

やはり俺の
青春ラブコメは
まちがっている。

My youth romantic comedy is
wrong as I expected.

渡 航【wataru watari】

illustration ぽんかん⑧

12
twelve

GAGAGA

総武高校プロ☆
コンシューマー映像撮影

比企谷八幡
hachiman hikigaya

由比ヶ浜結衣
yui yuigahama





雪ノ下陽乃
haruno yukinoshita

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My youth romantic comedy is wrong as I expected.

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Interlude

There was a long silence.

The words that followed were so quick that they lacked emotion, while at the same time, they were also devoid of logic.

Saying meaningless words was the same as saying nothing at all. Hence, I guess it isn't wrong to call it silence.

The cloudy skyline that was dyed red from the evening sun turned to a shade of deep blue, and the occasional snowfall was now engulfed in a masking shadow.

The streetlamps lit up shortly after, and the shadows receded in every direction until they faded into figures that bore no resemblance to their original form.

After all, it seems like it'd turn into a long discussion. Someone said that. Actually, it's possible that I may have said that.

The words ended there. It was clear that I wanted to continue, but no one objected to my silence. So, with a smile and nod of assent, the matter was put to rest.

I actually really wanted to grit my teeth and ask, are we going to run away, even now?

More than anyone, I really wanted to ask this to myself.

Even if there was a little bit more time, there was not a glimmer of hope to be seen.

However, I know that a definite answer will bring us to a conclusion. That's

why that answer should be spoken.

If one doesn't say it, then no one will understand, but even if it was said, there's no guarantee that it would be understood.

Thus, that answer should be spoken, even though I know that decision will bring about regrets.

It's all because I don't want something genuine that is only cold, cruel, and sad.

Chapter 1: Finally, the seasons change, and the snows melt.

I have long since gotten used to the winter cold.

Because I have never left my place of birth, or this street, this cold was something I've been acquainted with for a very long time. Thus, I didn't feel that there was anything special about winter in Chiba.

Whether it's the dry air, the prickling icy wind, or the chills creeping up my back from my feet, they weren't that particularly loathsome. Though, it was still annoying.

You could say that for things with which one becomes accustomed, they are seen as natural occurrences, and thus are widely accepted.

Anyway, whether it's hot or cold, it's a question of how much that has surpassed the current weather standards. In other words, you can't compare this cold against anything if you have never experienced winter in other places.

So, if you don't know what warmth is, then you would never know about other sources of warmth. For example, warmth is just like when you blow out white breaths of air to warm your frozen hands, or the soft sound of your coat and muffler rubbing against each other, or just like when a bunch of people sit on a bench and accidentally rub their knees against each other, or even the simple heat from the person sitting next to you.

I thought about why warmth obtained through touch was so scary as I stretched myself. By the way, the people sitting next to me were Yukinoshita and Yuigahama. The two of them were sitting a fist apart.

At night, in this park that was just next to the sea, there was no one else but the three of us. If I looked up, I could see the two condo buildings where Yukinoshita was staying.

This park was a small walk away from the shopping district in front of the station, and if you took the main road, you would immediately arrive at the street filled with condominiums. Although it was by the sea, because of the presence of various majestic trees, and the trees planted to firm the sand, the sea breeze was not that chilly.

Even so, the reason why we all could feel the winter air so strongly was because of the lack of people, and the gradually accumulating snow.

The day was still the 14th of February. People call this day Valentine's Day — or the day of dried sardines. Today was the day that my sister, Komachi, was going to be taking the entrance exam for my school.

At the same time, it was the day where we headed towards the aquarium together.

The snow that had fallen since morning had not accumulated much, but its presence could clearly be seen on the trees and grass. Let me tell you, snow can absorb noise.

Although I didn't think that such a thin layer of snow could possibly reduce noise by any discernable amount, it seemed like none of us were making any noise — just staring off silently into the night.

For a fleeting moment, the moonlight snow and streetlamps illuminated us. Thanks to that, our figures lit up brightly in contrast to the dark night. I remembered that in the past, the lamps emitted a pale fluorescent light. If that was still the case now, I am pretty sure that light would make us all feel colder.

The orange color that reflected off the snow did however give off a warm vibe. Still, the snow would disappear after the slightest touch. That warm, transient light tells me that the sparkling snow that fell into the ocean in the setting sun was not a hallucination.

Snow had indeed fallen, and the day that we had spent together was real as well. The snow was proof of it, yet, with a subtle temperature difference, or with the slight passing of time, it will disappear.

If you touch it, it disappears, and if you play with it, it will crumble and break. However, even if nothing was done to it, it will still disappear one day.

If the weather remains cold like this, is it possible that it would stay there forever...? I keep thinking about these meaningless "ifs." With a shiver, I tossed those wild thoughts aside. The answer to that was found long ago when I made that snowman back when I was a kid.

I shook my head, and left the bench. From the corner of my eyes, I spotted a half red half blue vending machine.

Just as I was about to head over, I turned my head and asked, "Want to drink something?"

Hearing my question, they looked at each other for a brief moment, but just as quickly, they nodded their heads. I nodded my head to show that I understood.

I walked to the vending machine and took out some spare change from my wallet.

Like always, I chose coffee. Then, I chose two plastic packaged red teas as well. Squatting down, I quietly slipped them into my coat's pocket.

As I was taking out the drinks one by one, the last one that reached my hand was a little scalding yet had an unusual chill to it. If I were to keep holding it, I would definitely be scalded. As I quickly tossed the can back and forth from one hand to another, I thought about the reason why it would even feel cold.

When my hand got used to the heat of the can, my question was answered.

The warmth that could be felt by one's body could be represented in numbers. Without ascribing to them any sort of meaning, they are only numbers.

However, I do know of warmth that was more than that. The difference between warmth and warm temperature was not just in their words. I had felt it through actual experience as well. Despite that, I didn't feel that I had noticed anything worth praising since I had only just realized that.

When comparing the warmth that I could obtain through coffee with a 100 yen coin, I felt that the warmth given off from body temperature that I received in that swift instant when our knees touched was a lot warmer.

While ignoring the heat in my hand, I continued to walk towards the bench. As I walked, I reminisced about the warmth in my chest that had remained to this day.

I had an inkling that, most likely, it was no longer possible for me to feel this warmth again. Hence, I wanted to let time freeze in this instant, yet I found myself continuously marching on.

The seat that I had been sitting in when I walked off was still empty when I returned. Since I now understood that warmth, I couldn't bring myself to sit down.

What, then, is the correct distance to be? Up until now, I have not found an answer to this question.

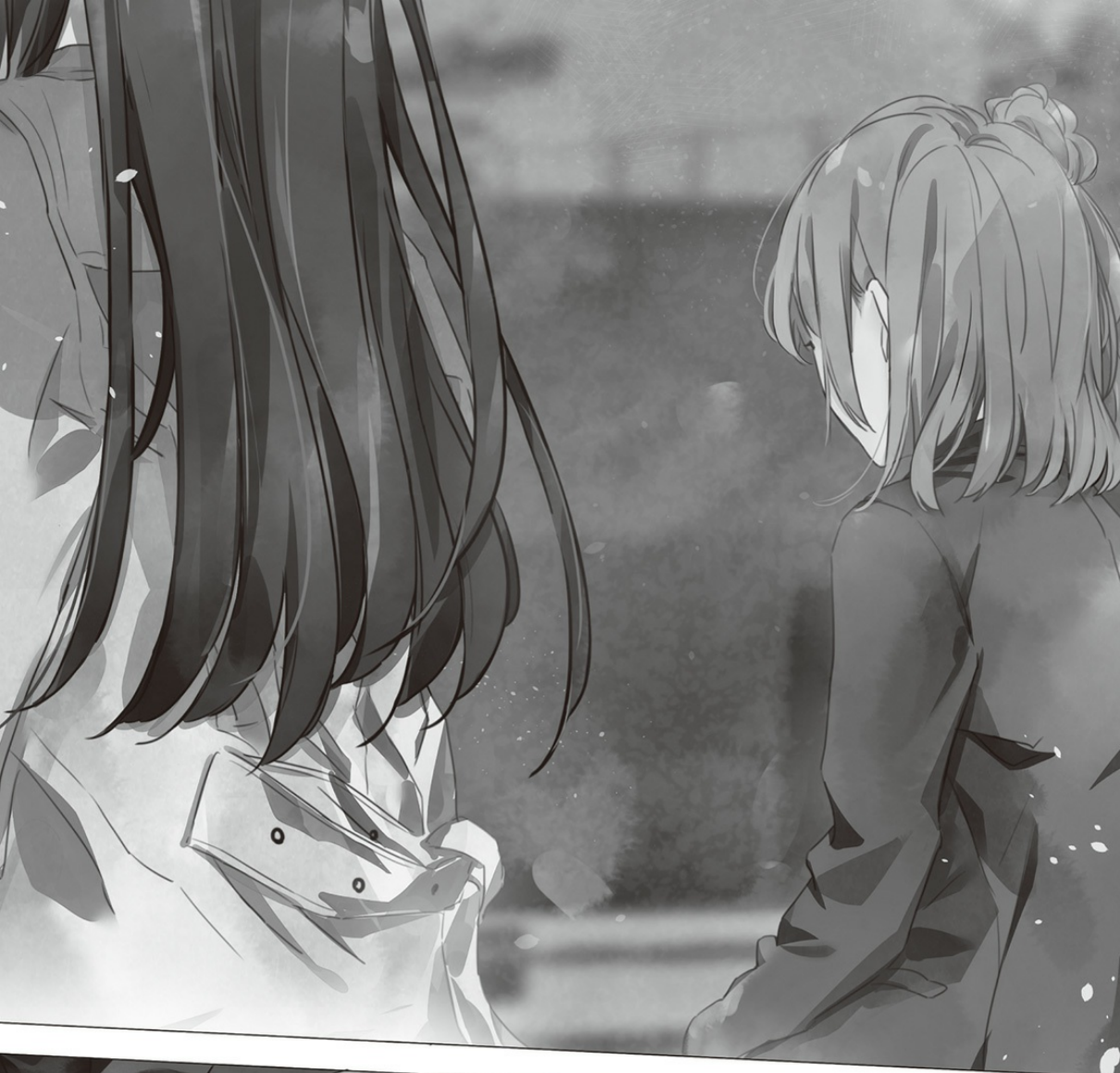
So I thought, "It should be fine up till here. I would probably be allowed to take a step further," as I continued to walk slowly towards them.

Just like how this entire year had played out, I gradually approached them, testing my limits as to whether I can move a bit closer, and at the same time, continuously recalculated the sense of distance between us.

I made bold steps forward while not knowing anything, yet carefully treaded whenever I noticed something. However, when I realized that I didn't understand anything, my legs couldn't take another step forward.

Just one more step. Even half a step would be good.

But, at this distance, I stopped.



The streetlamps illuminated the bench like a spotlight. Shadows snaked off into countless directions, gradually fading off into the distance.

I gazed mindlessly at those shadows as I took out the two cans of red tea and silently passed it to them.

They both seemed a little troubled, but thanked me anyway. They reached out for the tea, and I carefully handed it over so as to not touch their fingertips, then put my hands back in my pockets.

In that moment, there was a clear, crisp crinkling noise.

I could feel something smooth in my pockets, and, upon inspection, I noticed that it was the packet of cookies that I had just received.

The amount of cookies had neither increased nor decreased. Well, even if I were to repeatedly smash them, it would not increase either.

Likewise, happiness would not increase so simply. Be it Peter, Chita, or Carrousel,^[1] they have all mentioned this.

Yet, despite it clearly not increasing, the fact that it could so easily decrease or be lost was a horrible characteristic of it.

Worried that they might've been smashed, or mashed into some weird shape, I took them out of my pocket. Luckily, the pink wrapper had protected it by acting as a cushion.

Heaving a sigh of relief, I had originally intended to put it back into my pocket, but then I heard someone exhale beside me.

Looking at the source of the noise, I noticed Yukinoshita looking at the cookies.

“Those are really beautiful...”

She seemed to be looking at the cookies with much yearning as she said that. Those words that had suddenly slipped from her mouth made Yuigahama

very surprised. However, she quickly leaned forward and replied, "Ah, yup! The bag and masute, I took a really long time to find them."

"Huh? Masute? Is that some greeting in India?"

Yukinoshita pressed her fingers against her temple and said, "The greeting is namasute, and she's talking about the masking tape."

"It's a surprise you know so much pointless information about greetings despite not really doing many greetings of your own."

"Are you stupid? With the proper greeting, the atmosphere will quickly turn into that of friendly conversation. The set phrases for greetings are a must to know."

With that said, Yukinoshita looked tired and gave a bitter laugh.

"Well, if it's you, a greeting would probably count as a conversation too."

"Ah, true. That's why I try to avoid greeting people."

"Hikki, are you really that bad at making small talk!?"

Well, I can't help it if my name's "Hikki." How true it is that a person's name determines their behavior. Come to think of it, I had actually gotten used to Yuigahama calling me Hikki... If it was the past, I would have totally ignored the person calling me by such an embarrassing name... Maybe I would've even looked away blushing and objecting to that name calling in a small voice. Yeah, right, as if I have any memories of that sort. I had simply given up and accepted her way of addressing me from the very beginning.

Masute, the abbreviation for masking tape, huh? Alright, I've remembered it, but I still don't really know what kind of tape it is or how it is used. Come to think of it, Miss Yukinoshita, you seem to have quite a good grasp of youth's terminology. What a surprise. I shifted my gaze to her while I was thinking of this.

As though understanding my intentions, she smiled gently.

“Masking tape. It is originally used for the sole purpose of sealing things. However, it has recently been used for decorations and design purposes.”

“Yup! There are many cute ones too, it’s very mainstream! It’s commonly used for packaging or on notepads.”

As I listened to Yuigahama’s explanation, I took another look at the bag. I see, it really is quite exquisite.

The bag had been tied with just the right amount of golden string. Even the little dog paw prints on the bag made it look pretty cute. Altogether, it was a beautiful design.

I continued to look at it. Yuigahama, who seemed uneasy, started to shift restlessly about. Her eyes kept darting about as well.

“Well, about the taste... I don’t have much confidence, but I did my best.”

With that, she looked at me with a determined look. Her serious eyes made it clear she was not joking. I gently caressed the bag of cookies.

Without a trace of sarcasm, I replied, “...Yes, I am pretty sure of that.”

This was something she had made with the best of her efforts. Although I didn’t know the taste because I hadn’t tasted it yet, this was something she had expended her best efforts on despite not being good at cooking. Thus, I know very well that she had indeed put her heart and soul into it.

Hence, to the best of my abilities, I will tell her my feelings honestly, without any sort of deception or beautifying it. However, she seemed to know what I wanted to tell her.

“Right? Hikki, didn’t you say that before? Something about ‘as long as one tries their best,’ or something like that.”

Yuigahama laughed and puffed out her chest. She wagged her finger proudly as she did that.

“...You still remember that?”

It was a little surprising. She had a surprisingly good memory. Well, of course, I remembered it as well.

What I said back then wasn't a lie. I really did feel that way from the bottom of my heart, but it did make me a little embarrassed to have people tell me about what I had said in the past. I am one of those people who feels like dying each time I think about what I'd said in the past.

However, it wasn't only me who seemed embarrassed.

“Well, that... instead of saying that I remember it, it's more like I couldn't possibly forget it. See, at the very beginning I was a little taken aback by those words, and so...”

With yet another embarrassed laugh, she stretched her body slightly as though she was feeling uneasy. Hey, if you keep doing that, I will become uneasy too! I ended up joining her and laughing as well. When our eyes met, Yuigahama swiftly averted her gaze.

“Well, Hikki's always saying stuff like that. I have already gotten used to it.”

Then, as though she was telling a joke, Yukinoshita laughed and added on, “Yes, he really betrays people's expectations.”

Yuigahama nodded her head vigorously in agreement to Yukinoshita's words.

“Yup yup.”

Meh, I wished that they would keep those thoughts to themselves. I stared at Yukinoshita for a brief moment as I thought that, expressing my disapproval.

“Regarding that, I don't think I am the only one. Aren't you the same too, Nanameshita-san?[\[2\]](#)”

“What's with that suspicious way of addressing me...?”

Nanameshita-san's eyebrow twitched as she gave me a sidelong glare. But in contrast to that, Yuigahama who was next to me lowered her eyebrows and

opened her mouth in wonder.

"Uhh... Like the animal therapy...?"

"Yes yes, stuff like that. Though I'm not sure if that was below or above the expectations."

I nodded my head in agreement towards Yuigahama who looked a little awkward as she scratched her cheeks. At that time, our relationship wasn't that good, so I couldn't say much. But looking at it now, I feel like I could say "What the hell did you just say...?" Maybe Yuigahama thought the same way as well, for she was also nodding her head like she was thinking of something.

"Hmm... I wonder. She's so smart is what I thought, but..."

Whoops, looks like a paradox popped up. If you end it with "but," that means whatever follows would only be the words of negation... She probably wanted to say that Yukino just wanted to play with the cat.

But, not telling her that is considered kindness as well. After all, if we delved too much into it, she would rapidly throw long rebuttals at us. I'll just quietly keep my thoughts in my heart.

However, it seems Yuigahama wasn't able to keep it in her heart. Indeed, that chest of hers doesn't seem like it can keep them in!

"B-But still. Yukinon also acts on instincts sometimes!"

Yuigahama said those words with a little power. Perhaps she was planning to follow up on them, but she was met with Yukinoshita's icy gaze.

"Aren't you talking about yourself?"

"O-Of course not! Look, when playing card games, I did use my head..."

Yuigahama began her rebuttal amidst hesitation as she thought about past events. Her words once again brought up memories of that time when we were playing that dark game.

“I feel like you were just lucky...”

“W-Why should it matter? Luck is also a measure of one’s true ability. It was my birthday on that day too, so having good luck was to be expected. Good things happened on that day too and I was quite happy.”

Yuigahama, who had started off talking in high spirits, hung her head and lowered her voice as she went on. Please don’t say stuff that you will feel embarrassed about half-way through. When I thought about the present on that day, I wanted to die of embarrassment. Unconsciously, I lowered my head as well.

All of a sudden, Yukinoshita started to mumble to herself.

“So you were lucky because it was your birthday...”

“Does it matter?! I won, and that’s good enough.”

Yukinoshita tilted her head as she voiced her opinion. Meanwhile, Yuigahama seemed somewhat displeased and unhappy. Looking at them, I couldn’t help but laugh.

It was just as Yuigahama said. No matter the process, the result was her winning the game. Therefore, that’s good enough.

This sort of positivity from her had always been the thing that saved me. Yukinoshita as well.

Yukinoshita understood this too and smiled, then she brushed her shoulder-length hair and nodded her head in satisfaction.

“Well... winning is a good thing after all.”

“Here we go again, that ‘I hate losing’ attitude.”

Without thinking, and with a bitter laugh, these words escaped my mouth. As soon as I said it, I was met with a stare from the wide eyed Yukinoshita.

“You sound like you enjoy losing.”

“Not really... I try my best to win every time.”

Although that was what I said, the two of them didn't seem to be listening seriously. In fact, Yuigahama sighed, as though agreeing with Yukinoshita.

“Just like that time during tennis and judo...”

“Now that you remind me, I do think it was a waste of effort on your part.”

Yukinoshita seemed to have suddenly grown tired, or she was just out of words as she just sighed. Being seen in such a light, I was a little unhappy. Thus, I made the effort to correct them.

“There was no such thing. My bones didn't break^[3], it was just that my waist hurt during judo that time.”

Hearing my reply, Yukinoshita suddenly became angry.

“It was just a figure of speech. What do you mean by your waist hurt? Anyway, did you go to see a doctor? Waist pains may have long term effects. It could have negative effects in the future.”

“What's with that surprising amount of concern?! I-I too am very concerned as well.”

Looking at Yukinoshita who had suddenly began asking about my waist, Yuigahama felt surprised, to the point where she interjected to show that she cared. Although I am very grateful for your concerns, it would be better if you had voiced them out when I was actually injured... Well, since they are now showing me their concern, I guess I should update them as well.

“I did go, although it was just to an osteopathic clinic, but I did manage to get a formal excuse from gym class.”

Looking at my smug look, Yuigahama said somewhat halfheartedly, “You did what?! To think I was still worried for you!”

No, I am pretty sure you weren't that worried back then... Probably from noticing my reproachful glance, Yuigahama quickly added, “But, those sort

of idiotic activities were fun, the ones where everyone is involved.”

“...Really?”

I did agree with her on the idiotic part, but I was a little skeptical about it being fun because everyone was involved. Yuigahama puffed her chest and replied, “Yes, with Yumiko, Hina, Hayato-kun, Sai-chan, and Komachi-chan... It was fun playing with all of them. Like that time during summer break.”

Yuigahama was now gazing off into the distance. Yukinoshita nodded her head at those words.

“Rinkan School, right? Putting the issue of whether it was fun or not aside, it was indeed very lively... You haven’t forgotten her, have you?”

I did a mental headcount of all those who went to Chiba village and started to remember.

“There was still Hiratsuka-sensei... Well, she’s the teacher, so it would be hard to say we were all playing together.”

“...But, I do think that she had fun.”

It wasn’t as though I didn’t understand Yukinoshita’s feelings, who was now frowning. Ah, well, Hiratsuka-sensei always seemed to be quite happy... Tobe was there too. Screw that guy. It’s Tobe anyway. Tobe, I still remember your request very clearly, so please go rest in peace. Tobe probably heard from Hayama about all those strange things that I did. It would be great if I was the only one who remembered that.

During that summer break, there were a great many things that left behind deep impressions.

That bitterness accumulated like sediments, lurking about within my heart.

I was unable to just ignore that person called Tsurumi Rumi, because she looked exactly like someone I know. Even though the concept of “everyone” was vague, there was a strong pressure to be in sync with everyone else. It

was this pressure that nearly crushed her, or maybe I just felt that she shouldn't be pressured.

The outcome of that couldn't be termed as good.

However, she still held out her hand despite knowing everything was fake, and I still held the faintest of hope, a prayer-like wish for her. This was yet another thing that I hope only I would remember.

But, regardless of how one thinks about an event, memories were something shared amongst those who had gone through the same experience.

Hence, she would probably talk about something that she wished only she would remember as well.

Raising her head to the sky, Yuigahama said, "The fireworks were fun too."

Looking at her, I couldn't help but raise my head. There were no giant rings of light or golden showers of rain, just a pitch black night sky.

"Fireworks, huh?"

"You still remember?"

"Well, although I didn't do anything, that day was something I remember."

There was a slight teasing in Yuigahama's voice. Thus, I shrugged my shoulders and replied in a self-depreciating manner.

Having been through those events, we were able to treasure our shared memories.

What followed were bouts of light laughter that turned into the shallow noises of soft breathing. Our breaths gradually faded away until everything was devoured by silence.

Yukinoshita, as though trying to break the silence, inhaled deeply.

"That summer break was about 40 days long, yet I only have memories of

those few days...”

“That’s probably how summer break is like. Before you know it, it’s already over... Come to think of it, we became really busy after that.”

“A lot of things happened in the coming semester after that.”

“Ah... Well, I blame the committee president for that...”

Suddenly, I started thinking about that one person, and my tone quickly grew unpleasant.

Yuigahama chewed her lips, looking a little troubled.

“Hmm... No comment.”

Ah! Yuigahama-san, you are too kind! Normally, at this moment, one would be like a judge who would jump up with much vigor and issue the death penalty! As I thought that, I noticed Yukinoshita shrugging her shoulders. It seems like Yukinoshita wants to voice her own opinion. Nice! Yukinoshita-san is not such a kind person!

“It wasn’t just the fault of Sagami alone.”

“Ah, her name, you said it...”

“...You’re one to speak, I doubt you were going to say her name at all.”

Yukinoshita placed her fingers to her temple and looked at me with a frown. I could only nod my head in an expression of “yes, yes.” I know, my bad.

She lightly coughed before continuing, “At that time, it became the way it was because of various reasons.”

Her way of saying it felt somewhat abstract, as well as a little broad. Then again, how else could one put it? Even so, we were still able to understand what she meant.

The main problems were things like thoughtlessly pushing one’s ideals,

becoming stubborn and not relying on others, and not being willing to think over one's plans.

However, in the process of going through these things over and over again, and learning a little more about each other, I now feel like we have acquired some new answers.

These answers were probably a little different for each of us, but they were probably the same in the end.

“Anyway, the schedule was way too packed.”

Yuigahama and I nodded our heads.

“True. Our school field trip was immediately after that camp.”

“We were rather busy during that trip as well.”

I didn't dive further into the topic. However, Yuigahama and Yukinoshita did.

“I always thought that we didn't really have the spare time to go and do some leisurely sightseeing. I think we only went to Kiyomizudera? Then there was that place with the many bird's nests? We didn't get to eat many local specialties as well... But the trip to the movie village (Toei Uzumasa Eigamura) was really fun! The haunted house too!”

“...I thought the haunted house would've been a most bothersome place.”

In contrast to Yuigahama's excitement, Yukinoshita appeared unmoved. Although we did indeed have different schedules because of us being in different classes, I didn't think that Yukinoshita would ever enter a haunted house even if we were together. To be honest, I didn't think she was good at that sort of thing! No, I'm absolutely not good with them, you know?

“I think we more or less visited all the sightseeing spots. There was Ryuanji, Fushimi Inari, Toufukuji, Kitano Tenmangu, and so on... There were other places that I visited as well. As for food, we did have tofu and udon sukiyaki hotpot back at the inn. I also managed to go to a café that I had always

wanted to go.”

Yukinoshita seemed to be quite happy. ...Ah ah. It was just as I thought, that café that you went to in that morning was due to your own interest. Well, the shop’s appearance was very fashionable, and the food was delicious too, so I don’t really have many complaints...

As she was reminiscing, Yukinoshita seemed to have thought of something and added, “As well as the ramen...”

“Ramen?”

Yuigahama tilted her head, looking doubtful. Yukinoshita shut up immediately and I quickly said something to redirect the conversation.

“Ah, there are a lot of famous shops in Kyoto. Places like Kitashirakawa and Ichijiyoji are super popular. If I had more spare time, I would love to go to those places too... Not to mention Takayasu, Tentenyu...”

“Huh? What?”

“Ah, nothing. Those were just the names of ramen shops that I wanted to visit, don’t mind me.”

“O-oh, okay...”

Now that I’ve finally gotten rid of Yuigahama’s suspicions, I decided to continue on with the previous conversational topic.

“Well, after that was a huge bother as well. Shortly after we freed ourselves from Sagami’s issues, we had to deal with Isshiki’s.”

“Ahaha... The student council election was really something.”

Yuigahama let out a bitter laugh and Yukinoshita’s shoulders drooped a little. Watching her, I exhaled exaggeratedly.

“After the elections, that Christmas event happened. Really, those were the hellish days of ‘logical,’ ‘magical,’ and ‘preach it...’”

With a chuckle, Yukinoshita bit back with a vicious remark, “It was really hard understanding what that person was talking about... Then again, what you said just now was hard to comprehend as well.”

Her back, which was hunched over a little while ago, was now upright. Yuigahama nudged her.

“Well, we did get to go to Disneyland for free, and we had great fun there too! We also bought many Pan-san goods!”

“...Well, I suppose that’s true. It wasn’t all that bad I guess.”

Yuigahama let out a laugh and looked towards Yukinoshita. Yukinoshita looked away. It was heart-warming to see those two like this.

Indeed, it wasn’t all that bad.

I thought that the things that we did during those days were meaningful. Had we done our best to help and look out for Isshiki? Maybe not. Did we help Tsurumi Rumi end up at the right place? I don’t know. Needless to say, I had no idea why she said those things as well.

But, at the very least, it was not all in vain.

It was because of all these thoughts that we were able to live out this year in peace. I suppose it wasn’t only me, but also the two of them who were also holding on to this warmth.

This was probably why Yuigahama could talk about all these past year memories with such calm.

“I always felt that things really did go by in a flash. Is it because so many things happened in the past year...?”

“I thought that it was really busy after the New Year as well... Especially since that’s when Komachi really began to prepare for her entry exams.”

After the start of the new school term, it became very busy due to all the rumors and all the other things happening. The time where it was truly

peaceful was during the brief period of the New Year. Hence, all I could really remember was that period during the start of the New Year. Whenever I thought about it, I couldn't help but worry about the outcome of Komachi's exam.

My worries over the outcome of the examination results were probably plastered all over my face. Yukinoshita offered me some encouraging words.

"It would be great if the shrine visit at the start of the New Year brought her some good luck."

"Uh? Oh, right. Yeah, I hope so..."

I decided to change the mood of the conversation and added, "Well, I guess it wouldn't do anything even if I kept worrying about it."

Yuigahama nodded her head at those words, "Yes. How about this? Let's celebrate her hard work when it all ends!"

"Ah, sure. Let's host a huge party to celebrate her passing of the examinations."

"...Okay."

"Let's!"

Although what I said hinges on the presumption that Komachi indeed passes, the two of them did nothing to point this out. They stood there smiling. I am really grateful for their words, and, so, I smiled as well.

Then, Yuigahama's mood grew a little solemn.

"But, it will be our turn soon, huh?"

"That's right. At about this time next year, we would be taking our college entrance exams. Then after that..."

As Yukinoshita rambled on, her gaze lowered gradually as well. We knew what she wanted to say even without her continuing.

After the exams, it would be our graduation.

“This year went by really fast...”

As I said that, the reality of it all hit me a little harder than I expected. One year. The length of this period of time was nothing more than the summation of all the events that we had talked about previously. I think the two of them understood that as well.

“This year is the fastest year that I had experienced so far.”

Yukinoshita sighed heavily, and Yuigahama immediately replied.

“I think so too! How should I put it? You know, it’s like what the adults like to say? How the feeling of time gets shorter as one grows older.”

“Ah, well, it’s because of this, and that we were so constantly busy... The requests just kept coming in one by one, but I blame all that on Hiratsuka-sensei.”

“When you put it that way, you make it sound like she’s the New Year Monster.”

Yukinoshita laughed bitterly, to which Yuigahama and I expressed similar expressions too.

Really, everything had happened because of things that one person had said.

All of it was really not much of a big deal. They were probably things that she just happened to decide to push onto us.

Now, all of it was coming to an end.

Ultimately, I was always unable to reach a decisive conclusion, just some vague ones. Even so, I want to remove that vagueness; even if I'll make a mistake, or even if I'll lose something, I've decided that I shall find my own answer, our answer.

There would be no end to it if we keep thinking about the past; I could say as

many things as you wanted me to about the past year.

They would all be joyous and happy, things that would make one keep on laughing.

If one needed to say something, it would be said, but if one didn't, it would be hidden.

Yet, there wouldn't be a single breath for what one truly wanted to say.

Arbitrarily, intentionally not saying those things would also be proof that one cares about those things.

Regarding this point, I think the three of us knew this all too well.

Hence, our conversation came to a halt.

The time that we had spent together was barely a year. In this one year, there were many memories. Whether we remembered them, or forgot about them, or even pretend to forget, it doesn't matter.

All this talk about the past will have to end one day.

If we were to talk about the past until reaching the present, then conversation coming to a halt was unavoidable.

Hence, what should follow should be about the future.

Perhaps because we all knew this that all three of us made sighing noises, but no one spoke.

The future was something that cannot be seen, cannot be known, cannot be understood, and cannot be gone against.

There was no way of seeing it, or any way of knowing it. Despite it clearly being incomprehensible, there was no retreat once one proceeded on.

In this moment of silence came the sound of a muffler rubbing against the clothes.

“The snow seems to have stopped.”

Yuigahama raised her head to look at the misty night sky as she said that to no one in particular.

Yukinoshita did not reply to her, she merely gave off a smile that was like the moonlight piercing through the misty, cloudy night sky. She nodded, and then raised her head as well.

I guess she was looking at the moon too.

It has always been like this thus far.

At the same place, looking at the same things, spending time together.

However, I fear that the answers we would give would not be the same. It is our answers that we each absolutely believe to be unchanging.

Hence, so as not to say it, we kept talking about other things like the weather, or the very sweet coffee, or maybe some other trivial memory.

“It was snowing on the day I was born. So, Yukino... this name is really simple?”

In this silent moment, Yukinoshita suddenly talked about her name. Watching her self-mocking smile, Yuigahama replied in a gentle voice, “... But, it’s a very beautiful and wonderful name.”

Although I knew that Yuigahama wasn’t looking for any sort of approval for her comment, I nodded my head naturally.

“...It is a good name.”

Hearing my reply, Yuigahama blinked in surprise. Yukinoshita also opened her eyes wide in surprise. What’s with those reactions you two? It will only make me feel embarrassed. Thus, I averted my gaze.

I raised the coffee to my mouth and took a small sip so as to disguise the awkwardness.

I really did think that it was a good name, so it would be really strange for me now to go and deny what I had just said. There was also nothing else for me to do.

The name Yukino suits her pretty well.

Beautiful and transient, along with a ring of loneliness to it.

What was unusual was that I didn't associate her name with any form of coldness or frostiness.

"...Thank you."

Hearing her soft words of thanks, I turned my gaze back and noticed Yukinoshita had lowered her head. Her hands were clasped tightly together on her skirt. Her smooth black hair was like a curtain that covered her face. Yet, one could see her blushing from a small gap in her hair. Yuigahama had probably noticed this bit as well. Her lips twitched a little and laughed softly.

She probably heard her laughter because she coughed and raised her head before correcting her posture.

"This was decided by my mother. Then again, this is just something that I had heard from my sister..."

Her voice sounded calm from the very beginning, but it felt as though her voice had gradually faded off into the night sky at the end. Looking up, and then looking down once more, she let out a somewhat bitter laugh.

At that instant, Yuigahama and I were at a loss for words.

Should we just follow up on her words with anything we could think of? For example, "My name Hachiman is even more simplistic. My parents clearly were frustrated for a long time when trying to think of Komachi's name, but my name was decided almost instantly." Maybe something as random as that?

Or maybe I should let Yuigahama do the talking. She will probably handle it better than me?

However, both Yuigahama and I chose silence.

We used the sound of our breathing in exchange for words to reply her.

Yukinoshita's mother, as well as Haruno-san...

Regarding the relationship between them, we didn't know much. Well, I didn't know much about Yuigahama's family relationship as well. Rather, I have absolutely zero idea. Furthermore, the two of them probably didn't know much about my family either.

What I didn't know was something even more basic.

I didn't understand her or the both of them. Because I didn't understand, I didn't know the correct way to reply them.

If it was a case of me utterly not knowing anything at all, I suppose this was excusable.

It can't be helped if someone says something strange because they don't know the other person. It's natural to expect one or two misunderstandings because they don't know them, and it's natural to not be concerned because they don't know them. If troublesome matters were to come about, then just pretending that one doesn't know would be good enough. After all, we really don't.

Yet, the understanding between us has reached a point where we can no longer ignore it. We can no longer pretend not to know. It would be completely shameless to pretend to ignore it at this point in time.

In the end, I still did not know of the appropriate way to approach this relationship amongst the three of us. On the surface, all I did was go about exchanging banter with them, expressing agreement with their views, conversing about our own stories, and voicing some not-so-strongly worded suggestions. I could more or less do all of that. These were probably model answers. Anyone would have normally done these to the extreme as well.

But, it was because we wanted to reject all of these things that we were here on this day.

Unknowingly, my hands had begun gripping the coffee can with much more force. However, the metallic can wouldn't be crushed flat just from that force alone. Thus, my fingertips started to shake, and sound of water could be heard.

The fact that these soft noises could be heard was proof of just how quiet we are right now.

Slowly, I raised the can to my mouth and shook it slightly to gauge how much was left. I made a decision. After drinking, I will speak.

If it's something I decided upon, I have to do it. It has always been this way. Although I might be dragged along, swallowed up, or pulled along, in the end, I must be the one to make the final judgment.

This is my personality. Having strong judgement was not something worthy of praising. Rather, it was just second nature to me. There's only yourself, hence you yourself must do everything. That's what it means to be a loner. You could call me a utility player, but I definitely cannot do everything. In fact, there are many things that I am not good at. If you really wanted to know something that I was good at, that would be deceiving myself through persuading myself to give up.

However, now was not the time to be deceiving myself.

I have to be honest with myself.

Frankly, I felt that I've always avoided thinking about the future.

Running away didn't seem quite an accurate description. But it was the closest word to it.

You could also call it avoiding.

But it was definitely not escaping.

Even right now, I felt a little annoyed.

In the end, I was not hoping for any sort of answer, solution, or conclusion. I was only hoping for things to somehow disappear. I was only waiting for all these difficult problems to somehow vanish into thin air.

I fear that the three of us were probably subconsciously wishing for all of this to just disappear. That was what I had thought for my own convenience. Although it was quite arrogant of me to make this conjecture about their feelings, I felt that this wasn't far from the truth.

After all, the time that we had spent together was like a slumber, or you could call it one that seemed to slowly drag out. Yet, it was also a time that had its moments of ups and downs.

However, I know that this would not come true.

Yuigahama Yui had already tossed her question out into the open.

Yukinoshita Yukino was already preparing to answer it.

If so, what should Hikigaya Hachiman do?

The past me would surely have laughed at this dull situation. The future me would surely not allow this conclusion that couldn't even be called an answer. However, the present me does not know the correct thing to do, but felt that this situation wasn't right in any case.

If so, then what I should do would be to try my best to right this wrong. What I should be doing is to speak.

After drinking the last bit of coffee that had already gone cold, I began to speak.

At the very beginning, nothing but the sound of me panting came out. Then, the sound of slight moaning as I thought about what words to use. Finally, I said something somewhat decent.

“...Yukinoshita, can I hear it? The things that you want to say.”

I wonder what I was trying to tell her through those words.

The parts that I wanted to hear about were not conveyed clearly at all.

However, this should be more than enough for the both of them. The sentence had no head or tail, as well as no trivial bits. However, it is still possible for it to be the start of something. At the very least, this sentence conveyed the idea of the want for a conversation as well as advancing this relationship, which was now at a standstill.

Yuigahama inhaled lightly and stared at me. Her gaze seemed to be asking about my resolve.

However, Yukinoshita's body seemed to stiffen and she lowered her head.

“...Do you really want to continue listening?”

Her hesitation could be felt through her reserved tone. The glance that she sneaked at both me and Yuigahama seemed a little weak, and hesitant.

Yukinoshita's question. No, I wasn't even sure if it was a question. What she said was not directed at me. To settle this, I coughed a little, and looked at her for confirmation. Yukinoshita looked somewhat troubled, dropped her eyebrows, and became silent.

Like me, she was probably searching for the right words.

As though wanting to give Yukinoshita some support, Yuigahama sat by her side and touched her hand.

“I have always felt that... it is right to keep on waiting. Up till now, even if it's a little by little, you have told us a lot of things.”

Yuigahama leaned her head on Yukinoshita's shoulders. I wondered what color those eyes were that were hidden behind her closed eyelids. I did not know. However, the stiffness of Yukinoshita's body slowly began to relax, just like ice gradually thawing. This was either due to Yuigahama behaving like a puppy wanting treats, or because of the warmth that she gave her. Her fists that had been tightly clenched and placed on her skirt began to loosen up as well. She reached out to hold Yuigahama's hand.

She held both hands as though trying to confirm each other's warmth, and then slowly began to speak.

"Yuigahama-san, you once asked me what I wanted to do, right...? However, I myself still don't quite understand yet."

I always thought that Yukinoshita's voice was somewhat entrancing, like a small kid who doesn't know how to speak. I probably had a similar expression too, like that of a small kid who didn't know where to go as I listened to her quietly.

Yuigahama looked down, seemingly hurt.

Yukinoshita noticed this as well, and as though being mindful of her, or maybe encouraging her, tried her best to be cheerful and smiled gently.

"But you know, in the past, I too had things I want to do... things that I wanted to do."

"...Things that you wanted to do?"

Yuigahama was probably somewhat surprised, for she repeated Yukinoshita's words. Yukinoshita nodded her head proudly.

"My father's work."

"Ah... but that's..."

Now that she mentioned it, I remembered as well. I had once heard that Yukinoshita's father was a member of the diet, and, in the past, had ran a construction company. These were something that Haruno-san had once told me. As I tried to think of something to say as I recalled these vague recollections, Yukinoshita spoke first.

"Yes. But, because my sister exists... that decision is not mine. It's always been my mother's."

Yukinoshita's voice had grown a little cold. She was looking into the distance, as though staring at something there. Watching her like this, we

didn't say anything at all.

There was a saying that when one talks about their memories, they would look off into the distance. Yukinoshita was now looking up at the sky, and I followed her gaze.

I didn't know if it was the wind from the sky, but the clouds that were soft like candy floss kept on drifting, and the clouds that were bathed in moonlight kept on changing their shapes.

It seems like I didn't have to worry about this weather. The clouds that would make snow fall seemed to have already drifted far away. Maybe we could even see a few stars.

The light from the stars came from sources that were tens of light years away from us. The light was vague in the sense that, even in this instant, we had no way of knowing whether it really existed right now. Because of this, it looked all the more beautiful. Something unobtainable, or maybe something that was about to disappear, is the most beautiful.

Because I knew this, I was unable to extend both my hands. Surely, in the instant that I touch it, its color would fade and rot. I knew too, that for a person like me, that was not something that I could grasp a hold of.

Yukinoshita, who was describing her wishes in the past tense, as well as Yuigahama who was listening to her, was surely aware of all this.

"From the very beginning, my mother had decided everything. She has my sister tied down, yet she gives me complete freedom. Hence, that is why I keep following in my sister's footsteps, because I do not know how to act..."

From her murmurs, I could feel a tinge of nostalgia and regret. Looking at her side profile, her gaze looked somewhat lonely and sorrowful.

"...Even until now, I still don't know anything... Really, it's just like what my sister says."

As she softly spoke those words, her focus had shifted from afar to looking at

her feet. Motionlessly, as if trying to ascertain if she was unable to move, she gazed at the tips of her beautiful boots.

All of these quiet murmurs from her rendered us unable to speak.

Yukinoshita had probably noticed this painful silence, so she raised her head and smiled.

“This is the first time someone has listened to me about this.”

I was attracted to that smile. I let out a somewhat relieved sigh from my dry lips, and replied.

“Have you not told anyone else?”

“I think that I might’ve talked about this a little to my parents...”

She seemed to be thinking hard as she said that. That was probably something that she did a very long time ago. Yukinoshita continued to try her best to recall, but in the end, she shook her head.

“However, they’ve probably never taken me seriously with regards to these matters. They did tell me that I shouldn’t worry about all this however... After all, the heir to the family’s business has probably already been decided to be my sister.”

“Have you said anything to Haruno-san?”

“...I think not.”

Hearing Yuigahama’s question, Yukinoshita put her hands to her chin and thought about it for a while and gave a bitter laugh.

“That person, has that sort of personality after all.”

“Ah, true...”

Be it from her sister, Yukinoshita, or from her childhood friend, Hayama, as long as the topic is about something like the future, or love, or dreams, or

hopes, Yukinoshita Haruno was not someone especially suited for conversations of this sort.

If it was someone that she had utterly no relation with, perhaps she could put on a sincere face and give a suggestion that fitted the current cultural norm. She would not only be able to give a good reply, but also let the other party agree with her view and make the other party very satisfied. For that person, doing this should be easy for her.

However, if the party was someone close to her, she would take an entirely different approach. She would not only laugh and tease you, but would even continue to treat you as her toy and bully you despite the problem being long resolved. This was something that Hayama Hayato had said some time ago.

He and she had probably experienced something like that as well. Hence, this was why Yukinoshita had never once talked to Haruno-san about it.

Well, I wouldn't purposely discuss my future plans with my own family. I don't know if this was lucky or unlucky, but up until this point in time, I have never faced any major decisions that far exceeded my area of discretion.

But, it was because of this that when I heard about problems relating to family, I didn't feel any sense of being able to relate to her. If my family was running some sort of business as well, then perhaps I could sympathize with her a little. Unfortunately, my family was the typical salaryman family, so her conversational topic seemed a little far from what I could relate to.

This was probably true for Yuigahama as well. She had lowered her head, looking as though she didn't quite understand.

Yukinoshita didn't seem to mind our reactions and continued on.

"However, I should tell her properly. Even if it's possible, it won't come true in the end... But, it's probably because I am afraid of that answer that will set everything in stone that I am always unable to seek confirmation."

Yukinoshita's voice carried with it a tone of nostalgia. Perhaps this was regret on her part. No matter what, the past was something that cannot be

changed.

Yet, her eyes were still looking head on.

Right in front of her, were Yuigahama and I.

“That’s why, I should start seeking my confirmation from there... I want to decide it by my own volition, not because of anyone’s words, but because I want to think it through properly, to understand... to want to give up.”

The sound of her light breathing was accompanied by a silent smile.

Through her calm voice, Yukinoshita had said it. That she wanted to give up.

In Yukinoshita’s heart, she had probably been very sure about it. Yet, that line of thought had never received any sort of confirmation, hence it kept going through her mind.

If one doesn’t open the box, one would never know. Before that time comes, before the moment of observation, the result is not yet determined. Be that as it may be, but if the observer had always been understanding and accepting of that, then the end result matters not.

At the very end, the result will not change.

“I only have one request... I want to ask you to see it through to the very end. That much will be fine.”

Yukinoshita took a hold of her scarf and closed her eyes. She didn’t look like she was trying to tolerate the surrounding cold, but rather trying to correct the position of her scarf. Haltingly, but with much care, she had said each and every word just now as though she was swearing an oath in front of a god.

“That is... Yukinon’s answer?”

Yuigahama said that in between bouts of hesitation. Although this appeared to be a question, Yuigahama had lowered her gaze, and was not looking at Yukinoshita. However, Yukinoshita continued looking directly at Yuigahama.

“I suppose, but it could be wrong...”

Yukinoshita put up a seemingly wry smile, and softly held Yuigahama’s hand. Yuigahama raised her head.

“In that case...”

When she was in the middle of her sentence, her eyes met with Yukinoshita’s, and it was at this time that her words got cut along with the contents of what she wanted to say.

I also lost my voice, maybe because I forgot to breathe.

Yukinoshita’s smile was beautiful.

Her long, seemingly-combed black hair flowed gently, revealing her white, slender face; her crystal-clear eyes captured me.

Her gaze was without tremor or doubt as she fixated on us. I thought there wasn't even one lie behind those deep, blue colored eyes that seemed to suck me in.

“However, I... I still want to prove to everyone the things that I am capable of doing. I feel that this is the only way things can truly begin.”

Not only did her words contain no hesitation, even her tightly gripping hands, her fixated gaze, and her upright posture contained no hints of doubt.

“Truly... begin...”

Yuigahama’s face seemed fired up as she said that softly. Yukinoshita nodded her head in confirmation.

“Yes. I need to go back to my parent’s house and properly discuss it.”

“...So this is your answer.”

The way I said it made it sound like it wasn’t a question at all. This sort of sentence that didn’t address anyone was no different from a monologue.

However, this softly spoken sentence reached Yukinoshita's ears. She placed her fists lightly on her knees and gently spoke.

"I never gave up on it no matter how much time has passed... That's why I believe these are my true feelings... I think there's no mistaking it."

As she finished, Yukinoshita sent me a fleeting glance.

I could understand parts of what she said, but those were probably the parts that I could relate to.

If something were to not change no matter how much time passes, and if it didn't fade away no matter how long it was cast aside, then I would have no reluctance in calling that genuine. This was different from those false feelings that would vanish after waiting for so long that you end up parting from them.

If something does not disappear despite turning your face away, or averting your eyes from it, or pretending not to see it, or being forgotten, then it shouldn't be wrong to call it a genuine desire.

If this was the end that she wished for, then I have nothing to say.

There was only one point that I was fussing over.

Yukinoshita should proceed on her own, and decide on her own.

She shouldn't decide based on someone else's intentions, expectations, peer pressure, situation, or mood.

Even if she were to destroy something, that wouldn't be a good reason to rob her of her value or dignity.

What I wish for aren't her words that are meant to answer someone's request, but ones that come from her heart.

"Wouldn't it be fine? Giving it a try."

I said that as I lightly nodded my head in response to her gaze that seemed

somewhat lacking in self-confidence. Hearing my words, Yukinoshita touched her chest, somewhat relieved.

"Okay... I'll do it because I think that also counts as an answer."

Yuigahama, who was silently looking at Yukinoshita's face from the side, quickly removed her gaze and stared down at her feet.

Then, as though making sure of something, Yukinoshita slowly nodded her head a few times.

"Thank you."

Yukinoshita quietly muttered that as she drooped her head. I couldn't tell what kind of expression she wore because of this. I'm afraid that I would likely never know. Even if I were to see it, I surely would have immediately forgotten it.

That's because Yukinoshita's expression was extremely bright when she raised her face once more.

Without giving me or Yuigahama a chance to say anything else, she quickly stood up.

"We should be on our way. It's beginning to get cold."

Saying that, Yukinoshita took a step forward. Her destination was probably the exit of this park, and the room where she resided in. Yukinoshita looked over towards us who had still not moved.

Her flowing black hair, fluttering skirt, swaying muffler, and upright figure were so beautiful that I hesitated to approach her.

But, I had already promised that I would see it through to the end.

Thus, I began to walk in her direction.

I hoped to myself that at least her words held some truth, even if I ended up regretting it.

Chapter 2: Despite looking it, Yukinoshita Haruno is not drunk

I have already been here before.

The buildings of this two tower condominium looked like twins.

In one of the tower's upper floors is the room where Yukinoshita lives.

I was previously here during the Cultural Festival, when Yukinoshita became sick and was absent from school.

She was all alone in her room during that time. I believe Yuigahama was the one who came with me to visit.

I haven't visited here once since then.

However, Yuigahama has probably come here many times, both before and after the Cultural Festival. She seemed accustomed to coming here. Her expression was calm the entire time as she stood next to Yukinoshita, even as we came to the automatic doors at the entrance.

On the other hand, I was unable to calm myself down, and kept fidgeting about as I looked around restlessly. Well, I am at a girl's house, of course I am going to be nervous... Actually, I'm still at the entrance!

The pressure that exists before entering a girl's home is nothing short of horrible. I now think that it's a mistake to go through a dungeon and pick up girls^[4].

The entrance, devoid of human presence, was dead silent. If I was Bashou^[5], I would've been turned into a rock. What's with him, is he Angelo^[6]?

The sounds that could reach my ears were that of breathing, but that sounded more like perplexed sighs. The automatic doors that continued on towards the elevator hall were still closed.

There was frosted glass that was colored to match the orange plywood of the exterior of the building, and that made it nearly impossible to see through. Yukinoshita briefly glanced at the doors, then took out a key from her bag.

However, she didn't use the key for the intercom, but just made a clanking noise with it.

Since Yukinoshita is the only person staying here, there shouldn't be things like hesitation to begin with.

However, it would seem that there was someone else here right now.

I don't know what Yukino went through that caused her to live here alone, but if I had the opportunity figure it out, I wouldn't stick my nose into the matter.

Even after this, I most likely wouldn't pressure her for an answer.

It wasn't because I lacked interest. I think what I lacked was something entirely different. Simply put, it was because I didn't know how to ask, and also didn't know when it was appropriate to attempt asking.

I always become afraid when getting involved in private matters, but that's because I don't know where I would step on a landmine.

From my experience, I know that someone could still get deeply hurt from a casual remark. For example, when asked the question, "Do you have a girlfriend?" during a job interview, even if the other party bore no ill intentions, it would still hurt a lot due to the timing and way it was asked. Did I end up talking about myself again? Well, I have nothing to do with it. In short, what I mean is that treading into undisclosed information always carries risks.

However, I had just one thing to ask Yukinoshita now. If it was information

that we both mutually possessed, then I should be able to initiate conversation based on that.

“That person... is she still here?”

“...Probably.”

Even without giving the name, enough had been said. That person, Yukinoshita Haruno, is definitely waiting in this apartment.

When Yukinoshita answered, she put on a somewhat weak smile, and made more clanking noises with the key in her hand. She then finally inserted the key into the intercom.

However, before she even had the chance to turn it, the automatic door suddenly opened without making a sound.

“Oh my! Well, if it isn’t Yukino.”

A wild voice sprang out along with the sound of light footsteps.

The one who opened the door was Yukinoshita Haruno. Her figure was illuminated by the light that flowed out from the elevator hall like a spotlight.

“Nee-san...”

The two of them looked at each other with puzzled and blank faces. When they did that, I once again realized just how much they looked like sisters. No, the fact that their faces were similar is pretty obvious. Even if I were to put aside my own subjective preference and liking, the general consensus would still be that they are a pair of beautiful sisters. It's just that the impression they normally give out is completely different, which makes me think of them as different types of beauty.

Yet, in this moment, I jumped over those usual thoughts, and focused purely on how similar they looked. They both had their mouths open in astonishment, and the way they blinked made it look like they were complete mirror images of each other.

However, that image was instantly shattered.

“Welcoooome home!”

It may have been due to Haruno’s facial expression giving off a softer impression than usual when she patted Yukinoshita’s shoulder with an unbefitting cheerfulness.

When looking, her outfit gave off a different vibe from her usual smart attire, but was more of a soft-lumpy-fluffy feeling. This was probably her normal home clothing. She wore a coat that exposed her arms, and had on a pair of sandals at her feet. It was a rough getup that gave off the feeling of "alright, that's close enough."

On top of that, her hair was slightly wet, and her cheeks were red as if she was blushing. If it was per usual, her eyes would give off a sharp impression, but they seemed dull and tired.

Yukinoshita also seemed to have realized that her sister was acting differently since she frowned at her with a bewildered expression.

“...Did you drink?”

“Ahh, I guess. Just a little.”

When asked, Haruno gestured and pinched the air with her thumb and index finger. In contrast, the way her soft lips hung from her mouth made it apparent that she has drunk quite a bit. Unintentionally, Yukinoshita, Yuigahama, and I all ended up focusing on Haruno.

