Oh, oh oh."

As usual, Orimoto who had no regards for the sense of distance between us waved hi to me ever so casually. Just like that, she extricated herself from the Kaihinsougou High crowd, and approached me.

Then, Orimoto's gaze shifted to something behind me.

"Ah, hello."

"H, hello. L, Long time no see."

Orimoto waved her arms to greet us, and a somewhat flustered Yuigahama answered her. Yukinoshita crossed her arms, and greeted her with her eyes only. And then, a strange silence ensued.

There should be at least two or thrice times where they had met, and the most troublesome thing of this is that they could be considered acquaintances. If this meeting was their first, then they could just exchange simple pleasantries or have the choice to do the complete opposite and just not talk to each other. However, if they were already halfway through knowing each other's faces and names, then even if their conversation were short, the impression that would be left on each other would slowly change from, "We talked for a little bit," to "We didn't really talk much," to "We aren't really on good terms," to "I mean, we totally aren't friends," like some sort of Chinese Whispers game. [29]

In the end, it won't be pleasant, and a somewhat nervous feeling will be born.

Irohasu-, save me Irohasu-! Compared to Orimoto, it was easier to strike up a conversation with her, as well as create a pleasant atmosphere. I looked at her with pleading eyes, but the only thing I got in response was the sound of a cough.

"Ahem," came the sound of a somewhat deep cough. I was just thinking how this was not cute at all for Isshiki when I realized that the cough came from Tamanawa. He seemed to have noticed my existence due to Orimoto saying hi to me and his expression now was somewhat bitter.

"You guys are here too....."

"Ah, I thought I told you all?"

Isshiki placed her thin fingers to her glossy lips, and tilted her head slightly. This girl sure is amazing at playing dumb.....

"U, un..... Is that so? I don't seem to recall anything like that at all from the mails we sent through Mailbase....."

Isshiki cast a sidelong glance at the groaning Tamanawa, then turned to look at me and stuck her tongue out playfully. Whoa, what's this, you are being too cute.

I didn't know whether he had finally given up on asking Isshiki, who was doing a spectacular job of playing dumb. Tamanawa mumbled and grumbled underneath his breath, and walked in a direction away from us. The people of Kaihinsougou High followed behind tightly.

"Well, see you again soon."

Orimoto raised her hand up lightly, and quickly melded into that crowd of people.

Watching that disappearing figure, I began to talk with Isshiki, whose face still had that fake smile on it.

"That, what's up with them, those guys....."

"If we cooperate with them, we could probably rope in some of their budget, wouldn't that be great! I can also save on the cost of the obligatory chocolates, so lucky~"

"Oh, oh....."

As expected of Isshiki Iroha..... Always exceeding expectations..... I started worrying for her with thoughts like, 'Was this really okay, this girl is going to reap her just rewards one day,' and looked at her with disdain. Isshiki seemed a little troubled as well, and her face blushed slightly as she coughed.

"Anyway, the budget more or less comes from the collection of the entry fee. Thinking from the perspective of the budget itself, this event itself will surely reap a profit. Well, if you subtract all the miscellaneous expenses, then with the coming and going away and the pluses and minuses will balance each other out."

"I really don't understand what Iroha-chan is saying at all."

Yuigahama hugged her head, looked vexed.

Well, people with high awareness and people in the business world are in some parts similar after all..... Incidentally, 'coming and going away' as well as 'plus and minuses' have essentially the same meaning of balancing each other out.

Drawing in another school, hence multiplying your budget, then with the collecting of entry fees, increasing the budget even more with a Quiz-Derby style quiz. [30]

No, if someone were to point out that everything Isshiki has done was for the student council's own uses or that there was misappropriation of funds, I doubt that they can find an excuse for it..... Well, it's not like I really understand how the money is managed so I will just turn a blind eye to this this time. Anyway, [it's not my money so I don't really care], this sort of corporate slave-like thinking was deeply embedded within me.

Just hearing this alone is enough to give one a headache, in reality, she still did in fact manage to successfully set up this event with that, which showed that her efforts were not in vain.

It looked like I was not the only person who seemed to be having a headache. Yukinoshita too, was placing a hand at her temple and sighed deeply.

"Let's not talk about the rights and wrongs of your line of thinking..... Isshiki-san, you really exceeded expectations there, exceeded them outstandingly."

"Indeed indeed, Isshiki-san, you are pretty amazing~. Although you can be quite capricious at times."

"Ah, I think I understand a little of what you mean by that....."

Hearing that pleasant voice, Yuigahama gave a bitter smile. Ah, I agree with you totally.

.....Pleasant?

That voice was different from Yukinoshita, Yuigahama and Isshiki. It was a voice that was a little hypnotizing, and I turned my head towards that voice spontaneously.

With a hairpin at her fringe that ran down her forehead, and with a swish of her pigtails, a warm and pleasant air filled the surroundings. And so, there appeared Megu rin with his bright wide smile.

"Ah! Shiromeguri-senpai!"

"Hel, Hello....."

The sound of Yuigahama's surprised exclamation and the sound of Yukinoshita's bewildered greeting overlapped with one another. The two of them blinked their eyes in surprise.

"Un! Hello."

The student council president of the previous generation, Shiromeguri-senpai was waving her hand in front of her modest chest in greeting.

"That, why is she here....."

I felt the Megurin-effects, who had appeared out of nowhere, (main effects being healing and relaxation, a sister attribute, etc), or so I heard that's what they were. Meguri-senpai clapped her hands, bent her neck slightly and then spoke happily.

"I was invited here..... and so here I am."

Laughing sheepishly, the pleasant air continue to float about, and the Megumegumegurin meguri-shu effects activated (Main effects being resurrection and detoxification, and with the addition of the sister attribute, there was the additional effect of occasionally being able to witness the innocent actions of her amidst the matured feel she was exuding. Enemy, instant death.)

Then, she suddenly took a step forward, and clasped Isshiki's hands tightly.

"I was invited here~. I have to come up with formal speech at the graduation ceremony, so I went to school and along the way, ran into Isshiki-san. She asked me to come here if I had the time."

Oh, so it was Isshiki who invited her. Seems like she wasn't really good at getting along with Meguri-senpai..... I looked at her and she turned her face away unhappily, and spoke to me in a very small voice.

".....Well, in a way, if there are more people here, the unit price will go down."

Seems like none of what she had said so softly managed to reach Meguri-senpai. Rather, she seemed to be very happy at being invited by Isshiki, and shook her hand vigorously. At the same time, Isshiki twisted her body here and there, seemingly quite uncomfortable with the situation.

"I have already been accepted into a university so I am quite free. My friends all seem so busy preparing for exams..... So, as a member with spare time, I thought that I would come here."

"Haa, so it's like that....."

As soon as I answered her, a sense of unease came over me. Member? What a strange way to put it..... It was like as though she was a suspect and saying such weird things under some kind of unknown pressure. I don't really understand what she meant. I looked at her face and then she turned to someone behind her.

"Yup?"

With that, a few students suddenly appeared from behind her. What's this, nin nin, ninja? I tried to search my hazy memories, and I think that I might have seen them before. The impression of those glasses, as well as the 'glasses atmosphere'. They were probably the people from the spectacles student council of the last generation.

As expected, with regards to how the student council should be run, there were still a lot of opinions on that. Isshiki, as a student council president, had gone through a lot up till now. Furthermore, perhaps for Meguri-senpai, the student council remains a special place to her.

At last, Meguri-senpai released Isshiki's hand and placed her hands gently on the shoulders of both Yukinoshita and Yuigahama. Then, she looked at us dearly.

"I think, that although it was slightly different from what I had envisioned, but still, to think that I can still have the luxury to appear at this sort of student-council organized events, to be able to chat with Yukinoshita-san, Yuigahama-san, Hikigaya-kun as well, it makes me really happy."

"Me....., me too!"

Perhaps Yuigahama too had been affected by the Megurin power, and she replied with a warm smile. Even though Yukinoshita did not answer, her drooping ears were somewhat red as well.

Come to think of it, with regards to our Service club, the only senpai that understood it was probably only Meguri-senpai.

.....Uh-oh, if I saw her giving her formal speech at the graduation ceremony, I might just cry. If I had my way, the tears would already be flowing out of my eyes now. Even though I had a reputation of being especially weak against those younger than me, I was similarly weak against older sisterly like figures as well.

I am really glad that I have this person who I can regard as my senpai. As I was thinking such pleasant thoughts, Meguri-senpai was done looking at our faces and nodded her head.

Then, as though she was getting psyched for something, she clenched her hand into a fist tightly.

“Alright, then let’s give our all for today! O!”

No one followed suit when she threw her fist up into the air and shouted. As for Isshiki, that serious expression previously had disappeared from her, and was now looking at Meguri-senpai in an apathetic manner.

However, that cold gaze did not shake Meguri-senpai even one bit, and once again, pumped her fist up into the air.

“O!”

“.....O, o---“

If there was no reply, this was going to be repeated a few more times..... Furthermore, the pressure exerted by those former student council members behind Meguri-senpai was especially strong..... As they observed, they raised their hand to the height of a cat punch. With regards to our response, Meguri-senpai sighed in satisfaction.

Then, she shifted her gaze to the clock on the wall. I followed her gaze as well. People were starting to come in at this time, and the preparations of the ingredients and utensils were done as well. Kawasaki and the rest seemed to be a little later, but they should be here shortly as well.

It was about to begin. As I thought that, Meguri-senpai tilted her head seemingly in deep thought.

“Haru-san seems to be late.”

“Indeed, I thought this place was really quite easy to find.”

Isshiki nodded her head in reply to Meguri-senpai. Then, I froze there on the spot, not nodding my head. That was because I had heard something unsettling.

Haru-san. This was not in reference to the room maids at the hot springs. [31] There was only one person who Meguri-senpai would refer to as such.

Quickly looking at the person next to me, I saw that Yukinoshita was frowning. Yuigahama seemed to have sensed the mood as well, and kept staring at the door.

Before long, the sound of heels could be heard.

The door that was not shut tightly moved a little bit. The soft and slim fingers appeared from the door cracks and with a little bit of strength, the door opened with a crackle.

Then, with a thud sound, the sound of her footstep made with her heels sounded out. Slowly, step by step, she walked into the room, right in front of us.

"Hyahello! Sorry, am I late?"

"And so, here is our special cook of today, Harusan senpai!"

"Hi everyone, I am Haru-san senpai."

Isshiki finished her introductions sweetly and to that, Haruno-san responded to her in a joking manner. Yukinoshita Haruno ignored the crimson red coat fluttering about in the wind, and raised her hands up high in greeting.

"Ah, Haru-san, it's been a long time."

".....Meguri, didn't I just meet you recently?"

Seeing Meguri-senpai approaching towards her slowly, she patted her forehead lightly and asked in a surprised tone.

"Haru-san's snacks are really delicious, I am really looking forward to them."

"Well, since you asked for them, I will definitely make them. As a kind senpai, I can't possibly reject a kouhai's request~"

Rather than describe herself as kind, it would be more appropriate to say that it was combative. [32] The feeling that it gave people could only be described as fear.....

Once the two of them were done exchanging their greetings, they began to converse.

Taking this chance, I signaled to Isshiki quietly and spoke softly.

"Hey, why did you call her here?"

"Because, she seems to be a veteran in this?"

Isshiki cocked her head at my question and answered as though it was the most obvious thing in the world. Ah ah, your judgement is wonderfully correct. Rather than say she was a veteran, it would be better to just say that she was ever victorious. [33]

"I am more than enough for the job....."

Yukinoshita hugged her elbow, and shifted her gaze away from Haruno-san, who was opposite her.

"Well, let's not talk about your teaching methods, but the snacks that you make are indeed very tasty."

"..... It's not like it's anything special."

Yukinoshita seemed surprised at being praised and seemed momentarily at a loss for words but quickly turned her face away. No, she was not praising you. She did say that your teaching methods being horrible.

"But, I really look forward to having Yukinon teaching me!"

Yuigahama flew towards Yukinoshita, and Yukinoshita coughed, her mood having recovered somewhat.

.....Well, if there some someone else other than Yukinoshita who could teach the crowd, that means there was one more person who could be in charge of Yuigahama, which wasn't necessarily a bad thing. However, why did it have to be Haruno-san of all people?

“Must it really be that person? Talking about Yukinoshita alone, what she makes will definitely be tastier than all those other people.”

Quietly, I asked Isshiki about the reason why she invited Haruno-san of all people.

“Well, to be perfectly honest, I think that Yukinoshita-senpai makes some super delicious confections. So, that’s why I requested her to come.”

Isshiki broke off mid-sentence at this point, and shifted her gaze, looking embarrassed.

“Just that, that…… it’s kind of questionable whether the guys will accept her.”

“Such keen insight……”

In truth, Yukinoshita was really good at cooking, but she lacked the service spirit, or rather, the ‘service scene’. To be more explicit, she lacked the ‘service’ near her chest area. In contrast, Yuigahama’s ‘service’ was amazing, but the cooking skills was catastrophic…… Ah, I don’t know whether that should be referred to as steady, or rather a firm and standard way of making the snacks. What Isshiki referred to as being accepted by the guys, as well as how girls would show off their appeal via the snacks they made; in this aspect, I did indeed feel a little uneasy.

Taking her ability to see through a person’s heart for example, there was no one better than her at that amongst all those that I knew. Furthermore, she was someone whose spec surpassed that of Yukinoshita. As such, even when it comes to this event, she would definitely use all her might and tricks. Was it was going to be so skillfully done that not just humans, but even sprites and fairies were going to be tamed by her? [34] If that’s what you wish, then go ahead and tame me……

As these thoughts ran about in my mind, it appeared that Haruno-san had no interest in me. Right now, her eyes were focused on Yukinoshita and Yuigahama. Her penetrating cold gaze were fixed on the two’s intimate figures. However, she did nothing else besides looking at them. None of the usual mocking and none of her usual provocative talk. In her cold gaze, I could not see any trace of malice or ferocity in her eyes.

Which is why, that ice-like gaze seemed somewhat lonely, yet beautiful as well.

X

X

X

There were not much obstacles hindering the event nor did it contain any sort of eye-catching performances. The event continues to progress on slowly.

As the scheduled time for the event’s beginning approaches, everyone was merely looking at each other and the atmosphere surrounding it had the feel of ‘It’s about to start’. Isshiki gave a simple opening speech and everyone then proceeded to do their own cooking.

Naturally, I wouldn’t go and make chocolate and so had nothing else to do. If I had to describe what I was going to be doing in this event, it would be along the lines of being an assistant, a helper to support and do follow-ups. In other words, I was like an unemployed person.

In contrast to me, Yukinoshita immediately hurried off to begin her work.

At the kitchen table in front of me, I could see Yukinoshita, Yuigahama as well as Miura, who were standing in front of the cooking utensils, each with a serious expression on their face.

“First is to cut up the chocolate then warm them up by immersing it in hot water. Although it slightly differs depending on what you want to make, but this step is necessary in any case.”

“Just that?”

".....Well, this is the basic. Although I might say that, but the following steps after this are very important as well."

Whilst answering Miura's question that sounded like she was quite disappointed, Yukinoshita began to start cutting the chocolate into fine pieces with the carving knife in a rhythmical manner.

Seeing how she cut the chocolates so smoothly as though she had had a lot of practice on it, Yuigahama went 'Oh!' in an exclamation of praise.

No, I didn't think that there was anything worth admiring at this point in time.

Thereupon, Miura began to imitate Yukinoshita as well. Perhaps it was because she was not too used to using a carving knife, she set about crushing the chocolate nervously, making a 'Ka-cha', 'Ka-cha' sound as she did so. Incidentally, Yuigahama has still not been allowed to touch the carving knife. Oh well, guess that can't be helped.

When the chocolates were almost all chopped up into fine pieces, Miura looked up from her work. Her expression suggested that she was somewhat satisfied. It's still not completely done, you know.....

However, Miura seemed to feel that she was quite skilled at this.

"Hmm..... Isn't this super easy?"

Miura gave a proud smile as she said, "How's that" in a boastful voice. However, two voices flew towards her from her sides almost immediately.

"So naïve, Yumiko!"

"You're so naïve."

Yuigahama said so forcefully and without hesitation. Yukinoshita said that with a scornful smile on her face. Miura shook her head, probably because she was still stuck in the impression that doing the actual task was way easier than the instructions had sounded.

"Huh? What great difficulty is there?"

Hearing that, Yuigahama puffed out her chest proudly.