After doing that, as if the atmosphere had grown awkward, Haruno softly cleared her throat.

“Come to think of it, if you’re back here then that means—”

“Yes. I have something I want to tell you.”

Yukinoshita interrupted her from continuing and took over the conversation. The expression she held was neither stiff nor nervous. Seeing that, Haruno let

out a short sigh.

“I see.”

She replied in a monotonous tone. Seemingly uninterested, she shifted her eyes towards the rising elevator.

“...Anyway, shall we go? There’s no point in us talking here.”

“Ah, no, we’re all totally going home. We were just seeing her here.”

“Y-Yes... Also, weren’t you about to head out somewhere?”

Yuigahama and I answered with a troubled tone having been invited up all of a sudden. After all, they were going to discuss an extremely private matter which means we simply shouldn’t interfere. However, Haruno didn’t seem to care much for our replies and gently pushed Yuigahama’s back.

“It’s fine, it’s fine. I was just heading out to the convenience store for a little.”

“B-But...”

Yuigahama, who was urged to go on despite making such a troubled face, could do nothing but move forward. Yukinoshita sighed in exasperation as she followed them to the elevator.

Haruno repeatedly tapped the call button and hummed a tune while waiting for the elevator to arrive. You won’t make the elevator come any faster from doing that... Actually, there are even some elevators that cancel your inputs if you keep repeating them too much.

Haruno seemed a lot younger than usual because of her behavior. I had assumed that she would have a strong tolerance with alcohol, but her staggering figure was something unexpected.

The elevator finally arrived and we boarded it. The small amount of space made me somewhat uncomfortable. Outside of Haruno, who was enjoying herself, we stared at the constantly changing level display. In this silence, the

air grew heavy on my shoulders.

Perhaps it's because of this heavy atmosphere that Yuigahama began talking to Haruno.

“Were you drinking at home?”

“Hmm? No, no. I was out drinking. After that, I took a shower to sober myself... don't you crave for sweet stuff after drinking?”

Eh? She glanced towards me with a gaze that sought confirmation.

“No, I wouldn't know...”

Even if I was told that such cravings were sort of natural, we were still not of age... And, as if Haruno thought of the same thing, she tilted her head and voiced a “hmm.”

“I see. Well, you would understand if you could drink.”

“Eh... What's with the statement that sounds like something a sad college student would say...?”

“Oh, that's pretty cheeky.”

Saying that, Haruno pinched my ears, adding a new stimulus to them since they were throbbing from being out in the cold earlier. N-no! My ears are very sensitive! Besides, the faint scent of alcohol wafted through the air on her breath too, and her shampoo smelled nice, so just stop, seriously! Why is there such a nice smell left in the elevator?

“You will want to drink, and you will want to eat.”

Her mutter was loud enough that it appeared that she didn't mind whether it was heard or not. Without a chance to worry over whether or not I should reply, the elevator arrived at the level of Yukinoshita's apartment.

2-2

We entered following Yukinoshita after she slowly twisted the knob opened the door. Yukinoshita was probably staying in a 3LDK. Though I had only been to the living room during my last visit, I remembered that it was very spacious, and that there was a door to a master bedroom following a hallway.

Yet, the impression I was getting from this current visit was somewhat different from the last one.

From the entrance to the hallway, up to the living room, every place the eye can see is tidied up cleanly. The interior hasn't changed. However, only Yukinoshita recognized the origin for this uncomfortable atmosphere.

Yukinoshita's gaze rested on the sideboard on the armrest of the sofa. Following her gaze, I saw that there was something that resembled dry pasta on it. I had also seen something similar in Yuigahama's room. If I recall correctly, the general name for it is room fragrance or something along those lines.

Taking a closer look at it, I noticed a wooden stick that looked like a Pretz stuck upright in it. The base of the bottle was also filled with something that looked like medicine. This was probably the source of that fragrance. The "pasta" would absorb the liquid, and the fragrance would then get released into the air. Well, that's most likely how it worked.

The light fragrance was flower-scented. It was sweet, florid, and also felt a little elegant.

However, what was meant to be a fragrance to calm people down was currently wavering with unrest.

An alien feeling that I didn't feel the last time I was here assaulted my nose. The atmosphere spelled out the fact that someone else was here. Yukinoshita Haruno's stay here had left a slight influence on this place.

Ah, so this is the source of my discomfort.

I probably noticed it because this scent was not typical for someone like Yukinoshita. Most likely, this fragrance was brought here by Haruno. From an extremely subjective viewpoint, the cleanliness, or coolness, of mint or lemon would be closer to Yukinoshita's image.

In truth, it seems Yukinoshita also did not like this fragrance. She had a slight frown on her face. Just like a cat whose territory had been invaded, she repeatedly glanced at the source as she made her way to the kitchen and began boiling water. She was probably preparing black tea to welcome her guests.

In contrast with Yukinoshita, who didn't seem very happy, Haruno seemed to be the total opposite. She hummed a song as she opened the fridge and took out a wine bottle. She then grabbed a champagne glass and, with a skip and a hop, dove back onto the sofa and laid there.

She placed her bottle and glass on the sideboard, stretched out her long legs with her short skirt, and laid there comfortably.

I tried my very best not to look at her, so my eyes drifted about. Haruno waved her hands as though she was trying to get my attention.

"Well, sit wherever you like."

"Why is my sister taking care of the guests?"

Sighing as though stunned by her actions, Yukinoshita had returned from the kitchen. She began setting the black tea on the short table. There were four cups of black tea prepared. Looking at how they were arranged, we more or less found our places.

Haruno reached for the cup of black tea in front of her, and let out a satisfied sigh after drinking a huge gulp from it. Then, she poured wine into her champagne glass. Yuigahama was looking at her with a seemingly huge amount of interest.

"Is that wine? Do you drink often?"

“I drink everything, whether its beer, wine, Chinese rice wine, whiskey, or Japanese sake.”

“Heehh, that’s cool. I always thought it was cool for someone to know so much about alcohol.”

Hearing Yuigahama’s words, Haruno laughed.

“I don’t think I really know it all that well. Whenever I go to a store, I find that just about everything there is nice, so I just tell people about my preferences and let them choose for me.”

Whoa, what’s this? That sounded surprisingly cool, the way she puts it...

It must be that, when you start talking a bit, but then you get the urge to talk more. University students who know alcohol and get very talkative at the mention of Moriizou, Maou, or Dassai are extraordinarily annoying.

On that point, Haruno’s method choosing alcohol was indeed smart in a certain sense.

People who lecture on their vast knowledge of alcohol are rather annoying, especially those who badmouth Japanese beer in favor of Belgium beer. This type of symptom that would appear in the second year a person becomes a working adult should be given the term “Shanibyou!” Why is it that they like to try and showcase their knowledge to us small boys who didn’t even ask for any sort of explanation...? Well, I guess it can’t be helped. That’s just how guys currently like to exert their superiority over others.

However, it is indeed a little sad if one doesn’t even have an ounce of knowledge about alcohol. For example...

“Sommelier! It’s a sommelier!”

“Don’t go off spouting nonsense if you don’t really know it...”

Kids with a dying vocabulary, like the sparkly eyed Yuigahama, make me wonder what's with them. Recently, the vocabulary of young people has been so limited that it’s become a seriously terrible situation. Really, it’s horrible.

Unexplainable levels of awful.

However, the effects of alcohol should not be taken lightly. There are people in this world who make use of drinks to socialize and communicate with others, hence the effects of alcohol should be recognized. For example, even after saying something unforgivably rude, there's a tendency to see people blaming everything on alcohol as a safe way of getting out. It isn't. The person on the receiving end will never forget it.

In any case, it is a fact that Haruno is much more approachable because she's drunk right now.

Because of this, Yuigahama probably found it easier to find something to discuss that would close the sense of distance between them both.

After swirling around the glass of champagne and immersing herself in its aroma, Haruno gulped down her drink.

Her actions was surprisingly pleasing to the eye. Yuigahama, having watched that, let out an exclamation.

“Wow... So cool...”

“...Cool?”

Well, not really, but Haruno was herself, rather cool. Though, I don't approve of openly praising her like that... If it was the act of drinking itself that was cool, then does that mean that the group of uncles, who for some reason have their front teeth missing, who normally gather in large groups at the Nakayama race course, are cool as well? Are those uncles who begin drinking at daybreak at Koiwa and Kasai considered cool too?

However, Yuigahama did not seem to have such images of adults lost in their own regrets. Rather, she was looking at Haruno with eyes sparkling with respect.

“I feel that, it feels really cool if a woman can drink!”

“I am telling you, you should toss this notion aside as soon as possible...”

Seriously! You are really making me worry! When you enter college, you should choose your clique wisely! Make that a promise with your older brother!

In any case, I could sort of understand what Yuigahama meant by cool. We more or less had some sort of longing towards these actions which have a feel of adulthood.

Whether it was alcohol or tobacco, these were things that society had ruled that only adults may enjoy. Hence, maybe all that we have was just mere yearning for it. Longing because we wanted

to use these items and obtain the recognition of those around us to show that we were, indeed, adults in an easy, instant, and convenient way.

However, because I have someone close to me who became a mess due to beer, I did not really feel that way... For example, my family. I would hear my dad stumbling and bumbling about as he entered the door, or hear about how he strips himself when drinking with clients and stuff like that. It makes me feel like, "What...?" every time I hear stories about him.

Thinking of this, I let out a dry sigh.

My sigh overlapped with someone else's. Looking about, Yukinoshita once again went into the kitchen, but this time she came back holding a bottle of mineral water. She ferried the water over to Haruno who held out her bottle of champagne in exchange.

"The act of drinking is not cool. Being someone who knows how to enjoy themselves through moderation and decency is cool."

"That's right. Just like me."

Haruno giggled away as she clung tightly to her bottle of alcohol and refused to hand it over. With an astonished look, Yukinoshita placed her hand on her hip.

"Still going to drink?"

“There are days where you just feel like drinking. Furthermore, alcohol is the lubricant of life.”

“...I think that it’s the source of trouble most of the time.”

That’s right. Those who self-proclaim themselves to be lubricants are usually good-for-nothings. Even in interviews, if one were to use the word lubricant as an example to describe themselves, they were more or less done for, because all that companies have ever wanted is a gear in the cog-wheel!

However, occasionally, there were indeed people like that. People who were slippery like lubricants. You might call them people who would take things in their own stride and pay no attention to matters around them.

In truth, Haruno had treated Yukinoshita’s chiding like a passing wind and sidestepped it. Once more, she took another gulp from her glass.

“It’s okay, I will listen.”

From the way she said it, she didn’t sound even a little bit drunk. There was a certain calm to her voice. It seemed that Yukinoshita had noticed this as well. She lowered the bottle that she had been holding out to Haruno and smiled thinly.

“...Well, you aren’t someone who would listen to others when you are sober.”

“That’s riiight!”

Haruno playfully rotated and peered through the thin glass, locking eyes with Yukinoshita. Even through a light, golden filter, the sharpness in her eyes have not softened one bit.

“So? What doo you want to say?”

Haruno’s thin fingertips flicked against the bottom of the glass as she asked in a light-hearted manner. Even though that sound was both silent and beautiful, it felt very much like treading on thin ice. What remained was

simply the sound of bubbles rushing about like a whisper.

We waited for the echoes to fade away. The time we spent waking seemed like it would not permit any outsiders to intervene. Yuigahama and I remained silent. Even the sound of our breathing ceased.

She had indeed told us previously that she wanted us to watch. Therefore, all we did was remain silent, and waited for her to continue. My gaze wandered about. When our eyes met, I looked away unnaturally. In the end, my eyes rested on Yukinoshita's lips.

In this moment, Yukinoshita remained silent and accepted Haruno's gaze. She opened her mouth deliberately, as though carefully choosing her words, then closed it once more.

This movement so subtle that I couldn't tell if she was inhaling or exhaling.

However, her show of hesitation was only for a brief moment.

Yukinoshita's lips curled into a slight smile, and her mouth, which was tightly sealed a while ago, gradually opened.

"It's about us... About our future."

Her voice was cold yet clear. It was not loud, but surprisingly, it made us feel as though it was echoing throughout the room. Or, perhaps, it was because of her gaze that gave us this illusion. It was a gaze that showed us that she would not run, that she would face it head on. It was a gaze that would shake the listener's heart.

Haruno was naturally not an exception, and she let out a cry of admiration.

"So, you wanted me to listen to that as well."

"Yes... It's about me and you, as well as mother."

As though provoked by something in her words, Haruno squinted her eyes and tilted her head. After a brief moment of thinking, she conducted herself as if she was convinced of something, and then slackened her shoulders

disappointedly.

“Oh... That? That’s not really what I wanted to hear.”

She sighed and shifted her gaze.

“Right?”

She tossed the question towards Yuigahama as though seeking her agreement. Her gaze made Yuigahama stiffen her body. As though trying to shield Yuigahama, Yukinoshita stepped in front of her.

“Even so, I want you to hear me out.”

Her voice contained a strong determination. Her tone was no different from usual. She was by no means loud, and her tempo wasn’t rushed at all.

It was precisely because of this that one could see her resolve.

There was no mistaking it. She was not lost or troubled. Yukinoshita Yukino’s words had truly shook Haruno.

From her laying position on the sofa, she gradually got up and placed the glass of champagne back onto the sideboard. Her actions alone were enough to urge Yukinoshita to continue.

“That’s why I am going back home. Then, I am going to have a proper discussion with mother about my future path... Even if it may not come true, I don’t want to leave behind any regrets.”

Having talked up to that point, Yukinoshita cut her sentence short.

Her long eyelashes drooped downwards and her breathing started to shake. Her slender shoulders shook, and her long, glossy hair flowed downwards, hiding her face. Thus, in this manner, no one could see her expression. Nevertheless, Yukinoshita continued on.

“At least... I want to say what I want to say properly, so that I can convince myself.”

With that, she tossed her hair back up.

Her now exposed white and slender face floated a gentle smile.

Seeing this expression, I couldn't help but hold my breath. I probably wasn't the only one, Yuigahama might also be as well.

Yukinoshita's figure right now was beautiful. Her clear blue eyes exhibited her clear resolve, and her cheeks were stained a light red as though she was shy.

It seemed that no one was able to respond to her words, and that's probably because of how she was right now.

There was only one person, only Haruno, who sounded like she was sighing as she exhaled.

Hearing that, I looked in her direction, and once more I held my breath. On her face was an expression that was just like Yukinoshita's.

A smile that was gentle yet lustrous. Even so, there was a coldness to it.

"I see. So this is Yukino's answer."

Haruno spoke softly through her gentle smile.

Yukinoshita nodded her head silently in reply. However, Haruno looked at her with her usual cold stare, as though doing some brief evaluation of her. Even so, she sighed shortly after seeing Yukinoshita's unmoving figure.

"Well, alright. At least it's better than before."

She said it as though she was talking to herself. She then reached out for her glass once more.

After downing the rest of the alcohol, she brought the empty glass in front of her.

I don't know what was being reflected to Haruno through the curved surface

of the glass. All I could see were the droplets of wine that trailed to the bottom of the glass.

Looking at this in satisfaction, Haruno nodded her head lightly.

“I understand. Since Yukino is being serious, I shall help you out.”

“...Help?”

As though remembering some unease from before, Yukinoshita shot her a dubious look. Haruno smiled in return.

“Yes.”

Although she received such an extremely short reply of affirmation, Yukinoshita’s expression did not brighten up. I was the same too. As long as one had some slight understanding of the person known as Yukinoshita Haruno, they would know that they could not simply take her words purely in the literal sense.

Hence, even though I know I would be interrupting, I interjected.

“...Well, what do you mean?”

“My mother would not easily change her plans, so conversing with her on this matter would take a fair bit of time. Therefore, I will throw in a few words here and there when I see the opportunity to do so.”

Hearing my question, Haruno winked at me playfully as she answered. It was as Haruno had said, Yukinoshita’s mother was not someone who would change her mind on a whim. Although I hadn’t really talked with her, or really gotten to know her, I could easily tell from her conversation with Yukinoshita that she was such a person. Just from my impression, I felt that she was someone who didn’t need the opinion of others.

That person may seem like she was speaking to her own daughter, but in reality, she was really talking to herself. That was the feeling that one would probably get if they got into a conversation

with her. If it was just Yukinoshita who talked to her, there probably wouldn't really be a conversation going on between them.

That stubborn personality was very close to how I viewed Yukinoshita when I first met her. Her way of ignoring the opinion of others was also very much like Haruno. As expected of a mother and her daughters.

If that was so, then Haruno, as the elder sister, would probably have spent more time with her mother. Her aid might even have some effect on the outcome.

Just as I thought that, Haruno suddenly burst out.

“That being said, I don't know if it will be of any use!”

As she laughed at her words, she turned the bottle of wine upside down and poured the remainder of what's left into her glass. Now, I really have no idea whether this person would even be of help.

Holding her laughter, Haruno emptied the contents of her glass into her stomach. Then, her expression completely changed as she looked upon Yukinoshita with serious eyes.

“However, you better be prepared that you might not be returning here for quite a while.”

“...That's true.”

“Eh?”

Hearing Yuigahama's sudden comment, Haruno let out a strained laugh.

“I was sent here because she was worried about Yukino. If she's coming back, she's not going to be able to come back so easily.”

To put it in another way, that would be surveillance.

No, maybe it was just supervision. Well, she was, after all, not an adult yet. If you want to say it's common sense, then it's common sense. Your parents are

called parents because they are supposed to watch over you.

“Pack your luggage. Also, contact mother as well. There is a need to make some preparations if you are going to go back so suddenly.”

Ah, that was what Grandma often said too when my father decided to go back to his old house on a whim. Then, she would proceed to stuff me with food. My dear grandma, no matter how young I may be, there’s still a limit as to how much I can eat...

Anyway, now was not the time for me to reminisce about the Hikigaya household. The important point was about the situation surrounding the Yukinoshita household. Yukinoshita thought for a little bit and nodded her head.

“Yes, I will do that then.”

“Well, since Yukino is coming back... I can stay here for the time being, right?”

“It’s not my private property anyway, do as you please.”

Yukinoshita answered without hesitation upon being asked. Haruno suddenly became solemn and expressed her thanks.

“Thank you. It would be a bother for me to prepare this and that. Yukino, go and pack your things.”

From her tone, it looked like Yukinoshita would be away for a long time. When that comes, she'll have to move all her things to go to school from there. To a male like me, I can't help but think, "Is that much preparation necessary?" but it probably isn't the same for girls. For example, a woman would say that things like clothes, skin care products, and hairdryer are some of the many indispensable things that they would need. When Komachi would travel, she would also bring along a sizable amount of luggage.

Although I didn’t quite understand the trouble, Yuigahama was probably quite clear on this. She raised her hand.

“Ah! Let me help too!”

“It’s alright. There’s no need to trouble you so much...”

“It’s alright, don’t be so polite! In fact, I really want to help! I love packing things!”

“But...”

As Yuigahama badgered her with cries of “It’s okay, it’s fine,” Yukinoshita appeared sheepish as she replied, “No need, no need.” There seemed to be no end to this stalemate. Just as I thought if they were going to continue for the rest of my life, Yuigahama's voice quieted, and she looked downward.

“Because it seems that other than this, there’s nothing else I can help with...”

The voice that was barely like a whisper sounded depressed. Yuigahama probably noticed this and quickly raised her head. With a laugh, she smiled powerlessly.

Watching her like this, Yukinoshita looked apologetic, and was at a loss for words.

For some reason, I found this scene hard to watch. To interrupt what Yukinoshita herself had decided to do was the opposite of what she had wished for. Yet, the nobleness of Yuigahama wanting to do something to help was respectable. If so, then what is it that I should do?

Even though I didn’t think about it carefully, words still slipped out of my mouth.

“Isn’t that just fine? Free labor is precious nowadays. Even black companies are getting pressured by the Labor Standard Inspection Office.”

Just like how I would casually spout vague stuff normally, this was also something that sounded like what I would say. As long as there was an end, things like processes didn’t matter anymore. This was a pretty good catch phrase. Exploitation, unpaid overtime, two days rest a week (I didn’t say you can rest two days each week)... Ah, all of this had such a wonderful ring to

it.

The only one who entered into such joy was me. Naturally! Both Yuigahama and Yukinoshita looked at me with a bitter expression. There was only one person, Haruno, who was still smiling away.

“Yes, isn’t that just fine too? Why not stay here for the night too? If Yukino is going to go back to her parent’s house, she won’t be coming back so easily.”

The way she said it sounded very elder sister-ish. It was a lot gentler than normal, and for some reason, there was a hint of sadness in it too. Indeed, after Yukinoshita returned to her parent’s house, there will be fewer opportunities for Yuigahama to stay the night here.

That itself was a fact that would also mark the beginning of many changes. It was enough to soften the attitude of Yukinoshita, who had been quite obstinate and stubborn. Yukinoshita, who had been refusing Yuigahama’s help up till now, arched her back and looked at her with upturned eyes.

“...May I trouble you then?”

Her request was made formally, but there also a tinge of shyness in it and her cheeks were stained a slight red. Towards Yukinoshita’s humble request, Yuigahama smiled contentedly and lightly smacked Yukinoshita’s leg.

“Of course!”

“Thank you...”

I didn’t know whether it was because she didn’t like people hitting her leg, or due to Yuigahama’s overly huge grin, but Yukinoshita quickly thanked her and stealthily averted her gaze. Her gaze which was on Haruno.

“If Yuigahama is going to stay, we don’t have enough guest blankets.”

As she said that, Yukinoshita accidentally peeked at Haruno. In response, Haruno smacked the sofa that she was sitting on.

“If it’s just one night, I don’t mind sleeping here. I will probably be drinking here alone all night anyway.”

Yukinoshita let out a short sigh at Haruno, who was shaking her empty bottle as she replied.

“I see... Then, it’s settled.”

“Yup.”

Haruno stood up immediately, as though to say that that was the end of that discussion.

“I am going to go to the convenience store. Want anything?”

The two people that question was directed towards shook their heads. In response, Haruno nodded, took the coat hanging on the chair, and headed towards the door. As my eyes followed her, the clock came into view as well. Perfect timing. Just the right time for me to say goodbye as well.

“Well then, I am going home as well.”

The way it is, if I stay any longer, then I would have to help Yukinoshita pack her luggage. If that happens, then I am going to come into contact with various items that only females possess, and then, in the style of Mitsuru Adachi’s^[7] male protagonist, I will probably be crying out “mufu.” I may even find myself staying the night if I am really unlucky.

That last point is something I want to avoid most of all! If not, my face will turn into the likes of Kunimi or Tatsuya^[8]! Come to think of it, under normal circumstances, when in a girl’s room, you would feel as though you shouldn’t belong there, and that makes you uneasy...

As though I was chasing after Haruno, I also stood up. In response to that, Yukinoshita and Yuigahama both straightened themselves and followed me. Seems like they are going to send me off. As I bent down to put on my shoes at the entrance, Haruno seemed to have already put on her sandals and left. So wonderful... Even at times like this, she still won’t bother to match the

feelings of other people.

Then again, I didn't want to leave together with her and have an awkward time in the elevator. I took my time to put on my shoes, just to give myself a little more space.

At this moment, someone quietly passed me a shoehorn.

"Ah, thank you."

With gratitude, I turned my head and saw Yukinoshita's mysterious expression. She slackened her grip on the shoehorn, and as though not knowing where to put her hands, let them wave about in the air before putting them in front of her chest.

"My apologies. To have made you stay and join us in our ramblings..."

I nodded my head in reply to the words that she spoke softly with her head down. It was, indeed, rather vague. In truth, nothing major was going to happen. To be honest, it was just something extremely natural like Yukinoshita reaffirming that she was going to do something through her own strength.

"It's nothing. It was something you needed to do anyway."

I fear that saying that was not only for her, but for me as well.

Standing up, I tapped the front of my shoes to check that I had put it on well. I passed back the shoehorn that I finished using.

With a word of thanks, Yukinoshita took it.

"Well, I didn't do much anyway. If you want to thank someone, thank Yuigahama. Good luck with the luggage."

The modest smile she gave as she said her thanks made me feel a little uneasy, so I shifted my gaze away. I passed on the conversation from Yukinoshita to Yuigahama. Thus, Yuigahama clenched her fists tightly in front of her chest.

“Leave it to me! If it’s about tidying, I am the one for it!”

The implicit meaning seemed to be that she was also very good at other household chores... Ah. Although, my impression of her was that she wasn’t really that good at tidying things. However, if even she could overcome her poor cooking skills, then she would probably learn to be able to do other things.

It may be a little hard to notice, or the details may be too subtle and easily missed, but we were more or less changing little by little.

I rested my hand on the doorknob, and turned my head.

“Well, see you later.”

Yuigahama waved her hands in front of her chest, and Yukinoshita waved her hands slightly from a position that was just slightly above her hips.

“Okay! See you soon, Hikki!”

“Take care on your way back.”

Being sent off like this made me feel somewhat embarrassed. After giving a short, silent bow in return, I quickly stepped out.

2-3

Walking out alone from the elevator, I noticed that the entrance area was still engulfed in silence.

That was natural, of course, for it was already really late at night. There wouldn't be a lot of people entering or leaving.

This is a residential area in which few people lived. It was only natural because this was an area with high-cost condominiums. Thus, when night comes, this place would have very few people roaming about. Having now experienced this first hand, I took a step towards the entrance hall.

At this time, a person who was dressed in such a way that didn't blend at all with the expensive buildings came into my view. It was Yukinoshita Haruno who had left before me. She was clad in a light-pink, horizontally striped hooded parker that looked very fluffy. Though she seemed all zipped up, the area at her chest was slightly open. Furthermore, a pair of supple and nice legs extended out from her lumpy short pants too. Her light coat seemed to be a stark contrast to the stylish interior hall. That unbalance was brought about by her dangerous beauty.

Just her looks alone was enough to attract one's attention. Isn't she just a little too sly with her seemingly careless dress-up too...?

Although she wasn't someone I would proactively start a conversation with, it would be extremely rude to just ignore her when she was standing right there at the door. Furthermore, she was also smiling and waving at me, so I had no choice but to approach her.

"...I thought you left first."

Hearing my words, Haruno smiled and whispered mysteriously.

"If I do it this way, doesn't it feel like a rendezvous?"

"...I think you meant ambush."

Although both actions were about waiting, the difference was like Amin^[9] and Yumin^[10]. No, thinking carefully, regardless of whether it was waiting or ambushing, although the extent was different, the outcome was the same. Both were very frightening...

However, the most frightening bit was probably still Yukinoshita Haruno. She began to walk, believing without a doubt that I would follow her. After all, the closest convenience store would be at the station. That was where I was headed to, so I suppose I didn't really mind...

I followed after her. As we approached the main street, the winter chill blew. The chills struck my cheeks, and Haruno retracted her neck and buried her face in her coat. All of a sudden, as though she noticed something, she took a sniff, looked at her coat's collar and made a face.

As I watched her and wondered what had happened, Haruno suddenly raised her hands.

"Hm."

She didn't sound too happy and stood beside me. Her hands continued to remain in that pose as she waved them about as though trying to tell me something.

Eh.... What was she trying to do...?

Wait, calm down. ...Is she trying to get me to hold her hands? Eh? Why? Is she going to take my fingerprints? That must be it. It's the spell card, Reasoning^[11]! Oh no, my iPhone's going to be used to pay for in-app purchases! Stop it! Don't keep drawing till you pull a 5 star card!

My heart began to grow wild from my thoughts, and I looked away in a fluster. It was at this moment where I thought I smelt tobacco.

"Ah... Is there a smell?"

"Yes."

Although she replied me, Haruno's attention was not focused on me at all. As she retracted her hands, she made another sniffing noise.

The smell probably stuck onto Haruno's coat when she was out at the shops drinking. I sort of remembered something like that when I was working part-time at an Izakaya. She probably would want to take a shower and wash her hair to get rid of the smell.

Although smokers were already accustomed to this, and really did not mind, the smell was still rather nauseating to non-smokers. In particular, the smell of this tobacco brand^[12], which caused Haruno to care so much about it, had a very heavy tar smell. In fact, it smelt like the strong style tobacco of the old Showa period. It might be a bit better if the smell was from those that had a mint, vanilla, or fruity smell; or those cigarettes that were more likely to be accepted by females.

...In that case, the people she drank with were probably guys.

Were they male? If it was a male, then was it her boyfriend? Eh? Seriously? She has a boyfriend? Ah, but she was a young female after all. Having a boyfriend was not all that strange. However, whenever I come across information like this, I would somehow feel bitterness in my heart. It was the same feeling as when I saw news of a Seiyuu getting married. Well, I really hope they would stop writing "an important notice" on their blog. I would really be very hurt. I would really collapse on the floor from seeing it. In fact, after I get up, I would fall again once more, and, in the end, wind up rolling about on the floor.

Anyway, it's not as though I have been dealt an unspeakable blow. Truth be told, I really am not shocked at all! Because, you know, that! I am just shocked from hearing something that I had not expected! I-It's not like I have feelings for you or anything!

That was dangerous... If that person was someone closer to me, then I would really have gotten a huge shock. To be precise, that would be like Komachi, or Komachi, or Komachi. Oh, I am still missing someone. That would be Komachi!

Having briefly dodged reality, I managed to calm myself a little. As expected of Komachi to have such a chilling effect on a frantic heart. Don't tell me, is she like those medications that relieve heart pain?!

Putting that aside, the fact that there was such a strong smell on Haruno's coat would mean that she had stayed in the store for a pretty long time. Although I think that she had tried to use some sort of smell remover, the smell on it was so thick it couldn't really be removed.

"You seemed to have drank for quite a while."

"Yes. They refused to let me go home. I thought we were going to drink till morning."

Haruno looked fed up as she sighed.

"Ah, I see."

Drinking until morning really was obscene. She could've just substituted that with the television program "Asamade nama"^[13] which I felt was also a definite erotic program. Thanks to this program, I now think that the program, "Morning! It's time to taste it again"^[14] was also erotic.

Come to think of it, this was something that I didn't want to know about Haruno at all... Was the Hachiman cannon of Hachiman Weekly going to explode again? Eh, actually, this time, I think it might be a salute of guns. There are times that we do get scoops that are worthy of celebrating! Anyway, now was not the time for me to be spouting off ridiculous excuses into the air. In fact, I should be grateful that Haruno had so much to drink that she was much easier to deal with today. There was no reason for me to be shocked at all.

In fact, if it was the old Haruno, she would definitely not let up with her questioning to get to the bottom of the matter. Today, however, she looked happy-go-lucky. I slowed down to take a clearer look at her expression, and in front of me, Haruno let out a short "ahhh" as she stretched her back.

"However, it was great that they did let me go home early. As a result, I was

able to hear what Yukino had to tell me.”

“...”

I couldn't do anything but keep my mouth shut in front of Haruno, who was sighing in relief. Perhaps she noticed my silence, because she turned her head and said, “Hmm?” Her eyes seemed to be asking me for the meaning of my silence.

I shook my head lightly, indicating that there was nothing to it.

“...It's nothing, I just thought it was a little unexpected.”

Hearing this, Haruno turned by pivoting herself on her heel, and spoke playfully.

“What iiis it?”

“If I had to say specifically... it would be that I didn't expect you to listen to her so honestly.”

“Oh, that. Isn't that normal? I am her sister after all.”

She smiled dumbly, and just when I thought she was going to start walking backwards, she turned around once more.

“Even Hikigaya would listen to Komachi's request, right?”

“...I guess so. When you put it that way, I guess I sort of can begin to understand.”

Indeed, if it was about me and Komachi, then there was nothing wrong with the way she explained it. If it was Komachi's wish, especially a wish from the bottom of her heart, I think I would agree to it without a second thought. I hummed as I thought about the comparison to Komachi. Hearing me, Haruno broke into a laugh.

“Right? Since Yukino has made her decision, then I would support her, whether it's right or wrong.”

“Well, normally, wouldn’t you stop her if she’s wrong?”

“That girl won’t listen to me. The most important thing is that it doesn’t matter whether she’s right or wrong. There’s no difference, whether she proceeds smoothly, or gives up ultimately...”

I couldn’t see the expression she held after she said that in a low voice. I was a little curious to see what kind of look she had, so I stepped up my pace to catch up to her.

Yet, the distance between us remained the same. I remained at a distance where I could just barely see her side profile. In the end, after we passed the overhead bridge that goes through the main street, we finally arrived at the small pathway that leads through the park.

Amongst the large patches of withered grass stood rows of neatly aligned orange lamps.

With every step we took forward, the lamps casted a warm light, and cold shadow, on Haruno’s white face. This made her expression difficult to read, just like her blurry words that feel contradictory.

Passing through the field that was covered with trees, my field of vision suddenly cleared. The promenade that goes through the center of the park came into view.

As we approached the long path that stretched along the fountains, Haruno slowed down and looked up at the sky.

Lured by her gaze, I followed her eyes and saw a crescent moon. It was curved like a bow, hanging in the sky. Beneath it, the condominium’s twin-like towers were faintly illuminated.

Hopping along the uneven path, Haruno turned and looked at me.

“You will only become an adult when you have learned to give up lots of things.”

“Ah, is that so...”

Narrowing your scope of the world would also imply that you are growing up. It is only when you reduce your list of options, and remove the possibilities, that you become able to carve out a more accurate depiction of your future. I could understand where she was coming from. Perhaps Yukinoshita's decision was also something similar to that.

It's just that, when Haruno said it, her eyes seemed a little lonely. They appeared to be colored in a shade of sadness, which made me notice them a lot more. Or, perhaps, it was because her tone sounded faraway, as though it was talking about some other matter.

"...Is it because you have some similar experience?"

"Hm, I wonder."

Haruno laughed again.

"I am not talking about myself. We are talking about Yukino now... This is probably the first time I have heard her voice it out properly. Hikigaya, you will watch over her too."

I had the feeling that she was telling me to not intervene in this. The nuance in the way she said it was similar to that time when she had called me kind over the phone.

In the first place, I had no plans to do anything but to just respect her resolve. I didn't have any intention to interfere and raise my own opinion. Hence, I nodded my head in agreement to Haruno's words.

This was probably what it meant to hope, and to be the target of someone's hope. Since Yukinoshita Haruno had already confirmed this, I don't think there was any need to find any more problems with that.

"...You are right."

Haruno probably was content with my answer, because she placed her hands lightly behind her back, puffed out her chest, and laughed happily.

“Hehe, I have shown my sisterly side once again.”

“How about always being a good older sister?”

“No way.”

She replied to me in a semi-joking manner, but her reply was instant.

“I am different from you. For you, you have always been a good older brother.”

“...Of course, I am her older brother after all.”

Why is she saying all this? It was something so obvious and natural. Ever since Komachi was born, I have always been her older brother. I could now be considered a “veteran elder brother.” I didn’t even have to consciously think about it, I have always been living my life as the older brother. In fact, I am rather proud of it.

Haruno looked at me for a brief moment before bursting into laughter.

“I see. Isn’t that nice, being an older brother. I want one like that too!”

Haruno started cracking up. Was it really that funny? She placed her hands around my shoulders, probably because of her drunken state. Since she leaned against me to support her weight, I took notice of her soft skin and nice fragrance.

“Man... drunkards really are annoying...”

“I am not drunk, I am not drunk.”

Although I wanted to gently push her arm off me, she managed to keep up with me through her unsteady and tottering steps, making it impossible for me to shake her off.

As we walked on in this manner, we eventually came to the end of the pathway and arrived at the street leading to the front of the station.

The outlet mall was just two streets away. Although it was already closed, the pathway that led to the plaza in front of the station was still illuminated by warm lights. If we were to continue walking in this fashion, I would surely be conscious about other people looking at us.

We arrived at a junction. To the left was the convenience store, and to the right was the station.

There, with much effort, I managed to tear Haruno off my shoulders and step away from her.

“Erm... you won’t have any problems returning, right?”

“Ahhhh, so kind. So amazing. Such a gentleman! Gentleman!”

She slapped my shoulder in a manner that felt as though she was saying, “You really are a friend of those gentlemen who are especially good at being kind to girls!” ...Annoying. I managed to move my stiff face and made an unhappy expression.

“It’s not like I’m a gentleman or anything. I will be going home now.”

Hearing that, Haruno laughed happily again.

“It’s okay.”

After reeling in her laughter, the voice in which she replied to me was extremely calm. Her eyes, which had been drifting about aimlessly, were now coldly looking at me with a piercing stare.

“How can I be drunk just from that?”

Although that was what she said, I didn’t know how much she had to drink. However, I could tell from her voice that it was different now. Her voice contained no trace of trembling or intensity. In fact, it sounded just like the old, usual Yukinoshita Haruno. It was her usual voice. A beautiful, alluring one that would put the listener into a stupor before she went in for the kill.

Hence, in order to avoid this fate, I took my usual stance as well. As I sighed

and avoided her gaze, I replied to her in a jesting, sarcastic tone that was just barely audible.

“...That’s what all drunkards say.”

“I really am not drunk... In fact, it may even be impossible for me to get drunk.”

Her voice, which leaked out in a whisper, captivated me, and I found myself looking at her again. She, however, was looking at some faraway place. Her face was slightly colored, but her eyes were cold. Her lips were curled, but she didn’t look like she was smiling at all.

“No matter how one drinks, there will always be a calm self. That calm self would be able to clearly see one’s present state. No matter how I laugh, or make merry, you will subconsciously feel that it has nothing to do with you.”

At this moment, it felt as though Haruno was describing something that was unrelated to her, for her voice had a ring of distance to it. Although she was clearly talking about herself, it felt extremely objective, which made one wonder where the subjective aspect of it was. Due to this unprompted remark by her that came so suddenly, it made one feel as though both truth and lies were mixed into it.

Noticing that I was looking at her silently, Haruno stuck her tongue out to brush it over. Through this action, it was clear that she intended the above to be merely a joke.

“...So after I keep drinking a lot, I would feel disgusted and vomit before passing out.”

“You really are the worst example of a drunkard...”

“Really, I am the worst.”

Following up on my comment, Haruno covered her mouth with her hand as she laughed. Then, she began walking forward again, and away from me. Just as I thought she was going to go to the convenience store, she turned and

looked at me.

From the slight distance between us, her smile seemed to encompass both pity and affection. This smile that was the kindest that I had seen to this day.

“However, you are probably like me. Let me make a prediction... You will never be drunk.”

“Don’t be like that. In the future, I will be a super corporate slave that begrudgingly gives his all at those drinking parties, otherwise I would be a super high-class full time house-husband that uses his wife’s money to go drinking during lunchtime.”

Instead of a customary goodbye, I responded to her with turbulent words and an unpleasant, intrepid smile. With that, I began to walk.

Turning my head around, I saw that Haruno was still rooted there, sending me off with a more innocent than usual look. At a comfortable three steps distance, something which didn’t matter slipped from my mouth.

“...You know, I still think you are drunk.”

Hearing that, she showed me a smile that seemed as though she was truly happy. It was as though the real Yukinoshita Haruno had been exposed. I thought that she was definitely drunk.

With a slightly puzzled expression, she replied, “I wonder... Well, you can take it as that, yup.”

As though trying to hide her smile that had suddenly appeared, she brought her hands to her mouth and nodded innocently.

After giving a simple goodbye in reply to Haruno, who was now waving her hands, I turned myself away.

That person, under the pretense of alcohol, had put on another mask. At the same time, she was also spouting some great lie about how alcohol was the lubricating oil that could let one speak freely.

Although she would never show her true self, in the end, she did intentionally reveal her flaw. Yet, I would never ever get to know the real her.

If I could evaluate her contradictory behavior, or her crafty way of dealing with the world, then I suppose that she could truly be called an adult. To be able to pretend to not hear the last bit that I had said before I could contain myself, she, at the very least, was much better than me.

It was now really late into the night, and the city was asleep in the quiet darkness. The sources of light that I could see were from buildings and tail lights which were from taxis that were waiting to be flagged down. As those taxis pulled away from the station, the noise grew fainter.

Due to this silence, there was one sentence that kept repeating itself in my head.

You will never be drunk.

I have a feeling her prediction will come true.

Interlude

It's true that I love tidying things.

Though, I'm not very good at it.

However, I still enjoy it.

I like to neatly arrange things that are flipped over, scattered, neglected, and helpless.

Because, when I do that, it makes me feel great.

It was just the two of us left in this room. After having a short discussion about where to start packing, she went out to prepare some empty boxes and trash bags. I was left alone to wait.

Looking around the room, I could see it was very neatly sorted, almost as if there was no need to clean anything up. It was different from my room. It felt like there weren't as many unnecessary things.

However, the corner of the room, next to the end of the bed, was cluttered.

Things like stuffed toys, or items relating to cats, all sat in that corner. They were all probably things that she liked or found important to her. It all sat there, neatly arranged.

In a room of monotone colors mixed with various sorts of refreshing ones, such as blue, light blue, and silver, that corner of the room stood out and showed the gentleness of a girl.

I found it very cute and heartwarming as I caressed a stuffed toy panda.

Shortly after, I found a plastic bag that seemed to be hidden behind the

stuffed toy.

It was flat, black, and rectangular, making it feel somewhat out of place in this cute corner.

I think I've seen this bag somewhere before, so I instinctively reached for it.

I opened it a little. Peeking through the small gap, I could see a souvenir photo. I also had a similar one like this too. It was something that I got at the end of an attraction when I went out with my family.

I knew that it was best not to look at it, yet I opened it nonetheless.

There were two familiar looking people in the photo.

Their faces looked slightly surprised, and somewhat ridiculous, but definitely happy.

And then, my body curled up, my eyes shut tightly to hide my existence, but, my hand clenched tightly into a fist.

All I could think of at that point was, "Ah, it's just as I expected."

I wonder if the two of them had properly talked about it. I've always worried about if they have, but my honest thoughts were that of relief.

I thought it was cute. This photo, how she carefully cared for it, and the act of hiding it, it was all cute.

That's why I put it back gently, in its original place.

I should forget it.

I should pretend that I never saw it.

I can't pretend that this moment never happened, but I could at least forget.

Surely, she would do the same.

This photo was without any sort of decoration, but still meticulously placed within the depth of her treasures.

She kept her feelings here without even thinking how she would put them into words, nor even conceiving how she would put them into actions.

Perhaps it would be better for me to ask about it instead. I could ask her in a joking manner, like I was teasing her. Then, I could laugh and tell her that I'll be rooting for her, or something like that.

Yet, if I were to really do that, then maybe everything would come to an end.

If I asked and questioned her, she would certainly deny it and say that it's not like that, that such a thing is impossible, then end it as is there.

She won't acknowledge it, will overlook it, ignore it, and neglect it.

She'll pretend that none of it ever happened and forget about it, then lose all of it.

That's why I definitely won't ask her.

It is unfair to hear her feelings.

It is unfair to say one's feelings.

But, that's because it's scary to know his feelings.

It would be most unfair to blame her.

The truth is that I've known for a long time.

That there was a place that I won't be able to enter. Even though I've stood in front of that door many times, I thought it best not to interrupt them, that I should only peek through and listen.

The truth is that I've known for a long time.

That I want to go there, too.

That's all I've ever wanted.

That's why, the truth is...

Something genuine, I never wanted it.

Chapter 3: Surprisingly, Hikigaya Komachi starts anew.

I awoke to a chilly atmosphere.

When I looked by the window with my sleepy eyes, faint rays of light from the morning sun were streaming in. The neighboring roofs all reflected a soft light.

Today's weather was slightly cloudy. My still hazy thoughts were appropriate for these kinds of conditions.

I turned over and looked slightly at the clock. Normally, around this time, I would be panicking and jumping as fast as I could out of bed. Fortunately, though, thanks to the high school entrance exams, today is a day off. My head still felt dizzy, and my eyelids were heavy, so, once more, I let myself succumb to inactivity.

However, in that moment, those words that had come to mind just a moment ago ran through my head once again.

Entrance exams! Yes, the second day of Komachi's exams! My parents probably already went out of the house, so I should see her off at least!

I leaped vigorously from my bed. I'm motivated, energetic, and fully awake! [\[15\]](#) So, with that kind of feeling, I rushed out of my room and ran downstairs with loud footsteps. When I came to the living room, while suppressing a yawn, I saw the cute and dreamy Komachi as she was just about to leave.

My beloved little sister, who was using her favorite beaming hairpin, and wore her uniform nicely, which was in proper style to school regulations, raised her hand as though she was calling out "hey!" when she noticed me.

“Oh. Good morning.”

“Yo.”

I made my way to the table while greeting her. There was what appeared to be my share of breakfast, which was wrapped, and a cup of coffee.

After our hasty morning greetings, Komachi brought her gaze back to the contents of her bag. Perhaps she was checking her things one last time before she headed out. It looks like she'll only be bringing her writing tools and admission ticket for the exams. When she finished, she hit her bag to flatten it.

The bag, which she effortlessly slung over her shoulder, looked a little sad. Because of that lonely feeling, I realized that the entrance exams were, for the most part, almost over.

The written exams were completed yesterday, so the plan for today must be the interview. As such, there shouldn't be a reason to bring things such as reference books and the like.

The interviews don't have a big meaning to them. What's felt as important here for Chiba's public high school entrance exams were one's academic ability.

Therefore, it can be said that the trend has already been decided from the results of the first day.

Komachi also must have brought home her question sheets filled with answers to go over her own tests, just like how an examinee would. Of course, it would be better if her results were already there, but, if it happens that she wouldn't be able to focus during the interview because she was minding her mistakes from the exams, then that might be unpleasant to see.

Worried that it was something like that, I decided to ask her indirectly.

“How are you feeling?”

I reached for the cup of coffee that was set on the table. While drinking it, I

made sure to ask her in a very nonchalant way, and that the words I put forth were gentle, perhaps cheerful at best, but ambiguous.

Komachi turned towards me with blank eyes. She then brought the tips of her fingers up to her chin and tilted her head to think.

“Hmm... Well, not bad. Even if I were to struggle now, it can't really be helped.”

The tone of her voice, which had hints of a smile, was very composed.

Her resolve is amazing. She would still be calm even if she was told that the end of the century was about to come. She was possibly as calm as a wax doll. That's Seikima-II for you. In any case, Komachi appeared to be composed, so I was relieved. [\[16\]](#)

However, that doesn't mean that her calmness is, by all means, a plus.

“Besides, the exams have, more or less, been decided.”

Behind those words, she had on a wry smile that gave off a faint trace of uneasiness. Perhaps, in time, she will come to a realization that will lead her to peaceful understanding. Right now, Komachi is like an ostensibly calm water surface, but one gentle breeze might turn that into a wave.

That's why I should talk about something unrelated, even if it was just meant to avoid reality, and even if it was just running away from what was in front of us. Because, I know that forcing reality and slapping people in the face with a sound argument wasn't right.

“When it's over, want to get something to eat?”

“Oh? That sounds nice.”

“Right?”

“Yep, yep!”

When I returned a grin, Komachi clapped her hands. Then, she put those

hands on my cheeks. As though she was doing it on purpose, she began to playfully flirt with me.

“To think that it’s going to be big bro’s treat! If there is a reward, then Komachi feels like she can do her best! Blush, blush. That was totally high in Komachi points! Blush, blush.”

“It’s not a treat, and that’s pretty low in points...”

I’ve already spent most of my money yesterday... But, even if it was just a joke, if she says that she can do her best, then I may be able to do something about it.

“Well, since it’s a date with my little sister, I’ll try to find a way.”

I told her in a joking and arrogant manner, and confidently grunted. When I was about to show off my wealth, Komachi’s expression abruptly turned cold.

“Yeah, no. If you’re saying it’s a date, then I totally don’t want to go to be honest. But, if you’re the one paying for transportation fees, then I can tolerate it.”

“Stop, stop. Stop with the serious look... What the heck, tolerating it? That's heartbreaking you know. It was just an innocent joke from your big bro... I only say things like that to you, Komachi, so it's fine, right...?”

"Uwaah, that part of you is rather disgusting."

Komachi struck a final blow at me, who was bursting into tears of sorrow, with a voice that appeared to be extremely annoyed. That's harsh... I mean, before I realized it, I will be paying for not just the food, but the transportation fees as well... Why do you know about such terminology

in the first place? Are you at that age where you pretend to be an adult? Oh no, Komachi is gradually becoming an adult...

When I took a glance, Komachi was chuckling. She shouldered her bag again, then swung out her phone while leaving the living room.

“Alright, I’ll contact you once everything is over.”

“Okay. While you’re waiting for your interview, to kill some time, think about what you want to eat.”

As such, I implicitly told her not to get too worked up. I wasn’t really worried whether she understood me or not as I followed her to the doorway.

She had put on loafers, and, as if checking out their condition, kicked them on the floor. She then turned around.

"...Alright, I'll do that."

She was calm and had a somewhat mature smile on her face. I understood it without being told, while knowing that it was a self-satisfaction that in this whole world, she was the only person with whom I could get through to without saying or asking anything concrete.

Komachi put aside her smile that she's had on for a while, then deeply inhaled and snappily saluted me in a frolic manner.

“Well then, I’ll get going!”

“Yeah, take care.”

I saw Komachi off. She spun on her heels and began to run.

Now then, while I’m casually checking the Tabelog, I might as well get ready to go out.

3-2

When the afternoon was nearing, I went to the station near the high school and dawdled around for a while.

I can't quite guess at what time Komachi's exams would end. In any case, the only thing that was set for the second day was the interview. Students could sort of go home as soon as the interview was finished. Though, the time when Komachi will be finished puzzles me because I don't know what number she had for her examination ticket. More importantly, the examinees had a lot in their heads right now because of the examinations, so they wouldn't be able to know about what time they would be finished.

If things are going to be that way, then the action I will take is certain.

I'll lie in wait near the high school. Hachiman will have to ghastly wait like Aming and Yuming. I'm doing a good job on pretending to be cute. [\[17\]](#)

Although, it feels a little unpleasant that if I were to hide in a tree's shadow, then I'd worriedly call out "Komachi..." or ambush her in a way that Hoshi Hyuuma's big sister would. That is particularly lousy in terms of appearance. The Hikigaya household's son is circulating around the neighborhood again, the circulation notice is so close to happening. Our distinctive feature is black clothes! Don't we love black clothes way too much...? [\[18\]](#)

Because of that notion, it would be unsettling if I were to get reported immediately from such an action. That's why I've decided to kill some time today waiting nearby for Komachi.

Thus, here I am in Marinpia, just beside the Inagekaigan station! [\[19\]](#) I'm currently in Aeon, which was previously called Jusco, and will totter around inside the bookstore. [\[20\]](#) Then, after buying whatever copies of books there, I will dedicate myself to killing time in the Saizeriya near the station, which is my goal. Definitely Saize! Going alone is also just fine!

Also, since the Saize in Inagekaigan was located on the second floor in the

front of the building, the pedestrian traffic could be seen very well. I know, it's the perfect plan to catch kids wearing middle school uniforms when the examinations are over!

Perhaps, I might be considered a genius for being allowed to kill some time here in Chiba... While shuddering in fear from my own talent, I went outside.

Because of the cold wind that welcomed me on the main street by the seashore, I unconsciously shivered. Even if there is a difference between temperatures, this wind is kind of... well, I ended up adjusting my muffler by rolling it around over my neck and burying my face into it.

Then, in that very moment, from the corner of my eyes, I saw someone familiar. Directly beside the exit of Marinpia was the San Marc Café that faced the street, and in the seat from the counter that faced outside, which is opposite of the glass pane, was a restlessly shaking bluish black ponytail.

As I gazed at her, I made an audible "hm?" in wonder. It appears that ponytail was with a little girl who had the same bluish hair, but with pigtails. She was playfully bouncing around while being cared for by having her mouth wiped off and her nose cleared.

Only one person comes to mind when seeing that little girl. It's Kawasaki Keika. Then, the person who is taking care of her must be... right, it's Kawa-something!

Still, those two sisters do get along very well, huh? Very different from the other sisters that I know. I unintentionally stared at the Kawasaki sister's heartwarming moment. On the other side of the glass, a pair of eyes blinked rapidly and widened when our gazes met.

Keika opened her mouth wide and pointed at me, who was on the other side of the glass window. Then, she started to move her mouth energetically. Oh no, what is that? That's cute...



With that, now is not the time to be hooked on Keika's cuteness, because Kawasaki immediately noticed me and locked eyes. We both did small greetings to one another, and, with just that, our bodies stiffened. It was like we were stabilized in Jizou time. If we stayed like a Jizou for too long, then we might receive coolie hats, maybe even offerings. This Jizou time is a decent thinking time in its seeking time. Since we're in that time, we can use it to say solve puzzles for quizzes.

Now, here is the question. What correct action must be done when you meet your classmate in a city!? Buzz in! You win by getting seven correct answers, get it wrong three times and you're disqualified! That's *Nanamaru San Batsu!*

Particularly, ignoring that person would be correct thing to do, and acting like we don't talk to each other. Thus, if that classmate isn't really close, then it would be smart to just greet them and then leave. Conversely, if it was a close friend, since we could meet at any time, and because there wasn't an expressed necessity to have a long chat, there should be no problem with just leaving. What the heck, basically, the correct answer is to go home no matter who I meet outside!

And, with that kind of feeling, if I were to leave here, then it would be just fine, but this is Kawasaki. I suddenly started thinking about my relationship with her, and that made my feet stop. Perhaps, because of that, even if she was on the other side of the glass, I could make out that Kawasaki was flustered. This sense of distance was similar to meeting with a pet cat outside of the house. It was a delicate distance where if you made just one step closer, it would dash straight at you.

This precarious situation came to a complete standstill and made me want to shout for help just like how Tsutsumi Shinichi would. Somebody...!

Then, while I was asking Akusa Direct in my mind for help, the one who helped me wasn't Akusa, but Keika.

While Keika was happily smiling, she eagerly fluttered and beckoned me to come in. If I was normally invited, I would have earnestly declined by

saying, “I would go if I could,” but I ended up accepting this little girl’s invitation because that’s who I am.

However, this girl is a minor! How troubling! No matter how much she tempts me, if I don’t get her guardian’s permission, then I’ll be arrested!

I don't know if I should get her guardian's permission. When I glanced over, Kawasaki was talking to Keika about something with a slightly uncomfortable face, then began soothing her. However, Keika pouted and abruptly faced the other way. Doing that caused Kawasaki to let out a small sigh.

Thus, setting aside what appeared to be their stuff sitting on the seat beside them, she sent me a gaze that looked like she was peeking at me. I thought her lips were mumbling something for a moment, but then she opened her mouth slightly and whispered a few words.

Reading her lips, I feared that she was most likely saying, “coming in?” Moreover, she immediately turned her face away, so I couldn’t see clearly.

Well, if I got her permission, then I am extremely delighted. I’ll come in and start the conversation with a casual greeting by saying mipyo, kopyoko for a few times, then combine pikyo, pikyo, komupyoku, pikyo. [\[21\]](#)

3-3

Upon entering the store, I instinctively let out a sigh of relief.

I think the reason I did that was because of the temperature and humidity, but, personally, I would cast a vote that I did it because of the happy smile that was before my eyes. That's because Kawasaki Keika's charming appearance was heartwarming.

"It's Haa-chan!"

"Yo, long time no see. Ah, that's not right, we just met the other day. How are you?"

It felt like it has already been two years since the last time we've met... While I was in my nostalgia, I playfully stroked Keika's hair. She laughed energetically and tapped on the seat next to her.

It looks like she's telling me to sit there. What a smart, smooth, and fantastic method of invitation... Hmm, hmm. Is this guy perhaps a cool-looking one? Since there's a reputation of me being a rather uncool guy, I accepted the invitation and sat beside Keika.

I mean, I had no choice but to sit here. Or, rather, something like sitting next to Kawasaki is a little scary! My heart would skip a beat should our shoulders lightly touch! Stop! Give me a break from fights and muggings! Well, I know Kawasaki isn't the kind of person to mug someone. Unfortunately, there are times when her appearance looks seriously scary. It can't be helped, I guess.

For that reason, while also feeling secure being within Keika's unarmed neutral zone, I started a conversation.

"So, what are you doing *here*...?"

Since we didn't really share anything, I can theoretically enter a common topic that is harmless and inoffensive in a situation like this. Besides, bluntly asking her why she came all the way to Aeon near the high school on her day

off is awkward. Usually, high school students of Chiba would stay inside their houses, or spend all their free time by going to Destiny Land when entrance exams were going on... Hmm, hmm? Is this girl, perhaps, an oddball? Hmm, I'm the same though...

I don't know if she could tell what I was thinking, but Kawasaki quickly showed me the shopping bag which she had placed near her feet from earlier.

"We... came out to shop, but we're taking a little break..."

From the opening in the bag, I saw things like green onions and such.

But, why would she come all the way here during her day off? I believe there are supermarkets near Kawasaki's neighborhood... Some impressions that I had changed a little, and words rushed out from my mouth.

"Hmm. Why all the way here?"

"Because we shop here all the time."

Kawasaki, who was fidgeting and looked embarrassed, said that while averting her eyes. When she did that, Keika, who was next to me, immediately raised her hand out of nowhere.

"Point card!"

Laughing and discernibly smiling, Keika shouted and held a card with a dog character printed on it.

Ahh, um, is that the thing that makes a barking noise when you pay with it? Just as I was looking at Keika with that heartwarming feeling, Kawasaki, who was slightly blushing, chided Keika in a low voice to put her hand down. Yeah, well, children often do things like pushing buttons and bringing out cards... It seems like it's Keika's job to bring out those kinds of cards in the Kawasaki household. Perhaps they often go shopping after picking her up from the nursery.

Although, since there should be Aeon stores in other places, wouldn't it be a bit troubling to come all the way out here? I tilted my head while pondering

this, and, seemingly sensing what I was thinking, Kawasaki mumbled in an attempt to say something.

"...Also, for Taishi too. Today, well, is the end of the exams."

She wasn't looking at me but was instead turned facing outside of the window.

Ah, I see. So that's your reason. I've heard before that Kawasaki's little brother, Kawasaki Taishi, would take entrance exams for Sobu High School. She was probably growing increasingly worried about Taishi since she unintentionally looked toward me at my feet. Eh...? What is that about...?

"Hey, that's considerably brocon. That's bad. That's a sickness."

"Ah? I don't want to hear that from you."

"Agh."

She glared fiercely at me, so I involuntarily made myself small. Even though I knew she was a nice person, she was, as I expected, scary at times when showing her keenness. Then, while shrugging my shoulders and shivering, I suddenly noticed the cold.

The effectiveness of the heating near the windows wasn't very good, I could feel the chill from the outside coming through the glass. In this chilling cold, along with an unpleasant conversation, I find it impossible to compose myself.

I wonder if Kawasaki felt the same while sitting close to me, she would come and go looking outside the window, at me, and at Keika's space. Naturally, my gaze would tend to fall on Keika.

Keika held up a cup made for children with both hands and sipped on orange juice with a straw. Before long, when she finished drinking, she let out a sigh of satisfaction.

When looking, I could see that Kawasaki's cup was also becoming empty. It seems like Kawasaki was waiting for Keika to finish drinking. If that's the

case, then they would be heading home soon... Just as I was wondering if they were about to leave, Kawasaki glanced over and looked at me.

“Uhm... How about you?”

Her question was certainly on point, but I feel like she was implying that they were about to leave. If that's the case, then perhaps I should take this opportunity and allude that I'm also leaving.

“Ah, I thought about getting something to eat.”

“I see...”

Hearing that, Kawasaki replied like she was spent. She then lowered her gaze to Keika and patted her back.

“Haa-cha... Er, big brother says he's about ready to go.”

She struggled to find the right words for a moment and corrected herself. No, well, since Keika calls me Haa-chan, it shouldn't really be a problem. Rather, it was being called a big brother from Kawasaki that was a bit embarrassing... So, while writhing in agony, I felt a tug on my sleeve.

“Ehh, you're already going?”

When looking down to my side, Keika was looking up at me with a sad face. Before I even knew it, she firmly grasped my sleeve. Doing such a thing makes it hard for me to stand up from my seat... It felt like I was being asked, "going home already?" as a new employee at a company.

While wondering what I should do, Kawasaki, who saw my exchange with Keika, frowned. It felt like she was going to call out for Keika at any time now. Even though I've seen something similar during the sweet making event, that was definitely scary...

Since I felt sorry for Keika being the target, I'll say something random and interject. Becoming like a lightning rod and Hirai Ken is my specialty. [\[22\]](#)
No, wait, my facial features aren't that defined.

“...Wanna come with me? I was thinking of going to Saize.”

Kawasaki opened her eyes widely for a moment, and repeatedly opened and closed her mouth.

“H... Huh? W-We’re not going...”

“Isn’t that the truth.”

I knew it. It was written all over the internet that girls hate going with boys to Saize. The internet is truly vast; any information that you weren’t aware of can be obtained from there. I stood up after soothing Keika in her sullen by caressing the top of her head. Doing that, a weak voice called out to me.

“...Ah, wait.”

I turned around while letting out an audible “hm?” Kawasaki’s cheeks were faintly tinted a shade of red, and she standoffishly pouted and lowered her eyes. Then, she embarrassingly whispered.

“...W-Well, we can drink tea here.”

“Eh? Ah, yes. That should be fine. If it’s just tea...”

My unexpected words unintentionally became polite, and I dejectedly sat back down again on my seat. Keika cheered happily and leaned on me.

Crap, I completely lost my chance to leave... If the situation has become something like this, then I must order something too.

“Wanna drink something?”

While standing up from my chair and asking, Kawasaki came to her senses and quickly looked at Keika’s hands.

“Ah, eh, w-well, hot cocoa... and also an ice coffee.”

“Got it.”

As expected of being a big sister, she would consider Keika's drink before hers. Seeing that almost made me break into a smile, so, to hide that, I quickly went to the register.

When I hastily finished ordering and received the items, I cheerfully carried the tray to the wood textured counter.

What was set on the tray from the earlier order was hot cocoa, ice coffee, and a hot latte. Incidentally, I also bought a seemingly fresh chocolate croissant.

When I returned, Keika stared at the croissant with gleaming eyes. Like Sonny Chiba, she let out a voice of admiration with an audible "waah." As expected of a child to have a weakness to sweets. I have experience with children, so I know how to pick up on a child's feelings. In a manner of speaking, I am a child-meister.

That's why, right now, I let out the words that Keika wanted me to say.

"...Want some?"

Keika's gleaming eyes looked promptly in my direction. Heh, it appears my plan was a success... I am like a politician who suddenly preaches about caring for old people and pension related issues right before elections, a man who can easily obtain popularity without guilt. Also, I'm a man whose appeal involves being concerned with politics and aiming for a collaboration with the next election campaign for emerging adults. The ministry of internal affairs and communications, are you seeing this?

Keika had no idea about my strategy as she was in very high spirits.

"I'll eat some! This is why I love Haa-chan!"

When she cheerfully shouted, she tapped on my arm.

"Haha, yeah, yeah. By the way, with the way you casually touch me, us guys will quickly misunderstand, so don't be so carefree with others."

"Alright! I'll only do it with Haa-chan, okay!"

Oh no, this child. She already understands power words that tickle a man's heart. How scary... Should the day come where I was told about this kind of thing, men around the world would be blown away, and Keika would instantly become a mass murderer carved forever into history... The first one that would be on the memorial monument would probably be me. For the sake of world peace, I must do something with this terrorist filled with girl power. As I was getting fired up about my mission, the person hiding beside the girl power terrorist let out a sigh.

“What are you teaching to a child...?”

Bringing her hand to her forehead, Kawasaki frantically clicked her tongue and stretched her arm across Keika's back, forcefully pulling my sleeve. Then, she beckoned me, bringing her face over Keika's head and letting out a low voice like it was secret talk.

“I mean, uhm... what you're doing is troubling.”

“Eh?”

What's the problem exactly? Oh, I know. Maybe you're thinking I'm trying to carry out my own version of the Hikaru Genji plan by trying to win over Keika so I can raise her into a fine lady, perhaps? I'd say it's more along the lines of me getting welcomed in the midst of a frantic Columbus getting all the rave reviews right now. [\[23\]](#)

While thinking those thoughts, Kawasaki took a glance outside the window and gazed at the sun which was still rising.

“It's still not noon...”

“Ah, ahh...”

I see. Children's stomachs are a small thing. If she were to eat around this time, she wouldn't be able to eat lunch. I have no idea what they will be eating, but I couldn't bring myself to be an inconvenience to her sister. Saying that in English would be “no ninja.” [\[24\]](#)

But... but, here's the thing, alright? I bought this chocolate croissant to bid popularity from this little girl... After thinking for a while on what to do, I suddenly came up with an idea. I slyly pushed the tray where the chocolate croissant was to Keika's front and whispered into her ear.

"...We'll share. It's a secret to your sister."

"Yep! It's a secret!"

When I put my finger up and said "shhh," Keika also imitated that. This secret co-ownership is nothing better than making her keep a promise with an accomplice who has evil deeds.

"I can see you..."

As I was looking complacently at Keika, who started eating the chocolate croissant which was divided in two, I heard a sigh of discontent. Kawasaki's eyes relayed a mild anger as she glared directly at me.

"Don't spoil her too much."

"...N-No, I only do this sometimes, okay?"

"What do you mean sometimes when you're always like that?"

"It's not like I always do it... Keika is just kind of... special. Komachi too."

"...You're not self-aware."

Her almond shaped, ice blue eyes emitted a sharpness that was more intense than ever. Ehh... oh my, it has become colder! Oh, would it have been better if I included her with what just happened now...? I seriously don't understand girls. It's a complicated question like, "do you know why I'm angry?" No matter what I'd say, they would all be mistakes that I won't be able to defend.

While I was troubled and barking nonsense in my head, when I flinched and became flustered, Kawasaki changed completely this time and lowered her eyes apologetically. Then, she opened her mouth and looked as if she was

finding it difficult to speak.

“I’m glad that you care about Keika, but you should also remember that you need to be patient...”

“Yeah, I’m sorry...”

Instinctively, I apologized honestly to her. No, I think it’s unfair that you became angry then suddenly fell silent... If you do that, I won't be able to say anything anymore...

And, with that kind of manner, it seems Kawasaki doesn’t have anymore intentions of scolding me. Thus, we mutually continued the time in silence.

Being suspicious that our exchanges had ceased, Keika raised her face with chocolate smeared all over it and uneasily looked at us.

“Don’t fight, okay?”

“We’re not fighting. Come and face here, Kei-chan.”

When she kindly smiled, Kawasaki brought out a wet tissue from the shopping bag and wiped Keika’s cheek a few times. Seemingly relieved, Keika brought her attention back to the chocolate croissant.

Well, it’s not really like Kawasaki is mad. This person would be even scarier if she was seriously mad... When Yukinoshita and Miura had an intense argument with each other, I thought they were delinquents.

However, my impression of her right now has softened.

In the past, wooden swords, chains, and maybe something like a yoyo appeared to be more suitable, but these days, shopping bags and green onions totally look good on her. By the way, don’t you think this girl looks familiar because she has a shopping bag...?

She’s killing time with a girl that looks incredibly similar to her here in Saint Marc, so she definitely feels like a Yanmama. *Yanmama is a very obsolete word though.* [\[25\]](#)

And, thanks to that, I came to realize that we looked like a family if included myself. In this situation, if I drove minivans such as ELGRAND and ALPHARD, this rural mall would become a common scene. I'm on the verge of sharing my favorite manga, which are One Piece and Naruto, and I'm close to twitching because of the fragrance of the hemp in the back mirror. It felt creepy when I imagined those things.

Keika was silently eating with chocolate smeared on her face, and Kawasaki was resting her chin on her hand while watching over Keika with a wet tissue in one hand. I felt like I was becoming increasingly creepy as I watched them.

Staring at them for so long made me feel a little embarrassed, so I suddenly shifted my gaze to outside the window.

And then, a student in a middle school uniform that I'm familiar with crossed the front of the store. Perhaps it's around that time when examinees are heading home due to the interviews ending.

It appears that those uniforms caught Kawasaki's attention. She let out a long sigh like she was relaxing her stiff shoulders.

I understand her feelings. When looking at the other examinees, I couldn't help but be worried about Komachi. To put it differently, the person in front of us is a rival to Komachi, an existence that becomes an obstacle. The kind thing I'm feeling well up inside of me is the thought that it would be better to crush them now before it's too late.

If it becomes like that, then the first best plan is to crush someone that's close to her! The guy who is close to Komachi presently!

Yes, that's Kawasaki Taishi! And, for that reason, I've decided to gather some information from the enemies.

“How is Taishi?”

“...I don't know.”

When I suddenly asked her, Kawasaki tilted her head to ponder. Oh my, how unexpected. Since she's a caring older sister and a brocon, she should know about her younger brother's markings on his exams... Well, that's what I thought, but then Kawasaki sniffled and put on a sullen face.

"Asking him something like that would put him in a bad mood."

"Ahh, he's at about that age, huh?"

It's not like I don't understand Taishi's feelings. Though, it's not just limited to being in a rebellious phase, but also because she's family. That is to say, since she's family, there would be times that he'll get offended for being asked about something that's extremely private or sensitive.

For example, even though you would energetically talk to friends with self-deprecating humor about debt, low wages, and fundamentally negative things, speaking to family about such things is not easy. Subsequently, wouldn't being asked by someone with a serious face if you were really okay be very painful? Your attitude becomes that way from being asked while not wanting to be hung up on worrisome thoughts coupled with the feelings from them not believing you.

While saying things that boys were like that and whatnot, when I chimed in with a remark to all of the mothers around the world, Kawasaki nodded in agreement like a mom. Then, she muttered something that could not be ignored.

"But, he was marked at around eighty percent."

"It's strange that you know that..."

That's scary, the mothers of the world are always a step above us. Why do mothers always immediately know the place where their sons hide their secret books?

I mean, bro, you didn't tell your older sister, right? Don't you find it strange that she knows it? While turning towards her with my doubtful eyes, Kawasaki sneakily averted her gaze.

“Ah, no, well, Kei-chan heard...”

“Yup, he said it was 396 points.”

Keika, who was listening beside us, appeared to understand our conversation and proudly puffed out her chest.

“Hmm... Ah, so you heard about it Kei-chan.”

Taishi must find it difficult to tell his big sister, yet he accidentally shared it to his little sister, huh? Even so, children immediately remember things like that. It’s amazing, right? Riiight? When I brought my eyes back to Kawasaki, she once again stealthily averted her gaze.

As I compared my experience, slightly painful thoughts ended up leaking out. Perhaps Komachi may have gotten similar marks to his due to how she was acting this morning. From my previous knowledge, I know about the certain level of standards.

Kawasaki, who took the same exams as myself for Sobu High School, appeared to have the same thoughts and nodded with a hard look on her face.

"Yeah, since what happens after depends the acceptance rate and his unofficial transcript..."

The sigh that Kawasaki let out was serious. Our school's acceptance rate changes around 2.5 times a year. Speaking from experience, well, getting eighty percent is still passable with a little bit of hope. That is to say, Taishi is in between the boundary line of passing.

Kawasaki had on a painful expression that made it seem like she was unsure of if he was at that line or not. I can’t say I know much about their family’s circumstances, but I’m certain that the emotions she’s holding onto are painful. Before considering financial issues, rejection and having labels put on you are things that would always eat away at your conscience. He might be able to overcome and change when he becomes an adult, but as a fifteen-year-old, family and school are considered most important. Being rejected from the school you’ve sought after and being pitied from your family would

eventually become unbearable.

Especially since, in Kawasaki Taishi's case, another kind of pressure will arise. As I thought of that, although it was uncalled for, I opened my mouth.

"Well, yeah. You wanted to go to a public college when you were thinking about things for next year, right?"

"Huh? Next year?"

Kawasaki looked at me with a quizzical face that screamed, "you heard about that?" Yeah, I heard about it, how rude... I returned a lazy nod to that suspicious glare.

"Yeah, didn't you plan on going to a national public college? I hear there's a lot of pressure associated with that, but I'm not sure myself."

"You're speaking about me?"

As Kawasaki tilted her head slightly, that movement was also copied from Keika while she was humming. Their gestures were very alike, which, unintentionally, caused my voice to be mixed with laughter.

"No, no, no. It's not different, but, well, it is."

"...What are you talking about?"

Kawasaki was very irritated as she glared at me. Holy crap, that's super scary.

"No, you see, isn't your brother thinking that if you can attend a public school that your choices would expand to some extent? I don't know. That's why you want to pass no matter what, right?"

To avoid responsibility, I applied my catchphrase to my words. While I spoke in a panic, Kawasaki blinked in surprise. She did that a few times, but I believe she ended up smiling as she suddenly turned to face the other way.

"...The fees for high school and college are totally different."

Eh, really? This girl knows a lot about those things. I haven't researched about it because I have absolutely no intention of paying my own tuition fees... If I were to look it up, I'd carelessly make calculations based on the cost of one class. The result of that would be a waste of time.

“...But, it's certainly something he would say.”

Kawasaki whispered gently as she swirled the straw of her drink with her finger. Now that the way she speaks has become somewhat mellow, I also became more talkative.

“Right? That's because I know the feelings of a siscon more than anyone else.”

“What is that? That's disgusting.”

Her direct words were masked with a playful tone. Because of that, Keika also did the same as she innocently repeated “disgusting.”

No, that is absolutely correct. I think I really am a disgusting person. As I saw an awkward yet joyful guy reflecting off the window pane, I vehemently agreed.

3-4

The middle school students from outside were starting to stand out in their uniforms.

Some time has passed while I was playing with Keika. She would intermittently converse with Kawasaki like she forgot she was still there.

Then, my phone started ringing. As I looked at it, I saw that it was a message from Komachi. I sent a brief reply to her that I was at the Saint Marc Café near the station. I immediately received a response from that, and, in addition, heard what wasn't a ring, but a hard knocking sound. When looking at the origin of this sound, that is to say, when looking out the window, there stood Komachi. She had knocked on the window and excitedly waved her hand.

When I beckoned Komachi to quickly come inside, she entered the store with light footsteps. As soon as she entered, she opened both of her arms widely.

“It’s over! Yay!”

“Yay!”

I imitated her gestures and welcomed her wholeheartedly. A dry noise echoed about when we slapped the palm of our hands together. Before this echo had time to vanish, Komachi kept stepping further in and leaped in front of Kawasaki and Keika.

“Saki and Keika! Hello and yay!”

“Yay!”

Komachi greeted them and seamlessly gave Keika a high five. With this current flow, she moved to give Kawasaki a high five, but Kawasaki was totally flustered... However, she read the atmosphere and raised her hand slightly to meet Komachi’s.

“Y-Yay...”

She appeared to have become embarrassed. Her face and ears were red, and her voice was weak. Seeing that, Komachi bent over and took around three steps backwards.

“Wah, your voice is so low! Here, one more! Yay!”

“Y-Yay...! What’s up with this girl?”

Komachi graciously accepted the redo of their high five while Kawasaki was desperately trying to raise her voice. Kawasaki then immediately gave me an intense glare. No, even if you glare at me like that... actually, while thinking that, I also remembered that I am her older brother, so I should do something about her behavior.

“I’m sorry, alright? The mood has become rather exciting. Komachi, here, have some water. Why don’t you drink some of this and calm down?”

As I prepared myself to hear the response of, “is water delicious!?” I extended the glass of water to her. Komachi broke into a smile.

“Thanks, but that’s something that bro has already drank from, and that’s a little disgusting, so I’ll go buy my own, okay?”

Komachi avoided that in an extremely smooth, magnificent manner. After she turned around, she headed towards the register at full speed. When Kawasaki saw the way I was treated, she giggled.

“K-Komachi...”

My moans were unheard as Komachi skipped away. Your big bro just became so damaged from that... especially when you added in “a little.” It was all quite shocking... Thanks to Komachi's concern getting through to me, I began to reflect about my life...

While I groaned with my head over the counter, Komachi quickly finished ordering. She sat beside me with an iced café latte in one hand.

“...You did well.”

“Yeah, I’m beat!”

She nodded slightly as she spoke with gratitude. Then, after she took a drink, she let out a long sigh. She must’ve been holding in that sigh since the interview. No, actually more like she’s been holding that in since the exams. When her body language finally expressed a sense of relief, she put on a listless face and let herself rest on the counter.

With the both of us together and in the same position, Keika stared at us in fascination. She then silently whispered.

“You look alike.”

“...Eh?”

Having said that, Komachi made a super displeased face for a moment. When Keika saw that, she leaked out a voice of astonishment.

“Haa-chan and Komachi look so similar, who’s infringing on the other’s copyright?”

“You learned another weird word...”

Keika was seemingly fascinated as she tilted her head, and Kawasaki put her hand to her chin and sighed. Yeah, well, children do remember new words very quickly...

By the way, why did Komachi make such a disgruntled face earlier? Nah, I know the reason, so I won’t ask her about it. I mean, I think that too. I’m glad that Komachi doesn’t look like me... If anything, I look more like our father, and Komachi looks more like our mother. Perhaps the only

similarities that we shared was our hair. However, whenever she is relaxing, or putting on a displeased face, she looks totally like me...

As I thought about that, when I looked at Komachi’s face as she was clearing her throat, she straightened her posture and looked at Keika with a wry smile.

“Hmm. Well, that’s because we’re siblings...”

The tone that she let out sounded like it was neither accepting or bashful. Rather, it felt more like she was trying to brush away the matter. She shifted her chair to be closer to Keika.

“Keika and Saki look alike! You look exactly alike! In the future, you’ll definitely become beautiful!”

“Hehe, Komachi is cute too.”

Keika seemed to be used to dealing with these kinds of things. After Komachi thanked her in a bashful, laid-back manner, Keika returned the favor by praising Komachi. Komachi jokingly told her, “don’t say it, you...” while pinching Keika’s squishy cheeks.

...Hmm, these kinds of conversations are very girl-like.

It’s wonderful that girls praise one another and have this kind of give and take relationship. If one was hit on the left cheek, the other would have to hit back on the left cheek. It’s out of this world.

Should the east side be praised as cute, they would reply, "you're cute." Should the west side whisper that she's ugly, the other would respond saying, "no, that's not true at all! Look, I'm so fat (dies)." Should the south side be a classmate from middle school, she would open her mouth and eyes widely and make a promise she would never keep saying, "eh, eh, eh, eh, no way! Hasn't it been such a long time!? Eh, eh, let's hang out sometime!" while she was touching that person's arm. Should the north side, who I'll consider a girl for now, want to join the conversation, she'll interject by saying, "I feel you!" I really believe it's something like that.

Are you going to be like that, Kei-chan? What do you think? When I glanced over at the one who has the same features as hers, that person, Kawasaki Saki, was at a loss for words. She had become extremely embarrassed since Komachi said that she was beautiful. Yuuup, it’s natural that girls start teasing. I’m starting to think it’s bad that beautiful girls react in such a cute way, and the Kawasaki household certainly is cute.

As I thought about that, Kawasaki let out a low grunt as though restraining

herself when I looked over at her. She then briefly brought her gaze over towards me and Komachi.

“You two get along as always.”

She said that as if she was trying to hide her embarrassment, and Komachi immediately responded.

“Nah, that is seriously not quite true.”

“Komachii? Could you please stop with that denial voice of yours?”

When I thought she was going to quickly wave me off with a serious face, she instead brought up her hands to her lovely cheeks and smiled sweetly.

“Frankly, you’re super annoying sometimes. ≡”

“Ngh...”

My voice won’t come out anymore! It felt like her joke stabbed me. Perhaps she was serious? Now that I can’t say anything anymore, I intermittently let out some hoarse sighs instead. Kawasaki saw our exchange and suddenly started laughing.

“We are going home soon. I still need to make lunch.”

Saying that, she looked outside. Because of the location of the sun, it was apparent that noon was approaching. It was also probably the time where Taishi’s exams were about to end as well. Keika put on a pouting face once again and let out an unhappy sigh.

“Eh?”

“I’m waiting for Ta-kun.”

Kawasaki put her hand on Keika’s back. While muttering something briefly and letting out a slight groan, she crossed her arms which made it feel like she said something reluctantly when she nodded.

“We have no choice then.”

When I saw that, I put on a forced smile. Kawasaki hastily gathering their things. She made Keika put on her coat, rolled her muffler, and tightly fitted her gloves. After that, Kawasaki gave us a slight nod.

“Well then...”

I returned a nod to her very low goodbye.

“Ah, see you.”

“See you! I’ll see you later too, Keika!”

“Byee!”

Keika waved energetically at us as we accompanied her, and Kawasaki started heading towards the station. After sending them off, I looked back at Komachi.

“How about we eat too? Have you thought about what you want to eat?”

“Yeah, I gave it some thought while I was killing some time...”

When I asked her, she suddenly stopped talking and nodded for a moment. Then, she giggled and spoke with a smug look on her face.

“They arrived at Hitsumabushi!”

Hmm, what a bad pun... We would usually enter into a discussion about it, but, since she’s cute, I’ll make no objections! [\[26\]](#)

“Eel, huh? Eel sounds good... Since they are becoming extinct, we may not be able to eat them anymore. So, if we eat them now, they would taste really good and give us a sense of that premium feeling. Also, eliminating them myself sounds cool...”

“Uwaa, this person is the worst... Eel can’t rest peacefully if you eat them with that kind of reason... Ah, but, but, what about raising them completely on a farm in Japan? They should be able to do that now. I saw it on the news recently.”

Ahh, if I remember correctly, Komachi did some research about some kind of concerning news as countermeasures for her interview. However, you are naïve, Komachi!

“Nope, that’s impossible.”

“Why?”

“With the current decrease in birthrate and aging population in Japan, they won’t have spare time to breed Eel.”

“Oh, social awareness!”

With a triumphant look on my face mixed with a hint of smugness, Komachi made a Cobra-like “hyuu” noise and shoved her finger towards me saying, “that’s how it’s done!” My mood lightened up drastically because of that. [\[27\]](#)

“When thinking about it, I suppose eels might not go extinct so easily. I mean, look at all of those corporate slaves enduring the harsh world of the corporate working environment. Moreover, Japanese treat eels better than they treat their corporate slaves.”

“Aren’t they both becoming extinct...?”

That's right. Eels and corporate slaves are both surviving, no? Every now and then, I would talk about the working environment of Japan to show that my interest in politics are at a high level. In this way, I can slowly work towards a collaboration with the election campaign for eighteen-yearolds and so on. As my heart leapt with ambition, Komachi had a puzzled look on her face.

“I mean, we don’t really have to eat eel. I ate eel with mom and dad the other day.”

“Is that so...?”

Why did you decide to go do that without me even though I wanted to contribute in exterminating eels too? Well, it can’t be helped since I’ve been going home rather late recently. I see, they all went together, huh...?

Well, in terms of financial power, it's inevitable that I would be no match to my parents. It might be necessary to temporarily forget the route of high class and tasty meals.

In that case, in a way, I could use my strong points and reward Komachi.

A surprise that only I can do! Though, it's not like I have anything particular in mind. The only thing I could boast about to others is that I have the world's cutest sister. However, I am definitely giving a reward to Komachi... What should I do though? This is quite troubling...

“Ah, how about that? How about we hang out somewhere? Somewhere where we could use our bodies to the utmost of our strength? Something like playing tennis with Totsuka, and, after, we ask him to hang out with us too?”

While I was murmuring to myself, *mikoon!* [\[28\]](#) A divine revelation fell upon me. Hey, hey, aren't I a genius? I was supposed to reward the world's cutest little sister, and yet I'll get to hang out with the world's cutest friend!? Isn't that a win? I won, hahaha! But, Komachi made a displeased face.

“Umm... Well, that is...”

When she said that rather conservatively, she also made an “X” sign with her fingers.

“I-Is that so? I personally meant to spoil you though...”

I still wasn't going to give up on my dream of hanging out with Totsuka, but I immediately realized that I had no courage to invite Totsuka, so I persisted only for a bit. However, Komachi shook her head nervously.

“The results haven't been released yet, so I'll reject your offer.”

“O-Oh, I see...”

There's no point if her reward is something that she doesn't want. Whatever Komachi wants is something I should prioritize more than anything else. In that case, I don't know what else to do... While I was thinking, Komachi

grabbed my sleeve and tugged on it.

“Hm, well, I feel that it’s fine... if it’s just the both of us. I believe that scored me some points...”

As if she was trying to hide her flushed cheeks, Komachi had promptly shifted her gaze elsewhere and whispered. In response, I unconsciously asked something that would have better been left unsaid.

“Nah, I’m totally fine with that... but are you sure?”

Komachi faced at me and nodded with a serious look.

“Yes, yes. You’re simple, handy, and convenient.”

“That’s not praise at all...”

Though, if this is what Komachi wishes, then it’s something that I’m bound to uphold. I’ll offer a suggestion about a plan that the both of us will truly enjoy.

“Alright, where are we going? Lalaport? Lalaport, right? Lalaport? Isn’t Lalaport an option? Right now, there’s this vending machine that only sells MAX Coffee there. Let’s buy MAX Coffee there. It’s definitely going to be delicious.”

“The flavor and contents are the same...”

What happened to that bashful expression from earlier? Komachi had said that with an extremely dejected face. She then continued while spinning one of her fingers as if she was admonishing me.

“It doesn’t have to be anything showy, and it doesn’t have to be special.”

“Oh? What do you mean?”

That is to say, *what do you mean dattebayo!*? [\[29\]](#) Without hesitation, Komachi moved her body forward and pressed on. She inhaled deeply, then exhaled slowly.

“I want to go home and do some chores!”

“Ehh, what...?”

I don't understand. Haa... I don't understand, I don't understand! When I felt the Sappari fairy fluttering around me, Komachi promptly stood up. [\[30\]](#)

"So, let's go shopping then go home!"

“...Alright.”

In any case, I'm happy to make go along with whatever Komachi wants. I stood up following behind her and started heading towards the shopping district.

3-5

Once we got home after shopping, Komachi immediately started doing household chores.

Excluding laundry, she made swift progress up until dinner. Earlier, I thought I heard knives rhythmically dancing about as they clanged off one another, but now I'm hearing water flow from the sink and the clanking sound of silverware being washed. It seems she was cleaning up a lot of other things while cooking. I can't help but say that she has a natural talent for this.

During that time, I dozed off under the kotatsu while caressing our beloved cat, Kamakura, who was sitting on my knees. If you were to look at me, you'd think that I was some sort of evil boss from how I was petting the cat. But, while watching Komachi as she quickly and restlessly moved about, I naturally started to think that I should do something to help... This feeling was slowly building up inside of me.

“Is it alright if I helped?”

Komachi gave me a curt response while in the kitchen.

“No, I'm fine. Just stay there. You would only be a hindrance.”

“How mean...”

I collapsed into tears and incidentally buried my face into Kamakura's back. Kamakura looked at me in annoyance, and Komachi responded with a tiresome voice.

“If you helped me, the work will be sloppy-ish, and you can't even cook or clean.”

“...Hm, well, you're right. I won't help, mainly because it's a pain to do so... I'm sorry, Kojuutochan.” [\[31\]](#)

“Who is Kojuuto? I'm Komachi.”

When she quickly replied with dissatisfaction, she vigorously turned off the faucet. Since most of the preparations were finished, while taking off her apron, she turned towards the living room.

“Besides, this is something Komachi wants to do, so it’s fine. I wasn’t able to do this at all because of my exams, and chores had been unfinished since then.”

While she was speaking, she took a pot and started to make coffee. Even though it’s an instant coffee, its sweet smell roused my nostrils. While admiring the smell, Komachi prepared two cups. Then, she walked her way over and sat diagonally across from me while extending a cup from one side.

“...I’ve also caused a lot of inconvenience for mom.”

The expression she had was, more or less, regretful. I took the cup and offered her some small thanks in gratitude. I then put my thoughts into words.

“You don’t have to worry about mom. You usually do a lot of things for us, so it’s fine. You worry too much.”

“Umm... well, that’s true, but those two are also really busy.”

Since she couldn’t make up her mind about the matter, she put on a gloomy smile on her face. Actually, since our parents are actually busy people, to an extent, it was normal for us to do household chores on our own.

When Komachi was still young and inexperienced, I had to handle the chores. But, when Komachi reached the upper levels of her elementary years, I just stopped doing them. Since then, the main person in charge of doing the household chores switched over to Komachi. Thanks to that, my knowledge on household chores ceased to be when I was in sixth grade.

As I gave it some thought, this heavy burden was forced onto her... Speaking about it started to give me a guilty conscience.

During the exams, the occupation of our parents was unchanging. Instead, before we settled this matter, and since I had lots of spare time, I should have

been doing things because Komachi was extremely busy during this time period.

“...Sorry, I just thought I should do something, ya know?”

When I gulped down the bitter coffee, the words coming from my mouth had an unpleasant feeling to them.

No, I did think of doing something you know? But, you see, um, if I didn’t help properly, mom would get really angry at me...

If I were to do the chores, I’d be scolded in the same manner as Komachi did with me. Also, even if I could handle it myself, mom would be unsatisfied due to her certain standards. And, since I particularly suck at cleaning, I’d end up sweeping in squares like the prototype version of the Roomba...

Thus, instead of troubling them, I have come to the defiant conclusion that it’s better to not do anything. However, as I thought about it, I felt a little bad for Komachi since this was during her exams.

But, Komachi didn’t seem to mind as she laughed in a fickle manner.

“It’s fine, it’s fine. It’s my hobby after all.”

“Your hobby is chores?”

When I asked her, she put a finger to her cheek and tilted her head slightly. She started to think about something.

“Hmm, well... I mean, like, it’s my hobby to spoil my big bro?”

She put on a cute smile.

“What is that? I’m feeling so spoiled that I will cry tears of joy at any moment now... How beautiful... A complete victory. Komachi-mama...” [\[32\]](#)

Komachi-mama! I meant to shout that in my heart, but I’ve already let it slip out. Because of that, Komachi’s expression broke into disgust.

“Disgusting. You’re sick.”

“Shut up and leave me alone. Besides, you’re the same, and that’s a good hobby.”

“Right, right? I scored some high points there, right?”

Komachi giggled cheerfully and patted my shoulder. That wasn’t praise, you brat.

When I casted a glare at Komachi, she evaded it by closing her eyes. Then, when she put her hand on her small chest, she let out an enchanting sigh and put on a hypnotizing expression.

“When I think about spoiling others using these hands of mine, it feels really good...”

“You’re sick.”

When I said that, Komachi slyly stuck her tongue out and winked at me. Then, she cutely tapped her head. Since her reaction appeared as though she was doing it on purpose, I knew that she was just joking.

After we both laughed for a little, Komachi suddenly suppressed her smile. She gazed at the ripples inside the cup she was holding and slowly opened her mouth.

“...But, it’s true that I really love doing chores.”

“Hmm?”

“It’s like, it’s different from when you used to take care of me. I can do all sorts of things now.”

I looked at Komachi with a sidelong glance, but she wasn’t looking at me or the inside of the cup. Instead, her gaze was distant as she looked outside the window.

"Because, it's something that even I could do, or it's like I was able to be

helpful..."

When she said that, the usual innocence she would display was nowhere to be seen. Her clear eyes looked more mature when I saw them.

"...In that way, it isn't so bad."

Komachi said those words in a somewhat joking manner. Her expression appeared to be a little bashful when she said that, and she had on her usual face.

Without a doubt, Komachi must have had things she wanted to do but couldn't when she was little. She was at that age where she could still be spoiled, but our parents weren't always around. Instead, the person who was around the house was none other than me who was completely unreliable. Despite that, she still spent time with me while spouting criticisms and complaints, and even started looking out for me at some point.

"You're not bad at all, or rather, you're amazing."

This little sister of mine is, indeed, amazing. Meanwhile, there's me who is very pitiful. While I pondered on those thoughts from my heart, Komachi giggled and puffed out her chest exaggeratedly.

"Well, it's because I did my best! For the sake of my no-good brother and the sense of danger around him, I must grow stronger!"

"Right? I'm the best example of who not to be, right? I've raised yet another one. You should be thankful by all means."

When I replied, I swept back my hair in a smooth manner and looked up at the ceiling. I was behaving rather haughtily. Doing that, Komachi gave me a nod.

"Yup, I'm thankful."

"Eh?"

No, saying that honestly is troubling to me... What is it? We're not on the

same page here. I ended up staring at Komachi. When she caught my gaze, she cleared her throat and stealthily averted her eyes. She said something in quick and serious manner.

“I thought I should tell you this after I’ve properly passed the exams, but, if I passed, it’d be embarrassing to have to say it again, and, if I failed, there would be no time for that, so I thought I could only tell you this now...”

With that start, Komachi quietly got up from underneath the kotatsu. She then sat properly and put her hands above her knees.

“What? What’s going on?”

As Komachi straightened her back and looked directly at me, I unwillingly started to feel shaken. Because of that, Kamakura, who was still on top of my knees, got up and walked away. I was getting more flustered as time went by. Komachi put on a tranquil smile.

“Thank you. You’ve been very helpful.”

She said that while quietly putting her fingers to the floor and bowing to me.



When I saw that, I unconsciously stopped breathing, and my ability to think also ceased. Not only were her actions unexpected, but her behavior was also unusual. It was something so beautiful that I couldn't have imagined it. Quite possibly, I was captivated by it.

When I noticed that my mouth was agape, I panickily searched for something to say.

“...Stupid, what is that? That's embarrassing, stop that.”

“Hehe, I just wanted to try saying that. I thought It would score me some high points.”

She said that jokingly while she was caressing the back of her neck, but since her cheeks were stained a scarlet color, she wasn't deceiving me in any way.

Idiot, if you're going to get embarrassed, then don't say it. I'll end up becoming embarrassed too. Also, when you're going to deceive me, make it more convincing. If you want to hide your embarrassment, you should say something randomly to confuse me. Your big bro is so used to these kinds of things.

In an attempt to give a good example, I opened my mouth.

“You didn't score some high points. Besides, doesn't that sound like you're becoming like a bride or something? What is that? No, I really don't approve of you marrying a man either way. Well, what... really you should sto- “

I couldn't finish what I was saying, my voice isn't coming out.

I sniffed my nose, and I breathed heavily in desperation. I entrusted the situation to momentum up until now, but the voice that I squeezed out ended up being husky, and the words that I randomly spit out were completely broken off. After a while, I slowly let out the huge sigh that I have been suppressing.

With the inner corner of my eyes gradually becoming warmer, in the moment it started to ache was when I blinked a couple of times. Tears streamed gently

down my cheeks.

“O-Oh... for some reason, water is coming from my eyes... What is this? What? Why am I like this? What is this?”

I reflexively looked up toward the ceiling. I bit my lips gently, and a trembling sigh came from the gap of my mouth. Even though Komachi seemed extremely surprised when she saw me like that, before long, she started giggling and burst into laughter.

“Those are tears. You’re like a robot that has only just understood feelings for the first time.”

“THESE ARE... TEARS... THESE ARE... FEELINGS...”

“Why the sudden baby talk...?”

Komachi said that as if she was astonished, but, if I don’t at least make a funny remark here, tears would really start to come out, and there would be no help for that.

It’s not like I’m sad, or in pain, and my eyes definitely do not hurt. It’s just that, I believe I was happy.

At the same time, somewhere, there was a sense of relief that had a tinge of loneliness.

However, putting that into words would be difficult, so the only thing that I could do right now is moan like a gloomy dog.

With my head down and a voice that wouldn’t come out, Komachi briefly remarked that she didn’t have a choice and laughed. She then lightly wiped her eyes and extended her hands to reach my head and gently tapped it.

“I’ll go heat up the bathtub. I’ll be the first one to use it, okay?”

It sounded like she was saying that calmly, but I could feel that her voice was husky. When Komachi slightly sniffed her nose, she abruptly stood up. Then, without looking back, she quickly left the room.

As I heard her footsteps gradually becoming more distant, I finally let out a huge sigh. Proper words wouldn't come out, so, instead, I just sighed a couple of times.

While doing that, Kamakura, who had jumped away from me, came back from the corner of the room and rubbed her head against my back.

I wondered who he took after, because this cat is really good at reading the mood.

I lifted Kamakura and put him over my knees again.

"...Isn't she being separated from her big brother too early? What do you think, Kamakura? Don't you say she's growing up too fast?"

Though I tried asking him about it, Kamakura didn't give a single response, not even meow. He just sat there quietly as I continued to caress him.

In exchange, I sniffed my nose instead.

Chapter 4: Until today, that key has never been touched.

In February, the weeds had yet to sprout.

Even with the sensation of spring drawing closer, cold weather returned frequently, and the seasons shifted only on the calendar. It will take some time for these desolate trees to bud anew. Even for the boulevard that rested along the park riverside, the landscape still reflected a dreary setting.

On the usual cycling route to school, a spirited wind blew in from the sea, bringing with it a heavy scent of winter.

Thanks to the consecutive holidays, or perhaps Komachi's thank-you from the other day, I became somewhat listless, but this cold breeze that swept my face opened my eyes like I was waking for the first time. The entrance exams that spanned a total of three days were over, and that feeling of everyday life returning again welled up inside of me.

I supposed that was just my body adapting to this commute route. For nearly two years of traveling on this street, I'd been unconsciously winding corners that should be rounded, and taking the most natural and suitable actions at the stoplights.

Since I'll be doing this for another year, I'll probably be able head to school with my eyes closed. No, if I had to say more precisely, it's that I'll be using this path for only another year. After that, I'll drown myself in nostalgia, and maybe even stop by this street sometime, when I feel like doing it. But seriously, I only have one year left to call this path my route to school.

Whenever, whatever, and wherever, time limits always exist. In the mornings and evenings, the sun always rises and sets - but If we have to assign special

meanings to occasions like “the first sunrise of the year”, or “ the sunrise over the top of a mountain”, then the sun will lose its property of eternity.

Perhaps, such things could similarly be said for relationships. Komachi and I have the relationship of being siblings, and that in itself was an everlasting fact. However, since we’ve become aware that we were no longer children back in the days, it could be said that the level of our relationship had somewhat slightly changed.

I surely believed that we siblings would be more mature, even if it was just a little. Though, to begin with, after being together for the past 15 years, Komachi and I were fully aware that our relationship was *not* going to drastically change.

Since Komachi and I belong to the same family, I guess it’d be fine to keep it as is. I believed she was already out of luck, and in giving up, she had no choice but to accompany me for the rest of her life. Together, she would accompany her Onii-chan to hell.

—However, for those who are not in such relationship with me, I wonder how long would they be able to accompany me?

As I pondered on those thoughts, I finally reached the side gate.

While squeezing the brakes gently to reduce speed, I slipped myself between other people and bicycles. Just like that, I turned the handlebars and slid my bike into an empty slot.

I locked my bike which had come to a creaking halt. When I lifted my head, I noticed that there were more empty slots around me than I expected.

While tying myself in knots over why the bike parking lot felt so spacious, I walked towards the main building entrance at a moderate pace.

It’s possible that, thanks to the days off, students passing by appeared more spirited, as they were playfully chatting along the way. Their echoing voices sounded more noticeable than usual.

Because of that, I found the answer to my previous confusion.

Currently, third year students were at the height of their exam preparation, and they were free to choose if they wanted to come to school. Thus, most of them were absent, leaving the parking lot much more spacious than usual. Both the first and the second floor of the building were very inactive. The classrooms along my way to the stairs from the entrance were all deserted, which is why students' voices in the corridor were more noticeable.

The quiet and frigid atmosphere made them uneasy, and therefore, they chose to talk more to each other.

When I thought of that, I couldn't help but feel a sense of loneliness behind those voices.

Yet, even so, when I arrived at the classrooms for the second years on the third floor, I could hear the affectionate, noisy voices. Actually, it's pretty damn noisy. I couldn't care less about how you spent your days off, so just shut up! Hey, you don't have to bring out your phone and exchange your photos because, well, didn't you already upload those pictures to the SNS's anyway? Your friends may have seen them already. They probably reflexively pushed the "like!" button, and then immediately forget about it. Ah, I see, that's why you're showing them again on purpose. Oh my! How thoughtfully prepared you are! A two-stage attack to close the gaps!^[33]

While I thought about such things, and avoided the hallway flooded with Instagrammers, I heard the sound of light footsteps coming closer from behind me. To give some way, I stepped slightly to the right. Then, my left shoulder was hit softly.

"Hachiman! Good morning!"

When I turned around, I saw a person whose features looked more Instagrammy than any other subjects out there. It was Totsuka Saika, who wore a windbreaker over a school jersey.

"Y-Yeah... Good morning..."

When I somehow gave him a reply, Totsuka jokingly smiled as if to signify that his mischief was a success. Shortly after, he asked me in a low yet seemingly teasing voice if I was surprised. Because of that, I could only nod while I stopped breathing. Goodness! Teasing Master Totsuka-san, you are! [\[34\]](#)

No, of course I'd be surprised. I mean, why is he this cute? Isn't your girl power too high when you hide your lips behind your excess sleeves and playfully giggle? Hey, hey, now is not the time to upload those photos of the fashionable hoods that are seemingly sold somewhere like Daikanyama or Nakameguro. This is that thing! This is what you call *the girl power*! Come on girls, show some dignity and reflect on yourselves. For the time being, I'll just keep hitting the "like!" button on Instagram that's located in my heart.

And, after hitting the button for 16 times, I calmed my palpitation, and brought my breathing back to normal. [\[35\]](#) I finally had the emotional leeway to examine Totsuka carefully.

His slightly long, fine, white, glossy, and soft hair that reflected in the light was a bit messy. The way he adjusted his racket case that was shouldered on his back was quick and adroit, and he floated a smile that was vigorous and fresh. The complexion of his cheeks appeared hearty as if they were dyed pink. I see. It seemed that his morning practice just ended, and soon after that, he hurried his way here.

Could it also be that there's a faint trace of a citrusy spray-on deodorant? If so, then I must inhale it as much as I want, stash it away in my chest, and allow my red blood cells to carry it throughout my body. Such a thing was the only good manners for a gentleman. I inhaled deeply with my nose, exhaled through my mouth, and then started talking.

"Nice work on the morning practice. You're amazing, even when it's this cold."

"Yup. Though, I'm already used to it."

While Totsuka was keeping pace with me, he answered with a wide smile. I am positive that his smile held more confidence than modesty.

“Freshmen are coming soon. So, in order to show them the most attractive side of us, I need to work harder.”

He clenched his fists in front of his chest as if saying ‘Ganbaru-zoi’ to himself to cheer up.^[36] His features that displayed such a fighting spirit looked really adorable, pleasing, charming, dependable, and cute. I’ll say that almost all adjectives that are generally meant to describe good things are applicable descriptors. In the end, I could only look at him with tearful eyes because my ability to formulate words ceased to exist. I don’t need to use words anymore... Nevertheless, perhaps slightly confused by me quietly staring at him, Totsuka looked up with his upturned eyes, and tilted his head.

“What are you guys going to do with the freshmen?”

“Huh?”

When I was asked about something unexpected, I ended up letting out a bewildered voice while my eyes were still locked onto him in a daze. After that, Totsuka thought that his question may have been ambiguous, so he added out more words while waving his hands.

“Well, now that the Service Club has become a proper club, so wouldn’t it be a problem if freshmen don’t join your club?”

I’m not sure about whether we were doing club activities properly in that regard, but... I tilted my head as I thought about that.

“I wonder... As an underling, I dunno. Also, I have no idea as to how our club came into shape in the first place... I was almost forced and then threatened to join the club, as if I was treated like some sort of prisoner.”

“Ahaha, I see...”

“That’s why I don’t think freshmen will join.”

As I spoke to Totsuka, he laughed bitterly and gently lowered his eyes.

“I see... That’s a little unfortunate.”

If freshmen won't be joining, then, certainly, the existence of the Service Club will soon become history. While it was such an obvious thing, I came to realize it once again. I hastened my pace and led Totsuka by one step. In this position, where my expression won't be visible, I let out a weary sigh.

"It's disappointing for me as well... I wanted to say those Senpai-like things to a Kouhai at least once - 'You're not the only one facing tough situations. Everyone has crossed that path.' Or something like, 'If you give up here, things won't work out no matter where you go.', and stuff."

“W-What an unlikeable senpai...”

From behind, I could feel the traces of what seemed to be a slightly troubled smile.

“Ah, that's not what I meant! I just thought that the Service Club was a wonderful club, so I

wanted it to continue in the future...”

Totsuka vigorously leapt towards me and fell in line by my side once again. When he looked up at me, there was a feeling of anxiousness and worry coming my way.

“...Well, doesn't that depend on the club president and advisor? I'm merely an underling, so I

have no grounds to cast a vote on club issues.”

So, I spoke a pure, unadulterated truth.

Hearing my words, Totsuka giggled.

“The way you said that made you sound like an office worker.”

His words sounded like he was joking and complaining, but he might have just hit the nail on its head.

My stance has always been the same, even until now. Work that comes in the

form of requests and consultations was born, and problems and challenges often came with it, so I tried to settle it to the best of my abilities. As for my own wishes, they weren't really relevant. I've always just said, 'it's because it's purely my job.'

Thanks to that, the words that I returned next were also blended with self-masochism.

"Right? When I begin to work in the future, things are only going to be tougher and shittier, right? So I absolutely do not want to work."

While laughing about my comical statement, we arrived at the classroom. We then waved lightly to each other and headed towards our respective seats.

Thanks to the classroom heater, it was much warmer here than in the hallway. The ambience in the classroom was much more lax because of that. For those sitting close to the doors, the cold air entering through the gaps around the door froze them miserably. In comparison, for those sitting close to the windows where the heaters were located, a lot of them lazed around because of the heater's blessing. Kawasaki Saki, who was sitting in the front row next to the window, rested her chin on her hand with her eyes shut, appearing as if she was dozing off.

On the other hand, when I looked at the people in the back rows next to the window, they had high spirits as usual. Tobe was at the center of attention with him cheerfully talking about one thing or another, probably because of the chocolate making event that was held the other day that ended nicely.

Perhaps there were some changes happening to their relationship after that event. Even while Miura failed to judge the right distance, she closed it up a little bit. Ebina also made progress, while maintaining an appropriate distance to others. As for Tobe... well whatever. It seemed like he's having fun, and he's Tobe, after all. So, yeah, whatever.

However, for that one guy who said that the event was good... Since I was currently staring at

them, Yuigahama, who was in that group, noticed me.

Yuigahama faintly opened her mouth, and slightly waved her hand to me. Doing such things made me feel a little embarrassed, so please stop it... However, it's not like I can ignore her, so I gave a small nod in return.

Then, following Yuigahama's gaze, Miura and the others also glanced towards me. Miura soon returned her gaze back to her smartphone while twirling her hair, and Ebina let out an "ohhh" as a reaction to recognize me. Tobe and the others seemed to quietly say things like, 'yah', 'yo', and 'hey', instead of proper greetings. How classic of them.

As such, Hayama Hayato greeted me with a "good morning" by simply smiling and moving his eyes. In response, I nodded with a "yo," then quickly dragged the chair from under the desk.

I rested my chin on the desk and closed my eyes.

Now that I think about it, this was kind of strange.

We don't actively call out to each other and exchange greetings in the morning, but we have grown familiar enough that we will silently exchange greetings with each other, should our eyes happen to meet.

If you wanted to know when this started, the answer to that was extremely simple. It began when I first started to cast my eyes and observe them.

When I first joined this class, I was already aware of Hayama and the others, even if only as a part of the classroom scenery. Despite that, I knew their names, some information about them such as what clubs they were a part of, and I recognized them as individuals.

However, it is hard to say that I knew them.

...Even now, it's not like I really know them.

Perhaps, due to those thoughts of mine, or maybe because of the greetings that we exchanged and I was not used to, I felt uncomfortable sitting here.

I couldn't compose myself for some reason, so I immediately stood up from my seat.