"The difficult parts starts now! Warming something by immersing it in hot water is just about putting it in the hot water. You have to do it like Gwa---- Gwa---- something like that."

I guess that what Yuigahama was saying was something related to mixing or tempering. Or perhaps she was actually referring to the progressive tense of Tenpa? That surely can't be it! [35]

On the other hand, upon hearing what Yuigahama said, Yukinoshita placed her hand to her temple as though remembering something headache-inducing, and in between sighs, spoke.

"If you just let the melted chocolate harden like this, the white fats will rise to the surface, making it unsightly, and affect the taste as well. Furthermore, the time and effort spent in the process after this will take a lot of effort as well.

Come to think of it, the way in which they conveyed the same thing differed so much..... The difference between them was like the difference between a P2W and a causal player.

However, looking at how Yuigahama was backing up her words with such conviction and how logical Yukinoshita's statements seemed to be, Miura seemed to have changed her opinion as well.

Although the words that she said seemed very much like her usual self, her attitude had changed admirably. At least she seemed humble enough now that she wants to seek advice from them.

Seeing Miura like this, Yukinoshita gave a small smile.

“For now, we will just start with the mixing and tempering. After this, the work that is to be done will be different depending on what you want to make..... Well, there’s a quite a bit of people here so let’s just go with baking a chocolate gateau.”

“Chocolate gateau! Isn’t that like something made by shops?”

“It’s not really that difficult..... I will use black chocolate, while Miura-san and Yuigahama can just use whatever you like.”

Yuigahama’s eyes were sparkling and she looked at Yukinoshita with respect whilst Miura-san’s gaze had a “Hng, this girl is really good at this” sort of feeling to it. Yukinoshita responded to these with a wry smile.

Well, I was still a little worried for Yuigahama, but with Yukinoshita here, there shouldn’t be too many problems.

Now then, time to see what the others were doing, and so I shifted my gaze to the kitchen table next to the current one, and saw the figure of Isshiki Iroha making her sweets at her own pace.

From where I stood, she seemed to be doing just fine at her cooking.

The chocolate had already been melted, and the chocolate in the bowl had a smooth finish to it. In another bowl, there was meringue that was already whisked. Seeing this sight, one could easily tell that she was quite used to doing this sort of baking.

Isshiki continued to drip small drops of something that resembled Western liquor in to the bowl, and then proceeded to mix it. Then she took a spoon to scoop some of it out, and proceeded to taste it.

As she bit on the spoon, she shook her head, seemingly not very satisfied with the result. Then, once more, she began to add sugar, fresh cream, cocoa powder and all sorts of things into the mixture.

“My word, you are really good at this, aren’t you?”

Perhaps one could say that it was unexpected, but I spoke that out of surprise as I didn’t really think that she was this proficient at cooking.

Thereupon, Isshiki glanced at me scornfully.

“Senpai, are you doubting my words?”

“No, it’s not that..... I only felt that you were really good at this, and you are putting in a lot of effort in this as well.”

If she was working so hard just to be able to get Hayama to eat her chocolate, then this earnestness in her would let one have a good impression of her.Well, perhaps she also had the hidden intention of raising the value of her obligatory chocolate, but maybe it was because of her uniform and her apron, this also let me feel that she really was putting in great effort in this. How strange. I want to reiterate my point here, that a naked apron was still better than an apron worn over a uniform! Still, the best is Komachi wearing sleeveless short pants.

Isshiki blinked several times in surprise at what I said just now. Then, she let out a short sigh all of a sudden.

"Well, I guess girls working hard really are a cute sight to behold huh?"

As she said that, Isshiki was looking in the direction of Yukinoshita and Yuigahama. At this moment, it would appear that Yuigahama had cocoa powder stuck to her cheeks as she whisked the meringue. Beside her, Yukinoshita seemed to be on tenterhooks, anxiously watching over her progress.

".....Well, isn't that the common opinion? Even if the hand-made cookies aren't really done that well, a guy's heart will be moved just by seeing you try your best. Guys are after all, simple-minded."

As I told her that, I seemed to remember that at some point in time, I had said something similar like that as well. [TL: Vol. 1. Or S1E1]

"That's just like Senpai to say that."

Isshiki chuckled, flapped her apron lightly and spun around lightly in a dance. With that, she then placed her hands behind her, bent her waist and looked at me with upturned eyes.

"I am going to beat my rivals like this. What would guys do?"

"What do you mean by, what do we do?"

"No, right now, I just want to hear the thoughts that are buried deep within you."

As she said that, she had a malicious smirk on her. What a bother, this kouhai-chan of mine was indeed cute. On top of that, she was also sly, not to mention being able to read the mood, and following that....., her personality was absolutely terrible.

That's why, she didn't refer to any specific name or event. That was probably goodwill on her part. Or maybe, that was intentional as well. Because of how vague her words were, my brain sprang into action to willfully auto-complete her question. Thus, though I hated it, I also couldn't help but be self-aware.

".....Sometimes, I really dislike the way you say things."

"Because there's no one else who will say such things to you. Thank me at least?"

Despite me saying it with a sour look, Isshiki replied me nonchalantly. However, the truth is that there weren't many people who delved fully into Hikigaya Hachiman, me included.

Even so, just that one sentence from her pierced deeply into me.

It was already too late for me to look away. In fact, it was also too late for me to avoid the topic as well.

"To be frank, I am somewhat troubled as well..... Well, I think so anyway."

Right now, it was too late for me to smooth things over. However, there was also no need for to speak the complete truth.

Isshiki didn't choose to ask me in a straight-forward manner. If that is so, then my answer would also be in the same manner. More than anything, if Isshiki was the one who was listening to me, then this would more than suffice. I think.

However, Isshiki opened her mouth looking puzzled for some reason. In response to that, I shot her a puzzled look as well. Isshiki went, "Hah---," and began to speak in a voice resembling admiration.

".....That's unexpected. I didn't think it would have that effect."

"It does. It very well does.But, you know, it's completely fine. There's still the inner moat [36] and so

you can still construct a Sanada Maru. [37]

“Huh?”

“Eh, pretend I didn’t say anything.”

Hearing her usual annoying way of replying to things, I quickly cut the conversation short. Well, no matter how wonderfully I try to portray Sanada Maru, it would sure not get to Isshiki. Whether it was history or drama, she didn’t seem to be interested in either. [38]

That’s why, even if the Sanada Maru was constructed, she would still probably have no interest in the defeat during the Siege of Osaka. Isshiki cocked her head, and for a moment, looked unsatisfied. Then, as though having thought of something, looked at the bowl in her arms and nodded her head, going, “Fumu, fumu.” Then, she lifted her head.

“I could use this as reference. Then, I will be leaving for a bit. Hayama sen----- pai-----”

As she wrapped up what she wanted to say with a smile, she started running towards Hayama with a light pitter patter of footsteps. Watching her run off, I grabbed a nearby chair and sat down.

Once again, my eyes unexpectedly found themselves looking at the figures of the girls working hard.

Because guys are simple-minded creatures, the sight of them trying their best would move their heart. Seriously. I didn’t know who said that, but....., it was really true.

Chapter 6

[In order to confirm it, Yukinoshita Yukino will connect.]

Accompanying the spread of the sweet fragrance, the cooking room began to be filled with a calm and quiet air.

Then, another person who fitted the image of this calm and quiet atmosphere appeared.

This kid’s bluish-black hair was split into two, and extended down to her shoulders. She wore an appropriate sized apron as well. She was someone who I definitely believed will grow into a beauty in the future. Her set of facial features was something that I remembered clearly.

Kawasaki Keika. The sister of Kawasomething-san.

Kawasaki had first went to the nursery to pick up her sister, and had arrived here quite late with a hand carrying a grocery bag. She was now making the preparations for Keika’s clothes, and sighed in satisfaction when she was done. Then, she began snapping photos of her, probably as a memorabilia.

That apron was probably specially modified for Keika’s size; the applique and the name embroidered on it was very cute as well. After taking countless photos of Keika, she seemed to remember that her own preparations were not yet complete.

“Th, that, I will be doing my preparations over that.....”

She waved to me slightly in greeting, and spoke to me as though with some discretion.

Fumu. Although I didn’t know why she had to leave this place to do her preparations, girls will always have a lot of their own matters to attend to. If I were to pursue the matter further, it would only lead to anger. Komachi was proof of that. Furthermore, in this crowded place that was full of dangerous cooking utensils, I

guess she would be worried to have to take her eyes off her for even a second.

"Ah, don't worry, I will look after her."

"Well, then I will be....."

Saying that, Kawasaki nodded in reply and walked out of the cooking room.

I watched her leave, then turned my attention to Keika.

Keika was probably tired from the day at the nursery, or perhaps she felt tired after having her photo taken countless times by Kawasaki. She seemed to be very tired, and her eyes were about to shut.

However, upon seeing me, she blinked her eyes repeatedly at me with her mouth agape.

"It's Ha-chan!"

Seems like she still remembered me, and so, she pointed a short finger at me using all her strength

"Oh, that's right, it's Ha-chan. Well, technically, my name is Hachiman. Also, don't point your finger at other. They will get pierced----

I crouched down beside her and look at her, and at the same time extended my finger and poked her cheek. So soft, no way.....

I kept poking her cheek rapidly, and Keika kept making those queer 'Ou, ou' sounds like a seal, looking very confused.Umu, the punishment shall end here. She wouldn't be randomly pointing her fingers at other people from now on.

Although I had already achieved my objective, but the softness of her cheek made it really hard for me to put my finger away. Uh-oh, this was bad, her cheek really was that soft..... Komachi had a period of time where her cheeks was this soft as well. No, it would still be that soft even today..... As I thought this, I resumed my continuous poking of her face. Keika still had a puzzled look on her face, but then with an 'Oh', she seemed to have thought of something.

"Ei."

With a shuuuu, she poked my face without any restraint.

"Ouch..... That's why I said don't point your fingers at others. It would be dangerous if you poked their eyes."

As a punishment, I began to poke her again. She probably felt that this was some sort of game, and with a laugh, began to poke my face back in return. Un..... seems like I failed in teaching her a lesson.

I continued to poke Keika's face, all the while pondering over how did it become like this, when suddenly, a cold voice could be heard from behind me.

".....Hey, what are you doing."

"Eh, no, nothing really."

Turning my head around, I saw Kawasaki in an apron. With a bowl and chopped chocolate in one hand, she was looking at me with an apathetic expression in her eyes. She took a deep breath, as though there was something that she found difficult to express in words.

"You know, although you were a great help in looking after her, but this is, this....."

"No, hold your horses. This is not what you think it is."

A dangerous looking male with rotten eyes poking a cute little girl's cheeks..... The impression that one got from this was sufficient to get me into trouble with the law. If this incident took place outside, I could see this incident being circulated around on notices, and my mom making fun of me "Isn't this you? Hahaha" to which I could only reply "O, Ah" helplessly..... Besides the above, Kawasaki's "I thought I trusted you....." gaze made me feel a queer sense of guilt in my chest.

"This is, well see....."

I stood up and raised both my hands, indicating that I have no intention to oppose, and considered what sort of justification that I could say next. Thereupon, I felt something slumping against my feet. Looking down, I saw that I was Keika hugging my waist.

"I was playing with Ha-chan~~"

"Un, well, yeah, something like that."

Although I had indeed wanted to play with her, but from another point of view, it was more like a young girl wanting to play with me. Ever since I was attracted by those cute soft cheeks of hers, I can hardly say that that sort of interpretation was hardly wrong.

To be able to grasp a guy's heart at such a young age, this kid sure is scary.....

Well, however, to anticipate this future prospect of hers was not wrong. In actuality, one could see that from her sister Kawasaki Saki as well, in general, she was a beauty. The only problem was that the first impression she gave was that of a Yankee. There was no trace of that intimidation or scariness in her eyes when she looked at her sister.

".....Is that so?"

Seeing Keika's cherubic actions, Kawasaki seemed taken aback and smiled. Then, Keika smiled as well, and tilted her head, all the while clinging onto me.

"Want to play as well, Sa-chan?"

"No, no thanks. Ok Ke-chan, come over here."

Kawasaki pulled Keika away from me, and hugged her tightly. No, seriously. I wouldn't do anything to do her even if you weren't so cautious.

In any case, it seems like I manage to avoid getting into trouble this time. I heaved a sigh of relief. However, compared to how relieved I was, Kawasaki seemed a little anxious. As she patted Keika's head, she looked towards the inside of the cooking room and began to speak.

"Is it really okay to bring her here?"

It's not like I didn't understand what she was so worried about. Afterall, everyone here was a high-school student, not to mention that there were people from another school as well. Keika would be a most unnatural presence amidst them. However, this event itself wasn't any official event, and so there weren't any clear rules to follow.

I looked at the nearby diagonal kitchen table, and saw Haruno-san talking over there with Meguri-senpai. If even that person was here, then there was no point in talking about participation criteria and the like anymore.

"Well, it's going to be alright. There are others here as well."

"Un....."

Hearing my words, Kawasaki nodded her head as though accepting what I had said. Well, first and foremost, the reason why this event could even take place was because of Kawasaki's request. If she was going to feel uncomfortable staying here, I would be most apologetic, because I would at least want to fulfill her request properly.Then again, originally, this wasn't part of the request but I will see what I can do to make her feel more at ease.

Just as I was searching around for the existence of those who could help accomplish this request, the sound of hurried footsteps could be heard coming from behind me.

"Oh, Kawasaki. You made it in time."

The cheerful voice belonged to Yuigahama, with Yukinoshita following behind her.

"I haven't see Keika in quite a while."

Saying that, Yuigahama too, began to pat Keika's head. Both she and Yukinoshita had seen Keika during the Christmas event, so they could be considered Keika's acquaintances.

Yukinoshita however, walked to Keika's side but her hand seemed to be hesitant in reaching out to her. She extended her hand a little then retracted it. Seems like she was worried about whether it would be all for her to pat Keika's head. So clumsy.

As I thought that, it seems like there was someone even clumsier.

"That..... Today, I look forward to working with you....."

Kawasaki seemed to be vexed at what sort of greetings she should give, and in the end, managed to utter those words shyly. Maybe she felt that was unbecoming of her sister, and so, Keika who was looking up at her sister, straightened her posture and bowed deeply.

"Please take care of me."

She probably learnt that in nursery. Although she said those words slowly, but compared to her sister's curt way of saying it, it still felt more amicable, and let those who see it be more at ease.

Not only me, but Yuigahama too was struck by her cuteness and writhing about going "Kya~". Kawasaki's eyes were moist, as though touched by her sister's growth.

Thereupon, Yukinoshita too smiled with affection. She grasped her skirt and slowly squatted down, and looked at Keika directly and spoke slowly.

"I look forward to working with you as well. Well then, what sort of candy do you want to make?"

Having been asked such a question, Keika raised her head and looked at Kawasaki's face, and Kawasaki nodded in reply.

"Ke-chan, what kind of sweets do you want to eat?"

Hearing this question, Keika seemed stunned for a short while, then spoke suddenly.

"Eel!"

"O, Oh..... I see....."

I couldn't think of anything else to say at that point in time. I see. Eel, is it?

"Sorry, our family had eel previously, and she really liked it."

Kawasaki lowered her head, seemingly embarrassed. However, kids were all like that, and at times they will spout some nonsensical things, and other times they would say the very first thing that comes to mind without giving it further thought..... Something like this really can't be helped.

As I thought that, Yukinoshita-san was instead placing her jaw between both her hands and seemed to be thinking about something seriously.

"If that's the case, then how about, eel pie? If it's pie alone, it's easy to do it, but as to the preparation and cooking of the eels, I will have to look it up....."

"Oh- can that sort of pie really be made?"

"Yes."

Yukinoshita replied in a matter-of-fact manner. This girl really does know everything. Yet considering all that, it was strange that her own 'pie' was not made properly. (TL: Pie = pai = oppai = tits)

"If you don't mind, want to give it a try?"

Kawasaki's face was flushed a deep crimson as she shook her head at Yukinoshita's question.

"No, no need for that! Just teach her something that any kid could make....."

"Alright then, then something like chocolate truffle I guess..... Let me go collect some additional ingredients."

Saying that, Yukinoshita walked towards the teacher's desk at the front of the cooking room.

While waiting for her, I looked at Keika, wondering if I should continue to take care of her. However, it seems that this babysitting job was snatched away by Yuigahama.

Yuigahama took no notice of her skirt, and squatted down immediately and began to converse animatedly with Keika.