It's at times like this where I should just run away to the restroom. Running away was shameful, but useful.^[37] Not long ago, a famous comedic duo was involved in a car accident. They ran away, put on their best behavior, then came back and even made fun of the incident in their jokes all the time!^[38]

I quickly left the classroom and smoothly finished my business in the restroom. Maybe I should get myself a drink along the way as well... With that, I aimed for the vending machine. With the time being what it was, I saw students hurrying their way down the hallway in hopes of just barely being late. Compared to earlier, they were much quieter now.

Thanks to that, the sound of the footsteps behind me weighed heavily on my mind. The presence that I felt behind me was keeping its distance noncommittal, yet close. The footsteps followed me in a calm manner.

When I stopped in front of the vending machine, the footsteps from behind also stopped after a delayed step.

I swiftly grabbed my usual MAX Coffee and promptly stepped aside, and the owner of those footsteps slowly walked forward, and pushed the button that indicated black coffee.

"I've heard about it."

That person, who crouched to get the can from the vending machine, started talking without turning to look at me, with an attitude of certainty that I would stop there.

If this was before, I would've been bothered, and my words sharp, but this was not the case anymore.

Since I understand that Hayama Hayato was the kind of person who says things in an irritating manner, I was not irritated at all.

Above all, I knew that he came to specifically tell me something. In that case, I was not irritated in the slightest. Ugh, no! I was actually quite annoyed!

Seriously, why were you speaking like that...? The way he spoke was like he's testing me, which was kind of similar to a certain individual's way of speaking...

Well, there were times when a person's usual way of speaking was contagious. Perhaps that alone was the proof that they've known each other for a long time.

That is why it can also be said that the way Hayama brought *this matter* up looked extremely natural.

"It seems like it must've been tough for you. A little weight fall off your shoulders?"

He lightly tossed the seemingly hot coffee can in the air, and, while juggling his coffee, finally looked at me. He continued with a face that gave the impression of a know-it-all. Did you know it, Raiden...?^[39] As I muttered those thoughts within me, I tilted my head.

"Huh? What do you mean? Umm, are you talking about my little sister? Is this about her entrance exams?"

"No."

Hayama sighed and shrugged his shoulders.

"That also must have been hard on you, but... Ahh, that's right. Would you please tell your

sister 'You are doing a great job preparing for the exam' for me?"

"No, what is up with you? Why should I do that for you? Though, I'm happy you care. Thanks."

Compared to Hayama's bright smile, when I looked at him with my dull eyes, he blinked in surprise.

"I certainly didn't expect you to say thanks in return to that."

Hayama pulled the pop-tab off from the coffee can. As Hayama put it to his mouth, he wore a bitter smile. Hey, it's not strange for me to say thanks, you know? Rather than my behavior, your good manners are certainly more surprising in that you didn't forget to say the cheering words to Komachi, even at a time like this...

However, since Hayama is indeed a man of good manners, he quickly brought the digression back to his main point.

"Setting your younger sister aside... I'm here to talk about the other younger sister."

The other younger sister? Who are you talking about? Did you mean Keika? No, she is a seriously potentially dangerous little girl... So, while I figured it would be best to pretend that I didn't hear that, when I did so, Hayama Hayato's expression grew serious.

If I were to keep feigning ignorance, he'd definitely say something like, "I see, I see, so you are that kind of guy, huh?" and he'd certainly interpret it in his own way.

We have generally seen through each other's intentions already.

As a matter of fact, both Hayama and I just noticed that both of us assumed that we understood each other in our own ways, which caused us to feel disappointed, to give up on one another. Finally we even accepted this fact, and did nothing but force our self-centered sentiments onto each other.

The words we spoke toward one another never took the form of a concrete question, and they were somewhat off the mark. We neither bothered to confirm if our words were reaching the other person, nor were we able to hold our words back.

Although we understood that our stances contradicted one another, we still couldn't ignore each other in the end. Our exchanges were filled with self-centered monologues, and ironic, insinuating remarks.

"...Well, it seems things are only going to get rougher after this, but I don't

know.”

“Certainly.”

Hayama forced a smile and tossed the can from which he had finished drinking. The can drew an arc as it flew across and flawlessly landed in the garbage bin. In the quiet first floor of this building, a shrill sound echoed throughout its halls.

Making sure that it landed, Hayama put away his smile and let out a sigh. I couldn't quite guess if that sigh was a sign of satisfaction or loneliness. While I couldn't gauge the meaning of that sigh, Hayama promptly started walking.

“...But, it's better than before. I've always thought that nothing would change.”

His words came to my ear while he faced away from me. Apparently, he didn't intend to wait for me to reply. After all, he probably never thought that I was going to say something.

Ahh, just as I expected, this was our usual exchange of conversation. Wait, no, I didn't think I could even call this a conversation.

We muttered things that we didn't even want to say to the other person, like we were squeezing them out and throwing them up. Hearing the other person's words, each of us accepted them on our own accord, only to forcefully assign them a meaning according to our own understanding. Therefore, rather than describing our behaviors as giving an interpretation of our words, what each of us did was perhaps close to being the Kaishakunin of the other person. Even words that could have formed a meaningful conversation were cut short, and then each of us would attend to the other person until the final moment befell. [\[40\]](#)

Hayama was already a few steps ahead of me. As I followed him from a reasonable distance, I looked back on the conversation we just had.

Where did Hayama hear about this piece of information that Yukinoshita was moving back to her parent's house, I wonder? Was it from her parents? Or,

probably from Haruno? Perhaps, did he hear it from Yukinoshita herself? Did Yuigahama possibly talk about it as in her conversation with him? In any case, none of it made a huge difference. The implication of any of those would be the same, after all.

In the end, I got the feeling that Yukinoshita Yukino's actions were changing the *thing* that even Hayama Hayato thought would never change.

However, I was glad that Hayama treated that as a positive thing. Given that he has maintained a long-time relationship with the Yukinoshita family, especially with those two sisters, if he said his words with certainty, then that's enough for me to trust his words.

Thanks to that, I felt more or less relieved. I was relieved that Yukinoshita Yukino was doing her best in various aspects while I wasn't aware of it.

Back when he asked me if it was *a weight off my shoulders*, I intentionally acted like I was confused and asked if he was talking about Komachi, but perhaps his way of putting it wasn't wrong after all. The pain that I faintly felt in my chest was slightly similar to the one that I felt when Komachi thanked me.

Therefore, this pain that I felt was indeed the proof that I was doing the right thing.

The distance between us didn't change during the time we walked back to class.

Classes were about to start. The students, who were almost late to class, ran by Hayama and gave their morning greetings to him, and Hayama would return the greeting with a gentle wave.

For some reason, my glare kept focusing on Hayama's waving arm.

I suddenly realized that perhaps Hayama was thinking about the same thing I was. Just like how I look after Komachi, he probably felt the same about her, or them, both of whom were also quite close to him as well. I kept imagining myself being in his shoes at my own will, during this short period of time as

we made our way back to the classroom.

At the moment when Hayama put his hand on the classroom door, the distance between us had lessened.

4-2

As the end of the school day approached, even the classroom that seemed so silent in the morning began to bustle with activity. It felt like the entire school building was steadily growing more and more feverish.

Perhaps because club activities had been put on hold during the entrance exam period until today, those in the sports clubs were becoming especially animated. The shouts of the baseball club and rugby club could already be heard resounding across the field.

Even in our classroom, along with Hayama's group, those into sports had already left, and the other students were also slowly dwindling in number.

Club activities, huh. ...Did I have club activities today? Maybe not? For now, perhaps I should go there and find out. While lost in thought, I slowly prepared to leave, carefully rising from my seat. Upon doing so, I heard the pitter-patter of flurried footsteps approaching.

These footsteps must be... With a sneaking suspicion, I turned around. At that exact moment, the other party tilted their head as if trying to peek at me. As a result, both our faces ended up startlingly close.

"W-Whoa! You scared me..."

"Ah, s-sorry!"

Swaying pink hair tied up in a bun; innocent, wide-open eyes; a breath leaking from her supple lips; her chest, standing out as it warped in a big way due to the momentum of her recoil; the sweet smell of citrus as she turned away her face to separate our gazes that had met.

With every one of those features at point-blank range, my heart leapt even faster.

As I was breathing out a big sigh, Yuigahama glanced at me.

"Really, you're way too surprised."

Unable to hold it in, Yuigahama released a puff of laughter, then while lightly hitting my shoulders, giggled. Please no, it's all sorts of embarrassing and I feel like dying a few times over already... You speaking in a loud voice even drew several gazes to us, you know... For now, could you stop touching my upper arms? It's so overwhelmingly effective, that I might even put in some strength and start showing off my muscles.

"...are you going to the club?"

"...Y-Yeah. I suppose."

Still struggling to suppress the thumping in my chest from the earlier surprise, I responded to her in a somewhat disoriented manner. For a short while, Yuigahama appeared to be thinking, but soon she quickly nodded.

"...Is that so. I see. Wait just a sec, okay?"

Yuigahama immediately rushed back towards Miura and the others. After exchanging a few words of goodbye, she gathered her bag and numerous other belongings in one jumble, then hurried back to my location.

"Let's go."

With that being said, she suddenly pushed my back as if to urge me on. Ehh, hey, I'm already moving now, so please don't push... It is especially important at times of crisis like this, that you properly follow the rule of *Do not push! Do not run! Do not talk!*. [\[41\]](#) At my level, the awareness of disaster prevention routines was so strong I even avoided talking to people on a regular basis.

No, I was actually in a personal state of emergency. We had gone to the clubroom together before. However, I had the feeling that the two of us leaving the classroom together was an unprecedented first.

Which is why, I unconsciously turned to look back, concerned about the attention we would receive. However, those remaining in the classroom were

scattered, the majority of them focused on the person that they are talking to in front of them and not paying us any heed.

As for the two with whom Yuigahama had been speaking earlier, I glanced in their direction. Ebina was waving her hand saying goodbye to us, and Miura was tugging at the curls of her hair. They weren't particularly suspicious of us.

I was secretly relieved by that.

My inner thoughts aside, to other people though, this must be a typical everyday scene.

Both of them took it for granted that Yuigahama would head towards the Service Club clubroom after school. Since they also knew that I was a member of the Service Club, the two of us leaving together for the clubroom must have been a very natural scene to them.

In the past, I think we would have been both faced with strange gazes from the others. Not just towards myself, but also towards Yuigahama.

I had not given it any thought, back in the time when I still lumped the hierarchical elite together under a single label. However, by interacting as individuals and catching glimpses of each other's circumstances and backgrounds, using those as clues it has become possible to infer all sorts of things. Although I would not equate it to understanding, we would come up with some kind of reasonings ourselves, and in that way, get to know each other to a greater extent.

Of course, the same could also be said about the girl currently walking beside me.

Perhaps because several minutes had passed since the end of school, the hallway leading to the special building was even more lacking in human presence than usual. Just as usual, it was full of cold, parched air.

Nevertheless, by no means was it chilly.

The reason was, that I had Yuigahama beside me... maybe because she was carrying a fluffy bed sheet? When I quickly glanced to the side, the tip of Yuigahama's chin was buried in the bed sheet she carried in her arms. Just why was this girl bringing along a bed sheet. Linus? Are you Linus? Is it because this was Chiba, and hence it's somehow connected to Peanuts, I wondered?[\[42\]](#)

"Actually, what's with the bed sheet, something up?"

It's kind of awkward that we had been walking in silence along the way, so I attempted a casual question to start off the conversation. On doing so, with a "huh?", Yuigahama tilted her head questioningly.

"Bed sheet? Ahh, you mean the blanket?"[\[43\]](#)

"Aren't they the same thing... What, is there a subtle difference? Like with 'pasta' and 'spaghetti'? Don't just arbitrarily use foreign loanwords here and there regardless."

"Ehhh? But it says 'blanket' on the label here... Wait, aren't 'pasta' and 'spaghetti' both foreign loanwords as well..."

Immediately after Yuigahama pouted her lips and spoke in a dissatisfied voice, she suddenly came to a realization and frowned. Damn, she got me... However, not particularly minding her reaction, I instead took a long hard look at the blanket. There was the fact that it was folded up, but even so it was by no means very large. Perhaps about as large as half a tatami mat. With that sort of size in mind, I recalled the perfect words to call it.[\[44\]](#)

"So it's one of those, a lap blanket."

Upon me saying this, Yuigahama nodded, with her face comfortably buried in the blanket.

"Ah, yeah, that's right. Something like that."

"Humm. Didn't you already bring a lap blanket?"

I suddenly recalled a typical scene in the clubroom - at one time or another, Yuigahama and Yukinoshita sat next to each other, using a single blanket sheet like sharing a kotatsu. 'Ahh it must be nice to be so warm; ughhh, over here it's so cold. I want to go home already.' Such were my thoughts at the time that I remembered so well.

It's awfully cold in the place where I sit, you know... Feeling slightly envious, I looked at the blanket that Yuigahama was carrying. As I did so, Yuigahama blinked her eyes.

"You pay surprisingly close attention..."

"W-Well, rather than me actively paying attention, it just naturally entered my field of vision..."

"Naturally..."

"Ahh, well, I just have a broad view, for some reason"

I said that on the spur of the moment, but in reality I was not so sure about having a broad view. No matter how much I turned my head away in embarrassment to avoid looking directly at Yuigahama, at the edge of my vision, I was still able to see Yuigahama's face as she buried a reddened cheek in the blanket.

The sound of footsteps echoed in the hallway. Also audible were the sounds of wind knocking against the windows, and of the small breaths quietly escaping next to me.

Crap, this silence was making me super anxious! I don't know why, but I felt like I was digging my own grave there. If this silence kept up, after five seconds, and it'll end up as 'the Wrong Answer', giving me a grade like "Bad Communication"! My remuneration will decrease! Even though a 'Perfect' is probably out of the question, I would like to at least achieve a 'Good', no, a 'Normal Communication' grade. Well, even if I managed to get a 'Perfect' grade, it's not like there would be an increase in the Affection Points anyway.

[\[45\]](#)

Therefore, I blurted out whatever came to mind.

"Wait, so you bought another lap blanket despite already having one? Just how many laps do you have? Are you a centipede?"

"I'm not! It's a freebie that came with the magazines I bought!"

Suddenly raising her head, Yuigahama talked back at me. However, that vigor quickly faded away. Her expression fell with her eyebrows turning into a /\ shape, and her face dispirited. She began to grumble somewhat.

"...Before I knew it, I had tons. I'm really not sure how to get rid of them."

"A-Ah. I see..."

So you're getting rid of it...? Well, it's true that during the winter season you would receive an indiscriminate number of freebies, special items, or presents, especially those blanket kind. Come to think of it, I felt like we had those here and there in our house too. I caught glimpses of them at around the same frequency at which you receive dishes at the Spring Bread Festival. Those dishes really don't break, so they quickly pile up over time...[\[46\]](#)

When I went "mm, mm" in assent, Yuigahama nodded in return with a smile on her face.

"That's why I brought it from home. After all, it's still cold these days. And also..."

Suddenly, Yuigahama cut her words short. Her gaze was suddenly turned to face forwards. Drawn in, when I looked in that direction, there was the Service Club clubroom.

As if taking a pause to choose her words, Yuigahama softly inhaled.

"...I was thinking, if by any chance the club activity continues for a little longer, why not leave it in the clubroom?"

After adding those words in a mutter, she immediately fell silent, then looked down as if slightly troubled and uneasy. Watching her profile from the side as

she did so, I couldn't say much but only give her short responses like "ah" or "I see".

It might have been better to crack a joke here, just as usual. However, no such deception had come to mind.

- If the club activity continues, huh.

Echoes of a belief in its demise were present in her way of speaking.

While still unable to produce a proper response to the words that had come my way, the two of us arrived at the clubroom. Instead of speaking, I placed a hand on the doorknob.

However, although the door made a single loud clunk noise, it did no more, refusing to budge.

"...It's locked."

When I said this, Yuigahama peered over my shoulder, looking at the door.

"So Yukinon hasn't come yet..."

As Yuigahama spoke, she shifted her luggage under one arm, then began rummaging in her coat pockets. I glanced at her out of the corner of my eye, and then began walking.

"I'll go get the key."

"Eh? Ah-"

Yuigahama attempted to say something. Simply brushing her off with an "it's fine, it's fine" waving of my hand in response, I quickly made my way towards the staff room. The door to the Service Club clubroom had only ever been unlocked by Yukinoshita.

I only realized it now -

The fact that every time, she was the only one who always held the key, and I

had never touched it, ever.

4-3

I opened the door and peeked into the staff room. Perhaps because the entrance exams had just ended, things seemed rather hectic.

Every desk I could see was stacked with this and that, and a mountain of paper. The voices of people having conversations or talking on the phone could be heard all over the place. It's going to be difficult to ask where the key is, dude...

At times like this, it was best to call out to Hiratsuka-sensei. After all, that person was pretty much always in the staff room either watching anime shows or eating.

Quietly saying "I'm coming in..." while feeling like I was sneaking in to do some kind of morning prank, I stepped inside the room and headed towards Hiratsuka-sensei's desk.^[47]

It was a desk I had been called to and paid visits to countless times before. However, I was met with an unfamiliar sight.

Normally it would be in a state of 'rock and uproar', a jumbled mess of papers, envelopes, coffee cans, or freebie figurines.^[48] However, today the desk was neat and tidy. Aside from a string bound black notebook and a ballpoint pen lying by its side, there was not much else on top of it.

For a moment, I wondered if it was someone else's desk. But the swivel chair there had its back facing the wrong direction, something very like Hiratsuka-sensei would do. However, the figure of the person herself was nowhere to be seen.

"Ohh, if it isn't Hikigaya. Something up?"

As I turned my head this way and that in search of the source, a voice called out to me from a slightly far-off location. On looking, I saw Hiratsuka-sensei's face poking out from a partitioned off reception space, holding a

cigarette in her mouth. Ah, come to think of it, she did abuse that place as a smoking area.

Her hand, previously waving, now beckoned me to come closer. Obeying, I headed towards her. It would seem that she had been doing some kind of paperwork but was currently taking a break from it. Perhaps to go with the cigarette, in her hand was an unopened can of coffee. Chosen for this role was of course, the MAX Coffee. 'After all, he is someone very special to you now'. [\[49\]](#)

"Uh, I've come to take the key."

Sitting down on the sofa in the reception area as offered, I informed her of my business. On doing so, Hiratsuka went "oh?" with a mystified look on her face.

"If you're looking for the key, Yukinoshita took it just now..."

Exhaling a puff of smoke, she knocked the ash off her cigarette. As I grimaced at the distinct smell of tar and the feeling of wasted effort from our paths not crossing, Hiratsuka-sensei laughed in exasperation.

"Can't you at least contact her to check? HouRenSou is important, you know." [\[50\]](#)

"Uh, I don't know her number."

"...And neither does Yuigahama?"

"Aah, well..."

Faced with a suspicious look, I did my best to laugh off the matter. Is it something I can say, that my only intention coming here had been to take the key?

However, even if I did not put it into words, Hiratsuka-sensei must have already guessed something. She gently shrugged her shoulders and smiled at me. Finding her lukewarm gaze strangely uncomfortable, I twisted my body

to the side.

On doing so, the figures of the other teachers and office staff came into view, as they noisily toiled away.

"It seems kind of busy around here."

When I took advantage of that to change the subject, Hiratsuka-sensei squinted in the same direction.

"Hm? ...Aah. Well, we are already at the end of the year, after all. It's always like this around this time."

Hmm, I see. I had thought the commotion was due to the entrance exams, but apparently that wasn't the only reason. It looked like there were various things to do, such as graduation and students moving up to the next year. Additionally, since Hiratsuka-sensei's responsibilities were with us second year students, she might have very little to do with the incoming first years.

"It seems like the increased workload before the end of term or fiscal year end is the same no matter where you are. My parents also seemed rather busy lately."

"Well, I think the fiscal year end date will vary across different companies, but indeed most companies set the cut-off point to be the end of March. As a result, we have to work to match that pace, so things are already getting this crazily hectic... I want to go home... Final reports, ends of term and deadlines can all go to hell."

Hiratsuka-sensei spoke bitterly, mixing in complaints as she hung her head.

But you seem pretty free, as opposed to the words that you spat out... As I thought this, I silently stared at her. While I was being silent, Hiratsuka-sensei realized my unspoken concern.

"Ugh, I'm busy too, you know? Honestly busy, you know?"

Suddenly straightening up her body, she ostentatiously puffed out her cheeks. Hmm, sadly, had she been just a little bit younger that would have appeared

genuinely cute... But for Hiratsuka-sensei to do that to me at her age, it comes a full circle and on the contrary seems rather cute. Oh my, in the end, she's still cute!

"Right now I'm... well, taking a break, okay? A short one, okay? Hear that?"

Speaking with a certain emphasis on those words, Hiratsuka-sensei pressed her cigarette into an ashtray. My misgivings were also being stubbed out together with. However, I do believe that there was that old adage that says 'there was no smoke without fire'...

"You say that, but your desk is awfully tidy."

"W-Well, when you're busy, you unconsciously engage in that sort of escapism, you know."

Hiratsuka laughed and scratched her head, as she sidestepped the issue.

Well, I do understand the sentiment though... When you're very busy, you become disoriented and start to lose track of what is going on, and suddenly find yourself playing games or something, right!? Hmm, it can't be helped. She's innocent. Blaming her in this situation would be barking up the wrong tree. If anything, the work is the one at fault. Work is evil. A 'hate work, don't hate people' attitude is crucial.

I too, folded my arms, nodding in agreement. As I was doing that, Hiratsuka-sensei let out a small sigh.

"Still, I should probably get around to putting my work in order as well..."

Rather than directing it at me, she seemed to have said it to herself and leaked out that murmur. Hiratsuka-sensei's gaze fell on the nearby ashtray. In it by now was already neither fire nor smoke, but simply a lingering smell.

Despite having considered myself used to the smell by now, I still found myself unconsciously frowning, possibly also because I had ended up recalling my conversation with Haruno-san. The smell that I sensed that night had also been this oppressive. It was a smell that incited a sense of discomfort

from somewhere. Trying my best to forget that, I quietly stood up.

"...I should get going."

"Yes, please do so."

Hiratsuka-sensei followed me to escort me out.

Just as I was about to leave the reception area, she called out to me from behind.

"Hikigaya."

"Yes?"

Stopping to turn around, I saw Hiratsuka-sensei with her mouth slightly open. However, without saying a word, she motionlessly looked at me.

That gaze contained none of the usual sharpness. Yet, it also differed from the gentle look she would show from time to time.

It was my first time seeing her with such a look. As a result, I became all the more curious about the continuation of what she said in almost a sigh. Hence, I tilted my head as if to prompt her.

However, Hiratsuka-sensei closed her eyes and slightly shook her head. Then, she grinned, smiling brightly like a young adolescent.

"...Nothing. Here, catch!"

At the same time as her shout, with an awkward throw, the can of coffee in her hand came flying towards me. I somehow managed to catch it. I looked at Hiratsuka-sensei, wondering what the hell was this about.

Thereupon, Hiratsuka-sensei ‘kyaruruun’ ♪ placed her hands to her cheeks, ‘pachiin’ ☆ winked, and ‘pero~’ stuck out her tongue.

"Keep the thing about me slacking here a secret, okay☆? "

Woww, annoying... What's with the Yumekawa! impression?^[51] Eh? Then, is this can of coffee a bribe that was meant to keep my mouth shut? Well, even if you don't give me any bribe, it's not like I have anyone to tattle to...

For now, in contrast to her movements, I decided to respond by saying "Capisce!" with a sideways ☆ Peace sign, then left the staffroom.^[52]

If the clubroom door had already been unlocked, then there was no need for me to hurry.

After all, at about this time Yukinoshita should have already arrived at the clubroom and let Yuigahama in. While juggling the can of MAX Coffee received earlier, I leisurely made my way to the clubroom.

Not only was there no sign of Yuigahama outside the clubroom, but also within it, I could hear the voices of two people talking. Thanks to those voices, it felt like a certain warmth now dwelled in the scene that had been wintry until a short while ago.

Even the door that had refused to budge not too long ago now smoothly slid open. Since the heater had been switched on, the scent of black tea mingled with warm, soothing air in the clubroom. Beyond the door, I found the two of them seated in their usual places at the end closer to the windows.

With a single greeting, I pulled out my usual chair on the same side as the hallway.

"Sup."

"Hello."

Just about done with her tea preparations, Yukinoshita stopped pouring black tea into a cup, raised her head up from looking at the cup, and showed me a smile. However, her expression immediately turned apologetic, with her eyebrows dropping downward.

"I'm sorry. We must have just passed and missed each other... I should have contacted you."

"Aah. Well, it's alright."

As if to say "I did it on my way buying this coffee", I showed her the can of coffee. When I did so, Yukinoshita exhaled a sigh of relief. However, in contrast, next to her, Yuigahama stopped breathing and puffed up her cheeks.

"I did say I would call her..."

I found myself smiling wryly at Yuigahama, as she voiced her complaints.

"No, I don't remember you saying that..."

"That's because Hikki left before just before I was about to say it."

"Um, but I left for the MAX.... Ah, never mind, actually it's my bad. I'm sorry..."

In the face of her glare, I tried to use the can of MAX coffee in my hand as an excuse. However, feeling Yuigahama's gaze growing colder, I ended up straightforwardly apologizing to her.

"...It's fine."

Yuigahama released the air from her sulky, puffed up cheeks, then took a sip from the mug she was holding in her hands. Watching that exchange of ours, Yukinoshita softly giggled, then with the teapot in hand, directed her gaze towards me.

"I made tea... Would you like some?"

"Aah, thanks. They do say sweet things enter a different stomach."

"You'd say that about coffee, too!? Though it is true that it's super sweet!"

With a semi-horrified expression, Yuigahama looked at the can of MAX coffee. Of course I would say it. If you like to hear, this thing is indeed far sweeter than the low carb, low fat sweets you get these days...

Well, let's save the MAX Coffee for when I am slightly peckish. For now, I

shall have this black tea for my After-School Tea Time.[\[53\]](#)

"It's ready. Here."

"Yep, thanks."

Taking a sip from the cup of tea that Yukinoshita poured, I breathed a sigh of relief. I could feel the stiffness in my body loosening up.

As a result, I noticed that I had been bracing myself the whole time.

And also, at the same time, noticed that I unconsciously had become relaxed from that moment.

Because of that, the flow of teasing words that I had been letting slip until a short while ago came to a halt, and I could do nothing but exhale breaths tinged with moisture.

Even though I would not have considered silence at all troubling in the past, right now I found an awkward, tightening atmosphere extremely terrifying.

I sneaked a sidelong glance at how Yuigahama was doing, and found her staring into her mug, observing the ripples as they formed on the surface. Judging from her condition, I sensed that Yuigahama was in a similar state of mind.

However, Yukinoshita was different.

In the midst of the silence myself and Yuigahama were keeping, Yukinoshita broke the ice with a calm smile on her face.

"Um, thank you for the other day..."

She placed both hands on her lap and softly bowed her head. Her movements were indeed fluid and beautiful.

After seeing that, I was slightly relieved. Her beautiful, straightened posture, endearing hair whorl, and faint smile felt like something that I had seen somewhere before, though I had no evidence to back up this suspicion.

Thanks to this feeling of déjà vu, I managed to utter a few words in a way that was even gentler than I expected.

"...Did the move go well?"

Although I had already heard from Hayama in the morning, I purposely asked her anyway. As expected, these things should be heard from the person herself. Yukinoshita nodded and continued.

"Yes. Although I would not really call it a move... Besides, Yuigahama-san also helped out."

When Yukinoshita turned a warm gaze towards Yuigahama, Yuigahama gently waved her hands in front of her chest.

"Ah, not at all, it was no problem! I didn't even do very much to help..."

Possibly being modest, Yuigahama laughed in embarrassment, combing her hair bun and turning her face away. However, Yukinoshita did not avert her gaze in the least.

"You really did help me out a lot. Thank you..."

Seeing that bright and calm smile that gave me an impression of a clear sky, I felt like I was dreaming at that moment.

Being the subject of that gaze for the whole time, Yuigahama finally snuck a peek at Yukinoshita. Then, their eyes met. With a smiling, tearful expression, Yuigahama nodded and released a trembling breath.

Possibly finding that response embarrassing, Yukinoshita became somewhat bashful as well.

"Perhaps I should bring out some tea-cakes."

From there, the clubroom grew faintly warmer, and the aroma of sweetened black tea filled the air. As the evening sun began its descent, its light streamed into the room, dyeing the air in color.

Suddenly, that air shook. It was the sound of someone knocking on the door.

"Come in."

After Yukinoshita responded in a calm voice, the door slowly opened.

4-4

A solitary ray of light streaming through the window escaped through the slightly open door. The cold air blowing in from outside stirred up the background warmth, feeling just like a gust of wind.

One of the windows in the hallway had probably been left open for ventilation. Fresh air began to flow into the clubroom in which the heater had been turned on.

"Excuse me!"

The one who had ushered in that breeze, Isshiki Iroha, beamed at us as she stood by the door. However, she didn't appear to have any intention of venturing any further inside. Eh? Why isn't she coming in? Or rather, are you going to leave the door open like that and let the cold air slip in? When I sent her a reproachful gaze to that effect, Isshiki leaned an index finger against her cheek and tilted her head slightly.

"Umm, there is a computer here, right?"

"We have one, yes..."

Somewhat confused, Yukinoshita replied to this sudden inquiry. Upon which, Isshiki nonchalantly asked yet another question.

"Can it play DVDs?"

In response, Yukinoshita tilted her head in contemplation, then moved to take out the laptop kept inside the desk drawers. However, even without the need to do that, I already knew the answer.

"It's an old model, and thanks to that, it can play DVDs."

"Heehh..."

For some reason that impressed her...

"Is something wrong?"

"No, just checking."

"Haah... No, what exactly are you checking...?"

With a light wave of her hand, she made a face that said "nothing much, really". However, after this exchange of conversation, she perhaps finally felt like entering the clubroom. She reached behind with a hand to close the door, then walked over to us while grumbling about something.

"I could have bought and watched the digital version on the Internet, but in that case you don't get a receipt. You need a credit card and stuff for that kind of thing, right?"

"Even if you ask us for confirmation..."

The bewildered voice came from Yukinoshita, but the three of us shared that same facial expression. What was she saying? While we wondered and gave her such doubtful looks, Isshiki briskly booted up the laptop.

"You see, I rented a DVD. Since the student council's computer is a new model, you can't use it to watch DVDs."

Heeh... so you guys have a new one, do you...? It must be nice to have money... Well, it is true that most of the newest laptop models no longer have disk drives equipped... As I was thinking about such things, with a rustling motion, Isshiki pulled something out of her bag.

It was a palm-sized, white, rectangular box.

"...What's this?"

Yuigahama timidly poked it several times with her fingertip. Good question indeed. What was this? Tofu? Or so I thought, but it seemed to have buttons as well as something resembling a lens. Which means it couldn't have been tofu, huh...

While firmly gripping the box, Isshiki plugged in a cable, then began

connecting it to the laptop. Looking at her do this, Yukinoshita let out a "heeh" of admiration.

"It might look awfully small, but it's still a projector."

"That's right. Ah, one moment, I'll lower the screen."

Isshiki answered with a nod and stood up. She then lowered the rolling screen that dangled in the corner of the clubroom. The screen made a whooshing noise as it unfurled.

Just what are you expecting?^[54] As I watched over her while wondering that, Isshiki pressed a button on the box. Thereupon, a soft machine whirring noise could be heard. A short while later, the image displayed on the laptop was projected onto the screen.

"Heeh~ Amazing."

"Yes, it's quite a clean image."

Yuigahama's mouth was wide open, while Yukinoshita had her arms folded with a hand placed to her chin. Responding to the two of them, Isshiki wagged a finger, slightly cleared her throat, and puffed out her chest.

"Apparently you can also use it to project a smartphone screen, among other kinds of device!"

"Heeh. Ah. But... this must have been expensive, right?"

Her astonishment increasing, as if it had just occurred to her, Yuigahama jokingly asked a question while smiling "nufufu". Upon which, Isshiki flung her arms wide open and answered.

"Well, actually! For only now, with the student council budget, this is essentially free to me!"

"That's the worst kind of product pitch on a TV commercial..."

There's nothing more suspicious than a promotional line calling something

"essentially free". Be it those "essentially free to play" games, or those pyramid selling schemes that claim to 100% yield a profit in the mid-to-long term, you shouldn't place your trust in them so easily. "I won't be fooled! I will never be a pay-to-play player! I'll just gacha roll with the Apologems you get after maintenance!" Or so, I solemnly vowed as I watched in silence. [\[55\]](#)

"Actually, what's is this projector for?"

It seemed like the projector was still brand new, since it still had the transparent seal of protection affixed to it. When I asked, Isshiki stared hard at the projector while tilting her head.

"I suppose it's... newly bought equipment in case we need it, huh?"

No, even if you say something like "Jumping power, huh...?" to us... Irohasu-oniisan, could you please put in more self confidence while giving us an exposition on the appeal of the student council's new friend Projector-chan...? [\[56\]](#)

"That is not the point of my question. I am asking what you brought this here for..."

Yukinoshita pressed a hand to her temple as if holding back a headache. Yes, that's right. I, too, wanted to ask that question.

"Well, about that..."

As she said this, Isshiki spun a DVD disc around the tip of her finger, then inserted it into the disk drive. Perhaps noticing something from seeing that, Yuigahama suddenly stood up.

"A movie? Is it a movie? Are we watching a movie?"

Yuigahama, starting to get a little excited, cheerfully began drawing the curtains. At the same time, she switched off the lights, one after the other. Come off it, we can't possibly be watching a movie in the clubroom, can we...?

Or so I thought, but what got projected on the screen were clips I just might have seen before.

There was a Statue of Liberty, a lion roaring, letters being lit up, and even a rippling wave, and stuff.^[57] Eh? We're seriously watching a movie?

Completely disregarding my bewilderment, Isshiki shifted her chair to a location where the screen would be more visible. In addition, Yuigahama moved the table topped with snacks to the front. They've got everything prepared... Eh? We're seriously watching a movie?

With things already reaching this point, Yukinoshita perhaps decided that she had no choice but to go with the flow, so she began to b

rew more tea... It looked like they really did intend to watch a movie.

4-5

In a dark room where the curtains had been blocking the lights from coming in, the only source of light was the dim rays shooting from the projector to the screen. Had I been at an actual cinema or a movie theatre, I would have been able to better concentrate on the movie and enjoy the story.

However, the place that we were watching the movie was the clubroom, not a movie theatre. As a place where we spent our ordinary daily life, the room had become a space colored by an unusual scenery. Thanks to that, it all felt strange to me, rendering me restless and uneasy.

Above all, the sound came from the laptop's internal speakers, to which everyone had taken their seat close, and thus made it feel a bit crowded.

Thanks to that, I could not help but get nervous, moving my body around restlessly. Each time I did, I'd come in contact with the person beside me. There were sounds of uniforms rubbing when in contact, the gasps of surprise when someone was unintentionally touched by another person, or small secret whispers to someone's ear.



This was all I could remember, while the contents of the film had barely been recorded in my memory.

What I did get, was that this wasn't a movie, but a foreign TV drama, and a very coarse overview of the plot. It seemed to be a story about teenagers that takes place at an American high school. 'All in all, sports people sure are scary. The caste system there seemed pretty tough for the students there as well.' were my opinions after watching the movie. Around halfway through the film, my heart had finally given in and I stopped paying much attention. And after that, I felt like I had become a meditating monk, fighting against the klesha in my mind till the very end.

Just when I was about to achieve enlightenment, the film finally ended. The ending credits rolled and turned out to be shorter than I expected. As it finished, Ishikki turned the projector off.

"Ah~ That was entertaining~"

Yuigahama said, as she stood up to open the curtains. The outside was already completely dark. After turning the lights on, I could spot Yukinoshita closing her eyes and nodding in satisfaction.

It looked like everyone enjoyed the movie... I was distracted by other things, so I could only vaguely remember the content of the movie... While I thought about that, Isshiki, who seemed to be in an exceptionally good mood, began to sing in a low voice and clean up.

"~Dancing Queen~ Hnnfufu,fufu~n."

She was singing one of the songs that had played at the end of the movie, as I remembered clearly. However, she began to hum the second half, perhaps because she didn't understand the lyrics.

I really didn't want to intervene while she was in such a good mood, but there was something I had to ask. Taking advantage of the moment when her busy hands stopped moving, I slowly began to speak.

“Eh. Why did you decide to watch the movie here?”

“It wasn’t a movie, but a TV drama.”

“Whatever it is. It doesn’t matter...”

How bothersome, those movies where Americans in high spirit celebrating stuff should all just be called Hollywood movies. Those movies where the actors begin dancing for no apparent reason should just stay as Indian movies. All films are like that, right? Well, this was a foreign TV drama, though... As I gave a deep sigh, Ishikki’s face turned somewhat surprised.

“You didn’t like it that much, Senpai?”

“No, I probably would have liked it, had I paid attention to it, but rather, the poor and unpleasant scenes stuck in my mind more than anything else...”

Those were the scenes that I occasionally paid attention to and ended up remembering them, but above all, the truly hardest part was being surrounded very closely by these girls in this chamber...

“By the way, I imagine you all liked these types of movies.”

“Well, you could say that. They’re just interesting, as expected.”

“Yeah, I agree.”

When Isshiki said it with an affirmative attitude, Yuigahama followed and agreed. Yukinoshita also nodded without saying a word.

”Huh, I see...”

I had also casually watched other series, including “24”, “Prison Break”, etc, and found them quite entertaining, but this foreign drama we had just watched sometimes got very muddy, making me worn out in the end.

“Well, I guess this is the type of stuff that girls would rather like to watch.”

As I murmured, perhaps annoyed by my way of speaking, Yuigahama and

Ishikki's faces both turned a little grumpy.

(Yuigahama) "I don't think it's just girls. Guys can enjoy it just as well, though."

(Isshiki) "That's right. In fact, if a girl says she likes movies that are just normally popular among girls, that's a reassurance. On the other hand, if a girl says she enjoys 'Mad Max' or 'The Avengers', then she must be affected by her boyfriend."

(Hikigaya) "What? Seriously?"

Hearing something that I found hard to ignore, I ended up questioning her back reflexively. Thereupon, Ishikki grinned maliciously.

(Isshiki) "Well, 80% or 90% of the time."

(Hikigaya) "Hey, please stop saying things like that. Think about those guys who feel happy because they find out that the girls they talk to happen to like the same set of movies that they like. You are sending these guys to hell. There are indeed a certain number of girls that like those types of movies..."

My evidence to support that claim would be Hiratsuka-sensei. In fact, her favorite movies were 'Tremors', 'Battleship' and 'Pacific Rim'! I nearly fell in love with her when she told me that... Anyways, quoting her as the evidence isn't exactly reliable and trustworthy. As I thought about what type of movies regular girls may be into, I quickly turned my eyes to Ishikki, who then giggled.

"That's why I'm saying, girls who like movies that are elegant, vivid, cheeky and daring, such as 'Amelie', are way better!"

It looked like this girl just gave a very impassioned speech... Also, the example that she gave is quite old, though... Well, it is a pretty popular movie, after all, so there were lots of way to watch it nowadays, which is why I understood her a bit...

"Hmmm... So what is your favorite movie?"

As I asked, Ishikki made a kyururun~ cute pose, putting one of her hands on her cheek with a cute smile on her face.

““Amelie!≡””

“How cheeky...”

“Also, you sounded like you are lying.”

‘It sounded like a choice made by a sub-culture wannabe poseur bitch.’ - I almost said that immediately following the comments made by Yuigahama, who wore a questionable face, but before I could say it, Yukinoshita spoke with a calm voice, after taking a sip from the tea cup with her eyes closed.

“It’s a pretty good movie, though.”

That was close! Good thing I didn’t say anything. Everyone's preferences do vary in terms of their favourite movies, or anything really, so it’s best to respect their opinions. You never know when you might step on someone’s landmine and infuriate that person, after all!

Unfortunately, in this world, there are people who even though respect others’ opinions, but end up stepping on those landmines anyway.

“I see. Yukinoshita-senpai does seem like the kind of person who enjoys shows like these.”

“I sense malicious will in the way you put it.”

Seeing Yukinoshita frowning and throwing a cold look at Isshiki, Isshiki’s body suddenly froze. She quickly hid behind me. Watching all this, Yukinoshita put her hand on her forehead and sighed as if she had had enough.

“Then, why did you decide to set up a movie screening here all of a sudden?”

“Oh, right, right, about that.”

Also remembering the question I had asked earlier, I adjusted my shoulders

to face her. Ishikki clapped her hands when she remembered her request.

“I wanted to watch the movie and use it as reference material’. Everyone would think I’m killing time if I started watching it in the student council room, after all.”

(Yukinoshita) “That’s still not a good reason for choosing this place to watch it...”

(Hikigaya) “Watch it at home. At home.”

“It’s because I wanted to test out the new projector I had just bought. We don’t have a projector screen like this in the student council room or at my house. I’m also the type to not work outside business hours.”

It didn’t matter what type of advice that Yukinoshita or I gave. Ishiki didn’t flinch and kept smiling. In that case, she’d probably buy some speakers next time using the Student Council budget, just so she could have a complete home theatre set, something only applicable to her.

While I thought of that, Yuigahama slightly raised her hand.

“What do you mean by ‘using it as reference material’? We just watched the movie normally, and didn’t really do anything special.”

“You guys know how the graduation ceremony is coming up right? After that, there's something like a thank-you party. Well, the student council is in charge of it, that’s why I wanted to watch it.”

“Oh, a thank-you party...”

I went on alert for what could be coming next, pushed myself back from my chair, and had my rejection pose ready, all so that I could demonstrate to Isshiki that my intentions were to not help with anything that she said. In fact, Isshiki seemed to just ignore my movements. She crossed her arms, and began to think of something with a concerned look.

“The truth is, we could easily bring some tables together and provide the space and occasion for everyone to chat happily, in order to show our

appreciation to the teachers. This is pretty much just like what a normal thank-you party is supposed to do in that regard. But thinking about when I'll be graduating, I think it'd be better to do something fancy now in preparation for my turn. ...Ah, in addition, in this way, those who are graduating this year will also appreciate it and be happier as well."

'Wow! At least at the end of her speech, she did add some considerate words to the graduating class. Irohasu has grown up.' - Heh, like I would think that way. Rather than that, the fact that her level of selfishness had developed to this extent felt a bit refreshing in a way... Actually, I ended up feeling impressed by her somehow. At that instant, a similar sigh with the same tone as my own could be heard by my side. When I turned to look, Yukinoshita had an understanding look as she nodded.

"I see, that's why it was a prom movie."

"Ah, just as amazing as I thought, Yukinoshita-senpai! Amazing."

Isshiki clapped her hands, praising Yukinoshita.

"It's not a big deal. Anyone could have guessed it from the context of our conversation."

Yukinoshita's demeanor was calm, but her chest was slightly sticking out proudly. She also blushed as she looked a bit embarrassed. What an easy-peasy gullible girl...

Regardless, now I could understand what was going on, thanks to Yukinoshita nailing the question. So Isshiki's visit here has to do with proms... Wait, so, what's a prom?

"Pro-? What? Proactiv?"

The thing that cures your acne? After asking for a word that I wasn't used to hearing, I noticed I was asking the wrong person. Yuigahama responded to the question with her own.

"Pu-ro-mu... peaches?"

“That’s ‘Plum’. You really do like peaches...”

“Eh? Ah, yeah I do.”

Ehehe - Yuigahama’s smile was all over her face. What’s with that reaction. She looks super cute. Wait, that’s not what I wanted to talk about. I wanted to know more about what this ‘prom’ thing is.

So, please enlighten me, Yukupedia-san! Hence I turned my face to her, Yukinoshita proudly wiped the strip of her hair off her shoulder, and smiled triumphantly.

“Plums are also called Sumomo in Japanese. Although both peaches and plums are classified under Rosales Order, Rosaceae Family and Prunus Genus, they are technically different Species. In fact, it could be said that they are closer to cherries genetically. ”

“That’s not what I wanted to know...”

“Eh, eh, but, Sumomo is also Momo, yet Sumo and Momo are closest to Sakuranbou?”[\[58\]](#)

Yuigahama-san’s brain is completely disoriented.[\[59\]](#) Maybe it was because of the ‘Sakuranbou’ part. ‘One more time!’, is what I would like to have asked Yuigahama to repeat in a quick manner just as she had, but I’ll leave it for another occasion.

“Back to our conversation, so what’s this ‘prom’ thing?”

Yukinoshita nodded as she said “Let’s see...”, thinking of the words to begin her explanation next.

“The word ‘prom’ comes from ‘promenade’. Basically an abbreviation for a dance party. I think that...it’s something like a dance party that western schools do at the end of school year. Well, it wouldn’t be too wrong to think of it as a lavish, fancy graduation party. Don’t you remember something like that in the drama that we just finished watching?”

Oh... I see. So that American-style party in the film ‘Dancing Queen’ was a prom. When I nodded to myself, I suddenly realized something.

“Eh? That wasn’t fiction? People really do that kind of stuff?”

“Yeah, that appears to be the case~ It seems to be quite normal actually. Umm...”

Isshiki took out her cellphone, and began to tap the screen and search for something. Soon, she seemed to have found what she was looking for, and then showed us the screen.

“Tada~”

“Ohh...”

From the screen, I could see couples in tuxedos and vividly colorful dresses in the middle of a fancy party. Even though the location changed depending on event, be it the gym, a club with a DJ, a dance hall, or just an outdoor venue, everyone seemed to look equally dazzling. In fact, no one in those videos looked like a high school student...

“Look, look! It would be a super hit on Instagram! I super want to do something like this!”

“Stop thinking and judging things from such a senseless perspective...”

Isshiki was referring to the photo in which girls in dresses exit fancy limousines and walk into the dance hall. Guys would probably be more interested in Temjin rather than limousines...[\[60\]](#)

Though, it wasn’t the time to be thinking about Virtual-On.

It seemed that the prom parties that Isshiki had shown us were at a higher scale than the graduation party we had in mind. I felt like they looked slightly different from the ones you’d simply find at those night parties with swimming pools, where those party people are fired up in high spirit. They didn’t resemble the so-called ‘Juicy! Party! Yeah!’, either...[\[61\]](#)

Maybe because it comes from a different culture, or because of my own tastes , I couldn't really imagine a prom dance in our school.

“Why not just have normal graduation party...? Why make it a prom dance...?”

Having asked that, Isshiki put one of her hands past her pink vest and placed it onto her chest, and announced in a loud voice.

“Fufu~n, because I'll be the prom queen!”

“Ooh...”

What the hell is this girl saying... As I wondered, I decided to ask Google-sensei what a prom queen is.

Apparently, prom queen refers to the most beautiful girl in the school and by year, who shall be chosen by her classmates. On the other hand, there is also a prom king, who is chosen from the guys...

“I see... In our year, Hayama would definitely be the prom king...”

“Well, I guess so. In other words, Hayama-senpai would be the king, and I would be the qu... Ah!”

Apparently, as she spoke, Isshiki seemed to realize the time paradox. After an obvious cough, she turned to me with a smile.

“Actually Senpai, this is a completely unrelated question, but how about flunking a year?”

“Of course not...”

“Don't be like that! You'd end up as a Ronin anyways, so it's the same deal, right? In fact, you'd have a lot extra to gain from the Special Student Discounts.”[\[62\]](#)

“Could you stop deciding these things for me on your own? Besides there's more cons than pros in that scenario. I'll also apply to those less privileged

universities, so I won't become a Ronin, either.”

After I reassured my point, Isshiki puffed her cheeks and pouted her lips.

“I see... Then how about helping me with the prom instead?”

“Instead...? Instead of what...”

With her expression suddenly changing from puffing her cheeks to putting on a shameless face, Isshiki spoke confidently as if saying “I’m gonna make a compromise proposal just for my senpai!” In addition, what she had proposed was something I couldn’t ignore, so I got a little bit troubled by that.

“Hold on. You do intend to make prom happen?”

“Yes.”

I asked her, with my eyes and voice both conveying the hint of expecting a negative answer. However, Isshiki responded affirmatively with an unfazed look. All I could do was sigh.

“It would definitely be impossible to plan something like that at this point. Above all, it’s the type of stuff I’m not good at doing, making it even worse.”

“Y-Yeah... I think it would be fun, though... But I guess it could be difficult, too.”

“That’s true...”

Yuigahama smiled bitterly with a troubled face, and Yukinoshita put one of her hands on her forehead as she closed her eyes. It seemed like we were all in agreement. Seeing that two of us had already expressed opinions of its difficulty, even Isshiki seemed to back off a little bit.

“Ahh, well, I knew that, but I still want to make it happen... Is it really impossible?”

Her voice no longer sounded as firm as before. As she asked the question, she held onto the edge of her jacket, while her eyes slightly looked up with a

begging expression. Her attitude was not only foxy, but also with the same destructive power as usual, the type that would make me want to fulfill her request.

In fact, I could already foresee that things would definitely go bad if we didn't reject her request for a prom right now.

Despite the knot in my throat that made feel a bit guilty, I managed to somehow force the words of rejection out of my mouth.

"It's not like I can't or don't want to help, but more like because I really don't believe it's possible in any regard... I can give a lot of reasons for that... of course, I don't have to list them and I'm sure you understand."

I felt like there was no need to explain further. There were many things that are missing or we simply didn't have enough of them - such as time, funds, personnel, experience, information, and many others. I was certain that Isshiki also understood it without needing me to explain it to her.

If she still insisted on requesting help, then she probably had some particular reason for asking such an absurd request... In that case, it would probably be the most realistic for us to just listen to her explaining her motives, and to come up with some kind of compromise.

While I was trying to come up with a solution, Isshiki made a 'hmmm' sound. It looked like she was thinking something.

"I see... I understand. Then we, the student council will take care of it on our own."

"Yeah, it's for the best... Wait what?"

I looked at Isshiki again for the second time, thinking I may have misheard something. In fact, that didn't seem to be the case, nor did it sound like she was joking.

Isshiki suddenly raised her face and gave me a stern look. I could definitely see a sense of clear determination residing in her eyes.

“Did you hear what we said?”

”Yes. That’s why I decided to do that only by ourselves.”

After saying that, Isshiki gave us a bold, invincible smile.

After hearing her determined proclamation, I didn’t think there was anything I could do at this point. I didn’t try to stop her, or say ‘good luck’ to her. Instead, the words that came out of my mouth disappeared and turned into almost just a sigh.

“O-oh... I see...”

I was not the only bewildered person here. Yuigahama seemed just as surprised as I was. We both reflexively turned to look at each other in puzzlement. I looked over at Yuigahama and continued to ask with my eyes ‘what’s going on?’, to which she gently shook her head in response indicating ‘who knows...’ Meanwhile, Yukinoshita had her eyes closed and didn’t participate in our eye contact.

Because of that, it seems that only Isshiki could give us the legitimate explanation to solve our confusion, so we stared at her closely.

“Eh, your surprising looks really trouble me and I don’t know what to say... Yes, I understood in the first place that it would be difficult to hold the prom. Of course, being rejected by you all was within my expectation. I’m not that stupid, after all.”

Isshiki spoke in a bothered, upset tone, but as such, Yuigahama and I seemed to finally understand.

“Ah, in other words, you had planned on asking us for help anyway, even knowing that we would say no?”

“I see. So that’s why you looked unprepared when you showed up earlier to negotiate with us.”

Hearing our words, Isshiki twisted her lips slightly and avoided looking at us, as if trying to force her words out.

“A-at least I was thinking, that having you watch the drama together would make you all more interested in having a prom dance...”

That’s the same as coming unprepared... At least it’s good that she was being honest. Isshiki coughed a bit as if clearing her throat while I observed her with a warm gaze.

“Well, if you change your minds, come hang out at the student council. You’re always welcome! So much that I’d never let you go home!”

“Your intentions to exploit us were so transparent... So you are still determined to make this prom dance happen...”

“Yes.”

Isshiki’s answer hadn’t changed. She had already made up her mind. However, her rationale behind that decision hadn’t convinced us by a single bit. This was going to be very concerning and bothersome...

As I kept asking myself what we should do, Yukinoshita began to speak.

“If I may ask, why are you so insistent on holding the prom?”

Perhaps due to the sudden question Yukinoshita just asked, Isshiki’s shoulders shook in surprise. From the way she phrased her question, it seemed to be directed towards Isshiki, though she appeared to have been thinking about other things for a while.

And perhaps because of that, Isshiki’s reaction was also delayed.

“Eh, ahh, I did say, it’s that, because I want to be prom queen...”

“But that won't be realized until two years later, right?”

Isshiki stumbled over her words. When Isshiki paused, Yukinoshita sneaked her question in, and immediately continued asking her questions. Isshiki responded while grazing her cheek and occasionally brushing her hand over her hairline along her neck.

“Eh, hmmm, I need to first lay the cornerstone to prepare for that from now on.”

“Assume that the prom dance will take place within two years. You don’t have to prepare for anything now and will still be chosen as the prom queen.”

“I-I see... What?”

Isshiki glared at Yukinoshita, unable to comprehend any bit of what she had heard. Yuigahama and I had looked at each other, having the same thought. Yukinoshita gave a slight sigh at the suspicious glare she had received from Isshiki.

“I’m saying that there is definitely no need to hold the prom this year.”

“No, I definitely wasn’t talking about that.”

Isshiki spoke in confusion, but Yukinoshita disregarded her words. She only gave her a shrewd gaze as she waited for Isshiki’s answer to her question. Isshiki seemed to flinch a little bit as she seemed overwhelmed by Yukinoshita’s gaze. However, after a split second, Isshiki clapped her hands and found a way to respond.

“Ah, but see, there’s no guarantee that I’ll be student council president near year! That’s why there’s no alternative other than to start planning it now.”