"About eels, I know what you mean. I want to try them too~"

"Eels are delicious. Can be eaten together with rice and sauce."

"I know right, eels are so tasty~"

"Un, rice is very nice."

"Eh, rice....."

Although the subject of their conversation was totally different, but the two of them seemed very happy. Come to think of it, it would really be trouble if Yuigahama were to try her hands at making the pie.

However, it probably wouldn't be a massive flop if Kawasaki and Yukinoshita were around. It seems that I, as a taste tester, has yet a need to make an appearance.

Well then, before my job starts, I guess I should go take a walk around. Thus, like a bear, I began to wander about aimlessly within the cooking room.

Haruno-san and Meguri-senpai was talking to each other all this while. The current and old members of the student council were at various kitchen tables, taking down various orders, whereas the vice-president and Secretary-chan was chatting away and laughing from time to time. Vice-president, go and do your job!

Kaihinsougou High school was having a DISCUSSION with Tamanawa at the center of it all. Seeing how they haven't really started their cooking, they were probably still in the midst of BRAINSTORMING.

That means, the one kitchen table that was left for me was the one where Miura and Isshiki were fiercely duking it out. Miura was glaring pointedly at Isshiki whilst Isshiki was grinning from ear to ear. Hayama, who was stuck between the two, was maintaining his refreshing smile the whole time.

Uh-huh..... Seems like big trouble. As I observed the situation from afar, Hayama seemed to have noticed my presence.

With that, he smoothly extricated himself from Miura and Isshiki, fumbled about with his belongings, and came walking my way. Then, he took a seat beside me.

"Is something the matter?"

"Ah, no. It's nothing much....."

I had raised my voice loud enough so that Hayama should have heard me, but I wondered if in the process, I was also staring at him. No way! What is this?! I am just like a young maiden in love! If this goes on, I would have to buy a trumpet..... [TL: ??? I have no idea what he's referencing.]

All this aside, up to this point, I had probably already captured Hayama's kindness with my actions. However, right now, we were different from one another. Hayama Hayato is not a completely nice guy, and I, a truly detestable guy.

Hence, that is why, I could more or less deduce what Hayama wanted to do.

"Don't you have something to say?"

I looked at him through half-opened eyes but he did not shy away from it, but rather, gave a bittersweet smile and said, ".....You got me."

I thought this was rare for him, probably because I thought I saw a smile that was befitting of his age.

Hayama brought out two cans of coffee that he had been holding behind his back, gave them a light shake and handed me one.

"Won't you chat with me a little?This is for the other day."

Hearing him say that, it was then that I suddenly realized it. Come to think of it, he was probably referring to that time where we were both drinking coffee in the frigid park before the marathon meet. At that time, I had treated him to a can of coffee for the favor of asking him to come and have a talk with me.

What an honest dude. Obviously, this can of coffee wasn't for returning the favor for the other day, but rather, an excuse to talk to me. I don't think that this is a mean way of looking at the situation. Because we are like comrades, because we are like companions, I could empathize with why he did this. I and him we probably the same, in that we both needed an excuse to act. So as to convince ourselves, so as to obtain others' acceptance. No matter how much we differed from one another, we were both constantly searching for reasons.

With an 'Oh', I nodded my head slightly and accepted it from him. The brand indicated that it wasn't MAX coffee, but BLACK coffee. Seeing me look at the brand name again and again, Hayama gave a bitter smile.

"You like it sweeter?"

"Not really."

Even I, had no interest in drinking something sweet now. Besides, I still had chocolates to eat after this. I opened the can of coffee, and drank it in big gulps.

Hayama did the same as well, and sighed greatly.

There wasn't any sort of conversation between us, just the sound of coffee cans hitting the table as well as the occasional sighs that escaped our mouth. This sounds of this exchange replaced any possible conversation and continued on intermittently.

From the weight on my hand, I knew that I was nearly done drinking the can, when Hayama suddenly said, "Even so."

"I thought about it properly as well."

"Huh?"

My reply to him was serious, as I really had no idea as to what he was trying to tell me. However, he gave his usual Hayama Hayato-like smile that everyone was familiar with and continued on gently.

"If it's like this, then everyone..... everyone can behave more naturally that way."

Saying that, he took a glance round the cooking room. Following his gaze, I could see all sorts of things happening around me.

Miura who was looking at the weighing scales seriously, or Isshiki who was whistling as she operated the oven, or Yuigahama whose face was flushed pink as well as Yukinoshita who was hugging her head as she watched Yuigahama.

Soon, Hayama's gaze returned to me again. That expressions that he now had was one that I knew fairly well, a lonely bittersweet smile that was characteristic of Hayama Hayato.

The 'everyone' that Hayama spoke of.

Who was he referring to? And who was included in this 'everyone' that he keeps referring to? I noticed this faintly and averted my gaze from Hayama, and took a sip from the bitter coffee.

"It's not like that at all....."

I spat the words out, as though hoping that it would remove the bitter aftertaste from my mouth as well. In response, Hayama looked at me blankly. Thereupon, he forced out a deep sigh.. Then, a smile formed on his lips and as trying to suppress it, sighed softly.

"Indeed. Especially Hikigaya. He's the most unnatural one here."

As he said so, he looked at me with an all grown-up look. That gaze of his was in no way lukewarm, and I couldn't help but turn my face away.

"It's a given right? I am a civilized man after all. I am a city boy, so I don't live amongst nature, you know?"

"To think I would be told that by someone living in Chiba....."

Towards my weak rebuttal, Hayama shrugged his shoulders with a scornful laugh.

"What, you dissing on Chiba?"

"Not at all. I am just bantering with a city-boy's sense, that's all."

A collected smile as well as a sarcastic reply from him. Was the one being dissed not Chiba, but me instead? Even so, from someone like Hayama-kun, isn't this a bit too harsh.....?

No, this was probably the way that Hayama chose to live his life. I hated anyone who desired to be like Hayama. Against someone like me who didn't wish to be like him, Hayama had become like this as well.

As I thought of this, Hayama suddenly broke into a broad grin.

"You care way too much."

His smile right now, was one that seemed to suggest that he had seen through what I was thinking, which made it just somewhat detestable.

"I don't care at all. In fact, I generally don't care about anything."

"You do. About various things."

Saying that, Hayama averted his eyes from me, and seemed to be looking at somewhere faraway.

Following his gaze, it seemed that Tobe had managed to eat some of Ebina-san's chocolates that were still works in progress. He was being quite noisy his with exclamations of [Delicious!], [So sweet!] and [Awesome!]. Oh, you did try your best after all. But still, Ebina-san is one of those type of girls that were way more trouble than they would appear. To these type of people, they will only open their hearts in stages. Or perhaps, their mental make-up was just structured like that. I too, gave a wry smile thinking about it.

As a smile formed, Hayama let out a sigh as well.

".....It would be great if I can get used to that."

Hearing something like that from Hayama was quite unexpected and without knowing it, I found myself looking at Tobe then Hayama's direction for a second time.

"No way, I don't think that's possible....."

All I needed was to say one sentence, "Because it's Tobe," and that would form the strongest foundation to destroy any further arguments. Yet, I was unable to bring myself to say it. This was probably because Hayama's somewhat lonely face had entered my field of vision.

Instead of opening my mouth, I opened my eyes wide instead. Thus, I saw the things that Hayama saw. Right in front of me were Tobe and Ebina-san.

Just that one time, I had accepted a request from the both of them during the school trip. And then, I had used the worst possible method to fulfill it. Despite being bounded by so many restrictions, the two of them were still right here before me.

I had a hunch that the way these two were now, clearly resembled someone else as well.

I continued looking at them in a daze when I heard a sigh coming from beside me. Looking at the source of it, I saw Hayama down the rest of the bitter coffee, and shook it as though wanting to confirm that it was really empty. Then, he stood up and prepared to throw away his empty can. Miura had probably seen him doing that, because she was now calling out to him in a sweet voice.

"Hayato~~~~~"

"I will be right there."

Looking at Hayama as he gave his acknowledgment, my honest thoughts came tumbling out from my mouth.

"Seems like a big bother."

".....It's not really like that."

Hayama turned his head back the last time, to give a short and simple reply, before walking back to the kitchen table where they were waiting for him.

Just as I expected, Hayama didn't mention any specific name, but merely said that it would be great if he could get used to 'that'.

Was it Tobe, or did he mean Ebina-san, or maybe even.....

I watched the leaving figure of Hayama, and downed the rest of the coffee in one gulp.

X

X

X

The confection making had already entered its climax. Those that worked the fastest had already put their dough into the oven, or already putting the near-completed product into the fridge to chill, and were now advancing towards the final step.

Even Haruno-san, who kept talking non-stop, seemed to have at some point in time, completed most of the work. Not only that, Meguri-senpai as well as the previous student council that were under her charge had also more or less finished too. The only thing left for them seemed to be setting the shape as well as decorations and toppings for it.

As always, she seemed to have a knack for doing strange things in the calmest manner. I wonder if it was just limited to making sweets, hmm.....

However, she was probably getting tired of looking after others, for she was now leisurely enjoying a cup of tea with Yukinoshita.

"Yukino-chan, what are you making? Let your Onee-chan have a taste~"

Haruno-san's insistent voice was completely ignored by Yukinoshita. Yukinoshita was now supervising Miura and Yuigahama.

Under Yukinoshita's watchful eyes, Miura was molding the dough into shape with a serious look, whereas Yuigahama was shaping the mold with another piece of dough.

She was probably displeased with how Yukinoshita ignored her, and so her tone changed to one that was pouting, and spoke again to Yukinoshita.

"Hey, Yukino-chan, can you hear me~"

".....Haruno0san, Yukinoshita-san is still quite busy."

Seeing this situation, Hayama had a wry smile, and walked up to Haruno-san's side as though wanting to try and dissuade her. If the surroundings were going to be that noisy, Miura would probably get distracted. Maybe Hayama said such things because he felt concerned about this as well.

Those who were focused on their work were not only Miura and Yuigahama, Isshiki was squeezing out the

fresh cream, and were doing some sort of cute decoration, devoting herself to it. Amongst the Kawasaki sisters, Keika's face was full of chocolate, but she did succeed in making something that sort of resembled a chocolate truffle, which Kawasaki was busy taking photos of. Oi, you, how many are you going to take.....

As everyone focus on doing their own things, my job as a taste-tester was probably about to begin as well. As I thought that, I watched from the sidelines, maintaining my 'Not going to be a bother' pose. Thereupon, Orimoto came running my way, and spoke to me, who had currently nothing to do.

"Hikigaya, are there still spare chocolate cutters?"

"Oh..... just wait a bit."

Seems like the progress over at Kaihinsougou High was not bad as well. Although they had kept arguing over how they wanted the end-product to look like, it looks like they were gradually inching closer to completion.

As I told her to wait, I walked over to Yukinoshita.

"Excuse me, are there still spare chocolate cutters?"

"There's still some over there, you may take those if you need them."

"Oh, thanks."

And so, the one answered her wasn't me.

It was the one who had followed me here, Orimoto Kaori

Yukinoshita looked surprised at the figure of Orimoto who had suddenly appeared and became quiet. Yuigahama raised her head and looked on with a curious expression, probably because Yukinoshita's instructional voice had suddenly disappeared.

Amongst the Kaihinsougou high crowd, a particular person wearing the Kaihinsougou High uniform stood out a little more from the less. Although there were a couple of people looking at her, Orimoto didn't seem to really mind them, and was now scrutinizing the chocolate cutters one by one. Then, she spoke something casually.

".....Come to think of it, have I ever given some to Hikigaya?"

Her tone suggested that she really had no idea which made me smile bitterly. You don't remember? Well, that's to be expected.

Although Orimoto was the type who would give obligatory chocolate to whoever it was as long as they asked, I somehow did not fall under that category of 'whoever'.

How did I accept that reality last time..... I reminisced about that and my reply came slightly late.

I coughed a little to make up for the silence, when I suddenly heard the sound of 'Ka-cha, Ka-cha' sound of tableware. I took a look and saw that It was Yukinoshita holding her jaw with her hand as she looked at me, Yuigahama had averted her gaze and her hands were moving about in circles, Isshiki went 'Eh' and nodded her head as though interested in the topic, Kawasaki was looking at me with a somewhat shocked expression, Tamanawa coughed and went 'Fuuu, fuuuu' as he blew he fringe. Tamanawa-san, you are a little noisy, you know.....

"No,probably never."

I tried not to let that memory reside within me and answered as naturally as I could. To that, Orimoto laughed ever so naturally as well.

"I see..... That's probably true eh? Indeed, it would appear that Hikigaya has never received chocolates from anyone until now. Hilarious."

"That's true, but it's not hilarious....."

This girl, why was she here again? Wasn't she here for some cookie-cutter? Or else, to put me on a spot?..... As I tried to suppress my twitching cheeks, Orimoto crackled madly away. I turned my head behind and saw Yuigahama and Yukinoshita. The two of them appeared puzzled.

"Well, you are going to get some this year right? If you want, come here late. I will give you some to try."

After saying like that so simply, Orimoto picked up the cookie cutter and walked back to her kitchen table. I was taken aback by her words, and could say nothing but a couple of "Ah" and "Oh" in a flustered manner as I watched her leave.

Well, this was definitely Orimoto's unique ability to be able to say anything so casually, and that there was no deeper meaning hidden behind them. Finally, I don't have to read between the lines of someone's words, nor would I misunderstand their intentions and just accept the words as they are. Thinking of this, I couldn't help but smile and sigh as well.

I carried with me a small sense of satisfaction and turned my head back at the kitchen table, and my eyes met with Haruno-san, who was standing by the window.

Haruno-san seemed to have been watching our exchange with a great smile on her face. Her expression seemed to suggest that she had spotted something fun to toy with.

Then, her expression changed from the soft smile to a sadistic one. The corners of her mouth curled upwards, and her eyes that were now narrowed had a sharp edge to them. Haruno-san looked at Hayama who was beside her.

"Come to think of it, Hayato seemed to have receive some chocolate from Yukino-chan some time ago?"

Although she was talking to Hayama, the truth was that the voice could be heard by everyone present.

Yukinoshita who had been ignoring her all this time seemed to have reacted to it. She looked at Haruno-san with a confused expression and glared at her without saying anything. Those who couldn't find their voice was not only Yukinoshita, but also Miura. Even Isshiki shrieked softly.

I scratched my head briskly as I smiled bitterly. There was no need at all to say this in front of both Miura and Isshiki.

Even Yukinoshita, who had been maintaining her silence up till now, responded. Yukinoshita sighed tiredly, and glared at Haruno-san. A faint smile formed at her lips.

"Indeed. During my elementary school days. You made me do it."

"So nostalgic~."

Riding on Yukinoshita's words, Hayama smoothly evaded the topic with nothing but just those two words and his usual wonderful invigorating smile. Hearing the response from them, Haruno-san had a somewhat disappointed expression. Hearing their answers, both Miura and Isshiki heaved a sigh of relief.

Yet, in contrast to their reaction, Yukinoshita Haruno's expression seemed to grow even colder. She glanced at Hayama with a disinterested look, and left the window side as though she was bored with the development. Hayama watched her leave with a lonely look in his eyes. Haruno-san stopped by Yukinoshita's side.

"Yukino-chan, who are you going to give it to this year?"

Her voice seemed to suggest that she was just joking with her. If one did not have a good understanding of the two of them, it would surely have sounded like some cute teasing between the two sisters. In fact, Yukinoshita who now looked away with a "Hnng", looked like she was just responding to her sister's teasing with a playful sulk.

However, at the very least, both Yuigahama and I, and perhaps Hayama, were amongst the few people in this room who could sense the air being stretched taut. The figure of Haruno-san peeking at Yukinoshita's face from the top of her shoulders made her appear like a devil whispering to her. Haruno-san's ran her supple fingers across Yukinoshita's slender neck, stopping suddenly at her throat.

Having heard her sister's gentle voice and having her beautiful fingers thrust at her, Yukinoshita raised her jaw slightly.

There was no warmth in the looks that the two exchanged. The two of them that were facing each other now, were like mirror images of one another reflected on the ice, ephemeral and beautiful. Both of them had an identical cold expression.

Beside them, Yuigahama clutched her chest tightly, her lips stiffened, and she stood on tenterhooks as she watched over Yukinoshita.

Anyone who was observing them swallowed their breaths and a frosty, surreptitious silence soon enveloped the area. The only thing that interrupted this deathly silence, was the sound of light breathing.