“Though if you wanted to be the president, you’d probably be chosen again. For starters, there aren’t many candidates in the first place, that way even if there’s a final election, you’d probably win due to your merits and experience that you’ve accumulated until then. As I see it, there is no problem with planning all this starting next year.”

The meaning of each word that Yukinoshita put in her mouth looked gentle, but the sharp tone of her voice made it seem like she was blaming and cornering Isshiki. The conversation, that seemed more like an interrogation, made Isshiki even more speechless than before.

“Well that... umm... Yes, you might be right, but...”

“In that case, you can start preparing next...”

“That won't work!”

Yukinoshita words were interrupted half way. A while ago Isshiki was overwhelmed by Yukinoshita's words, but the words that she had let out just now had no traces of doubt and hesitation in them. Yukinoshita looked into her eyes, as if demanding an explanation of her intention.

“Even if I propose a prom next year, it would probably end up in the same situation again and be regarded as impossible. Just as what you guys said a moment ago, it will be rejected the same way, or they will say something like ‘there's not enough time’ and I'll probably end up giving up again... That's why, it doesn't matter how hard it is, or if it ends in failure, I have to start planning now for what's coming next. Otherwise...”

Isshiki let out her words in pieces. In the end, the words Isshiki had spoken stopped in their tracks. I could only hear a light trembling in her breath that she tried hard to contain.

Just when I was about to ask her if she was alright, suddenly, her flaxen hair started to shake greatly.

“I have to do it now, because it might be done on time only if I start now.”

After forcefully lifting her face, Isshiki gave Yukinoshita a strong and firm look. Nevertheless, after directly receiving such a look, Yukinoshita's expression did not change at all.

“Why would you go this far to do it? For whom?”

Isshiki blinked her eyes after being caught by surprise by her question. Perhaps she was taking her time to think how to respond, her jaw-dropped expression actually looked quite innocent. But soon, Isshiki wore a triumphant smile.

“For myself of course!”

Isshiki Iroha proclaimed in a loud, proud voice - her hand placed on her

chest, her back bent backward, and her chest slightly pulled forward.

I'm impressed, Isshiki. What you just said might be true, or it might be a simple lie to hide something else. The fact that you advanced faithfully in your words was worthy of praise. It would be extremely inconsiderate at this point to ask for more reasons or explanations from her.

Yukinoshita blinked a few times in disbelief, perhaps because she had been surprised as well, but she smiled a moment after.

"I see. Thanks for giving me the response."

Yukinoshita's smile was really a genuine, happy one, as if she had heard exactly what she wanted to hear from the bottom of her heart. Or perhaps, she had only asked it simply out of pure curiosity. She certainly seemed that way to me - because her following words just came out seamlessly from her mouth, as if she had prepared them from a while ago.

"Then, I'll help you."

"Ah? Eh? Seriously, are you okay with that? Wow! Yukinoshita-senpai, I love you so much! Also, what was that about earlier?
ItWasReallyScaryReallyThoughIWishYouWouldNeverDoThatAgain."

While saying that, Isshiki quickly ran towards Yukinoshita and hugged her tightly. With an extremely upset look on her face, Yukinoshita coldly uttered 'wait a second...' in a low voice and then forcefully pushed Isshiki away from her.

After seeing such a warm scene, Yuigahama and I sighed almost in unison.

"Well, if the superior has already made her decision, it can't be helped. It's time to work..."

"Yeah, that's right."

With a slightly bitter smile, Yuigahama nodded in response to the complaint that I said to myself.

In any case, the next goal for the Service Club had now been decided. If a task arose, we just had to complete it. After I got up to stretch, and moved my arms a bit, Yukinoshita called us in a gentle voice.

“Could you hear me out for a bit?”

“Hm?”

Perhaps a little bit nervous, Yukinoshita sat up straight as Yuigahama and I both turned our eyes to her and stared at her intently.

“What I decided just a moment ago was a personal decision that I made on my own, so I have no intentions of making you help if you don’t want.”

“O-oh. What are you talking about?”

I stared firmly into her eyes, wondering what she had said. Yukinoshita then straightened her posture after taking a slightly deep breath.

“Well, what I mean to say is... It’s not a decision I made as the leader of the club, so I don’t believe there’s any authority behind the decision that I’ve just made. That’s why you can take it as something that isn’t part of club activities. Of course, I would be grateful if you two can help as well. I just want you to know that I plan on taking responsibility over this prom dance by myself and making it happen accordingly. In other words...”

Yukinoshita’s words had become unclear and less audible as she continued to speak. Perhaps frustrated by how she should express herself, the hands she placed on her lap grabbed onto her skirt firmly, while she bit her lips lightly with her face looking down, as if she was having a hard time saying her following words.

Hearing her words that sounded completely off the point to me, I quickly tilted my head in confusion. In fact, I remembered myself making this kind of fallacy once before as well. I’m afraid that Isshiki Iroha was probably feeling the same way as I was.

However, these words put out in the air were much broader than mine.

“So that means, we’re free to participate if we want to.”

Yukinoshita looked at me after hearing my words. She was about to open her mouth in hesitation. However, before she could do that, a very gentle voice resounded instead.

“You’re wrong, Hikki.”

Her words should have seemed to point out my mistakes, but the tone of her voice didn't seem to carry any blame, warning, or disapproval. As if being attracted by her gentle tone, which vibrated with a feeling of fleetingness and the emptiness of a feather falling softly in the air, I looked at Yuigahama, and saw her shaking her head lightly. She then lowered her face towards the desk and sighed faintly.

After taking a short moment, Yuigahama gave a gentle smile towards Yukinoshita.

“Yukinon... You want to do this on your own, with your own power, right?”

Yukinoshita nodded without any hesitation.

Ah, I see. As I thought, I could feel an understanding relief, free from the burden that I had in my mind. Indeed, I was wrong; I had been wrong.

Always and at any time, after repeating her words and wrapped her thoughts in numerous layers of words, she always held back the most important words from being spoken out. With a gentle and soft voice, Yuigahama clarified and pointed them out for me, via only a few words.

With her lips trembling, Yukinoshita breathed in a little bit of air and said.

“We have no choice but to do *it* now. If we start now, we might make *it* before it’s too late... The same thing could be said for myself.”

Isshiki opened her eyes wide in surprise. She looked at Yukinoshita in a daze. I believe that Yuigahama was probably the only one here with composure. Yuigahama was probably the *only* person who *always* understood Yukinoshita’s words correctly.

“That’s why I would like to properly start working on it now... I’d very happy if you are there to watch me carry it out.”

“That’s fine. In that case, I won’t stop you, but promise me something.”

Yuigahama quickly lifted her pinky in front of Yukinoshita, who seemed a bit confused and had only lightly extended her arm. However, after waiting a moment, it began to get closer to Yuigahama’s in a cautious fashion, until they finally came together.

“Promise me, don’t do anything foolish and overwork yourself. In addition, if there aren’t enough people or if you need help, definitely let us know. Even though you are helping not as a member of the Service Club, we’re still friends, after all. As a friend, I’d like to offer my help when the time comes...”

“Yes, I promise... Thank you.”

After making a pinky promise, Yuigahama cracked a smile on her face, giving such an innocent, bright smile as she always did.

“Hm, well. I don’t think I have anything else to say. How about you, Hikki?”

Being asked by a voice that sounded as clearly as a bell’s ring, but I was unable to react immediately.

“Ehhmm.”

I could only give a reply that sounded almost the same as a breath. I wasn’t even sure what I had replied to. Thereupon, Yukinoshita raised her head and gave me a worried look.

“Am I wrong about something?”

“No. That’s fine. I suppose.”

“You only give vague answers.”

Yukinoshita smiled. My voice was also mixed with smiles. I had finally understood - what I had found in that beautiful bow, what those indirect, roundabout words had actually meant to express. Of course, this all somewhat felt like a déjà vu to me. Of course, this would convince me completely. This feeling of relief and loneliness was something I had already experienced.

“I see, I think I understand, for the most part.”

Isshiki murmured softly. Her face looked a bit tired. The sigh she gave out sounded painful and burdensome as well. Perhaps noticing that, Yukinoshita began to speak gently.

“Sorry... I hope you are fine with this. You probably won't feel too confident with just my help, but...”

“Ah, no. That kind of worry doesn't concern me at all.”

Isshiki returned a smile to Yukinoshita, who had bowed her head. After that, Isshiki quickly stood up, approached Yukinoshita and leaned her body sideways to look into her eyes.

“In that case, could you please come to the student council room starting tomorrow?”

“Yes, let's do our best.”

“Yes. Let's do our best, Yukinoshita-senpai.”

After giving a playful bow in thanks, Isshiki quickly picked up her things and turned around.

Perhaps finding the end of Isshiki's sentence strange and unnatural, Yukinoshita tilted her head. Isshiki disregarded Yukinoshita's reaction, said goodbye and walked towards the door. “Seeya Seeya”, she shook her hands before closing the door and exited the room.

After I saw her leave, it was only the three of us again in the classroom. It had already been way past the school's designated departure time. Things

could get real ugly if we didn't leave soon.

"It's about time we leave as well."

Yukinoshita spoke to us after confirming the time on the clock. Both Yuigahama and I nodded to her words and soon began to prepare leaving. After folding her blanket that she had put over her knees, she held it under her arms and walked out of the room.

In the same manner, I began to walk towards the corridor, with Yukinoshita following me from behind.

The total darkness that enveloped the campus made the hallway feel rather chilly. The two areas that were separated by just a slim door felt so different in that regard.

However, the cold, which I could feel in my skin once I left the room, was indeed the proof that the atmosphere in the club room had been soothing and cozy.

Since the request wasn't considered part of our assignment from the club activities, starting tomorrow, I won't have any reason to come back to the clubroom. It made me feel a bit reluctant and regretful to leave the place if I looked at it that way.

However, I'm sure that **self-sufficiency** and **independence** would feel somehow similar to this feeling. I felt a bit lonely, but also proud, similar to my peaceful yet eventual separation from Komachi as her brother. Therefore, this is something that is worthy of my blessing.

As if leaving something valuable inside, the door to the club room was locked.

She was the only one who always held the key, and I had never touched it, ever.

Chapter 5: As Expected Isshiki Iroha is the best Kouhai

A day after our conversation in the clubroom, the temperature was unexpectedly warmer than usual.

The wind had been strong since this morning, so much so that even after school had ended, the windows still continued to be beaten. The sun's rays coming through the glass were enough to replace the function of the heater, which had been turned off soon afterwards.

Even the students in my class who had previously distorted their faces due to the coldness of winter and refused to leave the warmth of the classroom, began to leave as soon as they could.

Having stayed in the almost emptied classroom, I took my backpack that had nothing particularly in it and began to leave, in attempt to follow the others.

Suddenly someone tapped my shoulder. As I turned back, I could see Yuigahama who had already put up her coat.

Roughly aware of what she might want, I quickly stood up from my chair. Yuigahama tilted her head a little while she wrapped her scarf around her neck.

“Hikki-, what are you going to do today?”

“...Hmmm~”

Being asked by Yuigahama, I was a little bit at a loss of words. It was probably because she had asked me something slightly different from what I was expecting.

Unlike Yuigahama, who had promised to help as a friend whenever anything happens, I hadn't really promised anything in particular. Nor did anyone ask me or request my confirmation on the subject, which meant that I didn't have any work at the moment.

Until now I had kept attending, saying that "only if I have something that I absolutely have to do, I'd do it". There wasn't a single bit of a lie in it, and I'd probably keep this stance unchanged in the future. I had not yet accepted a favor or received any request, nor did I have any responsibility to take or any promise to fulfill, nor was I carrying any sins that I had to atone for.

Therefore, I did not need to go to that classroom at all.

Strangely it had taken me some time to reach that conclusion, to which I found myself showing a bitter smile without myself noticing it.

"No, I'm heading home."

When I said that, I realized I had no idea why I even said "no". Despite so, I decided to swallow back what I was about to say, and said something else instead.

"You?"

Yuigahama fiddled with the scarf around her neck while taking a brief moment to think.

"Hmm.... I'm also going home...."

"I see."

"Yep."

Yuigahama nodded, almost burying her face in the wool scarf. The conversation stopped in that instant.

Although it had only been a brief moment, there certainly was a moment of silence. I probably wasn't the only one noticing and bothered by it. Not really much evidence but I thought so because both Yuigahama and I accidentally

made eye contact that crossed over for a couple times.

... What is this!? What is happening now!?

I grew anxious, so I began to think that I had to say something else, but I couldn't really come up with anything. In an attempt to cover it up, I re-adjusted my backpack, which wasn't even particularly heavy.

“...See ya.”

“Oh, yeah. See ya.”

Yuigahama gently waved her hand after saying goodbye. I nodded at her words and started walking, when I could hear the sound of hurried footsteps behind me.

I turned slightly back and with a glance, I saw that Yuigahama had jumped towards Miura.

“It looks like I don't have any club activities today, so let's go together~”

“Hmm.... Eh!? Eh!? You are coming, Yui? That's great! Darn, I haven't planned anything yet. Darn, where should we go?”

Miura had been twirling the tips of her hair while she was tapping her smartphone screen, then perhaps because she had received unexpected words from Yuigahama, looked at Yuigahama twice in surprise, and soon cast her eyes to Ebina-san, who then smiled gently after noticing it.

“You decide, Yumiko. In any case, it'll be in Chiba, right? Well, can't say for sure.”

“Huh? If you let me decide, the only choice would be Kushiya Monogatari though.”[\[63\]](#)

“Ohhh, fried fried it is~”

As if her panicked reaction from earlier had been a lie, Miura for some reason put on a pretentious face, to whom Ebina-san clapped her hands while

attempting to follow up Miura's words in a stupidly proper fashion. Seeing their exchange, Yuigahama appeared to be happy about it, "Kushiage? Kushiage? Seriously?--" she exclaimed happily with innocence. What is up with Kushiya Monogatari...? A place where everyone tells stories about Kushi-age? Kushi-age Discussion? Looks like they are going to have a fight on whether they should watch from the top or from the bottom...[\[64\]](#)

Whatever, it seemed that Yuigahama just decided her plans after school.

On the other hand, I had no plans afterwards. Thinking about what I should do next, I left the classroom and walked silently down the hallway.

Thanks to the previous long holidays, I already consumed all the recorded TV programs that had been stacked up, and I also finished reading most of my books in the spare time I spent in the clubroom. In that case, pretty much the only thing left was to finish the games I had accumulated... I had to refrain from playing my TV console because Komachi had to prepare for her exams at that time. As I walked down the stairs thinking that I could finally chill as a couch potato playing games, I grew quite excited. Even more so, if there's an official continuation of some big numbered games, I'd easily stay up for at least three nights... Apparently it was time again for the hero 8man to save the world.[\[65\]](#)

Just imagining it got me so restlessly happy, that I almost felt like jumping a few stairs.

Now that I thought about it, this was how I spent my free time before I started attending the Service Club.

After walking down the stairs, I headed towards the entrance of the building where the shoe boxes were.

At that moment, I spotted Yukinoshita holding her coat on one arm. Judging by the direction, she seemed to be heading towards the student council. I hesitated to call out to her, as her footsteps made her seem to be in a hurry. In the end, I could only see her off at a distance.

Perhaps starting today, Yukinoshita and Isshiki began preparing for the prom

together.

I didn't know anything specific about it. Yukinoshita and I had no intersection in our lives other than through the Service Club, so I had no way to ask her anything about it if it wasn't through our club activities. I, as someone enrolled in the Regular Curriculum, and Yukinoshita, who attends the International Curriculum, had no chance being in the same class, no matter if it's a physical education class or a class involving experiments.

For that reason, even though by coincidence we could see each other, I chose not to force myself to ask her anything about the prom this time.

Of course I could also say that I didn't have the opportunities to speak to her, but more importantly - as someone who wasn't even helping her, I couldn't just ask her things like "How's it going?", "Have you been working hard on it?". Had I asked, I would have definitely been treated like 'who do you think you are!'. I noticed that no matter what perspective or stance I took, I would look like a disgusting asshole in that regard. Hence I was afraid of and had refrained from talking to her. The moment that I was having this thought was already quite disgusting, right!? The real fear is one's self-consciousness....

Etc etc, while I kept depressing myself, Yukinoshita had already turned the corner of the hallway.

Her steps didn't seem to carry any doubt or hesitation.

Her back was beautiful, straightly poised, and her firm and majestic gaze pointed only forward. And each step she took was in an orderly fashion, while her long and glamorous black hair was waving in the air.

It was only until her silhouette completely disappeared from my sight that I finally remembered I was in the middle of returning home.

5-2

I stayed up night after night playing a game on my console, which I hadn't been able to do for a long time. I scratched my heavy eyes as I headed towards school, only to continue playing when I returned home.

As the story of the game proceeded, I enjoyed it so much that I felt like I had exhausted all the fun that I could have in my lifetime, but when it came to an RPG, finally the moment that I had to stop befell to me.

The reason that I had to stop was because of leveling up and completing all the collections in the game. For the leveling up part, the game didn't really make it impossibly hard to do so, but completing all collections was a habitual determination of mine. Especially as someone who had grown up playing Pokémon games, I had a particular OCD of spending time filling the blank spaces in the Pokedex, in the same way as a newly admitted university student killing himself by filling out and filling out his calendar for not having anything planned on his weekends.

There are things like trophies, titles, collections, the second playthrough, etc, that kidnap you in a way so as to finish the game.

However, just like a newly admitted college student who tried hard and managed to fit into college life, as a result of chilling and romping around over the summer break. When the school starts he would soon hear people talking behind his back like "Seriously, isn't that guy trying too hard?", "Honestly, he seems to be suffering sometimes", "Just by looking at him he feels like a poor soul already.", or "He really doesn't look like someone that I'd get along with for sure." etc. Soon after he then quietly fades himself out, and just like this, I also lost my momentum playing games... Hell, college students sure are scary.

In a nutshell, even hobbies and games are nothing different from a job when they become part of your daily routine and you begin to set up goals for yourself. It took me three days and nights after I had this realization, to which I found myself going to school already extremely tired.

I fell asleep through all my classes, which caused me a horrible back pain by the time school ended.

After homeroom which was the last class of the day had ended, I moaned in pain with my body creaking. I tried to lift my incredibly painful and shrieking hip by circling my waist. That was just like the Green Green that I had in my conversation with my dad someday. [\[66\]](#)

While pondering the happiness and sadness of living in this world because of the incredible pain in my hip and the sleepiness in my eyes, I left the classroom with my waist shaking and finally walked stumbling out of the classroom. [\[67\]](#)

Totsuka who had seemingly been watching from afar quickly hurried over to me.

“Hachiman, you’ve been asleep all day. Or, you have been like this for the past few days. Are you alright?”

Totsuka examined my face in worry as he stood next to me. His movement which was like that of a rabbit had made me smile involuntarily. At the same time, I began to feel guilty for making him worry in vain.

“I’m fine, I’m fine. I just stayed up for three nights playing video games and that’s it.”

“I-I see...”

I spoke with high spirits deliberately, but for some reason Totsuka just retreated back by a few steps. No, of course I do know the reason. Anyone would be shocked after hearing someone brag about not sleeping... Yes, I haven’t slept~~ I spent three nights playing video games without sleeping~~ Eh? Who did you hear from that I hadn’t been sleeping~? Who gave you that info~? etc. Facing someone who looked quite annoyingly gloomy in other people’s eyes, Tostuka put a hand on his hip as if regaining his spirit and puffed his cheeks. [\[68\]](#)

“Really you shouldn’t be doing such unhealthy things. Games are only meant

to be played one hour a day!”

Totsuka pointed up his index finger - Let’s have a dual bearing the rules in mind! - as if advising me that way. He really was a good person...[\[69\]](#)

He continued to add in a soft voice after turning to look at the classroom we just walked out of.

“Besides, if you continue doing these things you’ll make Yukinoshita-san and Yuigahama-san upset with you, right?”

I couldn’t help but smirk bitterly at his words. That’s true. They were surely also good people who would scold me if they were here at this moment.

“...Well, I could only do it because I don’t have club activities anyway.”

As I said that without thinking too much, Totsuka nodded his head two, no three times with a convinced look on his face.

“That’s true... You guys are taking some days off.”

“Yes, lately. That’s why I have nothing else to do...”

A yawn escaped from my mouth as I answered. Patrasche, for some reason I felt really sleepy...[\[70\]](#) It seemed I could see an angel in front of me. No, get a hold of yourself! You just received a reward from Totsuka... he just kissed... no no, he just warned you.[\[71\]](#) If I let him see me fall asleep in front of him, Totsuka will then give me a reward again. Surely, had I asked him for it forcefully, Totsuka would have definitely seen me as trash. Though, it wouldn’t be so bad at all...

Thinking so wholeheartedly in quiet, I really felt I was being very rude to Totsuka, who had been worried about me. More importantly, I had looked quite awful and disgusting for the day! The importance of sleep! At least for today I should carry it out in a healthy manner without drowning myself in video games.

“Well, it’s true that playing games all day is kinda bad... Totsuka, are you

free on the following days?”

I am afraid that, in the history of my whole life, I had probably never invited someone in such a smooth and cool way as this one. I could even say I had fallen in love with myself just now. Kyaaa, hug myself Hachiman! Or at least, I felt like I would die of shame and embarrassment if I did not cheer myself in that way... Had I done this to a girl, I would probably have recorded this in my memory for all eternity like in “A Century on Film.” It would be archived as the negatives of my history!^[72]

However, Totsuka was probably the only male whom I could speak with in such intimacy. Although calling someone a friend would require approval from that person, I still consider Totsuka as someone who is infinitely close to falling into that category.

Speaking of which, it was still very difficult to invite someone in a one-on-one fashion. This is not just for me, but for Totsuka as well.

It would be a lot easier if we have a group of people, and following the flow of the conversation, we jointly decide to go somewhere together. In this case, where the scenario is one-to-many, the personal burden is shared amongst everyone; whereas if it's one-on-one, then the entire responsibility is imposed upon the two. That being said, if the other person rejects your invitation, that person would feel extra guilty. On the other hand, when you are in a group, it's usually just safe to say something like “I'll go if I get the chance”... If you didn't go, they'd probably then say “That guy says the same thing all the time but never actually comes. Let's not invite him next time.” It really was a useful way to distance yourself completely from the group. I strongly recommend it.

Or at least that was how I explained it to myself at full speed. On the other hand, Totsuka opened his mouth as he blinked repeatedly and his eyes widened in surprise. Eh? What kind of reaction is that?

While I quickly put up all the excuses that I made to myself in my mind, I could see that Totsuka opened his mouth widely and his eyes blinked in surprise. Eh, what? What was that reaction?

As I carefully inspected his reaction, Totsuka half-opened and half-closed his mouth switching between “ahhh” and “oooo”, with his hands waving here and there in panic. He then emitted a low and troubled voice, clapped his hands firmly and lowered his head in apology.

“Sorry! I have club activities... during the weekdays, so I can’t really skip any of those... Ah, as for the evenings... I have cram school to go to, and it would be kind of late to go anywhere and play... Uhm, on my next day off, I also have friendly matches to attend... Uhhh~”

My heart grew painful as I watched him struggle in a dilemma with his responsibilities as the club captain and think about his plans for the following days. At the same time, I felt extremely elated that he had to feel this much trouble and worried for my sake... For both of these conflicting reasons, I almost couldn’t hold but shed my tears... Lately I had been very susceptible to shedding tears and I felt quite troubled by that. Besides, the fact that Precure keeps airing every week already made me want to burst in tears...

However, the one feeling most troubled by that was probably Totsuka, not really me. I don’t normally make invitations like these, so it was probably a nuisance for the person being invited! I’ll have to be more mindful and careful from now on. To put in practice, I’ll have to give three months warning in advance next time.. As I proclaimed my determination, it would be best if I started making the necessary arrangements now.

“No, that’s totally fine. Next time would be great for me too! I’m serious.”

While putting all expectations into the future, I deliberately stressed the words “next time”. Totsuka tossed himself at me leaning forward as he approached.

“Really? You promise! I’ll definitely let you know.”

“Ye, yeah...”

Totsuka pressed his fists firmly as he looked at me with his slightly quivering bright eyes, making me flinch a little bit. Totsuka then sighed in relief.

“I almost never get invitations from Hachiman after all! I promise! Some other time! Definitely!”

I smiled and nodded after Totsuka firmly pointed his finger towards me. Totsuka smiled back at me as he adjusted the tennis bag on his back.

“Well, I’m off to club then.”

“Alright, see you. Do your best.”

Totsuka ran a small distance ahead and turned back to me, waving his hands widely. I raised my hand a little bit in response. After seeing his silhouette disappear at the end of the hallway, I began to walk.

I felt like I was finally able to do things that almost everyone else just does normally. Although it was something I could only do after inspecting what I was saying, pondering it carefully, formulating a plan, giving it some reasons, putting some logic behind it, and finally questioning and convincing myself.

I hadn’t really wished to change nor had I thought about doing so. It had almost happened spontaneously and was greatly due to Totsuka and his kindness. Despite that, I did notice that I was able to walk up closer to others gradually, little by little.

Yet, I was probably able to do so only because it was Totsuka Saika after all.

Apart from that, at this moment, I was unable to do anything else properly.

The end-of-school bell finally rang. I didn’t really feel like going back to play video games, nor did I have any concrete after-school plans. There really wasn’t much to do if I had no club work, so much that feeling tired could be said to be even better than having nothing to do at all.

Feeling like I wanted to lie in my bed asap because of my back pain, I turned down the hallway and climbed down the stairs. At that moment, I could hear a very loud laugh echoing down the middle of the stairways.

“Fuahahahahahahaha~Hachiman! I’ve been watching you! I’ve heard it all!

You dipshit, I knew you had nothing to do!”

I could tell who the owner of that voice was without the need to turn around.

That’s why... Without turning around, it’s time to keep walking down the stairs and going straight home as usual!

5-3

It would have been nice being able to ignore him and then go home, but the fact that it didn't happen was precisely the most formidable part of Zaimokuza Yoshiteru as a human being.

Having tried to coax me, and then provoke me, and finally, cry in order to convince me, I was taken to Saizeriya in front of the station. Before I was able to regain my awareness of the situation, I noticed that I was already biting a doria alla milanese while enjoying the all-you-can-drink bar beverage.

After filling my stomach and catching my breath, I finally sighed deeply as I began to speak.

“Hey, I really want to leave now and go home.”

“Don't be in such a hurry. We're having a meeting.”

“Huh?”

“Speaking of meeting with light novel authors, Saizeriya is the definitely the most suitable place to do it...”

“Oh...”

Seriously? I thought it was normally carried out in the editors office or in a coffee shop... I'm guessing this was something he scooped off from the internet again. Well, it's not like he wasn't doing anything I imagined, but rather, his enthusiasm was fired up in vain, his focus was headed towards the complete wrong direction, and in addition, he wasn't really doing anything concrete... Crap... I really couldn't find any words of compliment to say about him!^[73]

Half disgustedly and half derisively, I ended up giving him a look of 100% scorn. Because I happened to be yawning at the same time, the tone of my responses and reactions gave a false sense of intrigue towards him. In

response, Zaimokuza's mood turned good because of that, but he also seemed to notice the abnormality of me saying it. Zaimokuza spotted my teary eyes, as he used one hand to push up his glasses in adjustment.

“What’s wrong, Kisama? You look rather sleepy.”

“Yeah, I’ve been free lately so I’ve been playing video games. Before I was able to notice it, I had already stayed up overnight.”

Zaimokuza was surprised at hearing my words.

“You’ve been playing because you’ve been free lately? That’s not cool. That’s absolutely not cool at all...”

Zaimokuza shrugged his shoulders as he raised both his hands like a Westerner. Ah~ This conversation was definitely about to get longer... Why is it that men like us, those who normally are very quiet, suddenly become so talkative when the conversation dives into an area of our interests... [74] Even though we know that after going back home we would end up regretting it and thinking “Ughh, they probably thought of me as a disgusting person... I was talking pretty fast also...”

But well, you probably don’t have to worry about that if you are with someone who knows you more or less. Zaimokuza raised his hand up high and began his long speech.

“Games can only be enjoyed the most when you are ass-burning busy and have absolutely no time to chill at all. ‘Dammit, dammit, dammit... I really shouldn’t be playing games at this moment...I’m super busy, I’m not playing. Seriously, I’m not lying this time!’ such and such, making excuses to yourself this way while playing video games. That’s the moment where a guilty pleasure makes the video game even more fun and interesting. I, myself as the source. That exhilaration I felt when it was exam week and I headed to school after playing video games overnight was abnormally and indescribably uplifting!” [75]

“I can’t say I agree with that, nor deny it either...”

The truth is, after staying up overnight yesterday and going to school, I felt like ‘Crap~ I haven’t slept at all~ Craaaap~’, feeling thrilled about it as much as I wanted while creepily smiling to myself. Crapp, I looked really disgusting. Crap~. [\[76\]](#)

Zaimokuza smiled triumphantly as if taking my ambiguous response as affirmation of his words. Crap~

“So, What games did you play?”

“Ah, this one.”

After a few quick taps on my smartphone, I showed Zaimokuza the official website of the game. Zaimokuza pushed up his glasses in adjustment and reacted in a totally normal manner with an “Ah~” as if remembering something nostalgic.

“Oh~ That one. It was pretty painful when the heroine left in the middle of the story~”

He said so in a plain and normal tone, not pretending to be some kind of fictional character this time. The moment I heard his words, I frowned intensely.

“What? Hey, hey, hey, what the hell are you spoiling here? I already used the seeds on her...? Aah... I don’t feel like playing the game anymore... Stop playing games any more and go back to writing your light novel manuscript...” [\[77\]](#)

“Eh, You haven’t finished it yet? I’m sorry... Ah, but... butt...! Swallow the damn spoiler for not playing it when it came out! Ignorant, ignorant!”

Zaimokuza laughed loud and proud. Well, he apologized in the beginning so I didn’t really mind...

Well, everyone that plays out-of-season games should be ready for these types of things at least. Not only games, you could say the same thing about movies or TV dramas. It’d be bad to feel sad when you read a Japanese

history textbook and suddenly exclaim “Really!? This samurai general died in the end!!? Ahh I just swallowed a spoiler for an NHK Taiga Drama!!’ There wasn’t a single samurai general from Sengoku Era that didn’t eventually die after all. [\[78\]](#)

Having said that, each person has a different set-up, environment or circumstance for playing a game, or viewing a show, so it is necessary to keep that in mind and be a little considerate so that everyone can enjoy the plots!

“I bought those games as soon as they came out, but they all just kept stacking up... Komachi had her entrance exams too, so I had to refrain from playing games at home.”

Zaimokuza nodded at my words as he chewed his focaccia.

“Hmm, I see. Now that you mentioned it, your sister is in her last year of middle school. So, which high school did she apply to?”

“Ah? To our school, ours. Hmm, did I not mentioned it to you?”

“Hmmmmmmmm, I didn’t know anything about iiiit.”

“Well. Normally we wouldn’t talk about personal things amongst ourselves after all. Things like our career plans, our future or family related things.”

“But I do tell you those things! I tell you all the time! My future dreams, and what I want to do in the futureeee! By the way, I called you out today just to talk about these things!”

Seeing Zaimokuza’s anger growing, I shot a glance at Zaimokuza as if asking what he wanted to talk about. Zaimokuza suddenly began to purposely cough and slowly covered his face with one of his hands. The expression I saw through his fingers showed a painful look on his face. Eventually, Zaimokuza took out a piece of paper folded in four from his shirt pocket with his other hand. After holding it between his index and middle finger, I could vaguely notice the characters that could be seen as it rose to the light.

“Remember we came up with a proposal at the library the other day, right? Well, now I managed to come up with the storyline...”

“Oh...”

It was when he came to the club room in early February saying something like him wanting to become an editor. However, this guys had always been coming up with merely storylines... I hadn't been able to read any completed draft of the story written by him yet... As I thought that, I took the piece of paper that he showed to me and quickly decided to read it anyways.

After doing so, a hand with a fingerless glove entered my sight as it quickly took the paper back from my hands.

“Wait, wait! It's kind of embarrassing for me. So how about you just read it at home...”

“What are you talking about, is it a love letter or something? By the way hey, stop blushing, you're giving me weird vibes.”

I stole the storyline back from Zaimokuza as I said that. I had no choice but to take it home after being told not to read it here. I carefully folded the piece of paper and put it deep inside my backpack. I'd probably completely forget about this and end up never reading it. So I should at least bury it solemnly.

Not noticing my intentions, Zaimokuza watched in satisfaction as I neatly and carefully put the paper away, after which he looked into the distance and whispered with a bit of lament.

“Next year we'll have entrance exams as well... It'll be my last challenge.”

Last challenge? Had he already done the first challenge before...? I couldn't help but doubt it, but seeing him say this with that painful yet serious look on his face made me swallow my question. Putting that aside, this would probably be the way Zaimokuza would settle the score.

There are no better words than ‘entrance exams’ as an excuse to give up things. The same could probably be said about “trying to get a job.” It was

enough of an excuse for one to melt the possibility of it ever spreading into dreams, hobbies or club activities. Eventually, we have the so-called ‘ideal adult’ that the entire society desires finally molded into good shape.

That’s why, before that happens, before being dragged, flattened and stripped off until nothing is left by the society, people try to defy and resist, struggling to at least try to have a glimpse and a tiny bit of the person that they wanted to become in their mind... I’m afraid that’s also what *she* had attempted.

Maybe because I began to think about these things, I had gone completely silent for a while. I didn’t know how he had interpreted that silence, but Zaimokuza smacked my shoulder and then gave me a thumbs-up.

“Well, don’t worry about it. I was just referring to my last challenge as a high school student.”

Uwah, he just a put on a cool face...

“No, I wasn’t actually worried about you...”

“H..here it comes~! You tsundere~!”

The laughter that Zaimokuza made while putting one of his hands over his mouth was really annoying... Although if I try to argue against him now, he’d definitely say something even more absurd and irrelevant again. Hence, I simply put up a sickened face, nodded my head slightly in agreement with him, so as to hurry him to move on to the next topic. Judging by his cool look on his face moments ago, there was probably still something else he wanted to talk about.

After having a serious laugh, and just as I had thought, Zaimokuza began speak in a serious voice.

“Of course I’m not giving up. Just as there are things that you can only write about as a high school student, there are probably other things you can only write about after becoming a college student. The shortest distance isn’t always the right way to follow. Instead, detours are my glorious way going forward.”

Had he been writing now as a high school student, his words would have sounded really good, in my opinion. But anyway, I decided not to say that outloud. After all, what he was saying wasn't too far off. So, I decided to say something else, with a big smile.

“Well, you're right. You'll probably also have a lot of content to write when you become a ronin.”[\[79\]](#)

“Ha~ha~ha! ...that sounds a little too real so let's stop talking about that. I really could seriously end up as a ronin so I don't want to think about that. Yes, stop now, stop now please.”

Zaimokuza went from facing up to the sky laughing loudly, to a serious face in an instant. I couldn't help but smile bitterly after seeing that. This guy really was a hopeless lost cause, which made me feel a bit relieved...

Come to think of it, Zaimokuza was one of the few people who knew me before I joined the Service Club. Although it was only because in the P.E. class they made us pair up in a group for being left out and not having a partner, we were both in the same situation at one point. If I hadn't joined the Service Club, I would spend my afternoons like he would after class like this.

... Although, that might not be as bad as one would think, either.

But hey, maybe spending my time like that once in a while is good enough. Keeping Zaimokuza company is pretty exhausting after all!

5-4

The morning news said the plum blossoms had already bloomed in the Kantou Area. Having heard that, made me certain the strong wind from the other day was the first to announce the arrival of spring. The returning cold of winter could still be felt sometimes the last few days, just like the so-called “three days of coldness and four days of warmth, and then the cycle repeats itself”. At the same time, the frequently blowing warm air certainly made me feel like the long winter had finally ended.

‘If the first wind of spring has already blown, continue to give us beautiful flowers, oh plum blossoms...’ is probably what the god of entrance exams would be chanting as well. Finally, it was the day when the results for the entrance exam that Komachi took were published.[\[80\]](#)

The plum blossoms bloomed but the sakura flowers hadn’t yet. Holding that feeling in mind, I was being very nervous all morning. But that was only me. Komachi, on the other hand, had been drinking tea in a calm manner.[\[81\]](#)

“Umm... I’m off to school then...”

“Yes, Komachi will go too... And, I’ll call you when I see the exam results, so it’s okay, don’t worry!”

After hesitating on what to say, I finally let out those words. Even after hearing me, who can only force out these many words, Komachi had replied “it’s okay, don’t worry” in complete carefree manner as she gave me a wink.[\[82\]](#)

It was probably meant to console me, who was apparently even more tense and restless than back when my results were announced. Seeing and feeling that confident attitude, I was able to finally rest easy.

Since a couple days ago, Komachi suddenly had become much more mature than before. Although she was still a middle school student, and a minor in society's eyes, I could notice her awareness that she was no longer a little girl

anymore.

She was already a mature girl, and a bit of an oddball by normal social standards, and now she had even filled her personality with tranquility and stability. It would not be wrong to say that this was proof of Komachi's growth or perhaps it was signs that she was becoming more independent... It really felt like she was growing apart from her brother.

I quickly hid the slight sense of loneliness behind my smile, and then left the house in a hurry. I spoke to Komachi from the entrance.

“Well, I’ll go on ahead.”

“Yes! See you~”

I couldn't see her, but I could hear her reply from the living room in a carefree tone.

As usual, I followed the same path to school as I biked away on my squeaking bicycle... Would we go to school together if she was accepted? [\[83\]](#) No, I had the feeling that probably wouldn't happen. Maybe by chance we would leave home at the same time every once in a while, but I don't think we would try to go to school together intentionally. That way, Komachi and I would be able to maintain the adequate and comfortable amount of distance between us.

I had been thinking that way about Komachi as I arrived at school. When classes started and throughout them, my mind had been somewhere else.

I looked at the clock when second period was about to end. I had been checking clocks all day, but finally the hands reached the important numbers I had been long waiting for.

Any moment now, the results would be announced...

While I sighed in secret, I could finally hear the sound of the bell announcing the end of second period. After seeing the teacher rush out of the classroom, I circled my arms a bit to relieve the stiffness in my arms, when my cell phone

began to vibrate.

After quickly putting it in my hand, I looked at the screen. I could see a push notification saying “You have a new message” next to Komachi’s name.

Just thinking how this message contained the announcement of whether Komachi had failed or passed, the fear took over, making me doubt whether to open it or not.

Even so, I was filled with determination as I tried to touch the screen with my trembling fingers.

However, before I could proceed, an agile beast dashed in front of me. Like the tail of a purebred horse fluttering through the air, a gust of wind ran through the classroom leaving a bright blue trace behind it.

After following that trail with my eyes, I could see Kawasaki Saki running past out of the classroom. She had probably received a message on the same matter from her brother Taishi at the same time as I did. Driven by that, I also stood up quickly and dashed out of the classroom.

Perhaps because the two people who were usually quiet and off in the corner of the classroom had suddenly ran out, the class suddenly got rowdy with voices asking “what happened, what happened?”

“What? What happened? Is something going on? Go!? Should we go too? Let’s gooo!”

I could hear Tobe’s voice making a fuss behind me as I left the room. However, now was not the time to turn around and check. Break time was only ten minutes. Kawasaki was already beginning to disappear ahead of me with her elegant strides through the hallway.

She was probably heading towards the bulletin board at the entrance of the school where the scores were posted. Of course that was also my destination too. Without wasting a minute, I managed to arrive at a group of people in an uproar.

Even though all the applicants filled the area with a thunderous noise, I could quickly find Komachi's silhouette. Apparently, she noticed me too.

After wiping the sweat off my brow, along with my messy appearance, my shoulders moved up and down to the rhythm of my breathing. In contrast, Komachi took her time approaching me in an extremely calm manner while raising her hands.

“O-Onii-chan. I passed.”

That was all Komachi said with a totally calm face.

Hence the fire inside me was contained. My heavy breathing that arose from running eased after I took a deep breath. I let the fatigue slowly flow through my entire body as a form of relief.

“I see...”

After finally being able to form some words, only those words escaped my mouth. In spite of feeling overjoyed enough to break into a dance and praise her openly in front of everyone, because she had been so calm as if her acceptance was a matter of course, I felt like I had to stick to those same standards.

I really wanted to stroke her head but we had already grown too old for that. As her onii-chan, no, as her brother, I had to behave calmly to be worthy of interacting with a sister who had matured.

As I thought that, I made up my determination and began considering the congratulatory words a grown man should say in this situation.

“I'm glad... I'm glad, I'm really glad.”

But what came out of my mouth turned out to be rather immature and childish. Really, what a dumb brother. It was really irritating that compared to his sister, this brother hadn't grown up one bit. Despite of always being able to come up with the proper words easily in a flashy manner, now I couldn't even ramp up the right thing to say.

‘You must be quite disappointed...’, I thought as I looked at Komachi.

I couldn't express myself properly with words, so I could at least congratulate her with a good expression, with my best smile. The truth was, my smile wasn't anything nice to look at, so I hoped she could close her eyelids at my smiles...

However, Komachi did not close her eyelids at all. She simply stared into my eyes with a gentle smile on her face.

“Yes, I'm really glad too. Really...”

After nodding, Komachi's big eyes began to gleam in the sunlight. Her nose sniffled, her words interrupted, and her deep sigh trembled. Komachi tried to suppress it in as she inhaled deeply. I could then hear her sigh mingled with sobbings.

“Really, seriously... I'm relieved...I'm really really relieved...!”[\[84\]](#)

Komachi threw herself and flew at me, sinking her head down at the collar of my jacket. The warm breath became irregular blobs of her sobbing voice, eventually hitting my skin intermittently.

I wondered when was the last time I had seen Komachi wail like this? Her crying look hadn't changed a bit since she was little, despite how mature she looked like this morning - I suddenly realized this and made a bitter sigh.

Ahh, I was wrong. It hadn't been that she was calm, but rather, she was only trying her best to behave in composure. She had been holding back her nerves and anxiety so as to not make myself or our parents worry about her. Or maybe she wanted to avoid getting overly worried so that she would begin stressfully asking questions. She had tried desperately to stay afoot with her trembling legs and properly take the exam result that was presented in a such mercilessly clear-cut way in front of her.

I'm glad her efforts had been rewarded - I really thought so from the bottom of my heart.

My hand naturally reached to Komachi's head naturally. I started stroking her hair after patting her head for a few times. Komachi then began to cry again out loud in my arms.

“Aaaaahn, Onii-chaaan, I'm really serious glaaaaaad and relieeeved.”

I comforted Komachi while patting her on the back. She cried so much she almost started to look like Tatsuya Fujiwara.^[85] Apparently it would be a little longer before we both began to separate and distance ourselves as siblings. Soon after that, even if I'll be kind of sad and unwilling to accept it, Komachi will become a reliable, dependable adult and a wonderful woman. Probably it will happen soon, in the not too distant future.

But, I wonder if, before that happens, maybe just for a little bit longer, she would allow me remain her onii-chan for now...

After accompanying Komachi for a brief while, I could hear a sharp voice from behind, coming from Kawasaki Saki.

“Taishi!”

“Onee-chan, yo I made it!”

After turning my head a bit around, I could see Taishi holding up a set of documents, probably the ones that accepted students would receive. He walked towards us.

Taishi's proud voice reminded me of the famous movie Rocky, in which Rocky calls Adriane in a very loud yet proud voice.

Maybe after she heard a voice from someone familiar, Komachi began to realize there were other people around. She came to herself and suddenly pushed me away from her. She then used the sleeves on her uniform to wipe the corners of her eyes.

Well, obviously she didn't want just anyone seeing her cry like that. I forced a bitter smile and hid Komachi behind my back.

Soon, Taishi seemed to notice me and started making his way towards us. Speaking of Kawasaki, she stood alone in a corner, looking up at the sky, occasionally covering her eyes with her hands. Right, right. Onee-chan, good for you...

While I pondered about Kawasaki's feelings, Taishi took a winner's stance with a fist pump.

"Onii-san, I made it!"

"Don't you dare call me onii-san. I'll kill you! Call me senpai. Good for you, congratulations. But one sec, who are you by the way?"

"Thank you very much!.... I am Kawasaki Taishi!... Ehmm.... Hi, Hikigaya-senpai!"

His radiant smile seemed a bit more manly than before. He now had the look of a man who'd become more competent. Seeing that made me want to congratulate him in a manly way as well.

"...happy for you. Good, let me toss you up into the air!"

"Oniisan, are you just by yourself!? Then you can't possibly toss me into the air! Isn't that just a german suplex!? I'll splatter onto the paved ground and die right away!"

Taishi extended his hands and arms forward as he distanced himself away from me, giving me a complete rejection posture. I smiled bitterly, about to tell him it was simply a joke.

"Oh, tossing him up in the air? Really, really? We should do it~!"

Tobe suddenly interrupted and showed up before I could say it. He probably just wanted to romp around noisily and camouflaged it as an excuse to congratulate others. Behind him was also Yamato, Oooka and the rest of the group. Upon closer inspection, I could see other students from our class and people from other classes as well. As for Hayama... after looking around, I found him speaking to the other teachers with a beaming face. I imagine he

had come to mediate for us. Although it was during break time between classes, we technically exited the campus after all. Unfortunately, his careful consideration seemed to be a waste, given Tobe and his buddies' presence here...

After a loud "Yeah!", Tobe gathered Yamato, Ooka, and the others and soon surrounded Taishi, who had been resisting but ultimately was tossed up in the air.

I took the opportunity to turn around and check out Komachi, who had been hiding behind me.

"Komachi, go ahead and let your middle school know, also our parents."

"Sure..."

Still speaking while having red eyes and a sniffing nose, Komachi pulled out her smartphone and began to contact the school first. I verified the time as I listened to her call on the side. I had better head back to class now, probably... Or so I thought, as I looked in the direction of Hayama, who was still trying to convince the teachers, I could see Yuigahama from aside as she ran over in a hurry.

"Komachi-chan!"

Komachi raised her head when she heard the voice. She quickly wrapped up her call and ran over to Yuigahama.

"Yui-sann!"

I thought she had finally calmed down a bit, but as soon as she saw Yuigahama she immediately began to burst into tears again. She then jumped and clung onto her without hesitation as if saying "Mu, Mugiwaraa...", and then began to cry again...^[86] Was she crying even harder than she did toward me? Was it my imagination?

After Komachi informed Yuigahama of her admission with tears and cries, Yuigahama nodded to every single word Komachi said while holding her

tightly. After that, Yuigahama put her forehead against Komachi's, who sank her face onto Yuigahama's chest, and then smiled gently.

“Congratulations... I'm glad... You really did your best... I'm so happy for you!”

The words she had whispered and crafted were followed by a big bright smile in the end. Komachi smiled widely back to Yuigahama in return, while still covered in tears.

“We have to tell Yukinon too!”

After hearing those words from Yuigahama, Komachi nodded as she took out her smartphone. However, she stopped herself halfway in that same moment.

‘Yep! Ughhuh, but I can't see with all these tears in my eyes...’

“Ah~... I'll call her then.”

Yuigahama smiled bitterly while beginning to make her call. After raising her smartphone as if she was going to take a selfie, she pointed the front camera towards herself and Komachi. Apparently she was trying to making a video call or something. She had probably intended to show Yukinoshita Komachi's face as well... but I wondered if Yukinoshita knew how to make a video call on her smartphone...

Or at least while I worried about it, after what seemed like a tough fight, the three of them had already began to talk through their screen. With the screen perfectly up close to her face “Yuginoh-sahn!” Komachi began to cry out yet again. Just as I expected, she completely forgot to contact our parents...

I can imagine our parents have been worried so much right now, especially our dad. “If she hasn't told us anything yet, then she must have...!!” he would then become even more gloomy and pessimistic... etc - vividly imagining his reactions gave me headaches. Maybe I should just call him. Though, he'd probably say something like “I wanted to hear it directly from Komachi...” Hphmm! Like father like son!

Well, anyways-

*Greetings, Dear Mother. Let me get straight to the point.

Sakura blooms. Best Regards.*[\[87\]](#)

5-5

After I saw Komachi off and returned to the classroom, the excitement inside me continued as I spaced out to spend my time. My body felt relieved from definitively knowing the fact that Komachi had succeeded, so most of the contents of the lessons had gone in one ear and out the other.

What a relief... As I savored such bliss over and over again, classes continued to pass one after another. Perhaps because I'd been taught since an early age to chew my food thoroughly before swallowing, I decided to taste and chew this happy piece of news two and three times over. You could say I'd been ruminating like a cow.

Because of that, even though the morning bell announcing the arrival of noon break had sounded loudly, I didn't feel the hunger and urge to eat at all. Even though normally I'd dash over to the cafeteria and try as hard as I can to secure a healthy portion of the lunch meal, today I had the coolness and flexibility to walk over leisurely.

As I was considering what to eat for lunch, I was just about to stand up and have my hips leave the chair. Almost immediately a couple knocks could be heard at the front door, to which the door began to open slowly. Putting aside the doors to teachers' lounge or club rooms, who would bother knocking on the door to an ordinary classroom before entering...? While I had my doubts, the person who appeared turned out to be Yukinoshita Yukino.

The class became boisterous at the sight of an unexpected guest. However, not affected by the attention she had received at all, Yukinoshita immediately began to speak out her business here.

"Is Kawasaki-san here?"

"Eh? Me?"

Having pointed at her own face with her finger and responding in a hoarse voice, Kawasaki blinked in surprise. Yukinoshita nodded in response, giving

her a confirmation. Since both of them were pretty girls, they even attracted more attentions from others. Being looked at by many curious eyes, Kawasaki quickly ran towards Yukinoshita, with her forehead frowning, her mouth distorted, and her face blushing due to her inability to hold back her embarrassment.

They both began to talk near the entrance of the classroom. Hmm... Kawasaki-san, maybe because of your embarrassment, I couldn't hear a single word from you... Perhaps also having that in mind, Yukinoshita spoke in a low voice as if they were having a secret conversation, which made it impossible for me to hear anything meaningful from them.

The people around seemed to want to hear the conversation as well, but based on their reactions, I could assume that they couldn't hear anything from them either.

Well, it probably had something to do with prom. It'd be impolite to want to overhear it, considering I didn't have any intention of getting involved.

This time I stood up with the intention of heading out the backdoor of the classroom. As I began to walk, I realized that the seats near the window at the back of the classroom had been quieter than usual, so I decided to take a look in that direction.

I could see Yuigahama observing Yukinoshita and Kawasaki from where she was. Yuigahama had probably guessed what Yukinoshita had come to talk about as well. That was why she hadn't said anything and just observed quietly.

But apparently, all of this had seemed a bit strange to Miura.

"Yui-, you are fine?"

Her way of asking was a bit blunt and her words sounded a little harsh. Even so, she seemed to be mindful of her words for Yuigahama's sake in her own way. She was probably abbreviating some words that held lots of meaning, but Yuigahama seemed to have understood it regardless.

“Hm-- Yes. Even if I don’t join the conversation now, she’ll probably brief me on the important stuff later. Besides, I’ll be going to club after this anyways.”

“Hhmmmm?”

Yuigahama thought for a moment and responded to her with a gentle smile. In response, Miura made a sound that was very ambiguous, not being clear whether she was satisfied with Yuigahama’s answer or not. Miura simply continued to play with the curls of her hair. After exchanging glances with Ebina-san, they both tilted their heads.

Well, it’s not like their reactions weren’t understandable. The position they found themselves in was a bit different than before, so it was normal for them to be confused.

However, the reason that caused this change in our situation and stance is surely that we have moved forward, even just by a little bit.

I looked at Yuigahama and the others out of the corner of my eye, and left the classroom.

5-6

I went to the shop at school, bought some random stuff that was still there, and sat down at the usual bench with a MAX can. Hearing the sounds of the tennis club's daily practice and the tweeting sounds of Japanese white-eyes, I began to enjoy the lunch break taking place slightly later than usual.

The wind was still kind of chilly for me to have my lunch outdoors. But thanks to the remaining excitement lingering in my heart arisen from Komachi's acceptance, I wouldn't say the cold weather was unbearable at all.

I bet our dinner today is going to be a huge celebration for Komachi's acceptance, so I thought it was probably fine to eat a light meal for lunch. After eating up two slices of savory bread, I took my time sipping and enjoying my waaaarm~ MAX can in leisure. [\[88\]](#)

After spending some time relaxing, I could hear humming sounds mixed with delightful footsteps coming from behind. 'This humming sound could be...' I turned my head around, and just as I expected, it was Isshiki. As soon as she saw me, she opened her mouth halfway and soon wore a disgusted face filled with surprise.

"Ah, he's really here..."

"Yeh? Eh, what's up?"

I noticed her words were somehow quite disrespectful to me... Anyway, it wasn't her first time, so I decided to let it go and asked directly about her business here. While saying 'Well, I just wanted to say a couple words to you...', she quickly sat down next to me and cut her sentence in the middle, as if something just came up in her mind.

"...by the way, why's Senpai not in the classroom!? You made me walk to your classroom all for nothing! It was super embarrassing for me to ask your classmates whether Senpai was in the classroom or not, though!?"

Perhaps she was recalling her embarrassing moment in that situation, she

immediately blushed red and dragged my shoulder incessantly to express her protest, the intensity of which did not stop but kept growing stronger.

“There’s more! There’s more, though! Tobe-senpai asked around in a super loud voice that I was searching for Senpai; Yo, anybody know of his whereabouts blah blah blah.’ Don’t you think that’s a pretty terrible move!?”

Ugh-, I really could imagine that scene... Well, I didn’t know about that ‘Yo’ part though. But indeed, it’d be something that Tobe would say. I couldn’t really hate him had he merely acted out of good-will. But in the case of Tobe, he was definitely trying to appeal to Ebina-san, hinting something along the lines of ‘despite of my way of acting, I am actually a good dude, right?? Riiight??’. That was quite hateful and evil in its nature, indeed.

“Yeah... well... I’m sorry to hear that..? It’s not my fault and it’s completely Tobe’s fault, though... So, in the end what happened? Hayama came out and helped you eventually. Right?”

As I was trying to guess what happened afterwards, Isshiki let go of her hand on my shoulder and waved it left and right.

“No, before that Miura-senpai came out and shouted ‘Shut up, you guys are being so noisy!’ and soon Tobe had gone quiet.”

Ah I see. That’s how it went... I could also imagine that kind of situation as well... As I tried to delineate the scene in my head, Isshiki continued talking even further.

“In the end, Hayama-senpai told me to ask Yui-senpai. So I ended up here.”

“Hmmm, I see.... So what’s your problem this time?”

“Yep, so I’d like you to do me a favor here...”

As I asked her again, Isshiki straightened up her sitting pose and then gently hugged her knees. After that, she tilted her head a little bit, looking into my eyes with her head slightly up. She dragged my sleeve gently with her thin fingers. Along with the wind, her flaxen hair wiggled and her brown eyes

moistened.

“Senpai... would you lend me a hand?”

“I said no way... I just hate the prom from the beginning...”

That foxy Irohasu attack won't work on me anymore...! As I thought that, I couldn't help but avert my eyes away from her. If I happen to see her face, I would definitely end up nodding my head, though, so it couldn't be helped at all!

In addition, since I had already rejected her request once, I would look bad if I changed my stance on it easily. Furthermore, if I yield here it would seem that I have lost to Iroha's cuteness.

That's just too impure and too dishonest. For someone like her, who holds firm her beliefs and position, and wanted to use it as a proof her existence, making the choice according to her own judgement, it would be too dishonest. I thought I should also take some pride in my response and decision. After all, it's not like I approved of the prom. It was a decision made from my own perspective, not from that of the Service Club. For that reason, I believe that my answer shouldn't change.

However, I heard that sometimes the meaning of words do change according to the listener. For some reason, Isshiki looked quite satisfied with the answer that I gave, wearing a gentle smile on her face. She closed her eyes, as if she was dreaming, and put her hands gently against her chest, and then slightly raised her chin up. She began talking as if she was singing a fairy tale like a bird.

“Even if you say so, you looked super happy being asked to do a favor by me, though!”

“...my face looked like that??”

Hence, I tried my best wearing a hateful, unwilling face just to show her. If words didn't do the job to convey myself, then eyes would do. I had to use my eyes to speak.

As I did so with my eyes, Isshiki quickly wore a serious face. The usually shiny, blinking eyes now quickly squinted, releasing a sharp blade-like sparkle.

“... Do you want an honest answer from me?”

“Eh? Wait, what? That’s kinda scary. Don’t put on a serious face. Please don’t.”

Being told that in such a serious manner, I couldn’t hold in my scared trembling. If I don’t move on to another topic soon...!

“By the way, isn’t Yukinoshita doing her job properly? Is there an issue here? Don’t tell me stuff like you actually don’t quite get along with her, okay? Otherwise, it would only make me feel sad and painful.”

“Eh, just so you know, I really am quite fond of Yukino-senpai, though... Well, as for whether she likes me back or not, that’d be another issue to discuss. I’m actually not quite sure if we indeed get along or not.”

She was a little sullen in the beginning when she was saying the first half, but she soon quickly turned a little gloomy when she moved onto the second half.

Nah, I think Yukinon does like Irohasu though... not just by a little bit but I think by quite a lot... Well, I had better not yuri that out loud..., one second.., not *say* that out loud. At one point Irohasu will notice it eventually.

Etc, etc, while I was thinking this and that, Isshiki suddenly raised her face and briefed me on the situation, waving her fingers in the air left and right.

“With regard to the ongoing preparations, it is actually going pretty well. I really noticed how capable of a person she is, to the point that when we are working together, I feel like she is more of a Student Council President than I am, and I really want to fire the Vice-President now and replace him with her.”

“Eh, you are talking about firing the Vice-President but not yourself... I think

he works pretty hard, though I can't really say for sure..."

As long as he doesn't flirt with the Secretary-chan, he's a pretty serious guy, in my opinion. I think... So don't flirt there, don't look down on work, and go work!

Judging from the envy, jealousy and respect from Isshiki's verdict on Yukinoshita, Yukinoshita has certainly demonstrated her ability well enough to enforce all of their agenda soundly. In light of Yukinoshita's ability and experience level, it's not hard to imagine that, at all. In addition, because of that, it's also easy to delineate what awaits ahead in the not-so-distant future.

"It all looks fine to me as long as you two get along while finishing your jobs smoothly... However, even if it all went smoothly, things do happen..."

"Sorry?"

Isshiki twisted her mouth at my words, which accidentally slipped from my mouth, as if she was merely trying to say 'what the hell is this guy saying'. She looked puzzled, with her eyes half open. What an irritating way of questioning me back...! Nevertheless, I guess I couldn't put all the blame on her. After all, before the school festival took place, she wasn't even the Student Council President then.

For that reason, she was not aware of the fact that there were people who were forced to be sacrificed in order to get things going smoothly.

More importantly, nobody in the prom planning committee at this point knew of this fact at all, not even Yuigahama was at the spot at that time. Even though I let Yukinoshita promise that she wouldn't overwork herself, if the situation ends up being urgent, there's the possibility that she would lie and deceive and eventually burn herself out. Because of this, she needs someone to notice it and stop her before that could happen. Otherwise, everything would go wrong.

Hence, I probably need to talk to Isshiki right now.

"I won't say it's some advice for you, but try not to rely on Yukinoshita too

much. She tends to be able to handle most of the errands, but just in case she collapses, then everything would come to a halt. She doesn't even have the kind of stamina that only stupid people possess. Because she is such a stubborn person who hates losing so much, she would totally work recklessly and burn herself out, yet still be wearing a face as if she's just fine and nothing's happened. Anyway, just so you know and beware of it."

Given that I wasn't helping them out, perhaps I shouldn't say too much to her. But at least let me say this much, in a way that doesn't sound too meddling or intrusive. For someone as clever as Isshiki, she should be able to get my point very easily.

"... I see."

After quietly hearing my words, Isshiki finally said in satisfaction. She then cast her suspicious eyes on me.

"I've had this feeling since a while ago... Does Senpai actually..."

Eh, what, what is this...? That's kind of scary though... As I was being stared at by questionable eyes, Isshiki finally dropped her sharpened mouth and then broke into a smile.

"Over-protection."

Though her mouth was wearing a gentle smile, I could somehow sense a tone of derision from it. Her voice contained a feeling of coldness as if it got released all at once. However, after her squinted eyes blinked two or three times, she then opened her eyes wide and told me that it was all just a joke.

Thanks to that, I was able to turn my face away, and breathed out the air that I was holding in my lungs for a long time.

"Nah, I don't think that's the case."

After I gasped out a few words, Isshiki laid her index finger against her chin and tilted her head.

"Then, how would you describe it? Oniichan-temperament?"

“Ah, that might be partly true...”

“In other words, you do like younger girls?”

“Nooo...”

As Isshiki asked me while leaning her body forward, I replied to her while leaning back the same amount of distance. After that, this time Isshiki learned her body backward a little bit, in an off-putting pose, and said the following as if teasing me:

“I wonder if you are really honest~...”

“No matter what you say, I do have a younger sister after all. Should I say it’s already become part of my habit, but I could accidentally end up treating other people almost like how I treat my sister.”

Without leaning myself back or falling, I straightened up my back, putting my hands in my pockets as if only saying proudly with my body language ‘Acting like an onii-chan, that has become my habit...!’ Thereupon, Isshiki put on a disgusted face, sighing briefly with an almost unnoticeable smile in it. What a fast switch of mood! It would have totally gone missed if not for me.

“I think you had better stop doing that.”

“O...okay...”

Saying that with a blatantly cold voice, Isshiki sat on the chair, hugging her knees to her chest and resting her head on her kneecaps. She disinterestedly stared into the courtyard.

“There’s no such girl who would feel happy about being treated like a sister.”

Along with her lonely voice, I felt like her words just disappeared in the chilly wind and I could tell that they were genuine.

Perhaps she had some past experience of being treated that way before. It

wouldn't be hard to imagine that Isshiki would attract a lot of attention from guys older than her. It would also not be surprising if she had any past experiences being treated like a little sister. I still couldn't fully understand why anyone would treat this super naughty little demon kouhai the same way as a little sister. In any case, my sister is indeed the only sister of the world - Hikigaya Komachi. There was no such Komachi prior to Komachi, and there will not be any Komachi after Komachi. I do not know of any little sisters that would surpass Komachi, and Komachi is and will be my only sister. If you wish, I could say from Zenzense that 'A Sister is All You Need' until I die. [\[89\]](#)

No, wait a second? In that case, would Komachi, as the sister of the world, often be told by other guys 'You somehow look like my sister'...?

That's a little bit unacceptable... As my heart grew a little itchy and uneasy, I couldn't help but let it slip out from my mouth.

"Well, that's true. Those who claim themselves as big brothers are indeed quite disgusting - ah that hurts! That's even a crime!"

"Huh? ...well, true, that's indeed very disgusting..."

Isshiki suddenly looked in my direction, wearing a slightly disgusted face as if trying to say 'what is this guy saying? Gross...' Nevertheless, she soon cleared her throat once and returned to normalcy.

"That's not what I actually meant. Don't you think in that way, you don't feel like you're being treated properly as a girl? Wouldn't you also not want to be told to be like an oniichan?"

"Nah, I am a real oniichan after all. So I really wouldn't hate that."

"Ah... Maybe guys are fine with that. Hmm, then..."

Perhaps something came up in her mind, Isshiki confirmed the condition of her throat with a "nnn" sound, closed her eyes and took a deep breath. She looked like an actress who was prepared to dive into the role before a film-shooting. After taking an Irohasu-break, Isshiki slowly opened her eyes and

put on an emotionless face. Now, Ready? Three, two, one... Action!

Isshiki first showed a friendly face to me, yet then she averted her eyes away from me while keeping that smile on her face.

“Ah, ahaha... Senpai, you somehow look like a father in a way. Eh, no, how should I put it, that... I really want to thank you for everything - something like that, right?”

That was such a shockingly hurtful statement for Hachiman!

I read out that line in a narrator's tone. I was seriously hurt by her words, so much that I had to pretend that I was caricatured as Zhuge Kongming from the Three Kingdom period in order to take her words.^[90] The more important thing is, judging from her choice of words and attitude, I could tell that she had the intention of deliberately avoiding being impolite and accidentally hurting my feelings - this is the saddest thing of all. Or rather, it didn't quite sound like a bad thing to say to a high schooler, right? However, when I turn into my 30s and am being told the same thing by someone a couple of years younger than me, then I would normally feel hurt by that, though!

After finishing an almost perfect performance, Isshiki used her eyes to ask me 'how do you feel about that?', I nodded my head unwillingly.

“... that caused so much damage to me... Not only did I feel like I was being put into another category, But more importantly, I also began to question myself, 'do I already have the old person smell?' - thinking about it made me want to die... perhaps I'll die.”

“Putting aside the smell, but that's basically how I feel about it - you belong into a different category.”

Isshiki nodded with her arms crossed. After that, she continued with her index finger pointed upward, suggesting that she wanted to give yet another piece of advice.

“There's a good chance that when a guys says explicitly 'You look like my little sister', he's really just using it as a pickup-line that basically implicates

‘I no longer treat you like a sister’. These two lines go hand in hand together.”

“Ugh.. that’s rough... What the hell... What kind of beings do these guys think sisters are... Sisters are holy sanctuaries that shall not be trespassed. I want them to reconsider this concept of *sister* and mend their ways of thinking.”

“Eh, that was some reaction that I did not expect, but whatever... Anyways,”

She said with her cold, reluctant eyes. She put her hands on her hips in a pose like she was about to teach me a lesson, and then began her admonishment.

“From now on, refrain from saying things like ‘You look like my sister’ lightheartedly to girls...”

She suddenly stopped in the middle of her sentence, then quickly leaned backward and covered her hand over her mouth.

“Ha! Do you, by any chance, want to say that ‘I no longer treat you like a sister’ pick up line to me but I don’t think I will get a heartthrob anymore at this point so please pick another chance and try next time, I am sorry.”

“Alright alright I got it I got it I won’t say a word I won’t say a word.”

Because I had just said a bunch of words all at once, I could not longer keep my breathing stable anymore. Isshiki also took a deep breath in and out. Her breath and my sigh overlapped.

“What is with your attitude there? You definitely weren’t listening, right?”

Isshiki puffed out her cheeks in dissatisfaction. Come on, not only did you say everything so fast but also at the end, you always end your long sentence with an “I’m sorry” after all... How could I possibly pay serious attention to your words...!

After seeing me worn out, Isshiki became very displeased and gave a strong snort, turning her head away from me.

“That’s enough, whatever. Anyway, please I’m counting on you for the favor.”

“Huh, eeh? Wait, didn’t I already...”

That was a pretty tough and bad attitude there to ask someone for a favor. Yet, since her voice sounded like she was kind of sulky at that moment, I could not really say no to her. Hence I lost my words.

A brief moment of silence.

“After all, I am not Senpai’s little sister.”

Isshiki whispered with her lips close to my ear. Completely different from her previous attitude, her voice sounded melting and sweet this time. Nevertheless, from deep in her tone, I could sense a bit of strength and persistence from her language.

Before I could react to her words, Isshiki quickly stood up and slapped the dirt off her skirt, smiling brightly at me.

And then, as if dancing a Waltz, she stepped away rhythmically. The trajectory from her skirt, the soft movement of her skinny fingers, and the glittering light reflected from the falling dust all gradually went afar.

“I’ll be waiting for you in the Student Council room after school!”

After taking a few steps away, she said that to me and waved her hands gently. Soon, Isshiki set off on foot while humming through her nose.

She was too far away for me to say anything back to her, and too distanced from me to chase after her. Why would I ever consider treating a girl like her, who is one or two cuts above me, as my little sister...

Hence, I need to fix my understanding right now - Isshiki Iroha is indeed *the Kouhai of the World*.

5-7

When school had ended, I walked leisurely in the corridor on my way to the Student Council room.

Given that I failed to deny Isshiki's request on the spot, I had to bear the consequence and go help. Although, I had no choice but to go, I had no idea how I was gonna face them when I'm there. So naturally, my footsteps grew heavier and slower.

Despite that, the Student Council wasn't even that far away in distance, and it didn't take me long to arrive there.

As soon as I finished knocking on the door, it opened immediately. Isshiki's face appeared from the gap of the door.

"Ugh, Senpai, you are so late."

"Ok, sure, I'm sorry."

It was a fact that I was being sluggish along the way, so I had better apologize on the spot. I was then allowed into the room.

Being welcomed by Isshiki, I entered the room and saw that Yukinoshita and Yuigahama were already inside. I couldn't see other members of the Student Council. I bet they were probably working somewhere else, then.

If Yukinoshita ever needed help, Yuigahama would probably be the first person she reached out to. For that reason, it wasn't particularly surprising to me when I saw Yuigahama there already. Perhaps Yuigahama had already heard from Isshiki that I was going to come, so she only briefly said 'hi' to me and waved her hand gently.

As for Yukinoshita, she noticed my appearance and opened her eyes wide in slight surprise. She began talking in a voice that was mixed with doubt and confusion.

“Hikigaya-kun...”

“Hi... I was told by Isshiki to come over. Well, I’m here to help.”

Judging from Yukinoshita’s reaction, it seemed that Isshiki didn’t mention to them that I was here to help. Hey~, Irohasu~, Hou-Ren-Sou is very important~! Had I come without being called for, perhaps I would have been supremely embarrassed and pained...[\[91\]](#)

However, despite showing a little bit of confusion, she didn’t seem to be bothered by it. Instead, she gave a bitter, apologetic smile.

“I see. I’m sorry for having to bother you, then. We kind of need some help today, so your help is genuinely appreciated. Thank you.”

“No need. I’m quite free today after all. I don’t mind.”

Welp, I guess my ‘free’ time today was going to slip away thanks to our busy and heavy work that was coming up next... As I thought this, Yukinoshita rested her chin on her hand, and began speaking in a non-busy and non-heavy fashion.

“You are probably having a celebration party at home for Komachi today, right? I intend to finish our work and dismiss everyone as early as possible. If you do have anything after this, please let me know, I will make some adjustments.”

I was a little bit caught up in surprise by her words. She really did have tremendous composure and poise in her... I was expecting this place to be more of a heated-up workplace though... My next response to her ended up mixing with some confusion in it.

“Eh, ehhhh... No, my father will get back home late after all. You don’t have to care too much about it... Well, I wouldn’t be against wrapping things up early though.”

“That’s true. In that case, without further ado, let’s get to our work now.”

Yukinoshita smiled gently, suggesting I sit next to Yuigahama. I obeyed and sat down. Soon, a pile of documents were pushed on the table.

“Before I could use some help, just in case, I would like to explain the overview of the event.”

As soon as she finished speaking, she spread out the documents on the table and began reading the abstracts. But, I could hear her words sporadically mixed with humming sounds. I quickly turned my eyes to seek the source of the sound, and discovered that Isshiki was preparing the tea while humming through her nose. She looked at the package of the chocolate snacks, mumbled ‘hmmm I see~’ and began munching on them... Well, after all, this person already knows all of this and shouldn’t need to pay attention anyways. Also, she will properly do the job when it comes to her.

“Along with the proposal documents, could you also please take a look at the progress planning table as well?”

As soon I was told, I began skimming through the documents. From the documents, I assumed that the proportions of the prom had been scaled down by us compared to the one we saw in the foreign TV drama.

The gym would be decorated with flower stands and balloons, with the front of the event space, including the stage, being designated as the dancing area. Several tables and chairs were to be equipped at the back of the event space as a chatting area, where food and beverages would be served.

As for the timeline of the event, it would begin with flashy Kanpai-cheers, and then followed by the Student Council president and school club presidents’ greetings. After a while, when everyone’s tension got higher, club music will be played to mark the beginning of dancing time. Periodically, the rock band would jump in and play its music, and in addition, public confession events would be held at an irregular interval. Eventually, both the Prom King and the Prom Queen will be chosen and they will be leading the dance with the flow of romantic, slow-tempo music in the background. In the end, let's rock and uproar! Given that there isn’t a designated time slot for chatting, attendees have to use the chatting area outside the dancing stage if they wish...[\[92\]](#)

I see, no, I don't get any of it. Partly, it's because I've had no concrete knowledge about proms in general. More importantly, I've had no experiences or connections with stuff like clubbing culture or dancing culture whatsoever, so I don't get any of those as well. What's up with this public confession thing? A new type of sentencing?

Therefore, I decided to ask or do research later on things that I didn't know, but for now I would dig into those that I knew already.

"This looks like it's going to cost a lot..."

That was my very first impression. Thereupon, Yukinoshita promptly took out a piece of paper.

"I've already made a trial balance sheet. It has an estimate of how much the event will cost. You can take a look if you are curious."

"Nope, I'm fine. It will be more accurate if you are the one walking through those detailed numbers. The more important concern of mine is the source of our budget. Where are we going to pull it from? Didn't we already use up all the budget when we distributed the pamphlets last time?"

"The prom itself will take place in March, so I will ask them for the billing statements next month and onward, and then process them by pre-using the budget from next the fiscal year. In case we have to pay the bills in advance, we will just pay in advance and ask for reimbursement later."

Slightly shrugging her shoulders, Yukinoshita explained in a lighthearted fashion. I couldn't help but to consider its actual feasibility. Since the budget spending has to be set and reported by the end of February, all expenses incurred in March roll into the next budget cycle. More importantly, shouldn't the budget planned for the next year already be settled...? As I asked myself these questions in doubt, our well-known dancing queen Isshiki Iroha-chan hummed in a good mood and began serving us the tea. This person really didn't have anything else to do...

"Given our situation, unfortunately, the prom next year might need to be scaled down in various ways. Oh well, there's not much we can do here."

“Is that really good...”

Yuigahama smiled bitterly as Isshiki poured the tea into Yuigahama’s paper cup. Holding the tea tray against her chest, Isshiki tilted her head in question.

“Huh? But no one would notice it anyways, right? I don’t think people really know what the Student Council does.”

“Hmmm... Ah, yep, I don’t think I’ll notice it either. I don’t really know much about it, either.”

Yuigahama looked like she was thinking hard about whether the plan was proper or not. Eventually, she placed the paper cup softly on the table, and hung her head powerlessly downward. Ahh, she seemed to have lost the argument... After that, Isshiki suddenly became hyped up, quickly raising her fist high up in the air.

“That’s it! This is the time when we need to go all out on the event, making it so flashy that everyone will think we are actually doing hard work and will then forgive us for everything.”

What she said wasn’t fundamentally incorrect, but it really made me understand how terrible of a person Isshiki is... Who was here to give her some candid advice... so I looked into the direction where Yukinoshita was. Unfortunately, she was apparently busy with her work. Holding a thick file folder titled ‘Accounting Documents’ in one arm, she moved her fingers along the text and checked it against the document displayed on the computer screen.

“I am performing a trial balance calculation now. It looks like there are many items that can be dropped, which will trim down the budget. So I don’t think it’s going to negatively influence our budget planning next year. In fact, every year we seem to have unspent budget at the end and now is the time to make good use of them.”

She quickly closed the folder cover and smiled proudly.

This was bad. This was going into a bad direction... A clever scum and a

capable junk car would probably lead to an ominous chemical reaction in the end.^[93] Although everything seemed to be going smoothly I still couldn't stop worrying about them...

I decided to referee the trial balance sheet, just so that I could reduce my anxiety level by a little bit. After confirming every single accounting item on the sheet, a question suddenly arose in my mind.

“Is it okay that we don't include any costume-related costs? Everyone needs to dress up, right?”

“Yes, but the attendees have to pay for that cost themselves. The only thing we could do, I guess, is to negotiate with those clothing rental companies.”

Yukinoshita quickly pulled out the catalogue full of clothing rental companies. Of course, it wasn't for me - she handed the catalogue to Yuigahama. Thanks for understanding me! I have absolutely zero interest in this kind of stuff... On the other hand, Yuigahama's eyes were already twinkling and she began to flip through the catalogue.

It's true that most girls yearn for beautiful dresses like these. Since opportunities to dress up on a special occasion like this prom are quite rare, they had better make good use of them and get dressed up nicely. Yet, what about the guys? According to some certain internet comments, I've heard that at a publisher party attended by manga artists, most female manga artists wear dressy clothes, whereas male manga artists usually just wear their daily clothes. There are even those who show up in sportswear and jerseys.

“Does everyone dress up like this?”

I was implying that I kind of wanted to refrain myself from this formality. Isshiki seemed to agree with me and nodded.

“Well, I bet there will be students who don't prefer dressing up this way. From our end, we will recommend for everyone to dress themselves up, but we will not enforce any dress code on our part.”

“In that case, I think everyone will end up dressing lavishly. No matter if it's

due to being affected by the surrounding atmosphere, or it's due to yielding to peer pressure... I don't think we should make explicit guidelines about things that can be left to people's tacit understanding, because it will seem we are making mandatory rules, creating factors that would get people criticized for not following them.”

Yukinoshita added, giving a blank smile. Isshiki also wore a smile on her face in return. That smile, which might be fabricated, still looked beautiful and cute. But for some reason, I started to feel an impending doom waiting ahead...

I turned my face away from the smiling two and turned my attention back on the trial balance sheet. To be honest, since there's no way for me to independently verify the accuracy of the price information, I could not determine whether the numbers were indeed feasible and made sense. Nevertheless, I could tell that all factors that fell within our planning so far were taken into consideration on the balance sheet. If we proceed and find out additional costs that we hadn't included beforehand, we could count them as 'preparation fees' and 'misc. expenses' on the balance sheet and should be able to cover that part easily.

“... well, it looks good to me for now, if we omit the missing 'labor cost' part.”

“I see. Thanks for double checking for me. To indicate that you have checked those items, could you please circle them one by one?”

After being smiled at in a delightful manner, I had no choice but to smile back at her.

As she continued her giggling for a while, she finally stopped smiling, put her hand over the balance sheet and pointed at the numbers on it.

“Even so, the numbers are actually not finalized yet. For example, the catering service could be switched to somewhere even cheaper than the one that we requested at the Thanksgiving event. We are still waiting for the biddings and the final comparisons to be made. The flowers that we need for decoration purposes can be combined with the bouquets given to the

graduating students in each club, and we can submit our order altogether in order to lower the unit cost. We are in the process of negotiating that as well.”

“O..oh... I see...”



Now, not just the Student Council vice-president, how about also adding the Student Council accountant into that list of to-be-fired candidates...? I noticed that Yukinoshita's practical skills had gone up by yet another level compared to before, to the point that she should just be called Yukinoshita Yukino RX.^[94] The feeling that Yukinoshita can simply take all the work and get it done perfectly has come home to myself. Even Isshiki,... she nodded her head as if saying 'let's let the RX do it'. No, I think the president might as well be added to the to-be-fired list, too!

Anyway, after reading through the prepared material, I certainly became more confident and began to feel more realistic about the actualization of the prom than what I thought before. It should be doable theoretically... Now we just have to deal with those non-theoretical parts of the business, which I am afraid is indeed the toughest part.

For example, things like deadlines and catching up with the schedule, do not usually rely on theories. These things do not possess human emotions. "Eh, to be honest I think it'll be tough to get it done.". "Let's work harder!", "Should I say blatantly that I don't think we are going to make the deadline", "Let's work harder!", "I'm sorry! It's impossible!", "Let's work harder!", "...okay...". I guess the only solution then is to move at light speed in order to slow the time down... That's already science fiction, though...

Now, let's take a look at the other thing that concerned me - the schedule table. So I pulled out the next document, the Progress Planning Table, done by hand. Probably handwritten by Yukinoshita herself, along with a checklist, completed items were already marked as checked.

Thanks to the table I was able to visualize the progress with a single glance. The beginning part were mostly colored already, but the more towards the bottom you went, the more white area you could see. It looked like we still have a long way to go.^[95]

However, conversely, the fact that it only took them the past couple days to start with the proposal and planning, and perform a trial balance sheet calculation was already very amazing and deserved being praised. Or rather, I should feel scared of her...

I felt very overwhelmed by the fast moving progression shown on the table. How hard did you work indeed...! Some of those already checked off items should have been rather difficult tasks to do, though.

For example, the top most item was ‘Pitching the Proposal to the School and the Parents and Acquire their Consent’. Checking off this one single item was almost as good as solving the majority of the issues concerning the prom project. Although the item was followed by a small footnote that read ‘Only Informal Consent acquired, pending approval after the midterm report is finished at later date’, as long as we had some kind of oral consent, we could already declare our victory...! We won! Gahaha!^[96]

After that, we had either already done budget finalization, produced the event schedule, announced the event in a notice, finalized the music and soundtrack, opened the official website, had a meeting with the Club President Association, and etc, or we just checked them off as expect-to-be-completed-soon. I would say we could not have done better than this in the planning phase.

The remaining tasks included the production and the assembly of the decoration materials, planning the operation on the day of event, setting up the event space, stuff that involves time dedication, labor, and couldn’t proceed until the event date gets closer.

Well, there were quite a few things that we wouldn’t have known how they’d go unless we are actually doing it, which would be the main uncertainty here... And then, I guess this would be the part when I would be told to get involved.

In order to find out what kind of work I should be expecting in the future, I began re-reading the table from the very beginning. There, a line of words seized my attention.

“Hmmm, ‘Announcing the Event in a Notice’... I had no idea that you guys have already announced it!”

Feeling a refreshing shock, I couldn’t help but leak my voice with mixed feelings. Then, while I was speaking, the air in the Student Council room

suddenly froze. Everyone cast eyes at me as if looking at a new species of animal from afar. Out of those reactions, Isshiki's was the most blatant. She stared at me with a face that basically said 'what are you saying, I have no idea?'.

"Huh? Why are you asking?"

"Eh? Because I hadn't heard about it anywhere...? Right?"

I turned to Yuigahama, who I believe should have possessed the same amount of information with regard to the prom event. Yuigahama then twisted her body uneasily, with her mouth hesitant to talk next. Nevertheless, she forced out her words eventually.

"... I also knew about it, already."

"Huh? How? Why? Are you people bullying me?"

"We are not! I was also wondering why you didn't know about this... Ah, wait a second."

Perhaps suddenly noticing something, Yuigahama took out her smartphone with a rustle. After seeing that, Isshiki also exclaimed 'Ah!', as if she also noticed something, and then took her smartphone in hand.

Soon, almost at the same moment both of them showed me their smartphone screens, loaded with the same content. 'LINE!', along with a mysterious message tone, the application that appeared on the screen was indeed the messenger application LINE that everyone knows.

"We created an official LINE account and released all prom-related information there. Since it's the media that our generation uses most frequently, we decided to use it as our main channel of disseminating the information."

After hearing Yukinoshita's explanation, I was finally able to understand why. It's true that high schoolers these days are all connected to each other via LINE. So indeed LINE would be the most efficient way to put up any

notices in a prompt manner... Of course I wouldn't have known anything! Since I wasn't using it at all!

“Hmm... I see.... Huh, wait, are you also using LINE?”

“I am. It's pretty convenient, though. You can easily obtain information like store information and electronic coupons on LINE. If you send a message to these official business accounts, they can also send you back photos and images of their merchandise.”

Watching Yukinoshita elaborating the convenience of using LINE in a delightful smile, I nodded and replied in agreement inattentively while peeking at Yuigahama sitting beside. Noticing me meaningfully looking at her, Yuigahama nodded at me and said ‘yep, yep, that's it’, showing a bitter smile in response to me. See! I knew it was the official account for the Cat Cafe!

She had more important things to talk about for sure...! As I was wondering about it, someone that seemed to want to do the job for me entered my sight.

“By the way, why is Senpai not using LINE already? Is it because you don't know how to use it? Were you born in the Showa period?”

“Nah, I am a human from Heisei era! You highly underestimate those born in Shouwa. Those older people can use LINE just fine without any issues. I did not use LINE intentionally because I don't think it's necessary for me.”

In response to Isshiki's extremely impolite comments, I complained with dissatisfaction. Yukinoshita put her hand on her cheek and nodded in agreement.

“Well, it's true though. I heard that enterprises these days use LINE internally as well... It's not a tool only limited to young people.”

“I think it varies from person to person in my opinion. No matter if it's an adult or an older person, as long as it was deemed necessary by the situation, they would for sure practice as hard as they can in order to be able to use it.”

I'm sure there are those grandparents who want to chat with their grandkids and then ended up picking up LINE... As I imagined this lovely scenario in my mind, Yuigahama, who had been listening the whole time, made a subtle expression on her face for some reason.

“But most of those people tend to pretend that they are young energetically in the conversation. How should I put it... For example, they would send very arbitrarily chosen emotes, emojis and stamps over... Also their ways of addressing us in a casual mood simply sounds so old fashioned.”[\[97\]](#)

“I can totally sympathize with you. I know, right, it's unbelievable. You made me remember that feeling of ‘old person smell’ that could be sensed in between the words they use in their messages.”

Isshiki clapped her hands in agreement.... For some reason, I felt extremely hurt by their comments.

“Wait, why are you all so familiar with what it's like to talk to the old dudes?”

“My dad is using LINE.”

“Same here.”

Hmm, I wonder what kind of ‘daddy’ they have indeed... They should be referring to their fathers, right? I started feeling a little bit scared somehow, so I had better switch the topic and ask them something else instead.

“But more importantly, do you still think it's a good idea to make announcements only on LINE? How about those people like me who simply don't use it?”

“We have also been syncing our LINE account with other SNS websites. Furthermore, just in case, we also post announcements on school bulletin boards and have been running the official website as well. So I don't think there'll be any issue.”

Yukinoshita quickly answered with a flow of words. She suddenly cut her

words off and then began chuckling.

“In addition, for those who can’t be even connected with all these efforts. Those who have been unwilling to make connections with others do not deserve to be connected, nor do they have the intention to attend the prom, in my opinion. A good example for now, would be you.”

“That’s a very sound argument...”

I had never expected that my everyday behaviors would become the supporting evidence for an answer to my question... Did I just win the argument again...? I want to learn about the feeling of losing.

As I nodded in agreement, Yukinoshita began to wear a mature, sisterly smile on her face.

“If you have any other questions or concerns, please go ahead and ask.”

After hearing her words, I thought hard for a while. With regard to the materials that I had reviewed so far, I didn’t think I had any particular questions in mind for now. Nevertheless, I did have concerns at the moment.

“... I don’t have any questions per se, but I do have pieces that I don’t quite understand. It might be a little late to ask it now, but I still don’t understand what exactly prom is in the end... I don’t get it at all nor can I imagine what it would look like. To be honest this is the thing that concerns me the most right now.”

I was having this concern in my mind when I was invited to the conversation on the matter of prom the other day, and also when I was reading the events schedule earlier.

Hearing my words, Yuigahama opened her eyes wide.

“Heh? Isn’t a prom just like the party that we saw in the drama we watched earlier?”

“Yep, well, that’s true, but... Assume that we wanted to replicate the same kind of prom as shown in the movie. I still feel like there’s definitely

something wrong and awkward with it.”

I could not find the most accurate words to describe my uncomfortable feeling about that prom. As I mumbled ‘hmmm’ in confusion, Yuigahama also tilted her head and showed her agreement. Just at that moment, Isshiki entered the conversation with a know-it-all face

“I get that! I get that! I want it to be a prom that we could hold, that only we could celebrate, that is only celebrated for our sake! That’d be it, right?!”

“That’s totally wrong...”

What was with that ‘a prom that is only celebrated for our sake’. Why did you turn to an aloof face only at the end.

“Really if it’s wrong, then what do you think it is...?”

Isshiki stared at me with dissatisfaction. I wouldn’t have been wondering had I known the answer already! I managed to escape from Isshiki’s stare by turning my face away from her.

Thereupon, my eyes met Yukinoshita’s.

“In that case, I suggest that we work on the answer together from now on.”

Wearing a peaceful smile, Yukinoshita said mysteriously. She then stood up from her chair.

5-8

Leaving the Student Council room, our next destination was the gym.

Normally at this time there should have been sports clubs practicing indoor sports activities. But for some reason, it was a completely different scenery than I expected. The party space was already set up and ready to be used in front of the stage area. I could see the flower stands and the balloons already carried over into the arena, along with the glittering mirrorball that was tied to the ceiling.

“Oh...this is amazing...”

After looking around the gym, Yuigahama expressed her honest opinion. As for me, I felt like I was suddenly thrown into another space dimension, merely frozen there in awe without being able to give even a simple line of comments.

“I will give a more detailed explanation at a later time. Could you all please get ready to change? Kawasaki-san will be preparing the costumes by the stage. Yuigahama-san, could you please give her a hand?”

“Okay!”

In reply to Yukinoshita’s calm instructions, Yuigahama answered energetically and quickly ran to the side of the stage in a hurry. However, I couldn’t follow her. Kawasaki was referring to that ... Kawa something-san? She was also here? As I was pondering what the situation was at that time, Yukinoshita looked at me with a puzzled face.

“Have you not heard about her from Isshiki-san yet?”

“Not at all...”

Hey~ Irohasu~? As I turned my face around and cast my eyes to her, Isshiki made a ‘darn’ face. Well, let me teach her a lesson at a later time and focus on understanding the situation right now.

“So, what is this whole thing we are doing now? What’s our plan?”

“We want to make an introduction video for the prom. In addition, we are also taking photos to be uploaded to the official website in order to produce the special event page. We can also use this chance to confirm our readiness of prom operations.”

Following the direction that Yukinoshita was pointing at, I could see a couple sets of cameras made ready by the Student Council members. Yukinoshita continued her words a bit unwillingly.

“So, we need an actress for the video. The person that I’d like to ask the favor of is... Isshiki-san.”

“...actress for the video?”

Both Yukinoshita and I quickly turned our attention to Isshiki. Perhaps Isshiki also felt pressured by the stares coming from two people and began to feel uneasy. She looked at the floor and began sweating nervously. Looking at her reaction, Yukinoshita sighed deeply in exhaustion.

“We will post-process the videos in a way that viewers cannot recognize the identities of the actors involved, so don’t worry. I also intended to ask you to take a look while editing the video as well... After all, you must have been pretty troubled to be suddenly told without advance notice, right...”

Since Yukinoshita mentioned both ‘post-processing’ and ‘editing’, I guess Yukinoshita was being mindful of Isshiki. Yukinoshita then wore a bitter smile on her face.

How rare for Yukinoshita to not get angry at this point... Normally she would just say ‘Isshiki-san’ in a cold voice though... As I thought this, Isshiki, who had been holding her head with both hands, suddenly dashed in front of me, and lowered her head in apology.

“I am sorry I apologize I have been really regretful and I am seriously repenting don’t get it wrong I was talking about something else so my focus was kind of diverged away... Also I told Tobe-senpai about this and asked

them for the favor as well and I thought I must have told you as well...”

“Tobe?”

I asked her in return, because I had just heard something unexpected from a long stream of repentance. In response, Isshiki raised her head up, combed back her loose hair over her ear, and nodded back to me.

“Yeah. I guess I wanted them to cheer up the mood as background actors, or just simply mob actors... So I recruited Tobe-senpai and some other first-year students from the Soccer Club.”

“Additionally, as for the girls’ roles, I asked students from our class and Isshiki’s friends to fill in.”

After hearing Yukinoshita’s explanation, I began pondering. Usually these introduction videos are used to convey the atmosphere and the hype of the event that it promotes; therefore, the more people in the video the better it is, perhaps. I guess people always say ‘Even dead trees make a mountain look more prosperous’ after all.

“It looks like you’ve asked quite a few other people as well... Well, as long as there are enough people for me to blend in, I’ll do it.”

“... sorry about that.”

“Nope, it’s partly my fault for not confirming the details of my job with you here, after all.”

It was kind of strange to see Isshiki apologizing in a faithful manner like this. I smiled bitterly, followed by Yukinoshita also giving me a smile back.

“Thank you. Your help is really appreciated. It would have been quite troubling for me to ask someone that I’m not that familiar with to retake the scenes again and again...”

“Please do not just assume that we are going to have retakes... Whatever, let me go get changed for now.”

“Ah, I already have it ready here.”

After saying that to me, Isshiki began walking. I exchanged eye contact with Yukinoshita to say goodbye. She also nodded at me in return to express her thankfulness for doing her a favor. Led by Isshiki, I walked to the other side of the stage, opposite to the one that Yuigahama walked towards. Along the way, Isshiki began talking with her shoulders down and a little bit of depression in her tone.

“Eh... I kind of have a better idea of what you said before.”

“What is that?”

I caught up to her and began walking at her side. Isshiki still kept her eyes looking at the floor.

“Despite the fact that everything has been going smoothly, without me noticing it, I realized that a lot of things that I should be doing were taken away... I might have been a little too careless. I guess not only this, but also among many other things Yukinoshita also did herself. If this trend keeps on going, I might end up solely relying on Yukinoshita for real...”

Her dismal voice was filled with regret. She seemed to remember the conversation that we had during the lunch break. Being able to reflect on one's other failures after making one single mistake could be said to be quite impressive and excellent. As for myself, I couldn't even admit and face my own failures... I opened my mouth as I admonished myself.

“Isn't it a good thing that you realized it now? It's a pretty small sunk cost you've made so that you are able to take precautions early.”

“Yep... I will be more careful next time.”

Despite of her lighthearted tone, Isshiki's face did not turn more cheerful. After replying to me, she kept mouth tightly shut. Getting wrecked by failures while being carried away certainly feels quite distressful. For example, when you are working on a part-time job, while you were thinking ‘wow, darn, I'm so capable, I'm already used to everything’, you then

suddenly screw something up. Your manager then kindly covers up for you, and then you begin to notice how deplorable you are and how apologetic and embarrassed you feel, to the point that you just want to die right away.

Since I've had a similar kind of experience before, I naturally felt like giving her some comforting words.

"If you have something next time, just tell me as soon as possible.... Well, I might make excuses and complain at the beginning even if you tell me early, but in the end, I think I'll always willing to help anyway. Therefore, how should I put it... Please don't get too depressed."

"I thought so too!"

Before I could end my sentence, Isshiki suddenly raised her face up, and smiled widely. I was struck speechless by that. Soon, Isshiki again dropped her shoulders in depression like she did before.

"I'm joking... I will seriously straighten myself up, starting now."

Perhaps she was just playing around with me just to cheer herself up a little bit. Her voice was quiet and I could feel a strong sense of determination from it.

We finally reached the side of the stage. Isshiki opened the door from aside. I followed her and entered inside, where I was able to see a wide area filled with a performance stage, microphone stands, among other random stuff. There were some chairs and a full-length mirror that was to be used for make-up before the performance during the event. There were also costumes stacked on top of those chairs.

"All the costumes that you need are left here. In case the sizes don't match I think you could ask Kawasaki-senpai..? Did I get the name right? She will make some adjustments for you."

"Alright."

After giving me a courtesy gesture, Isshiki walked away and left. Seeing her

off, I quickly got ready to change.

I took off my school uniform and grabbed the prepared costumes. I wondered if this was the so-called tuxedo...? I didn't quite understand its difference from a suit, but merely felt that it kind of looked like something you would wear to attend a wedding? If it has a stand-up collar and a bow tie then I would somehow know how to wear it. However, included in the costume set that was prepared for me, there was also a pin, or some kind of brooch-like accessory item, which I had no idea what it was. Let me ask about it later.

After I finished changing, I stood in front of the mirror to confirm my looks. There I could see a guy that looked like a tired, dying pianist. Hmm... I wonder if I wore it right. I had never worn this kind of costume before so I had no idea whatsoever. In addition to a tuxedo, a stovepipe hat, and a mantle cloak, I might as well also wear a white mask...[\[98\]](#)

Fortunately, it seemed that at least the size of the costume fit quite well on my body. In the end, I grabbed the bow tie in my hand, mimicked Conan and fastened the buttons.

I ended up taking a longer time since I was putting on clothes that I wasn't used to wearing. I quickly walked out of the side stage.

First things first, I decided to return to where Yukinoshita was, and when I got there, I noticed a handsome teenage bishounen who was dressed lavishly, yet I didn't think I recognized him. Since the dress coat that the bishounen was wearing had a feature of having pretty long tails, I was able to identify that type of costume at first glance. That was indeed the so-called tailcoat.

“Looks great! The size also seems to fit you.”

After being talked to suddenly, I looked at the gentle, smiling face and finally was able to recognize who it was.

“Oh... You are Yukinoshita... What is this, what happened to you?”

After hearing my question, Yukinoshita, who was wearing the tailcoat, anxiously stretched her arms, adjusted her collar and pulled up the tails.

“Just as I thought, do I look strange...?”

“Nah, it’s not strange at all...”

Or rather, it fitted her so brilliantly. The monotonically colored tailcoat highlighted the beauty of Yukinoshita’s white skin and made her stand out even more. The long tails and the trousers further emphasized the perfect shape of her long legs. Her hair was tied up in one strip and waved according to the beats of her movements, leaving an ephemeral impression behind. Adding her slender body to all of these made me think of the phrase ‘unfortunate bishounen’.^[99] Her looks were so fascinatingly beautiful that it gave an impression of a perverted beauty. Ah I could already feel a sense of danger from her.

“So handsome... to the point that you look like you are in a movie scene.”

“Ara, thank you. By your standards, that’s pretty nice and well-chosen compliment.”

Hearing my words that implicitly described something so unrealistic and surreal, Yukinoshita covered her mouth and giggled. Her hands were wearing pure white gloves, making her look even more unrealistic.

“No, I’m serious in all regards. If you were to be featured in a live-action movie adapted from a manga series, it would definitely have received very high scores and top reviews.”

“If you put it that way, then somehow it doesn’t really sound like much of a good compliment, though...”

She sighed deeply and placed her hand against her temple, yet another movie-like scene in my eyes. Thanks to her following words, I was able to return to reality.

“Your costume fits you well, too, and you also look like some character from a movie - maybe you are the protagonist..., no, an aristocrat that bullies the protagonist...’s hanger-on.

“I’m not like some yakuza’s thug... You don’t need to force yourself to compliment me.”

“That’s not the case. You are the right person for the job. If you try a little harder, you would actually look a lot better. Give me the sleeve button and the handkerchief.”

Yukinoshita took her gloves off and held out her hand to me. Her bare hand looked even whiter than the gloves in my opinion. So I gave her the handkerchief. As I was wondering what a sleeve button is, I noticed I did have something that I had no idea what it was for. I put my hand in my pocket in search of the accessory-like thing, which I found and placed in Yukinoshita’s hand.

“Ah, this is a sleeve button. I see...”

While I was mumbling, my arm was suddenly gripped. Before I was able to retract my arm out of surprise, my jacket sleeves were already rolled up, their cuffs pulled flat and the buttons tied neatly. In addition, Yukinoshita skillfully folded my handkerchief and quickly slid it into the pocket above my chest.

“Classic Three Peaks Fold... This is it.”

She gently tapped my pocket once as a final garnishment, and smiled in satisfaction.

“Oh, ohhh. I felt like this is... this is something that I’ve seen before. The thing that you see in a wedding.”

“Proms are in fact chances for you to learn etiquette like these things, although for us we usually don’t have these encounters.”

“In our case, this is almost just a cosplay, in my opinion.”

“That’s a rather unfavorable way of putting it. Well, something like that.”

Said with a disgusted face, Yukinoshita put her gloves back on.

“So, why are you wearing a tailcoat?”

“We wanted to film a scene where the Prom King dances with the Prom Queen. However, we didn’t know of anyone who is capable of the job. So I had no choice but to take the job myself.”

“Hmm, I didn’t know you can dance.”

“Only as an amateur. However, a tuxedo wouldn’t have looked good on me. A tailcoat, on the other hand, ended up fitting me unexpectedly well. Don’t you think so?”

After finishing her words, Yukinoshita made a perfect 360-degree turn. As simple of a movement as it sounds, her turn was formidably gorgeous. I see - a wagging tail what makes a tailcoat so attractive. Yet, more prominent than anything else, the very existence of Yukinoshita is indeed the most eye-catching part. Her dancing skill is definitely by no means amateur level...

“I feel sorry for the person who is going to dance with you.”

“Don’t worry. Isshiki practiced with me a little bit already. She seems to have good talent.”

Yukinoshita said in a calm manner. But that’s not what I meant.... I was talking about something more fundamental besides dancing skills... I thought. Yet rather than that, I was actually more surprised from knowing who she was going to dance with.

“Isshiki is going to dance with you?”

“Yeah. She is the future Prom Queen after all. ”

She said with a calm, peaceful expression on her face again, as if it wasn’t something that mattered at all. Hey, normal human beings don’t know how to dance in the first place, right? I wonder if Irohasu is going to be fine... Getting worried about her, I began to look around in search of Isshiki. Yukinoshita seemed to notice it as well.

“So, it’s about time to go welcome and pick up the princesses!”

After saying that, she began walking to the other stage side elegantly. Her silhouette from behind looked like a prince-sama.

...speaking of which, this prince seemed to be in high spirits starting just now.

5-9

As soon as I arrived at the gym, I began to feel a sense of strangeness and uneasiness, as if coming to another dimension of space. However, now that I had stayed in it for a while, where the actors and actresses gradually convened, I could feel that the prom-like atmosphere had gotten stronger and thicker. When the blackout curtain fell, the spotlight turned on and brightened the stage, the ambience almost became like the one you could feel in a TV drama.

The actors that were gathered as extras, perhaps, were also influenced by the ambience here. Thanks to Tobe, the festival boy who came here late again, helped us fire up the mood. People were all pleasantly enjoying their chit-chats. Male students were mostly in tuxedos; whereas female students all wore dresses. Partly because of the dress-up, even most of those who met for the first time, enjoyed their conversations as well. Rather than a prom, I would say it looked more like a party for marriage hunting - the fact that people dress up lavishly and gloriously is the same.

In particular, the corner where I was at was the most cheerful out of everywhere. The main reason for that was indeed the cross-dressing beauty - Yukinoshita Yukino, and the gorgeous, elegant little devil - Isshiki Iroha.

With orange being the main color of the dress that Isshiki wore, the vividness of the dress particularly attracted every pair of eyes that saw it. Both the radiant color palette of the skirt and the short yet mildly spreading skirt hem, reminded people of the liveliness and vigor of a young maid. At several nearly risqué spots over her chest was decorated lace that turned vaguely visible and translucent under the flashes of spotlights, further underlining the attractiveness of the gorgeous womanhood she possessed...

That little devil soon wore a devilish smile on her face. She appeared to be greatly satisfied and pleased by the situation.

“This might be a terrible way of saying it, but it really feels great to be waited on by a bishounen... I’m really feeling good right now.”[\[100\]](#)

Seeing Isshiki's body trembling due to being deeply moved and impressed by the situation, Yukinoshita showed a disgusted expression.

“You really said it in the worst possible way.... Could you please do me a favor and stay a little farther away from me...?”

“But isn't accompanying me part of a gentleman's responsibilities? Didn't you nicely escort me here just now!? Yaaa, I suddenly had a little heart-throb at that moment...”

‘Ufufu’ Isshiki leaked a smile onto her face after she apparently had some lewd imaginations in her mind. I immediately was able to realize what she was referring to. Earlier when Yukinoshita went to pick up Isshiki, this ‘high-spirit’ prince was a little bit too high-spirited so that she just elegantly hooked Isshiki's arm without any hesitation, and then escorted her all the way to the venue here in that fashion.

As a result, the venue was suddenly overflowing with commotion and excitement, eventually filling up all the pride that Isshiki had desired, and thus leading to a situation like this.

“... I am reflecting on my conduct”

Yukinoshita used the word ‘reflecting’ in her words, but I could feel a sense of ‘regret’ more than ‘reflection’. Thanks to that, she was now in a ‘low-spirit’ mood and remained rather quiet. She already began to seem quite exhausted, and I could tell her tiredness from her looks before the movie shooting even took place. Yukinoshita probably also noticed it herself. ‘Okay!’ She took a long deep breath out and regained her concentration.

“It's about time to start filming, shall we? We will need to go in and have some discussions first. Hikigaya-kun, could you please go and bring Yuigahama-san here? I think they should have already finished changing by now.”

“Understood.”

Being told that, I walked to the stage side. For the past couple minutes,

Yuigahama-san seemed to be helping other girls change into their costumes together with Kawasaki. They seemed to have already finished helping the others and finally began to get themselves changed.

I came to the front room located at the stage side, knocking on its door a few times. Soon, ‘coming!’, a slightly irritated voice replied to me. That scary feeling! It was definitely Kawasaki’s voice... Thinking so, I slowly opened the door.

Right behind the door, there happened to be Yuigahama, who had just finished putting on her dress and was doing a final check.

Colored in a very light pink that almost looked white, the transparent texture along with its shade of color unexpectedly gave a strong impression of maturity from an adult. Perhaps it was the contour and the design of her dress that made me think that way. Open and exposed largely around her neck, her waist was tightened firmly yet despite that, it emphasized the curvature of her body and drew attractive arcs along it. The dress itself was very long, but the slit on the side blurred away the heaviness of the skirt and brought balance to it. Also, every move-and-freeze of her body would bring her skirt up waving in the air, conveying a sense of lightness from the material. Her usual hair bun was braided into a corolla, making me think of a name that some prince had used to call it. [\[101\]](#)

However, the moment that I stopped embracing these thoughts, was the moment when I saw her smirking in front of the mirror - ‘fuhehe’.

Yuigahama stood in front of the full-length mirror. Concerned with the hem of her skirt and her chest, she touched her body here and there with her hands.

“Uhyaa... This dress is... really... dangerous!!”

“Don’t move!”

Kawasaki stood behind Yuigahama and adjusted the length and the tightness of Yuigahama’s dress, with her hands tapping and touching her dress back here and there. After hearing her frigid warning, Yuigahama immediately

straightened up her back. Yet soon, she put her hands around her waist.

“Yes, mad’m. Ehh...ehhh, I want it to be tightened more around my belly...”

“Huh? Don’t you have to dance later, right? Wouldn’t tightening it make it harder?”

Kawasaki responded with a quite annoyed voice at Yuigahama's nervous words. However, after paying attention, you could notice she was a bit worried about her. Perhaps because of that, Yuigahama didn't seem to back down from what she had asked before, in fact, she spoke like a baby who wanted to be pampered.

“Ah, uh, uhhh... I think I can take it!”

“Hmmm..... I'll adjust it a little.”

After sighing impatiently, Kawasaki quickly decided to respond to Yuigahama's request. Kawasaki then squeezed her waist tightly.

“Ok, this should be fine. Do the makeup yourself.”

“Ah, Yes! Thank you Saki! Sorry for making you wait, Hikki-! I'll get ready quickly!”

After saying that, Yuigahama made her way quickly towards the dresser with a mirror. Perhaps in an attempt to not dirty her dress, Yuigahama first put a scarf on top around her neck and only then began to take out her makeup equipment and spread them out over the table.

“Take your time. The others are still having a discussion at the moment.”

After saying that, Yuigahama nodded slightly and gently replied “mkay”, while applying her makeup. Kawasaki passed behind her as she headed toward the exit where I was standing. Her expression seemed pretty tired.

“Well, I'll be leaving now, so take care of the rest yourselves.”

“Yeah, good work. Sorry, it looks like they pushed this on you so suddenly.”

“Exactly...”

After I expressed my words of gratitude, Kawasaki-san glared at me in a bad temper... eh, I am so sorry!! - as I contracted my body and bowed my head facing the floor, I could hear a breath that I couldn't tell whether it came from a gentle smile or a deep sigh.

“The skirt of the dress is long and the heels are high, too. Be careful until you get used to them.”