"To my friends, probably."

Saying that, Yukinoshita suddenly broke into a smile. She said so with eyes that was sparkling like the morning dew, with a warm voice that could probably melt snow, with a quiet tone that one would use when watching over the sick.

That gentle smile shattered her icy-cold mirror-image.

".....I see. So that's what Yukino-chan is going to do."

Yukinoshita Haruno smiled brightly as she tilted her face, then, she laughed yet again. It was the first time that I had seen her smile. That smile was one that made her look as though she was about to burst into tears, but it was also, a very lovable smile. Her fingertips moved from the nape of Yukinoshita neck, to curling her glossy black hair. She combed it lovingly and the hair trailed behind her fingers as she combed it. In this gentle manner, Haruno-san continued to caress Yukinoshita's head.

"If, if there is some leftover, give it to me okay?"

"I don't want to."

With a curt reply, Yukinoshita deftly brushed off Haruno-san's hand. Although the way she put it was blunt, a smile lingered on her.

Haruno-san seemed to be satisfied at that, and spread her hands out in a grand manner.

"Now then..... the preparations are almost done. It's about time to go back, I think."

"Eh? Umm, just, there's still various things I want you to teach."

Isshiki went to her in a fluster and began tugging at Haruno-san's sleeve, who was just beginning to remove her apron. Seeing such a sweet action from her, Haruno-san smiled whole-heartedly, and grabbed Isshiki's hand tightly.

"I am so sorry, Isshiki-chan. But all that's left is to roast it, so you can't go wrong with that. Help me tell this to the rest."

Having her hand gripped by Haruno-san, and to have her smile so brightly at her, even someone like Isshiki-san couldn't find anything to say. For some reason, her cheeks were blushing slightly, and then with a relieved expression, Isshiki nodded her head.

Since there was no one else who wanted to prevent her from leaving, Haruno-san called out lightly to Hayama and Meguri-senpai, and began to make her preparations to leave briskly.

Then, re-adjusting the bag that she was carrying, she walked in front of me, Yukinoshita and Yuigahama.

"See you again, Yukino-chan."

Without saying anything more, she gave Yukinoshita a light clap on her shoulders. Without saying her goodbyes to anyone else, the sound of Yukinoshita Haruno's heels echoed about in the room as she left the place without even once looking back.

As I watched the disappearing figure of Haruno-san, I could hear a huge sigh coming from behind me. Looking back, I could see Yukinoshita readjusting her apron as though to try and get herself psyched up once more.

"Alright, let's get back to work."

Saying so, she turned her attention back to Yuigahama. However, though her voice should have reached Yuigahama, Yuigahama's reply was slow. Thinking that that was strange of Yuigahama, Yukinoshita broke into a smile.

".....It's askew."

Slowly, as though hugging her, Yukinoshita brought her hand to Yuigahama's neck, and began to retie the knot that had gotten undone. Seemingly troubled by her actions, Yuigahama came to her senses and laughed awkwardly.

"T, thank you..... Yukinon..... Erm, hey....."

Yuigahama, now right in the center of Yukinoshita's arms, opened her mouth to speak but seemed to have trouble getting the words out. Hearing her falter, Yukinoshita merely continued looking at her to urge her to continue. However, Yuigahama merely shook her head.

Then, Yukinoshita brought her shoulder and knocked it lightly on Yuigahama's forehead.

"It's fine. It's fine."

"I see.It's just a little more, I will give it my best."

"Un....."

Yuigahama buried her face within Yukinoshita's shadow, thus there was no way to see her expression. However, I could hear her soft, husky murmur.

Nodding her head in reply, Yukinoshita softly, gently and in a quiet and subdued manner, completed her task of tying the knot.

[Yet, Yuigahama Yui still cannot do it nicely on her own.]

The oven and the kitchen timer rang out in quick succession, emitting a piercing sound. Each time they sounded out, the cooking room would be filled with both sighs and cheers, and the air would be filled with a sweet and fragrant smell.

Looking at the crowd of people who had gathered in front of the oven, it looks like Miura's masterpiece, which she poured her heart and soul into making, was completed without any issues. Miura opened the oven door carefully, and from it, took out a chocolate gateau before quickly bringing it to Yukinoshita.

Yukinoshita began to inspect Miura's work. In the time of one, two breaths, she observed it slowly and carefully. Miura, who was beside her was restless, whereas Yuigahama who was nearby as well, seemed to be tenterhooks.

Before long, Yukinoshita looked up at them after taking a short breath.

".....It looks fine to me. I think it's been done quite beautifully."

Hearing Yukinoshita's words, Miura heaved a sigh of relief and her shoulders relaxed.

"Yumiko is amazing!"

Yuigahama hugged Miura and Miura's face relaxed as well.

"Un. Thank you, Yui..... Y, Yukinoshita-san as well."

Her face was faced towards the side, but her eyes kept glancing at Yukinoshita. What a strange way to express her thanks. Her reply too, was strange as well.

"I can't really comment much since I haven't tasted it, but at first glance, I think it's good enough for a pass."

Can't she just give an honest thanks in return, this girl..... However, what Yukinoshita said was not wrong. Today's events was not simply to teach others how to makes confections.

"Yumiko."

As though wanting to give her courage, Yuigahama gently patted Miura's shoulders.

Being urged on like that, Miura forgot to take off her mittens and carried the chocolate gateau away as though it was some valuable item. Then, she walked in front of Hayama and twisted her body awkwardly as though she was embarrassed and spoke.

"Ha, Hayato..... This, could you help me..... to taste it?"

Seeing her unable to look at him directly, and seeing her steal occasional glances at him, Hayama replied her with a composed smile.

"Of course. If you think I am suited for this."

"Un..... Un."

Miura seems to be searching for something that she ought to say, but in the end, all she managed was a deep blush as she nodded her head several times.

Seems like she's really trying her best, I thought as I clapped my hands in my heart. Meanwhile, someone

beside me was moaning.

"Mumumu....."

"What are you moaning about?"

I glanced at Isshiki, only to see give Miura a hateful gaze. In her hands was a beautifully wrapped baked sweet, complete with a message card that she already made.

She was holding on to it tightly.

"That seems to be a nice cake, Miura-senpai."

"Ah, that chocolate gâteau turned out pretty well, much to my surprise."

Hearing that, Isshiki went "Haa?" and looked at me dubiously. Can you not look at me with that 'What on earth is this girl talking about?' kind of look?

Isshiki pretended to cough, then began to explain what she meant with gestures.

"No, no, I don't mean that. I am talking about the gap, the gap. How can she change her normally 'bad-girl' attitude to something so cute all of a sudden? That's super unfair, isn't it?"

"Ah, ah, that....."

As expected of this master of slyness. Speaking of Miura, she probably wouldn't resort to something like this. This was simply a display of a young maiden. Isshiki seemed to have understood this point as well and she rambled on, "Her personality doesn't seem that bad actually." I agree, but your personality on the other hand, is pretty bad though.

Although she kept on grumbling, but once she was done with it, she seemed contented and smiled all of a sudden.

"Well, but this makes it all the more fun to compete with. After all, some people aren't even worth competing with."

Saying that, she sighed as though disappointed by something. Then she said, "Ah, that's it" like she just thought of something and proceeded to take out something from her apron pocket after fumbling about a bit, and with a 'Poi', threw it at me.

"Senpai, please accept this."

Taking it, I proceeded to take a look at it. It was a small vinyl bag that contained cookies. Besides a small ribbon, there didn't seem to be any other sort of decoration on it. It was a world of difference from the luxurious and gorgeous looking set of baked sweets that Isshiki was holding.

"What, are you giving this to me? Thank you?"

It was given to me so casually that I had trouble expressing my thanks.

She was going on about how giving obligatory chocolate was important and something about men's pride. Well, what do you know, her character wasn't so bad after all! I am sorry for saying that you had a bad personality just now!

Hearing my apology, Isshiki laughed all of a sudden and then she placed her thumb gently against in front of my lips.

".....Keep this a secret from others, okay?"

A devilish smile appeared on her face. Then, she winked at me and said, "It would be a bother if people know about it," before walking away. Seems like she was walking towards Hayama.

As for me, I was rooted to the spot, stunned by Isshiki's antics and her expression just now. She was no longer being sly. In fact, she was being quite scary..... If I was the past me, I would have fallen for her right away in that instant.

As I trembled with fear at my sly Kouhai's destructive power, I took a look at her, to watch her put in her best effort against Hayama.

Isshiki looked at Hayama with upturned eyes as she went Kyarurun~ as she passed him the baked sweets. [39]

"Hayama-senpai, please taste this as well."

"Haha, can I finish them all?"

Although Hayama was still eating Miura's chocolate gateau, he gave Isshiki an invigorating smile as welcomed Isshiki's advances maturely.

And so, once again, he found himself stuck between Miura and Isshiki. Then, with some crunching noises, Tobe walked towards Hayama whilst feasting away on some checkered and Osomatsu-patterned cookies [40] and gave Hayama a thumbs-up.

"Hayato-kun, if you can't finish it, I can help you."

"No, I didn't prepare Tobe's portion."

Tobe's kind words were frozen by Isshiki's cold voice. Faced with this, Tobe started whining to Hayama.

"Irohasu is so mean!? Hayato-kun."

"I am very happy that you are being considerate for me, but I think it would be better for you to just eat your own share, Tobe."

Hayama told Tobe quietly, as though he was whispering to him. Thereupon, Tobe gave a thumbs-up again and laughed.

Oh I see now. Seems like the checkered cookies and Jyushimatsu-patterned cookies were made by Ebina-san. That was unexpected, and as I thought so, I took a look at Ebina-san.

"Un, HayaTobe? Doesn't seem to be a match."

Ebina-san seem unsatisfied, and shook her head repeatedly as she munched on her checkered cookies. Seems like there was no future in that route.

Now then, ignoring Miura's side, I wondered about how the others were doing. I looked to the area opposite Miura's area, which was where Kaihinsougou High was. They seem to be almost done as well.

Meguri-senpai and some others were together with the current Kaihinsougou High student council members and its alumni, chatting away happily as they made the pastries. Amongst them, there was one person who noticed my existence and waved her hand at me. It was Orimoto Kaori. Ah ah, what are you doing, waving your hand at this time? You haven't changed since junior-high.Well, I guess it didn't matter since I wouldn't overthink about that action of her now.

Orimoto seemed to be making something on the kitchen table and then came running towards me.

“Hikigaya, here. You are going to taste it, right?”

After saying that, she passed me a paper plate of chocolate brownies. Ah, no wrapping of any sort. Well, I am going to taste it after all, so it’s fine anyway.

“Then.....”

I recited thanks for the food and began to tuck in. Then, I saw someone appear behind Orimoto.

“Un. Isn’t this sort of exchange great? To build up SEAMLESS relationships outside of the school framework is important. This is probably something necessary for the future.”

Hearing that way of speaking, I immediately knew who it was. He was the student council president of Kaihinsougou High School, Tamanawa-san.

Having noticed Tamanawa, Orimoto walked towards him with the plate as well.

“Ah, president, you are here too. Here, for you as well.”

“Th, thank you..... This is something from me.”

As he thanked Orimoto for the gift, he took out something gently as well. It was a beautifully cut chiffon cake. It seems like it was something that they had made.

Orimoto looked at the chiffon cake blankly.

“Eh? Why?”

Hearing that question, Tamanawa proceeded to cough for a bit, and then started to start his lecture with his hands gestures.

“During Valentines, it is the norm overseas for guys to be the ones giving gifts. This time, I want to have a feel of this GLOBALISATION. In japan, this is probably what you would call being INFLUENCED.”

“Oh?”

However, Orimoto’s reply seemed lackluster this time round, and didn’t say anything like “PREACH IT!” Probably noticing the weak response, Tamanawa quickly added in some more words and his gestured picked up speed.

“This is probably due to the CULTURAL GAP that exists between Japan and other countries. If I had to give an example, it would be like how people in France only wear a skirt in front of important people.”

Oh.....In other words, this was the reason why Totsuka didn’t wear a skirt! I learned something new! I have to have a more GLOBAL mindset then! PREACH IT!

Just as I was renewing my resolve, Orimoto suddenly took a bite of the piece of chiffon cake.

“This is delicious. Thanks.”

“Ah, un. That..... It’s about time for COFFEE BREAK, how about we head back now?”

“What the heck is a coffee break? You are so funny.”

Orimoto laughed before telling me, “See you, go your best,” as she waved her hands and walked back

towards the Kaihinsougou High students. Then, Tamanawa who was left, stared daggers at me.

"Well then, let's do this FAIRLY next time."

Leaving me with those baffling words, Tamanawa sauntered off.

"Nope, I am not going for her....."

Come to think of it, did my murmured reply reach his ears? Nah, probably not. If my words weren't in KATAKANA, he probably wouldn't hear it.

Then again, considering his attitude just now, could it be, that that was Tamanawa's effort in trying to hit on her! It looked like he was totally unable to convey his intention to her, though.Who cares, it's none of my business.

Looking in the direction that Tamanawa disappeared to, I saw Kawasaki at a kitchen table nearby, busy cleaning up the area.

"Sa-chan."

"Yes? Wait a little."

Keika gave her sister's skirt a few light tugs. She seemed to be really busy having to deal with the washing as well as Keika at the same time, and thus, didn't seem to be making much progress with the cleaning.

.....Alright then. If there was something I was confident in, that would be my ability to deal with young girls. Time for me to replace Kawasaki and entertain her for a bit. I love young girls!

Having made up my mind quickly, I sneaked up to Keika from behind her and then placed my hand on her head.

"It's Ha-chan!"

Keika looked up at me with a cherubic expression.

"Ah, that's me. I am not Ha-chan, but it doesn't matter. Did you make chocolates?"

"Yes! It was amazing! Black! And sweet!"

"Seems like you did a great job. Black and sweet, sounds like some great chocolate right there."

I continued patting Keika's head as I made small talk with her. Then, I saw Kawasaki looking in my direction.

"S, sorry, I am almost done with cleaning."

"Oh, you don't have to rush or anything."

Because I still want to play with young girls! Well, that was something I didn't say, because I have to enjoy what little time I still had with Keika. Putting it this way, doesn't it make me kind of a suspicious character? Problem? Is this going to become a problem?

Whilst this uneasy thoughts began to swim about in my mind, it would appear that Kawasaki was done cleaning. Kawasaki rubbed her hands against her apron and rushed back with quick steps.

"T, thank you....."

She uttered her thanks in a low voice as she stared at me. Her mouth opened and closed, as though having

trouble with something she wanted to say.

"That, it's about time to go back..... Need to prepare dinner."

"Ah, I see."

Listening to her, I looked at the clock. Sure enough, it was indeed close to dinner time. No wonder she was in such a rush to clean up the room.

Although it would have been fine to leave it as it is, Kawasaki was surprisingly thoughtful. Kawasaki-san, has all the makings of a housewife.

"Alright then, Ke-chan, let's go back home."

Okay..... Sa-chan."

Kawasaki patted Keika's shoulders gently. Then, Keika tugged at Kawasaki's skirt and responded to her actions with a sweet voice. As her elder sister, Kawasaki seemed to understand what Keika was trying to tell her.

".....I understand. Wait a moment."

Saying that, she took out a bag that was stuffed with chocolates, and passed it to Keika. Keika took it from her, looking very satisfied, and presented it to me.

"Here, Ha-chan."

"I think she wants to give it all to you..... Do accept it."

"Oh, oh thank you. It looks great! You are the best, Ke-chan."

I kept rubbing her head repeatedly and she hugged my waist tightly. Hahaha, what a cute girl, makes me want to rub her head even more.

As Kawasaki wore her coat, she turned her face away from me and said, ".....There's, there's some chocolates made by me in that bag as well." I didn't really think it was surprisingly that I would receive some from her, but strangely enough, I still felt somewhat embarrassed and so, shifted my gaze to the truffle chocolates.

"Oh, er, thanks. I can't tell the difference at all. Your sister is amazing."

To which, Keika puffed out her chest, grinned broadly and looked at me proudly as she praised her sister.

"Amazing right?! But, then, Sa-chan worked very hard at it too! She's amazing, scarily so!"

Hearing her sister dish out such praise, Kawasaki hurriedly interjected with some words of her own to stop her.

"This, this is for always taking care of Taishi! So like, this is um, a token of thanks."

"Taishi? Who?"

"I'm gonna bash you."

Eh? That's quite an amazing scowl right there..... With a wave of my hand, I told her that I was just kidding and I knew who was talking about. Thereupon, Kawasaki sharp glare turned gentle and her shoulders slackened. She was back to her usual kind, sisterly self.

"Somehow, talking to you, has become a little easier. Because I was a little uneasy at first."

Hearing her say that, some memories sprung to my mind. Indeed, during times like those mock interviews and the like, I would usually say whatever vague things I could come up with in the heat of the moment. Following that, I'd probably say a lot more superfluous remarks as well. Remembering that made me somewhat embarrassed, and the usual banter escaped my mouth before I could stop it.

"I see..... Then, tell my kouhai to keep trying his best." (TL: Taishi and Komachi are in the same school if you forgot)

Kawasaki reacted with a dumbfounded expression before saying, "Idiot..... It's still too early."

Then, she laughed and turning her gaze back to Keika, said, "Well, I'll be sure to tell him. Ke-chan, shall we go?"

Hearing that, Keika still did not let go of me. Witnessing this, Kawasaki continued to look at Keika intently. Thereupon, I could feel Keika trembling. Oi, surely there's no need to look at her with such a scary face.....

"Alright, let's go, Ke-chan."

As I said that, I began to walk, with Keika still clinging on tightly to me.

"Un, let's go!"

Keika continued to follow me. Kawasaki sighed as she followed us from behind.

With Keika following me, we left the cooking room and went down the stairs. In that time, Kawasaki helped Keika to wear a coat and had wrapped a muffler around her. She was completely devoted to taking care of her little sister. Before we knew it, we had reached the entrance of the Community Center. The sky outside was already dark.

"Do you want me to walk you to the station?"

"There's no need. I always go back at this sort of time anyway. Don't you have other things to do anyway?"

Kawasaki slung her bag and her grocery bag, and said something like 'Heave-ho', before bending down to pick up Keika. During this time, something underneath Kawasaki's skirt flashed before my eyes. I tried to avert my eyes with all my power. Seems to be something with a black lace, but I definitely did not see anything.

"Well then, good bye."

"Ha-chan, byebye!"

Kawasaki lowered her head slightly in farewell, and Keika, who was now at Kawasaki's chest bade me farewell as well.

".....Careful on the road."

I called out to the two of them who were walking on the path that would lead to home, and watched their retreating figures getting smaller and smaller in the distance.

There was no wind and clouds, and the winter night sky was clear. However, it incited coldness as well. The two of them clung to each other tightly, and thus, they probably wouldn't feel it.

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Returning to the cooking room, I noticed that there were no longer any sounds of anyone cooking. Everyone was eating their own confectionaries and drinking tea, chit-chatting away happily.

This confectionary-making event that was before Valentine's Day has ended. What was left, was to pass the remaining time away and formally bring this event to a close.

I walked towards my seat where I had placed my bag. Yukinoshita was there as well. She prepared the tea pot and black tea gracefully. The kitchen table was equipped with a gas burner that was currently heating up the kettle, and now, the water seemed to have boiled. Yukinoshita poured some water out from the kettle and she prepared to make tea.

What was beside it, was not those usually seen tea cups or mugs, but paper cups instead. There was no need to trouble her to bring those here anyway.

Yukinoshita poured the black tea into the paper cup, and after preparing three portions, sat back down again. Then, she noticed me walking towards her, and called out to me.

"Ara, seems like you worked hard."

"I didn't do anything worthy of that."

As I answered her I sat down, and Yukinoshita swiftly brought paper cup in front of me. Her eyes had a teasing edge to them.

"Is that so? Contrary to what you say, you seem to be pretty busy."

"Busy?"

Was that because of chocolates? That's right, chocolates and maka was really effective in reducing one's fatigue. Come to think of it, the fact that I was moving quickly from place to place wasn't exactly wrong, so it was indeed hard for me to deny what she had said. [41]

"Seems like you can get some rest at last."

Saying that, she took a sip of black tea. Following her, I blew on the black tea and took a sip to taste it as well.

The feeling was different from when I used a normal tea-cup and I couldn't get used to it, furthermore, because the heat would be directly transmitted to your hand, the speed at which I drank tea would also be slowed. Even so, it was still enough to warm up my body that had grown cold from the frost outside. After drinking a few mouthfuls, I let out a contented sigh.

"You worked hard as well."

"Yes. That's correct. I really worked hard."

With that, Yukinoshita's eyes looked in the direction of the oven. Following her gaze, I saw Yuigahama all by herself squatting down in front of the oven, resting her chin in her hands. The faint light coming out from the oven illuminated her white cheeks.

Reflected in the glass door was the sight of her tightly-sealed lips as well as concealed eyes. She seemed to be concerned over how her cookies would turn out and her back that appeared to be curled up like a ball seemed to suggest her unease as well. The sweets or cookies in other ovens were already baked but Yuigahama paid no attention to them. She continued staring silently at her own cookies being baked.

That was probably Yuigahama was the absolute last person to put her cookies into the oven. The others

were already celebrating away with their finished cookies in hand. Watching the crowd celebrate, it wouldn't be too far-fetched to suggest that the event this time was a huge success. Yukinoshita, who was sitting opposite me, suddenly had a tranquil expression.

".....This is a nice event, isn't it?"

At the center of this event was both Isshiki and Yukinoshita. To them, this was probably deeply emotive. There was a warm look in her eyes as she surveyed the cooking room. Following her gaze, all I could see was the sight of various people jumbled together doing whatever they wanted.

"..... Well, I don't really get this event though."

"I agree."

I told her my honest thoughts about this event and Yukinoshita covered her mouth with her hands as she laughed. Then, she straightened her back all of a sudden, and bit by bit, began to weave together a sentence.

"However, I am contented. I didn't think that I would have the chance to make cookies with Yuigahama again..... It's all thanks to you."

Yukinoshita smiled slightly as she tilted her head, and snuck a glance at my face. Feeling somewhat embarrassed, I turned my face away quickly, and uttered out a reply in a fluster.

"I didn't do anything. In fact, it is because Yuigahama is that sort of person that today became like this."

Having said that, I felt a surprising sense of satisfaction. Come to think of it, the only reason that we can be like this today is mostly thanks to Yuigahama's existence. If she had never existed, then probably, nothing would've ever begun. This was surely something that I didn't have to put it in words. I was pretty sure that Yukinoshita felt the same as well.

".....Indeed. It's because Yuigahama is that sort of person that we could become friends."

Her tone was a nostalgic one and she seemed to be looking at some faraway place as she spoke. Although her words seemed to be directed at me, it seemed like she actually intended it for someone faraway in the distance to hear. However, as expected, she was indeed talking to me, as her gaze returned back to me.

"Ah yes. Here. If you will."

She said it all of a sudden as though a thought had just crossed her mind. She reached out her hand for the cooking table opposite her, and took from it 2 beautifully wrapped bags of cookies.

"You made some as well?"

"Yes, since I had to have a sample for others to model after. Can you please give this to Komachi-san as well?"

I took from her two bags, each tied with a different colored ribbon.

"Ah, Komachi would be delighted. Thanks."

Since I wasn't one who often received this sort of thing, I couldn't help but be embarrassed, and thus, unable to offer her a better word of thanks. In response, Yukinoshita shook her head silently, indicating that it was no trouble at all. I locked eyes with Yukinoshita in this matter and being somewhat embarrassed by it, dropped my gaze to my hands. The two cellophane bags in my hands made a crunching noise.

And then, together with that crunching noise, I heard a miserable wail ring out. Looking in the direction of

the noise, I could see Yuigahama in front of the oven, apparently in a state of distress.

"I am going to have a look."

She sighed somewhat tiredly, then got up from her seat and walked towards Yuigahama. I watched the two of them from afar, and it would appear that somehow, Yuigahama's cookies had ended up unsatisfactorily.

Putting on her mittens, Yuigahama pulled out the tray, and as she whined to Yukinoshita in between sniffs, came walking towards me. Yukinoshita who was beside her, appeared greatly perplexed.

"Seeing the state of it, I am trying to figure out what exactly you did to make it become like that....."

"S, sorry, it's like, you know, I thought that just one flavor wasn't enough, so I added just a little bit more....."

Yuigahama went about explaining her actions to Yukinoshita, who had her fingers pressed to her temple, as though having some sort of headache. What came towards me appeared to be a tray of unevenly baked cookie-ish..... thing. No way, this is a cookie right? Although I don't have the confidence to really believe it.

"Anyway, we have to determine the reason for your failure. What on earth did you add to it?....."

Yukinoshita reached out her hand for the cookie-ish thing and was promptly stopped by Yuigahama.

"N, no no! You mustn't! It mustn't be given to anyone!"

Seeing her acting so frantic, I felt terrified as well.

I shuddered as I commented, "What, on earth did you make..... Some dangerous drug?"

To which, Yuigahama immediately retorted, "It's, it's not that dangerous to that extent! I, I think....."

However, as the bizarrely-shaped items came into my view, that voice quickly became quieter and quieter. With a depressed moan, Yuigahama hung her head dejectedly. Seizing the opportunity at that instant, Yukinoshita reached out for the cookies and took a bite out of it. Then, she immediately pulled a face.

"Ah!!! I said you can't have one!"

Yuigahama wailed, looking ready to burst into tears, and grabbed Yukinoshita's hand belatedly. However, Yukinoshita's response was slow. She was swayed to and fro by Yuigahama, and closed her eyes for just a short moment. Oh, was it really that bad?.....

As I trembled in fear for her, Yukinoshita mumbled in a small voice, "I see."

".....Yuigahama-san, do you have time, after this?"

"Eh? Ah, yes..... I have, but....."

Having been asked by Yukinoshita with such a serious expression, Yuigahama looked troubled as she gave her reply. Thereupon, Yukinoshita grabbed the hand that was holding her tightly back. Then, she smiled brightly.

"Can you accompany me for a while?"

"O, okay..... I am fine with that but, somehow, Yukinon looks so scary....."

Yuigahama faltered in her reply at Yukinoshita's smile. Oh, why is it that even I am feeling scared now?.....?

Did something invoke Yukinoshita's wrath? The things that would invoke the normally gentle Yukinoshita's wrath would be things like cats and Pan-san as well as the old wounds incurred during girls' politics in the past..... Hey, there is a lot of things that could provoke her. Come to think of it, this girl isn't even gentle in the first place!

Anyway, I had no idea what she planned to do to Yuigahama after this. The mood right now seemed to be one whereby she will probably get called out to the back of the school building and then, there will be some broken glass windows if I just leave this matter alone. Anyway, I thought that I should do something to stop it and with a jump, stood up from my chair.

"Oi, oi, Yukinoshita. Calm yourself, what's gotten into you....."

"Something unexpected. And, it's not like I am going to do anything strange."

I muttered in a shaky voice, "You can't exact your vengeance on her! Can't we just settle this amicably....."

Hearing me, Yukinoshita pouted, looking displeased. Then, she placed a finger to her lips, and closed one of her eyes.

"Didn't I say it before?I will do what I can do."

And on that note, Yukinoshita smiled, a mischievous feminine smile.

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What was left behind after a festival was loneliness. It was not an exception for this pre-Valentine's Day event held in this cooking room. After Isshiki completed her simple concluding statement, everyone began to pack-up and left in groups of two and threes. Because this event happened so suddenly, everyone was really tired and there was no one who had the strength in them to suggest going to an after-party. Everyone began to go home.

Amongst these people, I could see Yukinoshita pulling Yuigahama along with her. She was probably going to stay the night at Yukinoshita's apartment. Under this cold sky, I saddled onto my bike and quickly cycled home.

After wolfing down my dinner, all I wanted to do with to lie down in the kotatsu and do nothing. Right now, only Kamakura and I were in the living room. Also, all Kamakura have been doing was lying on the quilt coverlet of the kotatsu in a ball and sleeping. The only one awake was me.

The door opened with a clatter, disturbing the quietness of the living room. Glancing up briefly, I saw Komachi enter, dressed in her pajamas and nightcap.

"You still awake?"

"Yes. I was going to sleep but, before that....."

Then, Komachi proceed to walk to the kitchen.

"That's fine, but sleep early."

"Okay."

Although my heart was uneasy, as I had wanted to ask her whether it was really all right to be still awake at this hour given that she had her examinations tomorrow, all she did was to give me a carefree reply of okay. Then, the sound of fire being lit could be heard from the stove.

As I was thinking about whether she was cooking something to eat, I heard her looking for something from

the racks. As I thought about whether her inability to sleep was caused by hunger, she had already walked back to the kotatsu.

"Here, take this."

"Un, ah, thank you."

Komachi gave me a can of MAX coffee. I took it from her and felt some warmth in it. Seems like she had heated it up by placing it in a tin with hot water. The girl sure is amazing..... Warming max coffee was considered high level to the residents of Chiba.

"Onii-chan, your legs are in the way."

Saying that, she kicked my feet aside as she snuggled into the kotatsu. Then, the two of us started sipping our hot coffee.

Komachi sighed contentedly.

".....Tomorrow's the day."

"Yes. Hurry up and sleep when you are done drinking this. After all, this is the day before your exams."

Well, you could get a good sleep if you drink a can of warm coffee. Will this can of coffee be appraised as a medicinal item in future? My heart was beating quickly. Heh heh, good effect. If one were to say this and drink it at the same time, then one could feel this sort of unnatural feeling amidst the unnatural sweetness. I highly recommend everyone to do the same.

However, this didn't seem to be what Komachi was thinking of.

".....Not that, it's Valentine. As a guy, shouldn't you be all excited and thrilled?"

She sighed, her face was one of surprise.

To think that she was thinking about this one day before her exams..... The princess of this household sure had guts. Seems like there was no need for me to ask her, "If she was ready". Well, being the reasonably timid Onii-chan that I am, I made some prayers to the gods in the form of, "Cureppu Rapapa! [42] For Komachi's pass!"

"I definitely won't be like that. You could say that my mind is only thinking about Komachi now."

Komachi gave a wry smile in response.

"That's because Onii-chan pampers Komachi too much. Gross. It would be better to pamper yourself in this manner."

"I am already pampering myself."

"That's not what I meant. No, you are obviously pampering yourself with all that sugar."

I continued to sip my coffee as I spoke. Komachi started laughing all of a sudden.Wait, did she just say some terrible things about me casually? If you go around calling your brother gross, I might really just do something gross to you. Hence, I smacked my hands against the kotatsu, behaving like a spoiled child and making a fuss. I really am gross.

"Right, speaking of sweet things. Here, this is from Yukinoshita."

I pulled my bag towards me, having just remembered the chocolates that she gave. From it, I took out the bag that I had gotten from Yukinoshita and gave it to Komachi. Then, Komachi's face shone brightly.

"Oh! This is from Yukino-san!"

"But even so, Komachi-chan. What about Onii-chan? You aren't going to give him?"

"I have already given you something equivalent to that."

The Komachi who was brimming with joy up until just now was now staring at me, motioning with her chin at the MAX coffee. No, no, this was nothing like it. This wasn't even anything like coffee. I couldn't feel the love, the love.

".....Komachi, do you like your Onii-chan?"

"Nope."

Komachi replied instantly with a laughter of indifference. Woo, woo, unintentionally, I started whimpering. So mean.....

"Hurry up and give me chocolates....."

Seeing me break down in tears, Komachi sighed with frustration, crawled out of the kotatsu and went somewhere.

Seems like she couldn't take it any more..... Just as I lay down on the kotatsu in despair, Komachi came running back to the kotatsu.

"Here."

Then, she thrust herself onto my back and passed me something.

I turned my head, and that thing was a beautifully wrapped chocolate.

".....What's this, for me?"

"Well, it's just something simple. Since you asked for it....."

Komachi seemed sort of unhappy as she answered me. I hugged this box of chocolate tightly, and kept repeating my thanks as my hot tears streamed down. She specially prepared this for me, right. My sister was really amazing.....

Seeing me bawling, Komachi had a shocked expression on her face as she gave a bitter smile.

"I would be really happy if you could say those willful words to someone else other than me."

"Who else but you can I speak these embarrassing words to.....? Come to think of it, there's no value in receiving anything that was given only when they were asked."

The instant I said that, Komachi glared at me.

"Then by that logic, my chocolate is worthless?"

".....N, no..... It's not like that? Komachi's chocolate is different. It's special. Komachi is the cutest and the very best."

"You really are not being serious about this, you trash of a brother."