She said bluntly, yet at the same time kindly, Kawasaki passed by me and left. Seeing her extremely exhausted silhouette from behind, I could only say ‘oh, ok, thanks’ in return. Hmph, Kawasaki-san really is a tsundere! That Kawa-something-san is seriously so kawawaiiii. I quietly saw her off as I thought this.

After that, Yuigahama and I became the only two left in the preparation room of the stage side. Having nothing to do at that moment, I naturally turned my eyes in Yuigahama's direction. While Yuigahama was adroitly applying the makeup on her cheeks with a brush, her hand suddenly froze in the middle of her work.

“Hmm...eh.. I makes me feel uneasy to be stared at when I'm doing the makeup...”

She said it a little bit embarrassingly as our eyes met in the mirror. Her cheeks that were just brushed over had already turned a light peach-pink, which after seeing, I began to feel awkward myself, and averted my eyes.

“Ah, my bad. Please don't mind me and keep going... By the way it looks pretty much done to me, right? Isn't that enough make-up already?”

“Ehh??... Not at all!”

Yuigahama stared into the mirror for a brief moment in annoyance, yet quickly went back to her make-up work and got her hands busy again.

“I.. I see...”

I really did think that was enough make-up though, in my opinion! Well, eh, I mean, she's beautiful enough already - I swallowed back the words that I was about to say, and ended my sentence like that. Yuigahama switched from the brush to a highlighter pencil, and then gently applied it on her mouth.

"We are taking a video after all, right? It would be so embarrassing for me if I look bad in the video."

"Aren't we going to post-process the video clips so that our faces won't be recognizable afterwards?"

"Those are the clips that go public. The raw clips will still be saved. That will not be deleted. At least, I won't be deleting it... For that reason, I want it to be neatly preserved."

After finishing her words in a quiet voice, she gently applied rouge lipstick over her lips. Slightly raising her chin, Yuigahama moved the front of her jaw, changing the angle of her face and slowly moved the pencil to neatly apply the lines over her lips from different perspectives. Her lips eventually turned into a charming sakura-color, as if she had become a totally different person as I looked at her in the mirror. Her expression of carefully inspecting herself in the mirror was devoid of her usual innocence, as if she had evolved into an existence that was so far away beyond my reach. Therefore, I couldn't hold my words this time.

"I see... that's the case..."

"That is the case! Alright, it's finished!"

Thereupon, Yuigahama turned around to me, instead of facing the mirror, and smiled widely. As simple of a movement as it looked like, it was so much of a relief for me - I breathed out quietly, and at the same time, noticed myself holding my breath for a while before that. In order to cover that up, I almost unconsciously scratched my head.

"Hikki are you also fixing the look of your hair?"

"No I am not..."

“Ehhhh?? But, it’s in a mess right now. It’s an introductory video so you need to appear neatly at least. With this hair that you have now...”

Yuigahama’s eyes were fixed on the top of my head. In addition, I felt like her face gradually became more and more ‘ugh’ pitiful... Is my hair that bad...?? Moreover, in an introductory video where you are suppose to give people very positive impressions, it’s true that having a guy that looks this shabby and miserable is definitely unacceptable.

“Well, in that case, I’m gonna fix it a little. By the way, I’m borrowing the hair wax. I guess gel also works.”

As I walked towards the dresser table, Yuigahama quickly passed the spot over to me. Thanks to Komachi’s instructions, if it’s just little things like waxing my hair I could do it myself. After all, I was wearing a tuxedo, wearing a hairstyle as simple as swept-back hair would probably make it sufficiently good-looking. Nevertheless, the only problem is the person who’s doing it - in my case, it’ll just make me look more like an underling thug.

As I thought, I tried to stretch my hand to reach the hair wax amongst other make-up items spread out on the table. Suddenly, it was taken out of my hand from behind. I turned around and saw Yuigahama begin talking in a calm manner.

“Let me do it for you. Hikki-, it’ll probably turn out to be very weird, if you do it yourself.”

“Er.... My sense of beauty is completely rejected... Well, I can’t really argue against you... But, seriously if it’s just waxing, I think I can...”

“Don’t mention it. Just let me do it, let me do it. I am actually pretty good at these kind of things!”

Immediately after finishing her words, she grabbed my head, and turned it facing the mirror. That hurts that hurts that hurts! Also I was so embarrassed that the sweat glands on my scalp turned wide open and I quickly began sweating! Despite all of that, this woman was apparently cheerfully enjoying herself and humming through her nose.

“Dear customer, please let me know if you feel itchy anywhere~!”

“Eh, really you don’t have to do this and let’s just quickly get it done...”

Because I was so embarrassed and was concerned about all the sweat on my scalp, I couldn’t move my body a single inch. For some reason, Yuigahama’s hands suddenly stopped moving. Wait, what? Is my sweat disgusting to you? I’m sorry? - as I thought and looked at her in the mirror, Yuigahama wore a very grave expression on her face.

“Hikki-, you scalp feels so hard... You’ll go bald.”[\[102\]](#)

“Hey! You could have said anything else, but only this one is absolutely unacceptable to me... If you say it, a war will begin...”

“Joking, joking! It’s soft~ soft~. Rub rub rub~!”

“That’s itchy itchy itchy stop it stop it. Stop now... I beg you please stop please...”

Before I realized it, I had already covered my face with both hands. I bet my face looked pretty pathetic then, so I didn’t want to look at myself in the mirror, nor did I want anyone else to look at me. As my body contracted, I could feel slim fingertips gently scrubbing and rolling my hair and gradually turning it into stripes. Her nose humming changed to another tune before I was aware of it, and became a sweeter, more tender tune.

Sometimes I felt like my hair was being combed; sometimes I felt like my head was being patted; sometimes I felt like my head was being gently bitten by her fingertips - these feelings gradually relieved me and drove the stiffness of my body away. I closed my eyes in silence, as if I had already turned into a Koi-fish waited to be dismembered on a chopping board.

“Alright, done!”

I opened my eyes after hearing her voice. Through the mirror I saw Yuigahama tilting her head, with her eyes asking me ‘how does it look?’. I responded ‘excellent’ to her with three nods. Seriously, it looked so perfectly

done that it was such a waste to be done on me. Perhaps noticing me expressing my satisfaction through my facial expression, Yuigahama smiled gently and put her hands on my shoulders.

“Hikki you should also try your best to make yourself look good on the video!”

“Count on me! Recently video processing technologies have advanced drastically. The power of science is omnipotent.”

“Haha, what is that!”

She tapped my shoulders while laughing cheerfully. By then, both of us had finished our preparations. I quickly stood up and started walking toward the venue, followed by Yuigahama’s somewhat hard-sounding footsteps, which no longer had the energetic pattering vibe that they had before. Instead, they were slow and graceful. Thanks to that, it reminded me of something.

“Kawasaki said you should be careful about the long dress and the high heels.”

“Ah, that’s true. Indeed they are quite dangerous. It would be pretty troubling before I get used to them.”

“Yep... Also, it is kind of dark here, so...”

After saying that, I raised my left arm slightly, straightened my spine, drew my shoulders back and retracted my jaw. Also, ‘don’t panic and stress out’, something like that? I felt like that’s what I was told to do.

After seeing my series of actions, Yuigahama looked at me with a wonderstruck face, and gradually, as if she just remembered something, broke into a smile. Without saying anything further, she put her hand softly around my left arm, just like that time before.

After putting up so many excuses, we finally were able to walk together for a short distance, with the same stride.

5-10

The movie shooting itself went quite successfully, with the main reason being the most suspected point of failure - the dancing scene of the King and the Queen - actually finished in one shot. Yukinoshita and Isshiki showcased their perfect dancing skills to us.

Yukinoshita, who humbly claimed that she could only dance at amateur level, ended up making an outstanding appearance from the very beginning. Her dance steps were garnished by the loud sound of her leather shoes hitting the ground; her turns brought her tailcoat up waving in the air; her pure white gloves held her dancing partner's hand gently. Every time any of these movements happened, the girl crowd became enlivened up and screamed loudly.

On the other hand, as expected her dancing partner Isshiki was less skillful and nifty. From the beginning to the end, she seemed to be swung around by Yukinoshita. Sometimes when she made a mistake, she would step on Yukinoshita's foot, making her own movements a little bit lacking in comparison. However, every time she made a mistake, her reaction of drooping her head was quite foxy and unscrupulous; also when Yukinoshita tried to cover up Isshiki's mistake and smiled at her, Isshiki would smile back widely at Yukinoshita in return - this was all very pretty of her as well. Seeing Isshiki trying her best to pretend to be a kawaii girl, quite a few guys watching her from aside were also having heartthrobs.

In the end, all the spectators watching gave them a very warm round of applause and cheers, bringing the vibe to reach the climax.

However, Isshiki, who checked the footage during the break, tilted her head in doubt.

"I think it was done quite beautifully. People around us also cheered for us. But still, for some reason I felt like it turned out to be something else rather than a prom, which is pretty bad... Somehow it ended up looking like a dancing competition to me..."

“True. Even I think I looked a little bit different from the impression that I had expected.”

Yukinoshita peeked at the monitor from behind of Isshiki and put her fingers against her temple. She then sighed deeply. I stood next to them and listened to their words, beginning to ponder while reproducing the dancing scenes in my mind.

Hmm, well, they might have a point, though... Rather than everyone having a merry party together, it felt more like watching a performance or something...

As I was thinking that, Isshiki seemed to reach a similar conclusion as well. She nodded her head and turned to Yukinoshita.

“Well, I think it might be good enough for the cheek-time dancing video. In addition, I wanted another video that’s more high-spirited.”^[103]

“I see, so something that feels shattering and little bit clamorous... Let’s aim at taking a photo in which everyone dances together. Isshiki, could you please pair up with Tobe-kun and have both of you followed by the camera as the main actors that dance together?”

“Well, it can’t be helped... ha...”

Isshiki seemed really unwilling to take the job... Well, Yukinoshita isn’t quite good at this kind of following-the-atmosphere thing so it couldn’t be helped... As I smiled bitterly at someone else’s matter, for some reason Yukinoshita’s eyes quickly turned toward my direction.

“... additionally, we want to take another clip just in case. Yuigahama-san, can I ask you to do the favor? Hikigaya-kun also?”

“Huh?”

Yuigahama looked stupefied, whereas I opened my mouth widely in surprise. What the hell was she talking about...

“Ehh, I have never danced before...”

I said, raising my hand slightly. Yuigahama also nodded her head greatly. Hey, this is not a ballroom, okay?^[104] As I thought this, Isshiki began to walk in my direction.

“You could follow this video tutorial and I think you should be fine. Just give an impression of dancing in a nightclub or something you know.”

Isshiki said, putting her one hand on her hip, another hand raising her index finger and waving it in the air. Somehow that did give me a feeling of explaining things but it was by no means an explanation at all.... Seeing me look slightly worn out, Yukinoshita also walked over to me in attempt to help out the situation. With a bitter smile on her face, she opened her mouth.

“It’s okay to just imitate what you see. We only need it just in case. When we compile the videos it doesn’t hurt to have more than the necessary amount of video clips on hand. Or even, it’d be good enough if you two could do it as in just backing Isshiki-san and Tobe-kun up.”

“O..oh.. In that case I think I am very good at it though...”

I wasn’t called a ‘foil’ for nothing. Also what Yukinoshita suggested made sense in a way. It wouldn’t hurt to prepare more than enough material. In addition, the chance to organize a movie shooting event of this scale probably won’t come again. Rather than later having to run into troubling scenarios like ‘We can’t actually use this. We actually don’t have enough of that’, it’s definitely the right decision to take as many video clips as we can this time.

If we think that way, it should all make reasonable sense. However, somehow, there was somewhere that I felt uneasy and strange and it didn’t quite fit into the whole picture. I had the feeling that we were still missing an important piece to make it reasonable.

“Hmmm... Is it really good that the two of us are the ones doing it?”

As Yuigahama asked tentatively, I began to sense that the missing piece just appeared. However, it was immediately brushed away by Yukinoshita’s

following words.

“Well, I don’t quite want to ask other people to do it since these are quite prominent roles. If you two could help out, then you are really doing me a great favor. If it’s still troubling or difficult for you, we could seek and discuss other options though...”

“Ah, no, that’s not what I meant... If you think it’s okay if it’s us two, then it’s fine.”

Yuigahama smiled with a troubled face at Yukinoshita, who answered plainly without any hesitation. Yuigahama accepted her words and gently waved her hand by her chest. Well, since Yukinoshita already phrased her words that way, it made it harder to say no to her after all. In fact, other students who were gathered here all came out of their own kindness and willingness to volunteer their time, which of course made it hard for us to force our own will on them again by asking for more.

“So, let’s do a dry run for now!”

Isshiki said to us while clapping her hands. Everyone began moving. Yuigahama and I also moved along with them. After arriving at the designated spot, Yuigahama stood right in front of me.

“...can you dance?”

I asked her quietly. Yuigahama twisted her lips with a troubled face.

“I don’t really know... Ah, well, if it’s just ‘Yay!’ - with that kind of feeling, we could dance to the hype, right!”

“Waay - something that feels like that? I see...”

“Yep, yep! That kind of feeling! Yay!”

Yuigahama forcefully fired up her mood, shaking her body and her hands like an idol to demonstrate her point. Still, I had no idea what to do. As I sighed deeply, Tobe, who stood next to me also wearing a tuxedo, was perhaps triggered by the ‘wayy’ that I said. He put his arms around my shoulder.

“Hey, hey! Come on, Hikitan-kun! Get high! Say wayyy, wayyyyy! See, wayyyy!!”

Although I had no idea what he was trying to say, that meaningless hype of his, looked unexpectedly reliable to me.

“O...okay.... You seemed to be used to it...”

I said to him, almost as if I was talking to myself. Tobe reacted with a laugh, and then began to speak restlessly.

“I know right? Nah, don’t worry, chill man. This is that thing. Just go along the beat! How do you say it? Basically you bath in the sound of music. When the music begins, you dance! Like that?”

“Tobe-senpai, that’s enough of it. You are really noisy there.”

Being scolded blatantly by Isshiki, Tobe said ‘crap!’ and returned dejectedly back to standby mode.

Although his advice was not useful at all, if anything, that kind of attitude was probably what I wanted then. In that case, I had no choice but to somehow imitate that kind of ‘coolness and hype’ mood that Tobe had. When you go to a live house and there’s a song that you have never listened to, you can just wait for that ‘three, two, one!’ and then begin your yells.

After getting my mental preparedness ready, I quietly waited for the music to start playing. Soon, the lights went out.

Shortly after, the music that came out was a classic piece for dance parties. The spotlight jumped around, with scattered lights from the disco ball falling and pouring onto the floor.

Everyone looked kind of awkward and clumsy in the beginning, only shaking their shoulders along to the rhythm. Yet soon after Tobe and some others punched their fists high up in the air, a couple more people followed them. When they clapped loudly, with the clapping sound resonating, the distance among people gradually shrank and became closer. Step forward, twist; step

forward again, and then high five, mingled with trolling robot dances. There were even bolder people that joined their shoulders with others.

When everyone was about to get indulged in the music and the atmosphere, the next piece followed. Though not enough to be called a ballad, it was a lot mellower piece than the one before.

I looked around at others while shaking my shoulders like others in the crowd. I couldn't do much more than just that and snapping my fingers. Beyond that, I didn't think I could join the crowd and tag along with them without embarrassing myself. The only thing I could do was to shake my feet and my head to the rhythm like a ticking metronome. Suddenly, my empty hand was dragged over.

I looked back, and saw Yuigahama with a shy smile on her face. My heart beat was already raised a lot due to dancing and moving around. Now, because of that, my heart beat even faster, so that I couldn't help but avert my eyes.

At this point among all the people here, there were those who were waltzing disorderly and half-jokingly; and there were those who had turned their faces away from each other, without standing too close nor distancing themselves too far, and stared at each other's feet.

Therefore, thankfully, nobody was noticing what was happening here. Yuigahama was the only person looking at me. I quickly put my freed hand on top of her shoulder, and in response, she also wrapped her hand around my shoulder. I didn't know how to move my feet, so I only shook my body, and when she moved her foot forward I then stepped backward; when she moved aside, I just followed her. Heat began to pile up on the parts of my body that were in contact with her. I grew worried about the sweat on my hands. Since our faces were so close to each others', I didn't even dare to breathe.

I was not prepared for the graveness of the situation, mainly not prepared mentally... I opened my mouth involuntarily to put up my excuse.

“Sorry, I've sweat a lot.”

“Ah, don’t worry. It’s quite difficult after all.”

“No no, I meant, I was talking about how disgusting I am sweating. I’d better just die, I meant.”

“Ehhh? That’s too much of an exaggeration!? Also, don’t have such low self-esteem!”

While Yuigahama was laughing, the piece changed again. I think I knew this one. It was the last piece in the ending of that TV drama. Yuigahama moved her eyes to the side.

Following her eyes, I saw Tobe and Isshiki dancing as they pleased. No matter if it’s the rhythm or the movement, it all looked random and nonsensical to me. Even so, they did look like they were enjoying themselves. Tobe attempted to wrap his hand around Isshiki’s waist. But before he could do it, Isshiki quickly thrashed his hand away, making a round turn as if she was going to do a roundhouse kick... Isshiki is worthy of her Dance Queen title.

When the music ended, a round of applause and cheering took place. Soon, everyone began chatting freely and cheerfully taking photos with their friends and dancing partners.

In any case, the thing that I was most worried about - shooting the dancing clip, I suppose can be called completed.

The moment I came to think of it was the moment I suddenly began to feel exhausted and tired. I staggered out of the venue center and headed toward the tables in the food catering area.

After taking a couple sips of my beverage, I looked around again, at the dance floor, the stage and the decorations.

I see. This is the so-called prom thing... Well, in term of the ambience, I think I somehow got it. Just as I expected, I don’t fit in *at all*.

Chapter 6: Suddenly, Yuigahama Yui Thinks Deeply about the Future.

After the day of the movie shooting, Yuigahama and I were once again called to the Student Council Office.

Isshiki, who sat across the table from us, arranged a bundle of papers and quietly passed them to Yuigahama.

"I've printed out all the photos that can be used for the official site in thumbnails, so if any photos are deemed unacceptable, please cross them out. So, I'll be leaving the checking to you."

"Yes~ Uhm, want to look together, Hikki?"

Yuigahama asked as she spread the papers like a fan. I shook my head in response.

"No, it's fine. If you want me to look anyway, I'm inclined to cross out all of them... I'll leave it to you."

"I see... Got it! I'll look into them then."

Yuigahama laughed bitterly and respected my decision. She took out a pen and started to inspect every one of the photos. As she looked at them, shrieks such as, "kyaaa" or "waaah" could be heard from her. Girls really do care a lot about their photos, huh...

Now that she was looking at the photos, my hands became idle. I rested my chin on my hand, and peeked at the photo thumbnails in Yuigahama's hands.

As I was doing that, Yukinoshita called me from behind her computer.

"How is it? It doesn't appear as strange as you expected, right?"

"Yeah, after actually carrying it out, it doesn't feel that way as much. I can now sort of understand what you meant by 'creating the answer'."

I remembered the expression that Yukinoshita used at that time. I continued speaking.

"Since foreign dramas were the only material that I can refer to, I still can't really imagine what a prom is like. Well, thanks to the movie shooting experience, I can somewhat understand it better now. The way I'm going to say this may sound bad, but I don't consider holding a prom as much of an obstacle as I thought before. Don't you think the people who've watched the introduction video would think the same way?"

"Is that it? If that is the case, then our decision to shoot a video was meaningful enough. If it's just introducing what a prom is, we could have just pulled images from online and then uploaded them to our website directly. However, using a video that we shot ourselves indeed makes it easier for people to understand and imagine what a prom is like, since there are people that you are familiar with in it."

Yukinoshita said that slightly triumphantly and stuck out her chest. Her reaction somewhat looked so amusing to me that I ended up laughing.

In fact, I believe the shift of my opinion indeed proved how useful the movie was, despite that initially, I was holding a negative sentiment against the prom. It would be even more true for those who actually wanted to participate in the prom.

I'm afraid Yukinoshita wanted to create a video in order to carry out some kind of localization, in a way. The information we have regarding videos and photos of the prom mostly come from foreign sources, so differences of culture and race create obstacles for us to understand and imagine what a prom is. Even if we tried to replicate that with our own people, the differences in appearance, sense of fashion, and scale would be glaringly

obvious. As a result, if we hold a prom like that, it will only make people feel “the prom looks lame”, “this is different from what I expected”, etc. That is why, we should set up the case that a Japanese-style, no, a Sobu-style prom is also an epitome of proms, and then we need to force this impression that ‘this is what a typical prom looks like’ on people.

"Not only you, Senpai, but the students who came to the photo shoot also had quite a good impression of the prom. The LINE feed is pretty much exploding, too. Look."[\[105\]](#)

The smartphone Isshiki showed us was displaying the posts from the photo shoot. It seems that the people who participated in the photo shoot had uploaded their photos on SNS's, with comments like, "it was a lot of fun~" under the photos of girls in their lavish hairstyles and dresses. But still, aren't you hiding your faces too much with those cat ears and beards...? The eyes are big and intensely black too, along with the whitening effect, to the point that I have no idea what your faces originally looked like at all.

"Ahhh, I saw those too. There are people that upload a lot."

Yuigahama commented while raising her head from the sheets of paper. Isshiki agreed to Yuigahama's words and nodded her head. She then continued to flip her phone screen around to show us more photos uploaded by various accounts. Most of the photos were edited and corrected with apps like SNOW and Beauty Plus, thus leaving me have no idea who they are in these photos at all. Nevertheless, everyone looked gorgeous in the photos and they seemed to all enjoy themselves during the event.

However, there were a few with boys and girls promiscuously leaning their shoulders against each other, and some other ones where they were boldly putting their faces near to each other. Especially, some rather sexually suggestive photos were mixed in - the dress was widely open in front of the chest. If someone saw that they might squint their eyes at it. In fact, I am super squinting my eyes right now. I just want to say "Huh? Who the hell are you flirting with in a photo shoot?" and stuff. Well, I'm not really in a position to condemn the others! Errrr, just remembering what happened then somehow makes me feel embarrassed! I wanna die! And for that reason, I won't say a word or ask a thing about it...

In any case, every post generally received positive comments with good intentions. The timeline was mostly overflowing with reactions like "nice!" or "I want to do that too", or similar. Of course, there were negative replies as well, but only a few, so it is something that can be easily ignored.

"If we consider these reactions as secondary promotions, then all the costs that we have put in so far can be justified."

Yukinoshita closed her eyes, nodding in agreement to what she said. She then went back to her work, typing away on her laptop.

While Yukinoshita was at it, Yuigahama seemed to have just finished with choosing the photos. She quickly marked the thumbnails that she chose with her pen, and then returned all the bundle of papers back to Isshiki.

"Hmmm, so something like this?"

"Thank you very much. I'll make the special page for it on the website right away, okay?"

While saying this, Isshiki carefully checked the markings on the sheets of papers that Yuigahama handed over. Then, she pulled over the laptop and began to operate the trackball. [\[106\]](#)

"Thanks. Sorry for making you all come here to help me out. It's all good now."

Yukinoshita paused her task for a moment, and slightly bowed her head to express her gratitude to us. Seeing that, I blinked my eyes a couple times. It took me a while for me to understand what she implied by saying that.

"...Eh, is that everything?"

When I asked, Yukinoshita looked blank for a moment, then brought her hand to her chin and began thinking.

"Yes, I think so... The Student Council is working on producing the needed items. I don't believe we need any help from the others at the moment,

right?"

"Eh? ...eh, ah, h-haa.... If Yukino-senpai thinks so, well then, yes."

Asked for confirmation by Yukinoshita, Isshiki began performing calculations of the future work to be done. She answered in broken words while looking in different directions and kept pondering. Despite that, Yukinoshita seemed to be quite positive on her calculation of the overall progress, nodding her head in agreement.

"If we are short of people and reach the end of our rope, we may ask you two for help again. I'll call you two out then."

Seeing that wide smile on her face, all we could do is to say 'I see' and silently accept it. Knowing that there were no more jobs to do and that we could then go home early, I should be happy about this, but I just didn't feel relieved from the fact that we were dismissed that easily. While I was feeling bewildered, Yuigahama, who sat next to me, quickly stood up.

"Sure, I see. Thanks for all your hard work, too! Do your best, okay? If there's anything we can do to help, just call us out."

She hurriedly gathered her stuff, and tapped my shoulders with her elbow.

"Come on, Hikki, let's go."

"Oh, okay..."

Being urged on, I finally stood up.

"Then, see you."

"Yes, thanks for your work."

"Thanks for coming~!"

When I said goodbye to them, Yukinoshita and Isshiki both brought their faces up from over their laptops. Yet soon, they went back to work. Since bothering them would be troublesome, Yuigahama and I promptly left the

Student Council room.

After that, we walked in the hallway at a steady pace towards the staircase. The light coming through the window was shining brightly - much more than it usually was after school. Only then did I notice that the sun's position was still towering high.

"It seems that we have become free now."

Yuigahama murmured as she walked by my side.

"...Well, I'm always free, though. You don't want to hang out with Miura and the others?"

"I told them that I will be helping out today. Besides, Miura and Ebina seemed to have plans already."

"Hmmm..."

She said with a nervous and troubled laugh, to which I answered in a careless voice.

Our conversation ceased with just that, with only the sound of our footsteps echoing in the hallway. This reminded me of the same kind of bizarre silence that I experienced before. It was the day when I stopped going to the club room, I think? While I was reminiscing about it, I glanced at Yuigahama next to me, and then our eyes happened to directly meet. It would have been quite awkward had I turned my eyes away from her at that moment, so I chose to open my mouth instead.

"...Wanna go somewhere?"

"Eh?"

Rather than saying her reaction was 'surprised', I would say she wore a 'bewildered' expression and lost her words. Rather than a reaction that showed "unexpectedness", it was a reaction of "I don't get why". Bah~, did I make a blunder again?^[107] Embarrassed and ashamed of my words, I began

to feel that my face had grown warmer. In order to hide that, I pulled up my muffler.

"Ah, you know... I was thinking that I should prepare something to celebrate Komachi's passing the entrance exam, along with her birthday..."

I mumbled into my muffler as my brain worked hard at full speed to make up a plausible reason. Thereupon, Yuigahama seemed to understand me and went along with it. She clapped her hands, leaned forward and tapped my shoulder.

"That sounds great! I'll go, I'll go! I'll buy something, too~ Hmm, so where are we going, where are we going?"

I was grateful that you were in such high spirits and excited about this, but please give me some time to think...

"Eh, uh, I dunno... Ah! I remember that we've wanted to go to Lalaport."

By that heavenly revelation that swooped down, I instinctively gripped my fist. Exactly, I seriously had always wanted to go there. While I was getting excited myself, Yuigahama let out a strange "huh?", then pondered.

"Lalapo? I'm fine with it that but why there?"

"Apparently, I heard that there's this vending machine that only sells MAX COFFEE cans. I want to buy a MAX COFFEE there!"

Then, I remembered how I was given an earful by Komachi at that time. I did it again, ugh... As I thought, Yuigahama immediately nodded in acceptance.

"Sure~ Lalapo, it is. By the way, you really do like MAX COFFEE a lot, though..."

She added in the end, with a slightly defeated smile on her face. I was so surprised that she immediately acknowledged what I said, that I ended up replying to her.

"Eh, are you really okay with that?"

"Huh? Should I not be?"

She gave me a dubious look, as if saying ‘What are you talking about, dude? You're the one who brought it up...' Her eyes were complaining straight at me. After properly acknowledging that gaze, I let out a sigh to calm myself down.

"Yes, I hope you are... Then, Lalapo it is. How about we head to the train station now?"

"Yeah! Let's go now."

She cheerfully answered with a bright smile. Her energetic footsteps echoed through the hallway, and she was already ahead of me a few steps away. To catch up with her, I hurried up too.

6-2

Lalaport Tokyo Bay wasn't that far from our school.

It took four stations from the school's nearest station to get there, and took us 10 minutes or so to reach the destination station. Summing up the waiting and walking times, it took us less than 30 minutes in total to reach there.

Thanks to that, there wasn't any real moment of silence between us on our way. Even though sometimes when there was a pause in our conversation, thanks to the passengers getting in or out of the train, and the scenery that jumped into our eyes, we always found ourselves being able to keep our conversation rolling with comments such as, "The car is pretty vacant, right." or "There was an event there the other day", or something that don't really mean or matter much. Or should I say, thankfully, it was Yuigahama who tried to talk to me whenever there was a chance.

And because of that, after we reached our destination, our rambling conversation continued that way.

"By the way, Hikki, what are you planning to buy?"

"Actually I want to ask you that question. What do you think I should buy?"

"You're leaving it to me from the very beginning!?"

"Nah, listen, I literally have no idea which stores I should look for..."

Yuigahama stepped back a few steps in disappointment. I turned my head back to look in the direction where we had just come. This zone here consisted of a lot of fashion stores standing one next to another. And because of my ignorance in fashion, I could only blankly stare at them as we passed by.

Moreover, the first store that we saw once we entered the mall was Peach John, so my embarrassment and sense of shame rapidly increased,

discouraging me quickly. I was then in something like a stalking situation as I just followed Yuigahama from behind.

Had it been me buying things for myself, I wouldn't have had any troubles and would have bought the necessary stuff I needed straightaway. However, we were here to buy a present for Komachi. Despite of being my little sister, she was a girl in the first place. When it comes to giving a present to a girl, my senses and judgement would totally be too disastrously bad for it. It seemed that Yuigahama indeed understood my problem - she was walking energetically in front of me, leading the way and at the same time thinking about what to get.

"Uhm... Let me think... Since it's Komachi-chan, maybe a hairpin?"

"Ah, I see. But she makes her tastes pretty clear, so I feel like she may not be pleased if I give something that is not to her liking."

"Is that so..."

It appeared that Yuigahama wanted to say that she thought Komachi would be happy about it regardless. I continued anyway.

"Yeah, exactly. Maybe she'll say something like 'Oooh! Onii-chan, thank you!! Komachi is very happy! blush, blush', but I don't think she will ever use it in her lifetime."

"What is that weird imitation that you just did... Well, I guess that's true. If I receive an odd present from my papa, I don't think I'll ever use it, either. I'm happier receiving money."

"That's sad for him. I feel sorry for your father..."

While we were talking, we browsed for a bit in front of a different variety of stores and yet, we still couldn't find a thing that Komachi might like.

After walking around and making a circle of the entire the floor near the station, my legs started to get tired. As soon as I stopped walking to rest

myself, I recognized a place that I had seen from a picture on the Internet.

"Ah, this is the place where that MAX COFFEE vending machine is. I'll go buy one."

"Really?"

"Yeah, there's no way I'm mistaking it. I've absolutely done research about it beforehand."

"You spent time properly researching just that!? You should have spent the time researching about the present!"

I ignored her absolutely correct statement, and smoothly avoided the crowd to find myself in front of the vending machine. There were a couple vending machines that lined up by one of the exits leading to the street. One of those vending machines was colored in yellow.

"O, oooh... so this is the vending machine with the special MAX COFFEE design... I heard that it's only here for a limited time, so I thought it might be gone by now but..."

While I was deeply touched and trembled in emotion, I quickly took a number pictures of the vending machine. Yes, the feeling of this yellow color... cool!

"Ehhh, amazing! It's really the same color scheme and design as a MAX COFFEE can."

Yuigahama followed me from behind and remarked with absolutely no interest whatsoever. She showed neither any intention of taking a picture of it, nor any sign of uploading it on Instagram to get likes from others.

...I had no choice. Very well, I will briefly explain it to her.

"This is not just the matter of the similarities of the design. If you go behind it, you will even see the list of the ingredients printed there. It's the elegantly

detailed craftsmanship, right? I can definitely feel the love."

"Huuuh-.."

...I see that you are not interested after all!

Well, that's expected. Normies wouldn't understand what I said about the vending machine with the specifications of MAX COFFEE cans. I'm happy, though. Anyway, after taking pictures of the vending machine, I went to the back of the vending machine, made a side☆victory-sign and yaaay♪ and took a selfie of myself. Seeing that, Yuigahama suddenly laughed out loud.

"...But, looking from this perspective, the design may be cute after all."

"Right!? The design has changed a few times, but this one is considered the best by popularity! It's outstandingly cute!"

"Is that your most exciting moment today!? And besides, I have no idea what the previous designs looked like..."

After hearing me unintentionally rant on the design, Yuigahama sighed in low spirits.

"Well, whatever. I'll take a picture as well then."

With that said, she brought out her smartphone, and took a step forward to stand next to me, who had just taken a bunch of selfies moments ago. Without any warning or giving any signals, she clicked the button and took a picture. Because she did all it all so smoothly, I never had the chance to give any objection. Thanks to that, I was probably making a stupid face. Although, even if she asked my permission in the first place, it wouldn't have been different anyway. My face would've still turned into the color of a tomato in the end, with my eyes averted and my expression being stupid after all.

That was why, well, the picture that was taken just now should be slightly better.

"...Send that photo to me later."

"Sure."

Yuigahama answered in a calm manner, with her eyes staying focused on her smartphone screen.

And then, I saw her tapping rapidly on her smartphone and did something with it. Suddenly, I heard my smartphone vibrate. When I checked it, there was a message from Yuigahama.

The photo attached to it was brightly lit with shining stars scattered around, and in addition to that, our faces were decorated with dog ears, dog noses and dog whiskers. ...Well, if it's edited that much, then the infringement of portrait rights or whatever won't matter after all. I smiled bitterly and saved the photo with password protection.

"Alright. We've carried out our purpose here. Let's go home."

"We haven't yet, and we're not going home..."

Just when I was about to head back home in satisfaction, Yuigahama grasped my sleeve trying to stop me and let out a sigh at the same time.

"Ah, then, how about we go take a look at the IKEA store over there? They have quite a few sundries there."

She pointed her index finger towards a different building. Originating from Sweden, IKEA is a world-wide general merchandising store that sells interior furniture. Its No.1 branch in Japan is located here in Funabashi, Chiba. Worthy of Chiba - it's Japan's No. 1 Prefecture.

Well, it was indeed inefficient to aimlessly walk around in this huge Lalaport mall. So it might be better to try somewhere new. I nodded to Yuigahama's suggestion, and we promptly began heading towards IKEA.

This whole commercial area is located by the sea coast, and thus the sea

breeze is still cold during this time. It was dreadful for us as we felt the sudden change of temperature when we walked out of the shopping mall. While Yuigahama and I let out low cries of "cold, cold, cold", we trotted across the pedestrian bridge.

Shortly after, when we entered the store, both of us let out a sigh of relief. Needless to say the warmth of the store made us feel cozy; looking at the sofas and rugs arranged by the entrance also made us feel warmer.

"How about we go look around for the time being?"

Yuigahama hopped on the escalator as if she was already used to everything here. We then arrived at a huge showroom area. There were all kinds of furniture, interiors and sundries that one could pick up and inspect. Inside were a few themed booths that displayed different selection and arrangements of furniture, with theme names like "Three Person Family Apartment@Kachidoki", "LDK That Boosts Your Intelligence" and etc. The whole set-up felt, more or less, like a theme park.^[108]

Huuuh, this is the first time I had been to a furniture shop, but the vibe is pretty interesting~ "Kaguya-sama: Love Is War" is interesting too, by the way~ While I embraced those simple thoughts and comments of "Ah I see, I see." in my mind, we continued walking and looking around the store.^[109]

Just when we passed by a booth with a "Relaxedly Living Alone In Urayasu" sign on it, Yuigahama's attention lingered on that.^[110]

What was it that took her interest, like there was an attractive item, perhaps? Maybe an armchair that can endure being sat on 6,300,000 times and wouldn't break? ...With my head filled with those thoughts, I followed her and stepped inside the booth as well.

The basic tone of the interior was white. The wardrobes and storage shelves looked clean and tidy. Despite of being a relatively small area, it gave us a feeling of vast ambiance. Throughout, the walls and the space above the shelves were adeptly utilized, with the small articles neatly placed and organized. If you looked to the rear, the booth continued further inside.

Adjoining this was a small furnished kitchen and even had a big enough space for the washing machine to be placed there.

With this set-up, there is no doubt that you can relax living alone~ "Hachiman, go live in this kind of room!" I shoo away the imaginary mom who whispered those words to me. Meanwhile, Yuigahama briskly walked around inside the booth with small steps.

For a while, she surveyed the furnished room but not long after, perhaps because she's tired, she sat at the bed that's along a wall. Then, she turned around at me, opened her mouth and began speaking casually.

"Hikki, once you enter college, you will live by yourself, won't you?"

"It depends on which college and department I'll be entering. If I go to a college in Tama or Tokorozawa, then obviously I wouldn't want to commute to school from home. Although, presently, the college that I plan to attend is within my commuting range."

While I was speaking, I grabbed the stylish empty bottle from the table, held it in hand and observed it. Yuigahama let out a voice with a mix of admiration and astonishment.

"So you've already made up your mind which schools you plan to apply to."

"There aren't that many private schools that offer liberal arts programs and fit my transcript. I will just apply to several departments that offer the most interesting programs to me. That's why, well, instead of me making choices, it's more like me doing the process of elimination."

When I placed the empty bottle back to its original location, although there wasn't anything inside of it, it made an awfully heavy sound. So, to make it not seem awkward, I added a few words.

"It's not like I have something that I want to do."

That is why I am going to college - to find out what I want to do. I was not

able to continue what was I about to say.

I had already vaguely noticed, that even when I become a college student, things like an encounter by fate, or to chance upon a dream that determines your life will probably not happen to me anyway.

All of my life, I've never strongly devoted myself to anything . Therefore, I'm probably not fit to search for my own dream - it's just not my nature. Tentatively, even if I ever end up finding an interest that I can embrace along the way somewhere, I would get discouraged, then I'd make myself quit, and spout to myself that in the first place, I never really liked it at all. See, I can basically guess more or less how things would end up.

I don't think it's by any means pessimistic, though. In my opinion, it generally applies to most people.

Yukinoshita Haruno told me before, that many things needed to be given up, in order for one to become an adult.

Nevertheless, there are people that don't even give up, because they don't have any goals or aspirations in the first place, such as me. If one can't even give things up in the first place, I wonder what would happen to this person?

And thanks to those worthless, silly thoughts of mine, I noticed that our conversation had already died.

I quickly turned my eyes in Yuigahama's direction, and noticed that her eyes were fixated on the empty bottle by my hands.

"Yukinon has already settled on her post-graduation plan. She's quick about it..."

Yuigahama let out that murmur, that could be either described as a deep sigh, or a sorrowful exclamation. I had no idea how to reply to that; hence, I was at a loss for words.

She let out a small breath, as if telling me that she didn't really expect a

response or interruption from me, then faced me with a smile. As our eyes met, perhaps she noticed that I'd been standing all along, so she moved her hips and made a space for another person to sit on the bed.

I was slightly startled by the strange spring-bouncing noise that vividly sounded. Bothering to prepare a space for me is something I couldn't adamantly refuse; it would be bad of me. By the way, if I do refuse, the fact that I seemed bothered by sitting next to her would certainly make me look even creepier! And thus, I slowly sat on the bed.

"What was Hikki's dream when you were a kid?"

It must have been because we were sitting on a bed that Yuigahama asked me as if she was begging for a pillow talk. I had no collections of dreams to properly answer her question off the top of my head, so I pondered for a few seconds, and then opened my mouth.

"It depends on the definition of a dream... If it's those random whims that count, then, I guess I've had lots of them. To be a company CEO or to become a rich person... Also, a professional baseball player, a hero, a manga artist, an idol, a police officer... And there's more - a doctor, a lawyer, the Prime Minister of Japan, the President, and an oil magnate, too."

"It's all related to money, so they are all empty dreams..."

"Uhn, well, that's also what I thought 'what the heck was this little brat talking about...'"

In that case, I should feel slightly depressed and let down myself. I wasn't a cute kid back then, and of course not now either, huh... And, while I quietly began self-loathing, Yuigahama somewhat surmised this and then quickly followed up.

"Ah, but, but! I think that becoming an idol is a great and marvelous dream!"

"That does not make me feel better. I'll tell you this, I was a super cute kid back then. If only there was a good reason, I would've become an idol

already. By the way... how about you?"[\[111\]](#)

When I asked, Yuigahama crossed her arms and pondered.

"I... hmm, I've had quite a few dream jobs, too. I wanted to be a flower shop owner, or a cake shop owner, or becoming an idol!"

"Hey, isn't that in the same vein as mine, right?"

Yuigahama had spoken cheerfully while looking back on her dreams like a child. I unintentionally made a bitter smile.

However, her innocent face only lasted a second and turned into a mature one.

Yuigahama broke a smile, then stood up from the bed. She stretched out her footsteps one after another, as if leaving all her childhood dreams behind.

"...Also, becoming a bride."

Yuigahama said it facing away from me, and then turned around.

She stood in front of the furnished kitchen at the back of the display booth. The floor and tiles were pure white, and the artificial light falling through the skylight glass resembled a veil.

The words that slipped out of Yuigahama's mouth were too realistic for it to be called a dream, that I couldn't emit a laugh nor force making a bitter smile.

Instead, I slowly walked towards the kitchen. While walking, I tried to come up with a random joke.

"Isn't that also about the same as mine? ...Being a house husband is truly a good dream."

"It doesn't sound like a dream at all with the way you say it..."

Yuigahama thus dropped her shoulders, and smiled in disappointment. I think she smiled for my sake.

Even with the artificial light shining brightly inside this room, I could say for sure, that I feel the gentleness and the kindness from her smile. Growing embarrassed, I quietly lowered my eyes and looked at the floor.

The kitchen in this booth of course wasn't actually being used, but the cooking tools and tableware were adequately arranged. It all looked so real that you could almost begin living here right away. Granted, these products were for sale per se, and they are supposed to look authentic, but for some reason I could only see them as nothing but artificial things.

The furniture, tableware, kitchen and bed; all of them are real items from their appearances, yet they all look like forgeries. What makes it different from one and the other? With those thoughts in mind, I touched the cabinet unconsciously.

And then, she merrily clapped her hands.

"Isn't it better to just make something homemade?"

"Eh? Homemade furniture?"

"No, I meant the present. You know, a homemade cake."

I thought hard for a second about what she was trying to say. But when she mentioned the present, I suddenly remembered. Ah, I was here to buy a present for Komachi! I knew, I knew. Just because I couldn't remember doesn't mean that I forgot about it. While I was in a heated moment of making excuses for myself in the depths of my heart, Yuigahama kept coming up with whimsical ideas.

Next to her hands were plates, knives and forks. She arranged all of those together with a mug cup, and then let out an impassioned speech.

"So, when you bring the cake out, you also bring out a mug cup with

beverage in it... and then the truth is, the mug cup is actually a present~! Amazing! I feel like I've said something hip!"[\[112\]](#)

Yuigahama said in high spirits, putting both her hands to her cheeks.

"...Really? Hip, huh?"

"I-it's fine! There's a bit of a surprise with it, so it's fine!"

When I calmly told her about it, all her confidence in having hip taste vanished. Yuigahama slightly blushed, and bashfully began to return the tableware to their previous positions.

"But, well... homemade stuff doesn't sound that bad either, surprisingly."

Her pouting face looked somewhat funny and cute, so that I couldn't hold myself and laughed. In addition, I let out *sweet* words from my mouth, I mean literally.[\[113\]](#)

"Then, let's now go eat some desserts and do some research about them. How about that?"

"Ah, that sounds super great! Let's go, let's go!"

The enthusiastic Yuigahama forcefully pushed me outside to leave the exhibition booth.

To be honest, the idea of a homemade present doesn't sound bad. You can appeal to the person who receives it by heart. Above all, the time and effort that you genuinely put into it will definitely move that person. All the more, if that person is someone of whom you think dearly.

It truly sways the heart of someone.

...That is why, well, I'll do my best and make a cake for Komachi! Doing this may perhaps be an unexpected way for me to find and awaken a new dream.

Right, a dream to become the Legendary Patisserie PreCure...[\[114\]](#)

6-3

“The country may fall, but its rivers and mountains shall remain”, Du Fu once composed in his poem. On the other hand, there’s someone who also writes, “One’s dreams may fall, but his parents' home shall remain”. Of course, that person is me.

My dreams had been torn apart. We did some research of delicious desserts by eating them, and I came to realize this obvious fact that it is impossible for me to create such a thing. Therefore I decided to give up the dream to become the Legendary Patisserie PreCure. Because of that, after I got home, I sulked on my bed.

However, the morning still dawned.

The day after Yuigahama and I hung out, my school life was peaceful and quiet, with nothing special in particular, and before long, it was already after school.

Just as we were told yesterday at the Student Council office, we were really no longer needed to help prepare for the prom. Perhaps because of that, neither Yukinoshita nor Isshiki called us. So I remained here with nothing to do.

There wasn't any particular contact from them until this time , so I wondered maybe I can go home now... Despite that, I still felt a little bit nervous and restless about it, and thus casually glanced at Yuigahama. Had there been any attempt to contact us, she would have been the person who receives the call, rather than me.

When Yuigahama noticed my gaze, she nodded back to me in return. And then she waited for the perfect timing to end her conversation with Miura and the others. After she managed to do it promptly, she walked straight at me.

"Hikki-, what are you going to do today?"

Yuigahama asked, tilting her head. Judging by the way she asked, I bet there

was indeed no need to help with the prom preparations after all.

"If there's nothing to do, I'll go home."

"I see... I have nothing in particular either. I'll go home, too."

With that being said, Yuigahama hurriedly returned to her seat, then she waved her hands and bid Miura and the others her goodbye, and grabbed her belongings. She quickly put on her coat, shouldered her backpack and wrapped her muffler around her neck.

"Then, let's go home."

"Yeah..."

While bamboozled by this extremely natural flow of us going home together, our feet made their way towards the classroom's front door.

The door shook violently. Just when I noticed it, the door suddenly made an extremely loud noise and was slid open by force.

I was startled by the loud noise it made. And then I found that the person who appeared behind that door was Isshiki Iroha. It appears that she must have been hastily running all the way here, as she was panting very heavily.

"Thank goodness the both of you are still here..."

After seeing that both of us were still here, she turned flimsy and as if her strength had vanished away. She let out a long, heavy sigh.

"What's wrong?"

"...anyway, will you two please come with me?"

As soon as she finished her words, she quickly turned around.

Yuigahama and I both looked at each other, while wondering 'what happened?'. But after seeing Isshiki's serious expression, we had no choice but to follow her, despite having no idea what was going on.

Isshiki was in a great hurry as her feet were rushing through the hallway. In order to keep up with her, we sped up our pace as well. Reaching the staircase to descend, we were finally able to catch up with her, running side by side. I quickly glanced at her profile.

Although Isshiki noticed my gaze, she still seemed unwilling to explain things as if there was no time for doing it. Instead, she brought her gaze back to the front, with a firm look on her face, and once again hurried her steps even more.

"We are currently in a bad situation."

After slipping out only those words, she kept her mouth shut. A severe look surfaced on her face, hence I presumed that this was an unusually serious matter that cannot be dealt with lightly.

Before I asked for more details, we'd already arrived at the front of a room that seemed to be the place Isshiki intended to reach.

The room was located at the corner of an area where there were also the faculty room, the school office, the principal's office, and so on. Not even once had I entered this room in front of me, but the sign above the door said it's the Guest Room.

Isshiki knocked on the door. And then, without waiting for any response, she briskly opened the door, and walked straight into the room.

I hesitated for a moment, and wondered if I should follow her.

And when the door finally opened, I saw what's inside.

I could see the backs of Hiratsuka-sensei and Yukinoshita, both of whom sat on the sofa near the entrance.

And then, the ones sitting on the kamiza, were the figures of Yukinoshita Haruno... and the mother of the Yukinoshita sisters.^[115]

I wouldn't just say I had 'a premonition of bad signs' after seeing their

presence and their visit here. The word is not really accurate. Rather than calling it 'a premonition of bad signs', it's more 'a conviction that bad things will happen'.

The Yukinoshita mother and sister stared calmly, or should I say detachedly, at Yukinoshita Yukino, who embraced the gaze heavily with her entire body. Maybe it was just my imagination, but she seemed to be bending her back a little bit.

Yukinoshita's mother turned her face to the opened door, and looked at us.

If you'll look at her closely, you will see her beautiful eyes emitting a deep yet soft gaze as if it's going to draw you in, which adds to her gentle smile on her face. Even when she looked at Yukinoshita, I noticed that the temperature of her gaze hadn't changed in the slightest. In reaction to that, I felt a chill that ran through my spine.

When Isshiki met that gaze, she immediately bowed.

"Sorry for keeping you all waiting here. We are the ones who have discussed and decided to hold the prom... Therefore, please let us all join the debate on the matter of the practicality of the event."

Isshiki sounded determined, or should I say, she said it as if she was barking. The loudness of her voice, the tone of her speech, and the gaze from her eyes, were all oozing out hostility. Without hiding her hostility, Isshiki threw a sharp gaze at Yukinoshita's mother.

Then, Yukinoshita's mother let out a troubled laugh.

"Debate is such an overstatement and it's not like that, dear. I came here just to share my suggestions and my views to everyone."

As if caressing a child, she said so with a leisurely, gentle voice. After that, she wore a smile and urged us to sit down. Hiratsuka-sensei also turned around to us, and gave us a nod, as much to say 'just follow along'.

There were two black leather sofas there. The *bottom seat* that was in the

shape of "L" was located across from the three-person *top seat* sofa that both Yukinoshita and Hiratsuka-sensei were sitting on, with two sofas separated by a coffee table in the middle. Obviously, the bottom seat one was where we would be sitting. And naturally, we'd be facing Yukinoshita's mother and Haruno-san.

"...Well then, let us hear your views once more."

Yukinoshita, who didn't even bother to look in our direction ever since we came, broached the subject with a firm tone of voice.

When Yukinoshita's mother heard that, a smile that kind of looked like a bitter one emerged on her face. On the other hand, Haruno-san looked disinterested about this, and just twirled the stir stick in her coffee.

Influenced by the frigid atmosphere radiating from the three people of the Yukinoshita family, the room went completely silent. Perhaps she might have also felt it, so Yukinoshita's mother intentionally put on a meek smile.

"Regarding the prom, there have been concerns that the event should be cancelled. Several parents came to me and had conversations with me after seeing the photos uploaded to the internet. They said the photos don't appear to be quite wholesome... And yes, they seemed to be very worried that it doesn't quite align with what high school students should be expected to do."

Yukinoshita's mother expressed her concerns, while choosing her words cautiously. She then turned her eyes to look at Haruno-san, who sat quietly next to her. Haruno-san sighed annoyingly.

"There are, well, both positive and negative opinions among the alumni."

I, therefore, was able to surmise the reason why Haruno-san came here, based on the words that she said to complement her mother's speech. Apparently, she was brought here as cover fire for Yukinoshita's mother. However, the corner of Haruno-san's mouth was suddenly strained with a provocative smile, and she then added.

"...It's not like there were a lot of negative opinions, though."

"Just because the negative opinions were only by the minority doesn't mean that we could just ignore them! If there are people who dislike it, then we should take some actions that takes it into consideration."

Yukinoshita's mother immediately retorted to Haruno-san. It by no means sounded like a light lecturing - it's better to call it a *castigation*. Her attitude had sternness and harshness to it. However, Haruno-san pretended that she didn't hear those words, closed her eyes, and once again brought her cup of coffee to her mouth.

Yukinoshita watched the exchange between the two with her cold eyes. And perhaps because of that, when she opened her mouth, I felt that her voice that spilled from her mouth had coldly echoed as well.

"...So, why are you the person that came, Mother?"

"Partly because I am a member of the PTA... Also, since your father's companion asked, I cannot treat it lightly... you do understand that, right?"

Her expression was beaming, the tone of her voice was warm, and the way she talked was gentle. She spoke as if she was persuading slowly and patiently. You can say that she acted like she was lecturing a kid, from the way she spoke - a clear contrast to her attitude towards Haruno-san just a while ago.

Yukinoshita cast her eyes down and strongly gripped the hem of her skirt. The mother continued to speak even more gently.

"Of course, I wouldn't mind if you will carry out the event *with moderation and temperance*."

Her thoughtful smile, the way she leisurely spoke with benevolence and grace, and her words that seemed to concede one step back - although all of them are supposed to be extremely polite and thoroughly respectful, still beyond her plain speech, she was trying to make a totally opposite point. And that opposite point got revealed plainly with her words that followed.

"Nevertheless, we've done research regarding the prom, and found problems

such as drinking alcohol and impropriety between the sexes. It's a fact that these things do happen. There are a few people who also think that holding the event in its current state is inappropriate, especially given that the event is also meant to be a thank-you party for the teachers. And besides, if ever any problem occurs, I suppose you people would not be able to bear the responsibility, right?"

"That is why I was telling you! That such problems could be prevented if the PTA and the school cooperate with one another and take actions... Also regarding that, didn't we receive an informal consent from the school already...?"

Yukinoshita suddenly raised her voice for a moment. However, the tone of her voice gradually fell as she continued to speak, and in the end, her voice became sulking and weak. The last sentence that she added even sounded like a murmur. Yukinoshita's gaze fell onto the corner of the floor, and she ground her teeth.

Yukinoshita's mother listened quietly, with her eyes squinted. She waited until Yukinoshita finished her words, and nodded in agreement.

"The PTA also believed that their action regarding that was quite careless. But, wasn't that implicit consent made at the stage of only reading the draft documents that you prepared for them? We reserve the right to defer the definitive decision until we actually see the finalized plan ..."

"That doesn't make sense. We decided to ask for consent from the PTA in advance, because we wanted to make sure that the PTA doesn't reverse its course later. I mean, isn't it the parents' job to discipline their children in order to prevent these problems from happening?"

Isshiki snapped with hostility at Yukinoshita's mother, whose sentence hadn't even finished yet. Yuigahama widened her eyes after seeing Isshiki's gutsy attitude.

"Isshiki!"