Komachi sighed deeply with a fed up expression, mouthing out the words, "Uwa-"

".....However, if someone like you who isn't good at deception, can accept my chocolate, I guess I am still a little happy about that."

Komachi said so with a much more mature smile than usual. She placed her chin on her hands as she lay down in the kotatsu, tilted her head, and she looked at me directly, her gaze ever so warm. Feeling somewhat embarrassed to be at the receiving end of such a warm gaze and inhaled rapidly before averting my eyes. Then, perhaps owing to her embarrassment as well, she laughed in a most unnatural way.

"Say, was that high in Komachi points just now?"

"No, if you are referring to just now, then that was really low in points."

I gulped down the last of the sweet lukewarm coffee, my face a bitter expression. This coffee was so sweet that my mouth had slackened from drinking it.

"Then, I guess I should go sleep now."

"Oh, go and sleep then."

Komachi took the empty cans and proceeded to throw them in the rubbish bin in the kitchen. When Komachi walked to the doorway, Kamakura who had awoken, followed her in small steps from behind.

"Oh, Ka-kun. Let's sleep together?"

Kamakura did not meow in response, but rubbed its head against Komachi's feet. Komachi gave a small giggle in satisfaction when she saw that, and pulled Kamakura up for a hug and placed her hand on the door.

I called out from behind her.

"Komachi."

"What?"

As she turned her body to face me, one of her hand rested on the door knob.

"I will be rooting for you. Good night."

"Un. Thank you. I will do my best. Good night."

Although Komachi didn't say much, her smile was there. She picked Kamakura up again, and returned to her room.

I watched her leave and then snuck a glance at the bag that I'd pulled over. From where I was, I could make out the wrapping of both of their chocolate.

Opening the cellophane bag in my hands deftly, I tossed one of the chocolate into my mouth and tossed myself down onto the floor yet again.

I closed my eyes so as to avoid the dazzling illumination. The house was dark, quiet and cold.

The chocolate that was in my mouth, melted and disappeared in my mouth like falling snow, giving me the sensation of something being lost.

What should have been sweet, now left a slightly bitter aftertaste in my mouth.

INTERLUDE

Yukinoshita's recipe

Placing wheat flour, sugar and chocolate on the weighing scales.

Properly arranging all those that have been weighed.

To decide on the correct amount of time, to perfectly build up a list of established procedures.

In order for it to not go wrong, so that there will be no mistakes.

However, there is just one thing, there are lies mixed into it.

For what the truth is worth, there is a spoonful of lies.

As I baked them one by one, towards the weak looking portions, gracefully, without leaving a gap or an uneven surface, I coat it with a layer of bitter chocolate.

From the view here, the finely powdered sugar sparkled beautifully like snow.

The sugar falling down as I sprinkle them was just like the snow.

They could probably cover up and hide just about everything.

I think it's cowardly.

I'd probably even accepted this cowardly side of me already.

She is. My friend.

Knowing this and yet trying to hide it, I think I am probably trying to push my feelings of guilt onto her.

I am probably still clinging on to those sweet things.

However, because there are still things that I desire.

That's why, I will do the things that I can do.

I can only do it up till this point, the rest depends on you.

Telling her this, I turn around to face her.

And with that, I began to recall my initial conversation with her.

Just like that time too, it was just the two of us.

What kind of conversation it was, with the exception of the two of us, there was no one else, not even him, who knows it.

Yet, she was just like that time; I could see an uneasy expression on her.

To try and ease her uneasiness, I spoke to her in as gentle a tone as possible.

It's alright as long as you can smile even more brightly than during that time.

"The next time, the handmade cookies, we are going to give it right?"

Surely, this is the correct form.

Therefore, this is my recipe.

Yui's recipe

Putting the sugar little by little with trembling hands.

Even if the product doesn't come out nicely, it's fine.

It would be the best if it could come out cutely though.

But, it probably won't end up being like that.

Because there's a lot of things mixed into it.

I tried to collect just the sweet things, just the cute things and only the things that you like.

Just as I thought, it can't be done.

Chiseling here, cutting there, an unevenness all around. Sweet and bitter.

I am not particularly smart or anything. I've probably always been this way.

That's why, there's no way I can do it perfectly.

I don't know what is "correct". This is definitely not the right way to do it however.

Therefore, I've always been putting in some sort of subtle seasoning that only I know.

So as to not let anyone know. So as to not let him know.

Milk and condensed milk. Also, a little of bitter coffee.

Towards that pure white cream, mixing a little of black bit by bit.

The original whiteness of it can no longer be restored.

No matter how diluted it is, how much I add, he will surely remember the bitterness.

It's unfair, for both me and her.

However, it's because of love that this unfairness even arose.

I want to keep loving you. Both me and my friend.

Calling out, looking up. My eyes catches hold of the serious expression and I flinch, just a little.

Just like that time, I wonder if it was done nicely.

Totally different from me, not one bit of me bears any resemblance.

That's why I am attracted to you and rapidly fall in love with you

At the very beginning when I first talked to you, I was so nervous that I could barely converse.

Probably, the same was true for the other as well.

Though I want to give a smile that was more earnest than always, I don't think I have the confidence to even smile like I usually do.

However, probably, the way in which both she and I smiled were likely to be the same.

".....Un. I will try to do it, in my own way. Thank you."

Whether it's correct or not I do not know. However, this will be my recipe.

Chapter 8

[Perhaps what has been told, is his and her, and also her another story]

That day, an unusual snow fell. It does not usually snow in Chiba. The wet clouds that flow forth from the Sea of Japan were obstructed by the many mountain ranges that form the back bone of Honshu. Thus, when the snow does fall, the dry winds from the side of the Pacific that normally accompanies it will assail the particularly flat plains of Chiba. However, it can occasionally snow at an odd timing in this way. In my 17 years of experience, I have encountered snowstorms occurring at the start of the New Year, the Coming of Age day [43], or suddenly at the end of March. The timing could not be more unfortunate, as it coincides with Komachi's school entrance exam. Fortunately enough, the wind was not blowing.

The flower petals were fluttering about in the dancing snow.

Clad in her usual school uniform with her coat and mufflers, she wore her gloves and her feet was decked out in a pair of leather boots. She was more than well-prepared as she set off from the doorway. It was still far from her exam time, but it was probably for the best, owing to the traffic congestion that I fear will probably occur.

"Do you have the entrance exam label? What about your eraser, handkerchief and pentagonal pencil?" [44] This pentagonal pencil was amongst one of the several goods bought by our dad during our shrine visit to the Shrine to pray for her entrance exam's success.

A cross sectional view of the pencil reveals its pentagonal shape. Well, with the exception of that, it is otherwise a normal pencil. To be frank, I thought that an ordinary pencil would be just as easy to write with. After all, the sides of the pentagonal pencils of test takers were written with A - E, or 1 - 5 or otherwise ア - ア and some form of notation. Each time you come across a multiple-choice question that you do not know, you will be praying to the pencil that will determine your life. Rather, I think it would be better to say that the pencil was created for the sake of determining your life.

Komachi took one last brief glance at her bag, and gave an energetic nod. With that, she tilted her umbrella and gave a salute.

"I'm set! Well then, Onii-chan, I will be on my way now!"

"Oh, off you go then. Watch your step."

"Okay. Brrrrr, it's cold. Sin, cosine, tangent... Ah, doesn't seem to be tested."

Shivering, she seemed to be humming a tune whilst blurting out something as she trudged along steadily. As I sent her off, there was that small bit of anxiety in me. She'll probably be all right. I wonder if too much studying was the cause of this strange high-spiritedness in her...

In any case, it was finally time to welcome the day of the entrance exams. After having come this way, there was nothing left to do but to struggle. Though the actual time for it has not arrived, struggling and writhing as we approached the deadline for the exams has become a norm in this world.

Speaking of things that I could do, there was nothing left I could do but to offer my prayers, and leave it up to the Heavens.

The low-hanging massive clouds was a sign that clear weather was not going to be coming soon, just the sound of heavy snowfall with the white snow falling from the sky. It seems like it was going to snow the whole day long.

I shivered at the cold, and started to walk back to my house. At that time, once again, I shivered as I walked.

I reached into my pocket to discover the source of the vibration, to find out that it was an incoming call. The display indicated that it was from [Yui]. Yuigahama. From the time this contact was first entered, it has not changed, and it has stayed that way ever since.

I was troubled for several seconds over whether I should pick up the call. However, the call continued on uninterrupted and my hand phone continued on vibrating. Giving up, I pushed the Answer button and held it gently to my ear.

"..... Hello"

The moment I answered the phone, I could hear the sound of hesitant breathing from the mouthpiece.

"Hikki? Um, you know..... shall we, go on a date?"

".....Huh?"

What she just said to me far exceeded my imagination. I was left dumbstruck by her whilst a high pitched hiss escaped from the side of my mouth.

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Since receiving the phone call, I slowly began my preparations to leave. Looking out from the window, I saw that the sun had already risen past the middle point. The snow that had been falling in the morning, had more or less stopped.

I took a glance at the traffic information on my smartphone just in case. It seemed that the congestion on the route I am planning to take was easing up now. At least, there wasn't any need for me to worry about reaching the meeting place on time now.

In practice, the Kanto transportation network was really pathetic when dealing with snow. This was especially so in Chiba Prefecture, thanks to the Edo River and the Tone River that surround the borders of Chiba prefecture. Since having a bridge over them was not possible, this island is seriously going to become a lonely island. At this rate, there was the risk that would be a proclamation of the establishment of the [Independent state of Chiba]. Even when I went outside, the weather looked the same as always, the asphalt was becoming frosty owing to the snow that had started to accumulate.

The extent of snowfall was still not deep enough to trip me up, but it was easy to slip on it due to its sherbet-like condition. [45] I walked slowly on the road to the bus stop whilst following the tracks made by car wheels and footprints. It took a while to transfer from the bus to the train. One could view the ocean from the train's windows. From the window, I could see the snow falling lightly, drifting from the right to the left. The sun was at a great height, and shone through the grey cloudy sky, illuminating it with a shade of white.

The routes along the coasts were somewhat crowded. This was not just due to the weather. That route was usually crowded whenever there was an event. For example, at the Makuhari Messe[46], there could be a Game Show or a Motor Show, or a big site where the Comic Market(See: Comiket) resides, or a live event at the Shin-Kiba station. It was at those times whereby it would be particularly congested.

Above all, one station along this route, was home to Japan's grandest attraction. It was an establishment known as the Tokyo Disney Resort, or TDR in short.

Especially since today was Valentine's Day.

Even though it was snowing, it still appeared to be receiving a great deal of customers. I pricked up my ears to listen to the conversation between the couples that were on the same train as me. What's up with them being all romantic? They look like they even welcome this snowfall!

Indeed, for a Valentine's Day date, I guess it was an undisputedly good situation to be in.

Soon, in the direction of the train's movement, white plumes of smoke from a volcano [47] came into view. An announcement inside the train informed the passengers that the train would be stopping at the next station, and the train began to slowly decelerate.

With a dull shake, the train came to a halt. The door opened with a hissing sound. The cold air and the snow blew into the compartment, and then the couples that had boarded before me disembarked. Then, the doors closed and a bell echoed. The characteristic "Disney" music of the train station was used as the melody for the train's departure.

As I listened to it, I alighted from the train.

At one time or another, I had the vague notion that one day or another, we would surely visit this place together. That unspoken promise shall finally be carried out.

I recalled the phone call from this morning. It was not out of bewilderment nor surprise that I did not reject the unexpected words that came out from her mouth. In the first place, the one who had first invited her was me. This was just a continuation of what I have had always procrastinated.

I retightened my muffler, trying to psych myself up. I hurried on forth to the transfer station, that is the Resort land, or in other words, the Tokyo Disney Land station, where they had a monorail that went around the entire theme park.

That was the meeting place that Yuigahama had designated.

The commercial establishments nearby Maihama station, had put up heart-shaped monuments and other items which give off a snow-like image for this season. This, along with the flashing illuminations helped to liven up the atmosphere for Valentine's Day. Whilst I took all this in, I began searching for the meeting place.

"Hikki!"

She had probably been on the train before me. Yuigahama, who had seen me walking by, called out to me, and slowly waved the light-pink umbrella in her hand. Nodding in reply to her, I began to jog slowly towards her.

"Sorry, was I late?"

"Not at all, I came a little early, that's all."

As she said it, Yuigahama laughed shyly, gave her fluffy woolen hat a light clap and fidgeted about with it. She was clad in a beige coat as well as a long sweater. A moderately long muffler was wrapped about the base of her neck and she was wearing mittens as well. It would seem like she was totally prepared for the cold weather. However, it seemed like she had not worn any leggings, and the mini-skirt she wore made it look like she would be rather cold. On that note, she wore some sort of fluffy short boots as well, maybe to achieve some sort of equilibrium between cold and warmth.

Anyway, we met each other without much issue. All that was left was the timing to start talking to her. Taking a glance at her, she was twisting and turning her body, seemingly growing restless from waiting. She looked unable to calm herself down.

If one thought about the fact that it was just the two of us who came here on this day, it wouldn't seem entirely unreasonable to suggest that the silence that ensued was as though I was telling her, "Hey, you are really into the Valentine Day mood!" I mean, I was pretty much at my limit as well.

However, I was the one who had suggested going someplace to thank her. Thus, it was I who should be saying something right now.

Having decided as such, I looked directly at Yuigahama's face, albeit hesitantly, and averted my eyes somewhat. I think that saying what I wanted to say right now was really awkward, and no smooth words would come out from me. In some way or another, after countless rounds of clearing my throat, I managed to wring those words out of my mouth.

".....Then, let's go."

"Okay!"

With those stupid sounding words and her energetic reply of affirmation, the thank-you that I spoke of, and the date that she spoke of, began.

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From Maihama station to Disney Sea, there is a need to transfer to the dedicated monorail. The monorail was the color of Disney, and the BGM within the monorail was the same old Disney song each time. The display inside the monorail too, showcased all the Disney Land characters as well. Looking at the characters, Yuigahama let out an exclamation of wonder. She walked from one end of the carriage to another, looking here and there.

"This train is amazing! You totally can get the Disney vibe from this!"

"It's not a train per se, it's a monorail."

".....Mono, rail?"

Yuigahama cocked her head, looking like this was the first time she had heard of this word. That cherubic like action of hers was indeed cute, but other than that, it was completely worrying!

".....Could it be, that you don't know about this thing called the monorail?"

I asked her timidly, to which Yuigahama balled her hands into a fist.

"I, I know! But, it's not suspended."

However, she didn't seem to have much confidence when she said the last bit of her sentence. Well, I guess for Chiba citizens that were used to seeing the suspended type, it can be kind of unsatisfying to not be able to savor the feeling of flying through the air. [48]

The monorail rumbled on, shaking me as I thought about all these. Outside the window, the scenery of Disneyland flew past us.

"Oh."

Seeing the scenery, I couldn't help but mumble to myself. Thereupon, Yuigahama, who was beside me, took

a look outside the window as well, and naturally, saw what I saw. No matter how little interest I had originally, I became quite excited upon seeing the white castle as well as the smoke from the active volcano attraction.

"Hey, hey, which ride should we start on first?"

"Calm down. There are very few attractions in Disney Sea that are flashy, which means that those rides easily attract people. First, we should go grab their Fast Pass before we decide on which other rides to queue for."

"Why the heck is it so detailed?!"

"Naturally. For me, I know just about anywhere is Chiba."

"Oh, that sounds kind of amazing,But, Hikki, do you come here that often?!"

Yuigahama's expression took a complete change from the admiring one just now, and as though feeling some sort of unease, Yuigahama tilted her head slightly, her fringe flowing along with that action. Seeing the innocent look that she was now giving me, I couldn't calm myself down. Still, I managed to look away, and scratched my cheek.

"Well, you know it's like how they say, that Tokyo people have to go to see the Tokyo Tower. That sort of thing."

"I know, but it still seems overly-detailed!"

In the span of time that we were talking, the monorail had soon arrived at our destination, the Disney Sea station. In the instant that we got off from the platform, we were welcomed passionately like we just stepped foot in a Chinese restaurant. [49]

As we walked from the station to the entrance gate, the station staff was always waving at us with shouts of "Have a good trip!" Yuigahama waved back at them, answering them with cries of "I'll see you later!" Right, totally expected of the kingdom of dreams and magic. In this pragmatic world, if you were to greet someone as you walked past them, you would be instantly deemed a suspicious character. This is so totally the kingdom of dreams and magic! A land where the accepted norm don't apply.

The more I thought about it, the more correct I thought my logic was. We bought the tickets and passing through the gate, found ourselves in a huge open space. An exclamation escaped me before I could stop it.

From here on forth, it was a scenery that departed from reality, an entire world that was different from the norm awaited us. Facing the entrance gate directly, was a giant heart-shaped objet d'art and statue of characters clasping hands. In addition to that, the illumination that colored the area flashed on and off, lighting up the area.

The main highlight however, was the existence of the decorated door to the main street that stretched all the way from the open space to the park. The buildings that were constructed with Italian-style bricks that made it resemble Venetia or some part of Europe made the area exude an exotic feel.

Passing through the door, one could just manage to get a peek at the towering volcano in the distance as well as the luxury guest ship that was currently docked at the harbor. It was as though we were in a frame of a film. It made me feel as though it would be right here where our stories would begin.

Taking in all this sight, against my will, it made me all the more aware that we would be spending the day here, having fun at Disney Sea. If even I was feeling this way, then Yuigahama would definitely be feeling the same way too. Yuigahama tugged at my arm several times, her eyes shining and her face beaming.

"Hikki! Picture! Take!"

“O, okay. Why are you speaking broken Japanese by the way.....”

Right now, she was speaking with a similar intonation to that character that goes, “I, YOU, EAT” [50]

Alright, though we were at the gate, we had to wait our turn for an opportunity to take a photo there, since it was a very popular photo taking spot that could capture the buildings and volcano. Yuigahama stood next to me peremptorily. Naturally, in this sort of mood, I couldn't just reject her, and so, I have no choice but to let her. I mean, I can't bring myself to do it when I think about the Disney mania that she would exhibit when she comes to Disney Sea alone. In English, that would be no-ninja! [51]

Standing next to Yuigahama, I felt awkward and I tried to hide this awkwardness through these stupid thoughts. Soon, our turn came.

We stood in front of the camera. The sense of distance between us was per the usual. We made a little space between us, as though there was some invisible being there.

Since it was the park's staff who was taking the photos, I didn't have to be the one who took it. Somehow, there was a momentary sense of relief just by thinking about this.

With a broad smile, the staff member brought his hands together and asked, “Could you two please move just a little bit closer?”

“Ah, okay.....”

After answering, Yuigahama slowly took half a step towards me. However, the staff member kept up his smile and without a word, continued gesturing with his hand for us to move closer.

“I, I think that a little bit closer would be better.....”

As she said so, she looked uneasily at me. Then, I thought that I could hear the restlessness of the people behind us who were waiting their turn to take the photo.

What crazy pressure. It was not until now that I could feel the heavy pressure of people seemingly saying, “Can't you hurry up?” Such pressure from the looks of everyone. Indeed....., they were all looking in my direction.

Although I didn't cave in to the pressure exerted by their gazes and stiff smiles, I took half a step, just half a step, towards Yuigahama.

Thereupon, the staff member finally began to prepare the camera. The time taken for the shutter could be considered negligible. However, it felt unusually long for me, and I couldn't calm myself down at all.

“Okay, I am going to take it now!”

In the instant that the staff member said so, Yuigahama tugged strongly at my muffler. Caught off-guard by her surprise attack, I stumbled and before I knew it, I had my hand on Yuigahama's shoulders. This action brought me closer to her face. I could see a huge smile on her face, as though praising herself for the huge success of her little mischief.

At that instant, the sound of the shutter went off.

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We left the photo-taking queue and passed through the streets of American Waterfront. Then we managed to obtain the first fast pass of the popular attraction, Tower of terror. As we strolled along the coastland path that looked onto Tokyo Bay, we went on to take several rides that didn't seem to have many people

queueing up for them. The distance between me and Yuigahama did not shorten.

Probably, that was because we were already too close just now. I think, that this act of trying to keep a distance was probably a reaction to just now on the part of my self-consciousness. I mean, the photo just now, was really bad news..... It's definitely a photo of me looking at Yuigahama with a stupid look on my face. As I writhed in embarrassment, I looked at Yuigahama, who had gone on somewhat ahead of me, reproachfully.

However, Yuigahama didn't seem to really care about what she did just now, and was now opening a pamphlet, and didn't so much as look back.

"Where, shall we go next?"

At long last, she finally turned her head. Her head was a little red, probably from the coldness of the sea wind. She watched me uneasily with puppy-like eyes, looking quite concerned about me. Recognizing that, I sighed, a white breath escaping from my lips.

.....All right, let's do this properly. I blew onto my bare palms, trying to psyche myself up. Today, coming here, this should be considered a thank you to her for treating my wound the previous time. That should be the case, but right now, letting this awkward mood surface was totally the opposite of what I'd wanted to achieve.

First, let's have a conversation. A conversation. If this place aren't going to liven things up, that I would have to be the one to think of various topics so as not to bore her, or maybe think of some witty, intellectual jokes!

"Well, wouldn't somewhere warm be nice? We are by the coastline so it's kind of cold (samuishi). Get it? Cold (Samuishi), cold (samuishi)? Cold sea (Samui shi)"

"I, I see. It is kind of cold."

Yuigahama laughed awkwardly at my lame joke and whilst murmuring about a warm place under her breath, took yet another glance at her pamphlet.

Holding a conversation..... I can't do it!

Come to think of it, trying to create a rich topic or witty conversation had always been my absolute worst area. In fact, I don't even think I have to think to know that.

In fact, it was how Yuigahama, with her kindness, had purposely decided to reply me that made it all the more painful..... If it was any other person, they would probably just be like, "Hah?" and stare at me oppressively. The only one who would burst into laughter was probably only Hiratsuka-sensei..... As my guilty conscience ran amok in my mind, causing me to think, "And this is Hachiman-san, who has gone and done it yet again.....", my eyes suddenly found themselves staring at a stand.

"Hang on, ignore what I said just now."

"Eh? Where are we going?"

I waved my hands lightly to Yuigahama, to tell her to stop chasing after me, and then proceeded to make a sprint towards the store. Then, making my order quickly, I obtained what I wanted and quickly rushed back.

"It's cold that's why I think this will be good."

Saying it, I presented her with what I'd bought. Yuigahama cocked her head in bewilderment, and took it. She looked at it with a confused, blank face as she held it in her hand.

Using both of her mitten-clad hands, she was now clutching a steaming hot Eukiwa Bun. [52] Yuigahama looked at it fixedly, blowing on it every now and then.

"It's strange. Hikki being thoughtful is very strange. I mean, that joke you made just now was really lame. To be honest, it really turned me off."

"That might be true but still....."

Seeing Yuigahama giggle away happily, I couldn't help but give a wry smile.Eh, hang on? She didn't say anything mean at all just now? Well, I guess it couldn't really be helped that she would say something like that. After all, I had decided to be thoughtful.

".....I was worried, that's why I did what I did."

The words that sounded like a complaint came rushing out of my mouth, and Yuigahama blinked several times upon hearing it. Then, Yuigahama puffed out her chest proudly.

".....I see, you were worried huh?"

"Somewhat I guess....."

She stared intently at me and I looked away. I was unable to find the right words to continue, and so I merely decided to take a bite out of the Eukiwa bun. As though feeling satisfied from seeing me do that, Yuigahama followed me and took a bite out of hers as well. Neither of us exchanged any words in particular. All we did was to savor the Eukiwa buns as we walked. Once in a while, we would look at each other, as if to reaffirm how delicious the buns were.

Seeing her expression, I felt relieved. No, seriously, for the time being, in this current world, treating girls to prawns or avocados or pasta would be a safe bet. Furthermore, not saying anything whilst one was eating wouldn't be considered strange at all. Man! Hachiman, you genius! I am really a genius for developing a way to justify two people being silent.

Unexpectedly, this might just be the reason why there were such snack stands everywhere in dating spots like the TDR. If that's the case, I would say that this sort of experiment was kind of a success. Truthfully, as we ingested the food, the mood also began to unravel somewhat and our mouths became greasier too. Yuigahama, who had finished her Eukiwa bun was now wiping her soft lips with her fingertips before letting out a sigh.

"I mean, I was worried as well. Hikki, don't you feel cold since you aren't wearing gloves?"

"I am fine."

Saying so, I thrust my hands into my coat pocket, and ran about, so as to let the coat flap about. Yuigahama made a face at my action.

"If you fall, it can be dangerous. You can die."

"That's too extreme..... What are you, my mom?"

Though she meant it as a joke, but honestly, this girl seemed like she would make a good mother. Right now, Yuigahama looked slightly worried as she tilted her head, and made a troubled face, seemingly thinking of something. Before long, she smacked her mittens together, probably having thought of some great idea.

Yuigahama took off the mitten from her left hand and passed it to me.

"It's fine, really. The problem still won't really be solv....."

“Eh!”

Cutting me off halfway, Yuigahama made a sudden grab for my hand in the coat pocket.

“Maybe, this will be warmer, probably.....”

Her words came out in soft murmurs and she quickly turned her face away. Her face was colored a bright red all the way up to her ears. Are you serious girl? The only people who put their hands in other’s right pockets were those who wish to be accused of pickpocketing or Bump of Chicken..... [53] As expected of someone born in Chiba to be this vocal!

“No, this time, it’s different. Besides, this is somewhat.....”

Yet somehow, I don’t really think it’s different? Walking like this will be difficult. Also, my right hand will have nothing to do. This is definitely dumb, cute, weird and embarrassing..... As I tried to argue vehemently with her over her action, Yuigahama continued putting her hand in my pocket, shook her arm lightly, and began to walk.

It didn’t seem cold anymore. I could feel my own body warming up. It was also at this moment that I grew restless, nervously looking around, being mindful of other people, just like a civet who had gotten lost in a metro area, looking about the unfamiliar surroundings.

However, there was no one in the park who paid us any heed. Everyone was taking in the atmosphere of the Kingdom of dreams and magic, as well as being lost in their own world. Thus, there was no one who took any interest in the affairs of others.

Recognizing this fact, I relaxed myself. This was not an everyday world, because there was no one here who knew about us. For this small moment, this place appeared as ephemeral as a fantasy setting. That is why, for just a little while, I will allow it.

As I kept searching for these reasons like always, I plunged my hand into my right pocket. There wasn’t much space in the pocket and so, her hand and mine made contact. In that moment, I could hear the surreptitious breathing of the person beside me. Our fingers didn’t cross at all, but I could feel a faint warmth enveloping my hand.

However, as though wanting to leave that warmth behind, Yuigahama retracted her left hand and I too, removed my right hand entirely from the pocket as well. I could feel my own reluctance at having to part.

Thereupon, Yuigahama gave a small laugh to try and smooth it over, and moved away from my hand. As I watched her hand start to leave, I reached out and held it on to it tightly.

“Eh.....”

Having her hand gripped so suddenly, Yuigahama was so surprised that she was at a loss for words.

.....Well, if you think about it.

With the cold sea wind blowing, and the temperature of today with the snow falling, as well as the fact that there was still a long way before today ended, it didn’t seem like a good plan to waste our physical strength here. Furthermore, worrying about each other would just tire us out.

“..... Well, because it’s cold, you see.”

“.....Ah! Because it’s cold!”

She looked away to the side as she replied, probably too embarrassed to look at me directly. Then, with a happy smile, she held my hand back in return.

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We walked through the street that was modeled after the scenery in South America's Machu Pichu, Aztec. Along the way, Yuigahama seemed to be in high spirits as she waved my hand about.

"That was amazing just now! It just kept spinning round and round!"

"I know, even right now I still feel myself spinning round and round. Can't even compose myself..... Like, I think I am becoming a blob of butter or something....."

What Yuigahama was talking about was the 360 degrees loop <Raging Spirit> roller coaster ride that we had rode on earlier. Right now, Yuigahama was swinging my hands about, imitating how the roller coaster sped through the loop at high speed. As I tried to stop Yuigahama's hands as though I was controlling a horse, we continued walking along the streets, and before long, we arrived at an area where the Arabian mood could be felt.

Whilst walking down the Arabian like streets that were totally different from your usual everyday street, Yuigahama let out a yawn, either from fatigue from the excessive walking or she was just dazzled by the sights.

"Kyuuu~~"

I yawned as well, having somewhat been tired out too. Walking side by side was not so much a problem. However, holding hands with Yuigahama had taken a greater toll on my emotional strength than I had thought.

Taking a look at the area around me, it would appear that there weren't that many eye-catching attractions. It would be great if we could ride something less thrilling and more relaxing.

Having decided on this, I pointed towards an attraction as we walked by it.

"Next, how about we ride that one?"

The attraction that I was pointing to was the <Sindbad's Storybook Voyage>, an attraction that had a relaxed and slow-paced feel to it. Entering the attraction, I saw that the majority of the people here were families with kids. In other words, this ride was guaranteed to be a slow, carefree leisurely ride!

"Sindbad Sto....."

Yuigahama murmured uncertainly the name of the ride as she looked at the information board. My my, you are really weak in KATAKANA..... I thought that the anime was broadcasted alongside the release of the tankobon for Magi, the adventures of Sindbad.....

Then, Yuigahama suddenly raised her voice, having looked at the waiting time.

"There's only five minutes till the next one! Crap! Hurry!"

Saying so, she pulled my hand along. Though there was only five minutes left, it only took us about two minutes to enter the waiting area for the ride.

It seems that this attraction is one where you ride a giant boat and go on a journey through Sindbad's world. It had a similar feel to the <It's a small world> ride at Disney Land. We were quickly shown to the boat by a female staff in a turn, and the boat began to set off slowly.

The ceiling of the attraction was modeled after the night sky and thus, dark. As the boat moved along, one could hear robots singing in a musical tone. Sindbad was also amongst them, singing with a beautiful voice

effortlessly. I had barely sat there for one minute ever since the ride started, but I was already assailed by drowsiness. This was probably due to the combined effects of the effective heating and the slight rocking of the boat.

I thought to myself, that I was indeed a little tired after all, when I suddenly felt something heavy on my shoulders. Looking sideways, I saw Yuigahama with her eyes closed, napping away. Her long eyelashes hidden somewhat, and a faint smile could be seen. As the boat trudged along, she made a small groan as though detesting its progress, and buried her face in my coat.

This was probably the first time I had ever seen her so calm. I mean, she was a girl whose expression always changes so rapidly. No matter how many times I thought about it, those changes were always so lively, so enjoyable and so cute.

However, right now, I think that it was just simply, a beautiful one.

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Exiting from the super pleasant nap attraction <Sindbad Storybook Voyage>, Yuigahama brought her hands together and bowed her head.

“Sorry! I suddenly got kind of sleepy!”

“Well, it is a ride that makes you want to go to sleep.....”

My own body was falling into a snooze as well, so I had no reason to complain as well.

.....Still, during that 10 minutes on the attraction, I had always been looking at Yuigahama’s sleeping face. When I think about that, I felt that the one who should be apologizing was me instead. Whilst Sindbad might be singing about the compass of his heart [54], my own compass was in a complete disarray. Well, Gahama-san who was now looking downwards as though in complete embarrassment was probably in disarray as well.

In any case, looking at Yuigahama sleep like that, I also understood that she was not in a good condition. Thus, I quickly changed the conversation.

“Not enough sleep?”

Hearing my question, Yuigahama stopped all of a sudden. She fiddled about hesitantly, looking to readjust her backpack. Her expression was somewhat stiff.

“Yea, well, I didn’t really have much sleep.....”

Oh. What exactly did she do last night? Or was she one of those people that can’t sleep the day before a trip? As I considered the possibilities, I continued walking until we arrived at the huge dome that is the <Mermaid Lagoon Theatre> attraction. According to the pamphlet, there were a lot of small attractions and shops within this huge dome.

I walked towards the dome and asked “Shall we take a break?”

Yuigahama knitted her eyebrows in response and said, “Eh, wouldn’t that be kind of a waste? I think it’s better to go for more rides.....”

“I really don’t get it. If you do things slowly amongst the crowd of people who are rushing here and there, don’t you think that would be the grandest form of luxury? Skipping school just to watch 「Iitomo」 and 「Gokigenyou」 would make the shows five times more interesting. [55]

“That is so like you to say stuff like that, Hikki.”

Yuigahama chuckled and acknowledging my views, stood next to me.

The dome completely shut out the wind from the outside and the effective heating made the place cosy. There appeared to be many people who thought the same as well, and one could sense that many people were here to simply take a short break.

Both Yuigahama and I sat down at one of the benches. Then, both of us yawned audibly, unable to stop it in time. The loudness of it made us look at each other and laughed. It was strange how we can laugh over the most trivial of things.

As we took our short break, Yuigahama pointed to a place in front of us and said, "Then, shall we go take a look at some souvenirs?"

Taking a look at where she was pointing, I saw a goods shop that was extremely nearby. After nodding in reply to Yuigahama, I stood up from the bench.

When I entered the shop, I could see that it was stockpiled with Disney Land goods. Needless to say, not only were there the usual stuff toys and blankets, there were also T-shirts, caps, earmuffs, mufflers, socks, make-up pouches, tote bags, mugs, tea spoons and so and so forth.....

"As I expected, the product line-up here is really different from Disney Land."

"That's probably because the theme is different."

As we chatted, I took a look about the entire shop when Yuigahama pulled something out of a mountain of fluffy goods.

"Hikki, try and put this on."

The thing that she presented me was, some fish cap that seemed modeled after an anglerfish. The fish had cloudy white eyes that were pointing in odd directions and a tongue that stuck out from its mouth. If I were to put this on, wouldn't I really become like that Mr-Fish-san? [56]

"Eh....."

Although I tried my best to show my utter dislike for it, Yuigahama didn't seem to catch on at all.

"It's fine! It'll be just fine! It's gonna be alright! It suits you totally!"

"That's not exactly praising me, you know....."

Just as I thought, Yuigahama ignored my reaction totally and placed that Mr-Fish-san-like cap onto my head tightly. However, I am pretty sure that there was no one who would be suited to wear that cap. I don't think that even the models at the Paris Fashion week could pull it off. Still, there were a lot of eccentric designs over there at the Paris Fashion Week!

I stepped in front of the mirror, wondering how I looked and was instantly taken aback. Uh-oh, it totally fits me..... In that case, I should be a model in Paris Fashion Week?

Just as I thought I had discovered my new charm, I could hear the sound of chatter and loud laughter coming from beside me.

"You are amazing Hikki. It totally fits you! A. Total. Fit!"

"Excuse me? Could not comment about the eyes?"

I took off the fish hat that I had taken a momentarily liking to and gave it a long hard stare. W, was it really so fitting?..... I thought that this was far better-looking than that time.....

As I cocked my head, Yuigahama showed me her smartphone. It would appear that she had taken a picture of me in that hat. In the picture, I appeared to be fascinated by my own appearance. Yup, with this sort of grossness and gloominess, I definitely looked like Mr Fish-san!

Yuigahama continued flicking through her smartphone, all the while chuckling quietly when she suddenly said, "Ah!"

"What's the matter? Don't tell me you are going to upload this to Twitter? Seriously, please don't do that."

"No way. Uploading this kind of photo will just get me blocked."

I see..... I shot her a questioning look, asking her what she was going to do with the photo. To which, Yuigahama merely tugged at my sleeves, and led me outside the shop.

"It's about time for the fireworks!"

We got out of the Mermaid Lagoon and proceeded in the direction of the bay. The area had turned a complete black, indicating the arrival of night. Since the Disney Sea was situated alongside the coast, a cold sea wind had begun to blow. The wind was somewhat strong, and so the fireworks had been halted. However, seeing as there was yet any announcement to be made, they would probably continue on with the fireworks again as planned.

The path that led to the bay was illuminated at equal intervals with orange streetlamps. The faint light cast by the lamps added a sort of fringe to the water surface, and the glow reflected off the water surface illuminated the darkness of the night gently.

Then, all of the streetlamps and electric lightings were switched off simultaneously.

A moment of silence and darkness. Anyone who was present here right now was probably holding their breaths. Yuigahama, who was standing beside me, whispered into my ear.

"I am glad that we made it."

When I nodded my head in reply, I could see the night sky being lit up by the bright stars.

And then, classical music began to play, followed by an announcement announcing the start of the fireworks.

Then, whistling sounds of things being launched into the sky could be heard, followed shortly by the sound of explosions. Amidst the black canvas, the fireworks burst into full bloom, illuminating the night sky at various areas with many different colors.

"I never really thought that I would come here....."

A deeply emotive murmur escaped her as she shook her head.

".....Well, you did say you wanted to come here....."

In a reserved tone, she answered, "That is true, but that's not what I meant..... Hikki, thank you..... for keeping your promise." Then, she lapsed into a shy smile. Her smile, illuminated by the reflection of the fireworks on the water surface, made my chest hurt.

This promise that couldn't even be called a promise, I had always been procrastinating it. All I was doing now, was finally fulfilling the one thing that I could, that which I had always put off doing.

".....This is not the thanks that was spoken of..... This is because, I made a promise....."

And in that way, if the words that tie me, and the reasons that allowed me to act didn't exist, then surely, I wouldn't have been able to do anything. The one who had always given me those reasons was Yuigahama. The one who should be doing the thanking, was me.

Yuigahama raised her eyes as if to sneak a peek at my expression. The light reflected from those upturned eyes diffused in all directions.

After a brief pause, as though hesitating, Yuigahama quickly took a small breath and looked at me with a serious look in her eyes.

"Hikki, here."

And with that, Yuigahama took something gently out from her bag. A beautiful wrapping that contained cookies was held reverently by both her hands.

"My consultation, do you remember it?"

"Ahhhh"

My reply was so soft it could barely be heard.

How could I forget it? It was mine as well as the Service Club's first consultation that we had received. In the end, at that time, all I did was to use words to confuse. The solution that I gave was a far cry from a true resolution. And yet, despite this, Yuigahama had been trying to solve it properly with her own strength. This, was plainly shown.

Yuigahama appeared puzzled as my hands would not move to take the cookies. However, she pressed the cookies firmly onto my hand.

There was now a weight firmly resting in my palm.

The cookies that I could see from the cellophane bag were irregularly shaped, or had traces of burn marks or had an unusual hue to it. I could not honestly say that it was pretty. However, one could tell from a glance that it was handmade. From this result, one could tell the effort and seriousness she put into it despite her being bad at cooking.

"Since the longest time, I had always wanted to give it properly. I said that I'd try it on my own, that I would do it in my own way. And this, is what I came up with."

Saying so, Yuigahama puffed her chest out, and smiled brightly.

".....This time, it's not a gift."

I was dumbfounded, trying my very hardest to take what she said as a form of joke, and I found myself unable to look at Yuigahama.

Without looking away, without lying, thinking it through properly, to struggle and to writhe until the absolute last moment. That was what I thought, but yet.

".....Well, this feeling, I wonder what one should call it."

Shyly, she supplemented her previous answer and looked at me timidly. Since I have heard her answer, then that is why too, I began searching for the answer I should give.

If you don't say it, you wouldn't know. Even if you say it, it might not get across. Even so, someday, both

she and I would definitely say it properly. Probably, her and my story was one that could be put into words.

Trembling, I pressed down on my throat, and slowly opened my mouth.

So as to not get it wrong, so as to not make any mistakes. I carefully selected the words that I deemed to be correct.

"I..... Whether it be feelings or relationships, I don't think it would be correct to call them that. I feel that, attaching a name to it would be wrong in some regards anyway. That is why I....."

I kept weaving words out of my mouth, trying to search for words that came closest to the answer. The noise caused by the people around us continued on and the noise of the fireworks continued to echo in the faraway distance.

Even though I remained at a loss for words, Yuigahama kept quiet, nodding her head and looking at me directly, listening to my pathetic voice.

This silence felt like it was filled with kindness and tolerance on her part.

It had even become comfortable and dependable.

It had always been so.

We had always been saved by Yuigahama's kindness, always clinging onto it, always depending on it.

However, whether this was right, I do not know. I don't have the confidence to call this sort of comfort, genuine. I am becoming increasingly unsure for the things that I have been constantly putting lids on and ignoring.

"..... That's why I think, that no matter how I say it, probably, it will come out wrong."

Each time the fireworks went up, her moist eyes, her slightly sorrowful look as well as a somewhat lonely smile was illuminated by the bright flash, burning that image of hers into the depths of my eyes. I squeezed out some words, as though thinking that doing so would ease the pain in my chest.

"But, someday..... I will say it properly. Just a little more....."

"I am not going to wait."

The sound of my voice was blocked out by Yuigahama's shaky voice. Yuigahama bit her lips lightly and her expression looks somewhat distorted. Then, as though to hide the light from her eyes, she turned away from me.

From the way she was breathing, it sounded as though she was trying to crush her emotions. Other than what I said previously, I was unable to say anything else.

I was truly pathetic even until the bitter end, but there was no helping that.

I wondered what she was thinking right now as she saw me in this state. A shiver ran down my spine that had nothing to do with the cold. Stiffly, I looked at Yuigahama.

Yuigahama's back was rising and falling, breathing heavily. Then, she stood on tiptoes and looked back at me.

"I am not going to wait..... I will go instead."

Those words she said slowly, but in a voice that was more mature than usual. With her moist eyes and a

small shake of her head, it emitted a sparkling light.

Then, with a smile that I had always seen, a smile that I had always been unknowingly chasing with my eyes, she said, "That is why, next time as well..... Ah, no, I am going to keep saying it! Because this is who I am!"

I could feel something grating against my chest, and I was unable to smile in return. However, I managed to make a wry face, and with my best effort, utter a reply to her.

"Really....."

"Un huh, really."

Towards my vague, meaningless follow-up, Yuigahama laughed shyly in return. No matter when, we keep having this sort of conversation. Seriously, we haven't grown one bit. [57]

In other words, that was the sense of distance between me and her. Slowly, over time, little by little, getting it wrong and redoing it, to reaffirm it.

The fireworks rose more and more rapidly, and the silhouette that was illuminated by the fireworks gradually appeared frame by frame. Then at last, the eye-catching golden shower came, illuminating the coast brightly.

".....Are we, going to come here again?"

"Probably."

A murmur that seemed to be talking to the night sky, followed by a muttered reply.

"Then, it's a promise."

Saying that, Yuigahama held out her pinky.

The shine from the golden light filled the sky and reflected off the surface of the water, faintly illuminating her ephemeral-like finger. It looked so delicate that it would be injured if gripped without restraint.

Thus, in a reserved manner, I locked pinkies with her.

"Well, some day, I guess."

"Yes, sometime in the future."

Our pinkies had been entwined until then.

As an affirmation from the words and smiles that were exchanged, the glowing figures shifted into the shape of two people holding hands.

~~~~~FIN~~~~~

[1: Pun.She says鳥を取りwhich reads as tori wo tori]

[2: Hachiman being even lamer. The word he uses for trio is (トリオ) which reads as to ri o]

[3: Grandson is mago in japanese. The punny phrase itself, in romanji, reads, Komachi no mago no Magomachi]

[4: JDrama: 101th time proposal]

- [5: Induced pluripotent stem cells. WW knows some serious science shit.]
- [6: An Ode to the West Wind.]
- [7: Beginning of March, the day where hibernating insects are said to come out of the ground.]
- [8: Shibuya Rin from Idolmaster: Cinderella Girls]
- [9: Kantai Collection Shimakaze; coincidentally, also voiced by the same actor, Ayane Sakura]
- [10: Kantai Collection.]
- [11: Company that overworks their staff]
- [12: Parody of the Idol Girls Only Swim Meet Tournament]
- [13: JA is an agricultural association that sells rice using anime/manga characters to market their product.]
- [14: Touken Ranbu – Nikkari Aoe's name sounds similar to "smiling" in Japanese.]
- [15: Chibi Maruko-chan. SOL Shoujo manga]
- [16: Yatterman – The sound Boyacky makes when he presses a button for his gadgets.]
- [17: Giza Giza Heart no Kumoriuta – A song, also known as "Lullaby of a Jagged Heart", by Vidoll]
- [18: A manga by Hiroshi Takahashi, QP キューピー ]
- [19: Doraemon lives in a closet.]
- [20: Reference to the TOEIC, an English proficiency test for foreign students.]
- [21: Unique greeting for voice actress Chiaki Takahashi.]
- [22: Catchphrase of Aoba Suzukaze, from the manga <New Game>]
- [23: The actual way Tobe greets people is ちょりーっす (Chorissu) which is like hi, but in their own dialect. The sausage here refers to chorizo.]
- [24: Tobe's lame joke here that was impossible to translate/ I was too lazy to think of a similar lame joke. Original sentence is: チョコうまそうだわー、チョコッと食べたくなるわ. The first choco refers to chocolate, whilst the second 'choco' is supposed to be chotto.....]
- [25: Knights of Sidonia]
- [26: Some ancient commercial. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4zm7FUfQb44>]
- [27: Jojo's bizarre adventure, Johnny Joestar.]
- [28: Playing around with the words 意識 here.....意識高く; 意識低い; 意識レベル; means high self/social(?) awareness; low self/social(?) awareness and consciousness level respectively. When Yukinoshita says that sentence, she's deliberately uses the "wrong" word to mock Hikki, hence prompting Hikki's reply of level of consciousness ( in reference to how she says his lips turn purple etc.)]
- [29: A message is passed down from one person to the end, and errors usually accumulate along the way.]
- [30: JP's version of Celebrity Sweepstakes.]
- [31: I believe it's a reference to Haru-chan, a very ancient series. Also, those room maids are called nakai-san. ]
- [32: The word used in the LN is ヤシャシーン which becomesヤシャスイーン which is Persian for something like charge/attack. Why Persian? Because Arslan Senki.]
- [33: More of a play on words. Veteran = 百戦錬磨 and the next sentence uses百戦百勝. Which literally means out of a 100 fights, I win 100 times.]
- [34: Main plotline of Humanity has declined.]
- [35: Tenpa -> When you are one tile away from completing the winning hand in mahjong, you "listen" for this last tile that player either discards/drawn by you.]
- [36: There's a set phrase 外堀を埋める which means to get rid of obstacles to achieve one's aim. However taken, literally, it means to fill the outer moat. Continuing on from just now, Hachiman twists the sentence to 内堀, meaning inner moat.]
- [37: This continues on from the inner moat part, and references the winter campaign of the Siege of Osaka. Basically, the Sanada Maru is a small fortification near the main Osaka castle, which was under siege, built by Sanada Yukimura. Also, the reason why he says that there is still the inner moat is because during said siege, the outer moat was over-run and filled]
- [38: Sanada Maru can also refer to a NHK Drama, which began broadcasting on 2016/01/10.]
- [39: Catchphrase of Makoto Kikuchi from Idolmaster.]
- [40: Mr Osomatsu. A super popular comic/anime series in Japan.]
- [41: Chocomaka means something in a continuous motion. But if you split it up, you get choco (chocolate) and maka = maca in Spanish, which apparently has aphrodisiac effects.(and supposedly gives you a temporal energy boost)]
- [42: Lyrics for Mahou tsukai PreCure]
- [43: Japanese Holiday on the 2nd monday of January. To celebrate those who have reached the age of 20.]
- [44: Yes, they do exist. People use it for good luck during tests/exams.]

- [45: Lyrics from the song Sherbet snow and the airplane]
- [46: Convention center in Tokyo, home to many annual road shows.]
- [47: Volcano -> Tokyo Disney Sea. The attraction is right smack in the middle of Disney Sea.]
- [48: Image search Chiba and Disneyland monorail and you will see their differences immediately]
- [49: Sentence is kinda weird, (.....瞬間、熱烈歓迎中華飯店) The latter half refers to a 2013 drama.]
- [50: One of the speech patterns of the devil in Megami Tensei.]
- [51: Cannot bring oneself to... (忍びない) which can be taken as a casual abbreviation of 忍びは(い)ない (no ninjas). No-ninja is also some battle philosophy from the anime Ninja slayer.]
- [52: I ripped the name off a blog. It's described as a 'Donald Duck Life Preserver steamed shrimp bun']
- [53: Bump of Chicken is an alt. rock band from Chiba. The right pocket part refers to lyrics from one of their songs, Snow Smile (スノースマイル)]
- [54: Compass of your Heart: Theme song for said attraction, composed by Alan Menken.]
- [55: Refers to the two shows, Waratte Iitomo and Lion no Gokigenyou, two very long running variety/comedy shows that have since ended recently. The former airs from 1200 to 1300 approx. whilst the latter from 1300 to 1330 approx.]
- [56: Mr-Fish a.k.a Sakana-kun-san refers to Masayuki Miyazawa, some fish researcher and TV personality who is shown on google images wearing some dumb fish hat.]
- [57: "I am not going to wait....." and the subsequent conversation is almost identical to the one during the Cultural Festival. See S1E11, about 20mins mark. Or Vol6 Chapter 7]