"...I'm sorry."

Isshiki also admitted that she had gone too far when Hiratsuka-sensei reproved her. She reluctantly apologized. However, she soon pouted her lips, as if showing that she was still unconvinced. When Haruno-san saw the series of exchanges between the two, she quickly diverted her face and tried to hold her laughter. Of course, the only person who would be laughing in this situation is Haruno-san.

Hiratsuka-sensei quickly lowered her head to apologize on behalf of her student's impoliteness. Yukinoshita's mother shook her head slightly to show that she didn't mind.

"Of course, I believe all the parents have considered various measures to address the matter. It's not like the parents want to completely ban or restrict everything. It's just that we are worried for you, after all, especially about those internet witch hunts that can flare up on the SNS, with individuals being targeted and their reputations damaged... such matters and incidents can happen very easily, right? That is why, this kind of flashy event is more likely to appear as a sensitive topic and attract attention."

Yukinoshita's mother stared at Isshiki, as she spoke. Her eyes appeared to be looking at something so rare and unusual - they shone brightly, and more accurately speaking, they looked as if she was pleased.

"Isshiki-san.. Did I get your name right? As you said, I believe that both the parents and the school should teach the countermeasures against such situations and the proper way to use the internet. The school education is actually working on it. A lot of companies have also incorporated in-house training pertinent to these matters recently, as well."

She spoke passionately, and the tone of her voice sounded like she was absolutely enjoying this. Whenever she explains or comments, she does it vividly in a manner, which is way too similar to her daughter Yukinoshita. I can even say that it was causing me to smile.

However, when her smile suddenly faded into darkness, that semblance immediately shattered.

"... Nevertheless, it's still hard to say it's enough. Even the adults, who are

supposed to be equipped with the knowledge to make good judgements, are still bound to incentivize internet witch hunts sometimes, after all."

Therefore, as juniors, we are more prone to them; and therefore, the prom must not be held - she doesn't have to directly make these points, because the meaning had already reached us following her previous words.

As a matter of fact, the students who have joined the photo shoot did not intend to show any pretension at all - they were just being honest when they uploaded the photos throughout the SNS, not expecting it to cause anxieties among the parents. There are parents who are connected to their kids via LINE, so it is not weird to see that there are parents who would create Instagram accounts just to check on their children who started posting on this other SNS application.^[116] However, it is true that we students weren't consciously aware of these subtleties and being completely thoughtful. In this case, there is a chance that aggressive people, who would be triggered by what they see as unwholesome events, will find out and voice their concerns.

"... Talking about the possibility only brings us to nowhere."

Perhaps Yukinoshita was thinking about the same thing as I was. She spoke bitterly. Precisely right! Taking all bad things that can possibly happen into consideration, and based on those grounds, argue that there's risk in the prom and thus it should be cancelled - this is indeed very idiotic. The reasoning that she used could alternatively be employed to say that "The catered food at the prom might cause food poisoning; because of that we should cancel the prom, too." No matter how much preventive measures we take, nobody could ever guarantee that everything is absolutely safe.

This is, of course, something that Yukinoshita's mother should also understand already.

"But there are negative suggestions, after all. So I believe that there is no need to force yourself to hold the prom. Otherwise, people will talk and point fingers at you behind your back, and ultimately spoil all your hard effort towards graduation and your life afterwards."

So this time, she changed her method of persuasion, and began to appeal to

emotions. She spoke while lowering the ends of her brows and showing a worrisome expression.

"Yes, the graduation party is not only for the sake of the alumni but, but also important for the parents, teachers, and even the local people alike... With regard to all of the past parties up until now, there wasn't any particular dissatisfaction, right?"

Yukinoshita's mother said, and then turned her face to Haruno-san, who was sitting beside her. She tilted her head, as if asking Haruno-san for agreement. Haruno-san, however, nodded once in a cold manner.

Yukinoshita's words were stuck in her throat. A part of the mother's words might have hit her critically, which caused my throat to hurt as well.

It may be easier for people to understand us, if we hold the prom *aiming at addressing dissatisfaction with the past graduation parties* from the very beginning. But given that we began preparing for the prom, aiming at *holding the prom for the sake of itself* from the beginning, it would have been incredibly hard for us now, to force ourselves to appeal to the aforementioned argument.

When I thought about that, Isshiki slowly leaned her body forward.

"Now that you have talked about the alumni, we are future alumni as well. We have every right to suggest anything with regard to the party."

I instinctively let out a sigh, when Isshiki slipped out her skillful sophistry. *Good job, capable Isshiki!* As I gazed intently at her with admiration, Isshiki also glanced in my direction, and let out a "fufu-n" laugh triumphantly. As if she just gained momentum from the situation, Isshiki continued her words.

"In fact, the prom is receiving positive responses from the current students. The views and opinions on the SNS are mostly positive..."

However, she wasn't able to complete her sentence in the end. When Isshiki took her chance to catch her breath, Yukinoshita's mother smiled brightly,

and promptly cut in.

"That may be the case for the SNS. However, it is also important to listen to the suggestions that didn't make their way to the surface. Leaders are the ones that are trusted by everyone, and therefore, undoubtedly should bear such responsibility on their shoulders. You two should all remember that by heart."

She said the last few words to her daughters. The tone and the pitch of her voice didn't change throughout, yet only that aura of the last sentence was different. Haruno-san sneered with her nose, and disinterestedly sighed. Yukinoshita, on the other hand, had only been stiffening her body the whole time.

Now that that the situation had played out like this, I had to revise my perception of her. I remembered that Haruno-san once said 'her mother is scarier than her'. I could feel her point concretely at this moment. This is terrible. We're not making progress at all, at this rate.

She is the type of person who *cannot* be fought with logic and reasoning.

At first glance, she seemed to be listening to our words, with her noddings and a meek smile on her face, making you think that she was paying attention to her opponents' arguments and was down to having a debate with them.

However, if you think that's the case, you are totally wrong. She would ward off your arguments with a smile, for the moment. Yet as soon as she finds out a chink in your armor, she would immediately counter-attack, slashing you with a sword - that's her pattern. If her goal is to argue us down, and then force us to yield, then that actually doesn't sound too bad. However, this person doesn't adhere to that, and instead, she lures us into her trap that she has set for this matter from the very beginning.

She makes no concession on the conclusion of her argument. To achieve that goal, she'd show a downcast expression on her face, and then begin to use her special form of logic that is further enhanced by mixing in emotional appeals.

Yukinoshita's mother had told us, in the beginning, that characterizing this meeting as a debate is an overstatement.

It is, indeed. Because originally, this person didn't have any intention to debate with us. In the first place, she told us beforehand that she leaves no room for a debate.

Surely the points that she made were fraught with contradictions somewhere - there should be flaws in it, but they were perfectly hidden by her meek smile and the gentleness of her voice. Even if we found any flaws, the end result should still stay the same - she would first accept our words with a smile, and then this time, do another strike on us from a different perspective, eventually bringing up the very same conclusion.

If that is the case, then it would not be wise to speak too much here. After all, if she keeps on talking, our chance to win the argument would disappear.

Perhaps Isshiki might have felt the same impending doom as well. She glanced at me. I peeked sideways at her to acknowledge her gaze; there was nothing I could do at the moment other than giving a bitter smile. I know you are counting on me to do something, but I am really sorry. She's a tough enemy to deal with. If I have to tell you the only thing that I could do, it was to divert the blunt of her attack.

"But the school gave us the implicit consent, right? What was their intention then?"

After saying that, I, and then everyone as well, simultaneously looked at Hiratsuka-sensei. Yuigahama and Isshiki's expressions were hinting of faint expectations. Haruno-san thought that this could be interesting, as she seemed to enjoy watching the development of the situation as a bystander. Yukinoshita closed her eyes and waited for Hiratsuka-sensei's response. On the other hand, Yukinoshita's mother's gaze had calmed down from the turbulence from a while ago, and turned into a mild and gentle one, and then she just fixed her eyes at Hiratsuka-sensei.

After she sensed the varied gazes on her, only the corner of Hiratsuka-sensei's lips made a smile, and then she opened her mouth.

"Personally, I don't quite want to jump to the decision of an immediate cancellation of the event. The school also has this tradition of respecting our students' independence and emphasizing their self-regulation. In case the plan that students come up with is in lack of thorough considerations, we should aim at appropriately correcting it, which requires the discussion to keep going and cannot be done without the understanding and cooperation from parents like you. This will be my personal opinion."

A reliable adult as I expected. I'm really grateful to her for her help to end the phony discussion that we were having so far.

To her suggestion of a fresh start, Yukinoshita's mother didn't have any objections and gently nodded.

"I believe I have no doubts in your opinions, Sensei. Very well, I shall pay a visit again. Next time onward, can we discuss this matter with the school as well?"

"I will tell the superiors about it. I will confirm the schedule and let you know soon."

After their business-like exchange, Yukinoshita's mother bowed in courtesy.

"I am sorry for having to trouble you. I'll leave it to you... Haruno, say your greetings to everyone and let's leave."

"Ah, I'll leave after I finish this coffee."

Haruno-san pointed at the cup of her coffee, then absentmindedly smiled, and gently waved her hand, at which Yukinoshita's mother could only sigh unbelievably, as if to imply that she's hopeless and it can't be helped.

"I see. Well then, I'll return now."

After saying that, she quickly stood up. Even though she had sat there for a long time, her kimono didn't get disheveled and her standing pose still looked impressively dignified. With a voice that matched the impression of her appearance, she called her other daughter.

"Yukino."

After being called, Yukinoshita only moved her eyes to look back. Grasping that reaction, Yukinoshita's mother began to speak slowly and gently.

"I am aware that you are trying hard and doing your best. However, do come home a little sooner, alright? There is no need for you to force yourself too hard."

"...Yes, I understand."

With only those words slipping out, Yukinoshita closed her eyes thereafter, to which Yukinoshita's mother made a troubled face. Nevertheless, she soon began walking as if she'd just made up her mind. She slightly bowed to bid her farewell to us, then Hiratsuka-sensei stood up. She probably wanted to see her out. Together they left the guest room.

When the guest room door closed, each of us let out a deep sigh.

Hiratsuka-sensei and Yukinoshita's mother's voices could still be heard through the door. It can be said that they were still telling their few farewells to one another. Being mindful of not letting the two on the other side of the door overhear, Haruno-san whispered in a low voice.

"Haaa, I'm tired. It's really a nuisance that I was told to come here to accompany her, too..."

After saying that, she drank her already-cold coffee with a dissatisfied look, and then made a bitter face. Even Yukinoshita, who was not drinking coffee at the moment, also pressed her lips together, with her throat trembled as if she just swallowed something. That expression made the two look very alike.

However, speaking of looking alike, their mother is indeed the person that they share the most similarities with.

I can feel the similarities between Yukinoshita and Haruno - the fact that they both stand out from the others and their twisted personalities, both of which, of course, came from their mother. That is why I found myself wanting to

probe into it.

"Uhm... she mentioned that she's one of the PTA members; does that mean that she's a chairperson of some kind?"

"No, no. She holds an honorary post director or something that I don't get. The only thing she has is the title, and her work was just to write authorization papers, as far as I know. But not only because our father's work has strong connections in this area, but also because this is both of her daughters' high school, right? So she naturally became the one being asked to come here in person."

I see. So, it's a situation that only the influential people in the local area would run into. To give an example of someone close to me, it's like the director of my father at work, or something along those lines. If any trouble occurs and someone comes to report it to that director, he'll immediately say "I'll go talk to them", even if he wasn't asked to do it. And after that, he would cheerfully make his way to the source of the trouble. Actually, no. In Yukinoshita's mother's case, the reason she was here is that she was asked by the local people, so I guess the situation is a little bit different.

With those thoughts raining upon me, Haruno-san's voice abruptly shifted into a gloomy tone.

"...That's why, that person's intentions and opinions don't matter. Given that she was already asked to do so, she had no choice but to come, and at least say something just out of formality, right?"

Haruno-san said boringly and scoffed with her nose.

However, I couldn't seem to laugh it off like her. That - that stance, somewhere, reminded me of a certain individual who also talks big. Just thinking about it made my chest become painful.

While I was sighing on that matter, the room's door opened. Hiratsuka-sensei returned.

"Oh, man."

With those opening words, Hiratsuka-sensei commented while bitterly laughing at the same time. She brought out the crystal glass ashtray from the cabinet at the corner of this room, stood beside the window and lit up a cigarette.

It appears although in this school smoking is prohibited in principle, this guest room seemed to remain beyond the rules and allow smoking. Well, only those who deserve VIP treatment can make their way to a room like this, and surely there must be regular smokers among those people. In that way, by showing that the room is special and not bound by the rules, the school is able to express its honesty and respect to the guests that way.

In other words, it can't be anything else other than Yukinoshita's mother was being treated as an important guest. Just by looking from that angle, I feel I've clearly seen the stance of the school's side.

Perhaps Yukinoshita, who was present from the very beginning, had felt that the most from the conversation. Yukinoshita - who hadn't changed her pose since a while ago and was still in the very same manner with her back straightened out - asked Hiratsuka-sensei in a somewhat dark and downcast voice.

"...How will the school deal with this?"

"I can't say anything at this point. To be honest, with regard to the photos being uploaded throughout the SNS, I don't ... well, my superiors probably won't see them as problems that much."

After breathing in and puffing out her smoke, Hiratsuka-sensei said that to Yukinoshita with a beaming smile, as if trying to give her some reassurance. However, when she knocked the towering ashes off her cigarette with a huge sound, she continued her words, but this time, in a low voice.

"...it's just that, there are a lot of people reporting various things to us these days, *thankfully*. Sometimes we receive mail and calls such as, "The student's skirt was too short", "Students got wild on the roadside" or "They made fun of me". Each time, we'd answer them, "Thank you for your valuable feedback. We will make sure to bring it up to the Student Guidance

so that they can put it on their agenda.", or the likes. If needed, we'd get the students and do some counseling to them, and then call it a day. However..."

She paused her words for a moment, and after puffing out smoke, Hiratsuka-sensei put on a sullen face.

"Given that the problem has gone this far, it's then magnified and seen as a bigger deal... At this rate, the school has to deal with it by taking actions corresponding to the seriousness of the problem."

The few words she ambiguously mentioned was **taking actions corresponding to the seriousness of the problem**. However, to give those words a concrete meaning, it only leads to one thing, and that is **the cancellation of the prom**.

There are so many cases illustrating these kind of problems that I won't be able to enumerate all of them. For example, a recruiting advertisement was posted at a certain train station by a certain company. It had a very impressive and impactful design, and took a distinctive approach different from those conventional ones, so it went viral on the SNS, receiving thousands of "thumb-ups" and "likes" and created ripple effect at the time. Most people positively reacted and praised for its unique and interesting design. However, only a few days after, the advertisement ended up being voluntarily taken down by that certain company that published it. The reason is that, complaints were filed via mail and phones calls to the company, who eventually had to take it down because it had turned into a liability and a problem inside the company.

Even if there are a lot of positive reactions, when there is a small crowd that criticizes, then proactive measures should be taken to address the issues raised by that crowd, or should I say, *must* be taken into consideration. I guess, this has somewhat become a social norm these days.

Sayings and concepts such as Compliance, Political Correctness and so forth are starting to enter into people's vision. People are getting more aware of the idea that the society functions by people taking thoughtful consideration of each other. The fact itself, that this is taking place, is very pleasing. However, we are still yet in a transition period regarding the adoption of this change.

As a result, society excessively uses words such as ‘inappropriateness’, ‘imprudence’ and ‘unhealthiness’. Moreover, the general public seems to also react excessively as well.

In a way, it could be said that this prom faces a similar dilemma. After all the conversations we’ve had so far, it was sufficient for us to conceptually understand what was going on under the hood.

Now the real problem became, how can we take concrete actions next to combat the status quo.

"Can't the school plead to the parents?"

After giving an implicit consent, yet then the school reversed its course and brought us back to the beginning. The school certainly appeared terrible by taking these series of contradictory actions - I tried to leverage this point and thus brought up my suggestion in an attempt to seize the school’s support for the prom.

And then, Hiratsuka-sensei's gaze fell onto the cigarette she was holding, and then she took a moment to think.

"It's not like there aren't any ways to do the thing that you suggested... if you guys are still planning to hold a prom next year, I think it's better for me *not* to interfere with it this time."

After she snuffed out her cigarette into the ashtray, the glow vanished. Hiratsuka-sensei turned around to look at us. When the smoke disappeared, its strong tar scent began to drift around in the air, stirring up my uneasiness.

I had absolutely no idea what she meant by saying that, so I unconsciously put on a dubious expression.

Soon, Haruno-san spoke in shock.

"...Shizuka-chan, you haven't told them yet??"

"It wasn't formally confirmed yet, so obviously I can't tell them."

"You just weren't able to tell them, right?"

"...Uuuh, well."

Although she was composed just a few minutes ago, right after Haruno-san smacked her with those words, Hiratsuka-sensei clumsily averted her eyes. As if trying to pursue it even further, Haruno-san let out a deep sigh and continued.

"Moreover, since this is a public school after all, just by looking at how long you've been working here, it shouldn't be hard to tell. Last year was already tight for you to stay, so this year you are definitely going away, for sure."[\[117\]](#)

I'm roughly seeing the circumstances, just from the scraps of the conversation. However, I wasn't able to put it into words. The only feeling that I was able to put into understanding was "ah, is that so?" - a feeling that is so surreal and hard to believe.

However, Yuigahama properly put them into concrete words.

"Uhm, does that mean..."

"Well, that story is for later. Let's talk about it next time."

When Yuigahama opened her mouth in a fearful and nervous manner, Hiratsuka-sensei smiled and forcibly cut the conversation, then turned her face to both Yukinoshita and Isshiki.

"So... what are you two going to do?"

Being asked, the two quickly raised their heads. I, who had absentmindedly been thinking, scratched my head in order to force myself to switch my focus over to a new topic.

"What are we going to do, if you ask... we'll first correct the flaws in the plans, and then..."

While Yukinoshita was saying that, she shook her head shortly thereafter. Perhaps she might have realized as well that doing it would be meaningless

or more so, impossible.

If we ever were to change the prom to drop features such as wearing dresses, dancing and holding a flashy party, then the event wouldn't have been called a prom any more. Those who wished to participate in the prom definitely wouldn't have accepted that kind of change, either. Still, if even particular parts were more or less corrected, given that we were already heavily criticized, they wouldn't easily let us go. Fixing A would result in B being flawed, and vice versa. And in the end, we would reach the end of our rope.

"While the discussion continues, I'll think of a way to gain their understanding..."

Yukinoshita murmured those words. Thanks to her pale facial expression and tenuous voice, I was certain that she had mostly lost hope. However, given the current state of affairs, there aren't many more options, indeed. I nodded to that.

"Well, I guess you are right. For now, we should gather the materials needed to persuade them, and after that..."

My words stopped there. Yukinoshita, who was sitting next to me on the sofa, grasped my blazer's sleeve to stop me. The force that she applied to grasp it was pretty weak, but she gripped it so tightly that it formed wrinkles.

"Wait. That is our job... It is what I should do."

"...now is not the right time to fuss over that, right?"

Isshiki also nodded and agreed with my words. Hiratsuka-sensei had been observing us for a while, with a pair of eyes that seem to be watching over us. Yuigahama, who was sitting beside me, didn't say anything favorable nor negative, and just kept silent the whole time. Yukinoshita firmly bit her lips and was at a loss for words. I waited for her reply. However, the voice that pitched in was from a different person.

"...Are you again going to play *the big brother* role here?"

Her merry voice, her teasing tone, and her words that came out with a smile - yet they all coldly and harshly echoed. Yukinoshita Haruno, who was comfortably sitting opposite to us, cast an almost seemingly pitiful gaze at me.

"Huh? What are you talking about?"

Without realizing it, the voice that I let out with was mixed with anger. Even I could tell that the tone of my voice was harsh. However, Haruno-san giggled, as if she found my reaction amusing to her.

"Yukino-chan is saying that she can do it herself, yet you are recklessly lending her a hand. That's not okay. You're not Yukino-chan's big brother, or anything, after all."

I got drawn in by her seemingly joking words, with my voice smothered unexpectedly. I heard Isshiki from my back drawing a faint sigh, so I instinctively lowered my eyes.

"That is... not the case."

The voice may have been frail and shivering, but it was distinctly a denial to Haruno-san's words. Hearing that, I felt as if my back was caressed from behind. I reflexively raised my head, and saw Yuigahama glaring at Haruno-san.

"...Because she is such an important person to all of us. It goes without saying to help her out."

"If you think she's important to you, then I believe you should respect her own volition."

Haruno-san let out a sigh full of irritation.

"If the prom ends up becoming a reality, our mother's recognition of Yukino-chan may more or less be altered. Of course, that's only if Yukino-chan did it with her very own efforts... if you decide to interfere with that, you do realize the consequences, right?"

There was evidently a grudge behind that voice. She scowled at Yuigahama, then at me, with her sharp gaze that looked like it was going to shoot someone dead, and her words stabbing and impaling us.

It was a heavily profound question. In other words, I realized that it's like we're being asked whether we could bear the responsibility of her future and life. Of course, we definitely could not answer that question recklessly and lightly. It's not like we're that young to act without thinking of the consequences. It's not like we are already very mature adults to hold accountable and responsible for everything, either.

That is why, the only thing Yuigahama, Isshiki and I could only do is to shut up.

In this room, the only person who could answer that question was probably Hiratsuka-sensei. But, she didn't say anything. She sent up a curl of her cigarette's smoke and just bitterly smiled and stared at Haruno-san. When Haruno-san noticed that gaze, she quickly loosened her previously tight and serious expression. With a complete reversal, she spoke to us with a tender, gentle voice.

"No matter how much you dearly think of her, it doesn't necessarily mean that it's right to always lend her a hand... That relationship you three have, do you know what it is?"

"Nee-san, stop... I understand."

Yukinoshita wasn't aiming at interrupting her question, but merely answered in a tranquil, calm manner. Facing Yukinoshita's smile that was transparent as crystal, Haruno-san didn't push any further.

Yukinoshita stared at her hands resting on her lap. Soon, with that same posture, she quietly formed her words.

"I want to prove that I can handle things on my own - with my own ability. So,... Hikigaya-kun, I won't be needing your help anymore. I know that this is a very selfish request and I'm sorry for it, but... please. Let me do it this time."

With that being said, she raised her head. The same as her calm and composed voice, her expression was pure and gentle.

But, when our eyes met, hers became wet. Up until now, she had been keeping that slight smile on her face. But now, her lips were quivering, and sorrowfulness was seeping out from her. She gulped slightly, and the voice that came out was trembling.

"Otherwise, I'll soon be ruined... I knew this all along, that I was depending on you. Not only on you, but on Yuigahama-san as well. Although I've always told myself not to rely on others, each time I've always ended up making myself do it."

She talked falteringly, and her voice kept its composure. Yukinoshita only let out those words with a gradually falling pitch.

Yuigahama lowered her eyes, and listened to her. Hiratsuka-sensei was silent with her eyes closed. Isshiki uncomfortably averted her gaze, and her body stiffened. Although Haruno-san faced her with a frigid expression at the beginning, soon she let out a hazy sigh, with a smile formed on her lips.

However, I just couldn't just keep my words shut in my mouth. Even if those empty words didn't mean anything, I just couldn't bring myself to not repudiate it.

"That's, that's wrong. It's absolutely wrong."

As if squeezing out my words, I managed to somehow get them out anyway. However, Yukinoshita slowly shook her head.

"No, it isn't. Because the results have always been the same. Even though every time, I thought that I could do better, in the end, nothing has changed... So, please."

I looked at her damp eyes, heard her fleeting voice that recited those words, and was faced by her vague smile.

At this point, I couldn't bring myself to speak anything further. All I could do

is to let out a sigh.

"Hikki-..."

Yuigahama pulled my sleeve. To respond to her, after letting out a long sigh to suppress my quivering, I was able to nod my head to her. My intention was to tell her "alright, sure", but I had no idea if my voice came out, or if it did, how much of it came out in the end. However, it appeared that it had indeed reached her.

A smile surfaced on Yukinoshita's face. She nodded to me in return, and immediately stood up.

"I'll return to the Student Council Office to review our next step strategy."

After bowing to Hiratsuka-sensei, she started walking her way out. The traces of her footsteps showed no hesitation nor confusion, and without looking back, she headed out of the guest room. Isshiki also stood up flusteredly, also bowed and quickly headed out of the room to catch up with Yukinoshita.

When the two left, Hiratsuka-sensei let out a sigh as if she was finally at ease, then lit up another cigarette.

"Hikigaya, let's talk about this again next time. For now, just go home. You too, Yuigahama and Haruno."

She puffed out the smoke of her cigarette. A faint exhaust was seeping out with her bitter smile when she said that.

"...I'll do that."

When I answered that, I feel like I also made the same face as hers - a really worn out, horrific and painful face.

I didn't bother to put on my coat but just grabbed it, and picked up my bag. I bowed to Haruno-san and stood up from the sofa. If I don't force myself to move, then due to my fatigue and dreariness, I might end up never being able to leave here at all.

Yuigahama was beside me, preparing to go home as well. After turning to face her, I made sure I bid my farewell to her with a voice as gentle as possible - with the best smile I could put on.

"...Then, see you."

"Eh... ah, yep, see you..."

Yuigahama raised her head, and appeared to be surprised for a moment, but she must've quickly noticed my intention, so she swallowed her confusion and replied to me with a smile.

Taking her up on her kindness, I weakly nodded to her in return and left the guest room.

I had no confidence in properly talking to Yuigahama at this moment. It'd be fine if we don't talk at all. But if we forced ourselves to talk and did a terrible job at it, then we might end up saying things that shouldn't have been said or asking questions that shouldn't have been asked, and then regretting later.

I left the school building. Feeling like I'm dragging my weighty legs, I headed towards the bicycle stands. I unlocked the bike with my key, pushed the beat-up bicycle and plodded to the side gate. It's not only that my legs were heavy, but also the bicycle, my body and my mood all felt heavy as well. In addition to that, my shoulders suddenly felt heavy too.

I sensed that someone had pulled me from behind. I looked back, and saw Yukinoshita Haruno, who apparently just ran here in a hurry. She rested her hand on my shoulder, and let out a relieved sigh.

"I managed to catch up with youuuu. See me off while on your way back home."

Haruno-san said that while pretending to wipe her sweat off her forehead. And then, she lined up beside me and started walking along. To be honest, I was completely burnt-out so I had no emotional leeway to resist her.

"Is it okay to part at the train station?"

"Sure... It's such a rare opportunity so I was thinking that I could go home together with Gahama-chan. When I tried to invite her, she was cleverly able to run away. A quick-witted girl, really."

"Normally, people would run away from you in this circumstance, won't they?"

"I won't let most people run away from me, though."

Even though I dryly laughed while making my sarcastic remark, she returned it with a giggle.

As a matter of fact, a half-witted, airheaded guy would get captured like this. You could say that Yuigahama is quick-witted since she was able to perfectly avoid her before getting herself caught. Haruno-san, who appeared to be impressed, mumbled 'hmmmm' quietly.

"She really is a quick-witted girl, indeed. She knows everything, after all. From Yukino-chan's thoughts, to her real intention, eeeeeverything."

I've realized that I just heard something that I couldn't simply ignore. I unknowingly stopped in my tracks and turned my head to Haruno-san. Seeing my reaction, Haruno-san suddenly giggled.

"No, it's not only the 'quick-witted' part of her that's good, but also her looks, personality and her body shape. They are all good too... She really is a **good girl**."

"I sensed a malicious undertone from your words."

There was a strange emphasis on the ending words in that sentence. On top of that, I thought I heard her smirking while saying it, which made me feel that the words from her had other intentions. However, even after I explicitly pointed that out, she showed no sign of shame or embarrassment. Instead, she hopped onto the curbstone, turned her head around, and looked at me.

"Really? Isn't that your ears' problem? You've interpreted it the wrong way."

"...You have a point."

No matter how much I thought about the words that Haruno-san had said a while ago, they still sounded like malice. But still, it is true that I have a pernicious habit of reading behind others' words. That's why, I nodded to Haruno-san's words. After that, as if standing on a balance beam, Haruno-san carefully stepped along the curbstone, and then pointed her finger straight at me.

"Right! Therefore, Hikigaya-kun is a bad boy! No, *you* believe that you're a bad boy... I guess. Because you always think you've made a mistake... like what happened just now."

She chuckled at herself and smiled. She then jumped off from the curbstone.

"And, as for Yukino-chan..."

Starting with those words, suddenly Haruno-san looked up at the glowing, red sky. Her eyes appeared to be burned by the dazzling light, so she gently squinted her eyes.

"...she is an ordinary girl. She likes cute things, likes cats, hates ghosts and high places. She is very troubled about who she truly is. ...An ordinary girl that you can see anywhere."

Haruno-san tilted her head, as if asking "Did you know that?". However, it's not like she put her question into words, so I answered back "I wonder?" by tilting my head similar as she did.

I'm not sure whether Yukinoshita Yukino can be called an ordinary girl. She has good looks, has accomplishments in both schoolwork and sports, among lots of other things. If we begin to discuss her merits that make her stand out from the others, then our conversation would never end. Only Yukinoshita Haruno, a superman-like-perfect-fiend, could describe Yukinoshita Yukino as ordinary. If seen from most people's perspective, her very exceptional existence should look extremely radiating.

At the very least, I personally have never thought of Yukinoshita Yukino as an ordinary girl.

It appears that the super-perfect-fiend wasn't satisfied with my unvoiced answer to her unvoiced question, so she put on a sullen face, then briskly walked towards me, and began to stare at me.

"Yukino-chan is an ordinary girl. ...Well, Gahama-chan is the same, too."

Both Haruno-san and I were across the bicycle's handlebars, and our faces are turned towards each others. She might have forgotten, that I am also an ordinary boy, so being this close to a beautiful once-san is, unsurprisingly, making me incredibly nervous. I felt that my cheeks were reddening, and couldn't help but avert my face. In that moment, Haruno-san said in a murmur.

"...Yet, when the three of you are together, each of you will naturally end up playing each person's corresponding role."

Since my face wasn't facing hers, I couldn't see her expression. Even so, I strongly felt that sympathy and contriteness were straining out from her voice. I was a little surprised by her sad yet gentle voice, so I quickly cast my gaze back onto her. But what I saw was the usual super-perfect-fiend, equipped with her enhanced powered exoskeleton. With a face that was fearfully beautiful, she wore a extremely spiteful smile on her face.

"Alright, then here's my question. What do you call this relationship among you threeee?"

Haruno-san circled to the front of my bicycle, and then put her elbows on the handlebars and the front of the basket. Now both my paths forward and retreat backwards were blocked. It's like she was telling me that she wouldn't let me go home until I answered her question. Her upturned eyes stared at me.

"...A good kid, a bad kid and an ordinary kid. The Imokin Trio?"[\[118\]](#)

"Buuu, wrong. I'm talking about the relationship among you three."

I had, at least, answered her question, even though it wasn't correct. Yet Haruno-san didn't let me go, nor was she willing to teach me the correct

answer... If I don't give the correct answer, I won't be able to go home, huh. Or should I say, I won't be able to be liberalized, if I don't give her the answer that she wishes to hear. Or, was she possibly repeating the same question from the guest room?

With the hint that the answer should sound like something that Haruno-san favors, then it shouldn't be so difficult to give one.

The real problem is, that it would be tough to say it out loud. That is why, it took me a good amount of time until I finished preparing myself for it. Yet during that time, Haruno-san's and my eyes had been meeting, making it even more formidable for me to speak. Thanks to that, when the time finally came for me to speak, I sneakily averted my face and ended up raising my voice.

".....L-love triangle, or something."

Afterwards, Haruno-san was stupefied. She slightly opened her mouth, 'Huh?' and appeared to be thinking hard. After finally assessing the situation, she abruptly gushed out a chuckle, and soon, she burst out laughing.

"Ahahaha! So that's what you are thinking! Puh, and isn't it hilarious that you're saying that yourself? Ahaha! Ah, damn, this is totally punching my stomach and making my sides convulse! Ow, ow, ow, ahah!"

"You're laughing way too much..."

Haruno-san let her hands go from the bicycle, and she was still bearing the ache of her stomach, and was still laughing. Both my self-esteem and self-consciousness were intensely blunted, so I thought I should just outright go home now. But before that, I must at least ask her.

"Uhm, so what is the correct answer?"

"Eh? Correct answer? Ah, the correct answer, right... The correct answer is..."

After wiping the tears surfacing from the corners of her eyes, Haruno-san

waved her hand at me, beckoning me to come in her direction. She put her hand vertically against her mouth, as if telling me to come forward and give her my ear, I guess. Wondering that maybe it's some secret that she had to hide under cover, I slowly brought my body forward. And then, Haruno-san's face came near as well. A sweet smell glided into my nostrils, just like the one from a flower's nectar. Mixed with her smile, her tender breath caressed my cheeks.

It tickled me, so I instinctively turned my face away. However, her other hand had already touched my jaw, as if turning my gaze away would be unforgivable. Now, it's impossible for me to turn my face away, or to dash away from her. She then brought her seductive lips near my ears, and recited the words.

"It's called codependency."

She whispered those words that had echoed coldly. It felt more real than any kind of genuine things.

I already had a faint notion of what the word means. I've read about it in a book somewhere, that explains it as *a state in which one and another particular person both depend on his/her relationship with the other, and the addiction to the feeling of being imprisoned in such relationship*.

"I had specifically told you before, that it's not *trust*."

Haruno-san merrily giggled, with that smile impurely warped. She continued further.

"It feels good when that girl relies on you, right?"

Her charming voice entered my earlobes, causing my skull to go numb. Thanks to that, I was able to clearly remember - that the book's description of the word had a continuation. The reason why codependency happens is not only because of the person who depends on the other person, but also because of this other person who is depended upon. Accordingly, the other person was finding the meaning of his life and existence in being needed, and thereby obtaining a sense of satisfaction and assurance.

When the meaning of the words began to contextualize and connect to real-life experience, I sensed that my feet were about to quiver.

It was pointed out many times - that I had been spoiling others without noticing it, that I looked happy when being relied upon. Yet each time, I always pretended not to know it, and then made excuses like 'it's because I have an aura of being a big brother', or 'it's my job to do it so it can't be helped'.

With my sense of shame and self-hatred multiplying, I felt like vomiting on the spot. How ugly and shameless! While pretending to be distant and aloof, if I were asked, I wouldn't refuse to help, and in addition, I even found great pleasure from it, treating it as an boost to the meaning of my existence, etc - how can you possibly be even more stupid and numb than that! Learning the pleasure gained from being relied upon, I then get thirsty and begin to desire it even more. Whenever I am not able to get what I desired, I would then fake my feeling with a slice of loneliness on my face. That filthy personality of mine, is indeed extremely hideous and disgusting.

Above all, that is just me criticizing myself. I felt deeply disgusted by the fact that I'm telling excuses to my own self. I sensed that the lower part of my ear was itching, and the inside of my mouth was overflowing with saliva. I was somehow able to send it down my throat, and violently let out a wild breath.

Yes, indeed the relationship between Yukinoshita and me is without a doubt codependency. Even setting aside whether or not Yukinoshita depends on me, when I reflected on my current behavior versus the one of my past self, the one right now definitely seemed very morbid. If I were to do a check-up of a list of codependency symptoms, I can guess a lot of items would have been marked as checked.

Haruno-san suddenly put on a mocking smile, then quickly went on ahead. With my heavy steps trying to catch up to her, we eventually reached the park side's trail located between the school and the train station. Looking up at the dreary street's trees, whose buds, leaves and flowers weren't there yet, Haruno-san muttered.

"But that codependency is over. Yukino-chan will safely stand on her own

feet, and slightly move towards becoming an adult."

Her triumphantly proud way of speaking, the tone of her voice that was having fun, and then her melancholic profile when she spoke about her sister, all looked like a déjà vu scene. She had said a similar thing on that night, which was slightly colder than now.

Just like now, she was also walking a few steps ahead of me then, she had surely said it at that time.

I clearly remembered the words that she had mentioned back then. When I accidentally remembered her words, I would overlook them and treated them as some kind of prank to me, as if I'm ignoring them for someone else's good. But ultimately, I couldn't forget them.

The sun faded, and the city was enveloped with the evening scene. Before I realized it, the trail had already ended, and we were approaching the main street in front of the train station. In the twilight, the front of the station was filled with people hurrying home during the rush hour, so it was noisy and lively. [\[119\]](#)

"I'm fine here. See ya'."

While saying that, Haruno-san lightly waved her hand, and gallantly walked away.

"Uhm..."

Only looking at her feet, I called and stopped Haruno-san with my husky voice.

Taking another step forward, Haruno-san turned her face back to me. Tilting her head with her bright smile, she asked for the continuation of my sentence without putting it into words.

Her eyes and expression were awfully gentle, rendering me breathless for a moment.

"That girl... what would she give up, in order for her to become an adult?"

That smile that looked exactly like hers, silently crooked into a melancholic one.

"...Just like me, many kinds of things."

Even though she didn't tell me anything specific, she answered it so clearly that there is no need for it to be said further. With only that answer, Yukinoshita Haruno disappeared into the crowd.

Chapter 7: Despite knowing that I'll regret that decision

On the day when the morning was soaked by the rain of the four-warm-days, I spent the day normally, in sharp contrast to the turbulent previous days. [\[120\]](#)

After classes when dozing allured me, I could hear the sound of hurried footsteps approaching me, while I yawned and began to prepare myself to go home. As if repeating the habit from previous days, Yuigahama patted my shoulder.

“Hikki~ Let’s walk home together~.”

A sigh escaped my mouth, after remembering what happened the other day on my way back home from the guest room. Yuigahama tilted her head like an owl as if asking “You won’t come?”. I quickly sensed that her attitude was her way of being considerate towards me.

“Yea. Well, Let’s go then.”

I decided to respond toward that attitude by stretching vigorously like a cat and slowly standing up.

After leaving school, we continued our way toward the station. Our route home today had coincided thanks to the morning rain. Yuigahama spoke to me about all kinds of things as she shook her umbrella while in a good mood.

“Ah, well then, remember what we said about the home made cake? My mom said that you could come to our home and do it there. In fact, my mom was probably the one who was more excited than I was, so much so that I felt a little embarrassed about it...”

“That really makes it uncomfortable to go... Having heard the extra second half of your sentence, made it even more uncomfortable for me to go...”

Yuigahama forced a troubled smile after hearing what I had said, after which she slid her hand into one of her pockets and grabbed her cell phone.

“Hmm~ well, Hikki-, if we go to your house, Komachi-chan will find out, after all.”

Yuigahama lowered her gaze toward her cell phone. “Eh?” Yuigahama moaned, and then immediately stop walking.

“It looks like the prom planning seems to be going pretty badly.”

Having said that, Yuigahama showed me her phone. On the screen was the LINE application. I assumed that the interface showed a LINE group chat. The heading title read “Service Club”, I had noticed the names of “Yukinoshita Yukino” and “IroIroIrohasu”. There were too many punchlines to comment on in that regard, but all that desire disappeared after reading that last message.

“The school decided to cancel the prom? What do they mean? What happened to the negotiations?”

“Should I ask them through LINE?”

“No, it’s fine. It’s much faster to talk about this with those superiors who are responsible for this directly. I’ll make a call.”

I turned my back at Yuigahama after declaring that, and began to distance myself a few steps from her. As I waited for my call to connect, I looked at Yuigahama out the corner of my eye. I could see her stern face as she read the conversation through LINE, and she would occasionally turn to worriedly look at me as well.

After impatiently hearing the call tone for a while, I could hear Hiratsuka-sensei sigh through the cell phone speaker.

“What happened to the prom?”

I threw my words out before Hiratsuka-sensei could speak, to which I could hear her voice after she sighed for a long time, as if she had grown tired of all this.

“I’ll explain it to you another day. Right now we’re trying to deal with the problem. Later, when things have calmed down...”

“Wait, how many days do you think we’ll lose if we do that? We won’t be able to take things back if we wait so long.”

“But there’s nothing to take back. Besides, do you intend to help with the prom now?”

“A-ah, no... The schedule would be problematic if they say afterwards that they are allowing us to hold the prom again.”

“Well, I wonder about that. I don’t think that’s impossible, though.”

Her voice had a firm determination. I attempted to deny her immediately in my mind.

As demonstrated the other day when being cornered, Isshiki Iroha wouldn’t easily give up. Above all, Yukinoshita Yukino also wouldn’t easily give up on the wish that she finally managed to bring up. I wouldn’t let her do it.

Perhaps sensing the irritation mixed in with my sigh, Hiratsuka-sensei seemed to have given up, and said.

“I guess I can’t hide it from you... We haven’t told you that the suspension of the prom is at the request of Yukinoshita. Try to digest that. Having this in mind, I’ll ask you again, do you still have any reasons to help with the prom?”

As soon as I heard that, the words that I had been thinking of had all but disappeared. I believed the concept of time had also disappeared from my mind at that instant.

When I heard Hiratsuka-sensei call me ‘hello, hello?’ through my cell phone,

I realized that I had completely blanked out for a while.

“I don’t know what you’re thinking, if you stay quiet during a phone call. It’s a bad habit of yours. Put it concretely into words... I’ll wait for you.”

After hearing Hiratsuka-sensei’s soothing words that she slowly spoke out, I could finally grasp the situation. A reason. A reason. A reason.

“The reason is, well, not only are we in the same club, but also in the same boat.”

I had spoken hastily as I looked for words to say, but I couldn’t hear any kind of reaction during the phone call.

I couldn’t hear anything but breathing from the other side. That reaction had me irritated. Hiratsuka-sensei, you’re supposed to know me already!

“I have no way of putting it into words. It’s something important, that’s why I can’t say it. I need to think it over, follow the right steps, try not to make mistakes, and make sure that... Sensei, it’s something that you’d do as well, right?”

Didn’t you also try *not* to tell us that you’d be leaving your post? Wasn’t that not also important? - I intended to say that to her, yet I chose to bite my teeth tightly as to avoid saying it at all costs. Nevertheless, I could feel that my words had already slipped away.

“Hikigaya, I’m sorry. Despite all that, I’ll keep waiting for you... That’s why, just say it to me.”

It was the first time I had heard sensei asking for forgiveness with such sad voice and in such kind words.

All the reasons had disappeared since the moment she revealed that to me. The only excuses that I could come up with at the moment, were either related to my job, the club activity, or something about Komachi. For that reason, no matter how hard I tried to phrase my answer in different ways or using different words, I realized that it all eventually came down to these

excuses.

For that reason, it didn't matter how I tried to say it during the call, my mouth only changed into different shapes, without being able to form any words.

The only thing that remained for me to use, was the relationship between us. It was extraordinarily easy to frame it as the reason, since it had been a codependent one after all. I could easily say that 'I was able to confirm the meaning of my existence by having her depend on me'. I could easily convince myself with that. However, that wasn't the real answer. The codependency was only the plain structure of our relationship. It wasn't our feelings. I could probably use it as an excuse, but it couldn't be the real reason.

After thinking to such extreme and digging up everything I could think of, I felt that the only thing left in my heart was this feeling of regret.

However, that was something I did not want to say. It was the most pathetic reason, after all. But on the other hand, this sensei wouldn't let me move forward, if I didn't answer her. I knew that she was doing this to me in order to let myself give some excuses in this way.

Therefore, holding my forehead and giving a huge sigh, I decided to say it in a low voice so she would understand that I was reluctant to say it.

"It's because, I made a promise once, that I would help her one day."

To say that I would help her, and using that reason so casually as if doing it because she asked me to. That excuse in the form of a cliché was totally irrational and boring, and it made me feel incredibly disgusting.

"That's fine... I'll make some time, so come immediately."

After saying it in a pleased, satisfactory manner, Hiratsuka-sensei cut the call unilaterally. I put my phone away, and returned to Yuigahama, who had been keeping some distance away from me for a while. Yuigahama gestured with her eyes, as if asking *how did it go?*

“Sorry to make you wait... I’m going to Hiratsuka-sensei’s place now.”

After apologizing to her briefly, I decided to tell her what I planned to do for now. After that, Yuigahama blinked her eyes.

“Ah, I see. What are you going for?”

“First to understand what’s happened. To be honest, since I have no idea what happened, I can’t really do anything else otherwise.”

Yuigahama broke into a smile after hearing my unreliable, hopeless answer.

“I see. But if Hikki is the one that goes, it looks like those things will somehow get resolved.”

Yuigahama emphatically nodded her head a couple times to reaffirm my words. I could see a bright drop run down her face, as she continued to do so. The moment I saw that, I swallowed my breath. Perhaps noticing how surprised and dumbfounded I looked, Yuigahama also began to notice her tears, and immediately wiped them off with her fingers.

“Eh, ah, tears began to come out when I just started to feel relieved. Ah, that was surprising~”

Yuigahama made a long sigh, rubbed her hands and pressed her palms together. Since she said it as if it was taken for granted and it all happened naturally, I got a hold of myself, regained my composure and began to speak.

“No, I’m the one who was surprised... Are you alright? Let’s go to your house first.”

“Eh? Ah, I’m fine, I’m fine! I think this is rather normal for a girl.”

Yuigahama pulled the sleeves of her cardigan out, and wiped her eyes. She smiled in embarrassment, and began to play with her hair bun.

“Ah~ It’s because there were so many things I didn’t understand... I really felt relieved at being able to understand at least one thing now. In fact, I think I’m really fine now.”

Certainly the expression on her face had been very serious when she was browsing LINE. It might have been a result that naturally comes after being so stressed, and then relieved. As I watched her closely, Yuigahama's lips formed a smile,

“You exaggerated, Hikki. It's not a problem, you can go now. I'll be watching through LINE when I arrive home, so let me know if anything happens.”

Yuigahama expressed her intentions of returning home, as she adjusted her backpack and waved her cellphone.

“Ah, okay. I really appreciate it. I'll be going then. See you tomorrow. Be careful on your way back.”

“It's not a problem, this is very much my neighborhood.”

Yuigahama waved her hand lightly after saying that. I also started to walk slowly, as if pacing myself to the rhythm of her hand waving through the air.

After taking a few steps, I turned my head back, since I was still a little bit worried, but then I could no longer see Yuigahama at that place.

I gave a huge sigh, and began to run with all my strength.

(Illustration P356-357: Yuigahama wiping her tears of and Hikigaya turning back.)



Interlude

It's a good thing that my tears stopped at that moment.

It really surprised me that they suddenly began to appear out of nowhere. I was a bit careless. Good thing I was able to fool him and cover that up well.

Good thing that I was able to hide it so quickly. Good thing that he left so quickly. Good thing that he didn't come back to find me immediately.

He wouldn't be able to move from there, if I started to cry, after all.

That's why, it's a good thing that my tears had stopped.

Good thing that I didn't end up looking like a pitiful girl in front of him. He would help me again if he saw me that way. He is my hero after all.

If my friends had any troubles or worry, he would definitely go help them. He is my hero, after all.

He had always been my hero from the very beginning, after all.

He had already saved me before, after all.

It's because my "one day" had already passed.

It's because of that, he no longer needed to continue being my hero. I just wanted him to stay by my side.

It's because I knew that he was my hero, that I'm fine with feeling hurt.

I couldn't tell him 'Don't go'.

I couldn't ask him 'Why do you want to help her?'

I didn't want to say to him 'Please don't be kind to her any more.'

I understand precisely what she was thinking and what she had in mind, and yet I couldn't give up, or give in, or deny things like she did.

These are things that are so simple to do, yet I couldn't do any of them.

I couldn't just determine that 'it's all her fault; it's all her to blame'.

I depend on her, just like how she depends on him, after all.

I am the one who pushed everything over to her, after all.

For that reason, I should be feeling fine by now. But why? My tears won't stop.

It would've been nice, if my tears hadn't stopped at that moment.









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10th Anniversary
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Afterword

Translation Notes

1. » Refers to Shinnosuke Ikehata, Kiyoko Suizenji and Maki Carrousel, no idea how they are related to the sentence.
2. » Pun on Yukino's name: Yukino-shita, Naname-shita – means “slightly below.” Also, the phrase of “nanameshita” is used in the comical expression of when Yukino said that Hachiman betrays people's expectations.
3. » Hachiman misunderstanding Yukinoshita. Waste of effort = 骨折り損, and bone breaking = 骨折り.
4. » Reference to light novel Danmachi, AKA *Is It Wrong to Try to Pick Up Girls in a Dungeon?*
5. » Edo period poet who wrote "such stillness / the cries of cicadas / sink into the rocks."
6. » Criminal in manga *JoJo's Bizarre Adventure* who was made into a rock statue.
7. » Manga artist who has created many original series
8. » Kunumi is the H2 protagonist and Tatsuya is the Touch protagonist. Manga created by Mitsuru Adachi.
9. » Japanese female pop duo who sang single *Matsu Wa* (I'll Wait).
10. » Japanese singer Matsutoya Yumi AKA Arai Yumi who sang single *Machibuse* (Ambush).
11. » From Yu-Gi-Oh manga, the Reasoning card and Five Star Cards needing tribute to summon.
12. » Sowa Tobacco - Frank Sowa invented method of coating tobacco leaves with gel made of slurry of tobacco, to increase strength and toughness, and give flavor of higher quality strong tobacco.
13. » Sunday morning TV talk show
14. » Saturday morning TV travel show
15. » Yumekawa Yui's line from Idol Pripara. Original phrase was: やる気元気寝起き！
16. » A reference to Seikima-II's song "Rou Ningyou no Yakata."
17. » Reference to the song "Matsu wa," which apparently was sung both by Aming and Yuming. It tells a story of someone who will wait for their beloved eternally, no matter what that person thinks of them. The lyrics "pretending to be cute" is included in the song.

18. » Hoshi Hyuuma is the protagonist of Hoshi no Kyojin. Hachiman, just how old are you...?
19. » Marinpia is a shopping mall in Chiba. Next to Marinpia is Aeon, a shopping mall as well.
20. » Jusco, a supermarket established by the Aeon Group.
21. » Japanese tongue twister.
22. » Hirai Ken is a famous singer in Japan
23. » Hikaru Genji is a fictional character who raised a young girl to become his wife. The reference for Columbus is from the song “Paradise Ginga,” which is sung by the idol group called Hikaru Genji as well.
24. » Watari pointing out a literal Japanese translation of what he wrote into English. 忍びない: Shinobi (Ninja) Nai (No/none)
25. » Yanmama: Young mother, sometimes a delinquent.
26. » Komachi made a pun between a similar sounding phrase and a place in Japan. Her lines were: 「うん、暇つぶしに考えてたら……」and 「ひつまぶしに行きついたよ」. The pun is between 暇つぶし (Himatsubushi – killing time) and ひつまぶし (Hitsumabushi – an Unagi restaurant).
27. » "Hyuu!" (ヒューツ) is the catchphrase of the character Cobra, the protagonist of Space Cobra. It appears that he often expresses this phrase as much as how Naruto often puts "-dattebayo!" by the end of his sentences.
28. » Reference to Tamamo no Mae (玉藻の前) from Fate/Grand Order, she shouts “mikoon!” when she attacks.
29. » Naruto’s catchphrase.
30. » A reference to the Sappari fairy from the Mahoujin Guruguru series. When the Sappari fairy flutters about over a person, that person starts saying, "haa... I don't know, I don't know!"
31. » Kojuuto (小姑) means sister-in-law in Japanese.
32. » This is a Japanese meme which literally means: “I’ll revert back to being a child because I want to be spoiled by a young woman.” It’s difficult to word (バブミを感じてオギャる).
33. » ‘A two-stage attack to close the gaps’, or ‘隙を生じぬ二段構え’ in Japanese, is a line that comes from [Rurouni Kenshin](#).
34. » Reference to Teasing Master Takagi-san, a animanga series by Yamamoto Souichirou.
35. » “16 shots per second”, or 十六連射, is a reference to Takahashi Meijin. You can read about his anecdotes [here](#).

36. » ‘Ganbaru-zoi/I’ll do my best’ is a catchphrase by Suzukaze Aoba, a character from animanga series New Game. The whole catchphrase is 今日も一日がんばるぞい/I shall do my best for the day as well!
37. » Refers to the manga series 逃げるは恥だが役に立つ, which literally translated to the aforementioned sentence, but is better known as ‘The Full-Time Wife Escapist’ or ‘We Married as a Job’ in the English speaking community. It was later adapted into a TV drama starring Aragaki Yui and Hoshino Gen.
38. » Refers to Inoue Yuusuke, one of the Japanese owarai duo [NON STYLE](#). The incident happened in Dec 2016, but the court had ruled that it would not proceed with his prosecution. The duo resumed their activity in March 2017.
39. » Reference to a famous catchphrase from Sakigake!! Otokojuku. [Pixiv Encyclopedia](#).
40. » From Wikipedia - A kaishakunin/介錯人 is an appointed second whose duty is to behead one who has performed seppuku, the Japanese ritual suicide, at the moment of agony. The role played by the kaishakunin is called kaishaku.
41. » Japanese people have been taught from very young to follow various rules when there’s an emergency, such as an earthquake. The aforementioned three-phrase rule is the best known one: 押さない、駆けない、喋らない.
42. » A popular American comic strip by Charles M. Schulz, Peanuts, has a character Linus van Pelt, who is often seen carrying a security blanket. Incidentally, Chiba is the largest producer of peanuts and hence is nationwide famous for its peanuts.
43. » In the original text, Hachiman used a Japanese term meaning ‘bed sheet’; whereas Yuigahama used the foreign loanword ‘blanket’ as is.
44. » Half tatami mat is about 0.8m², or 8.6 sq ft.
45. » A reference to Idolmaster Million Live! Theater Days. In the game, when a conversation is triggered between the player and the characters, and if the player doesn’t act by picking a response within a certain period of time, the player would get a ‘Bad Communication’ grade.
46. » Of course, who could ever forget about the Yamazaki Spring Bread Festival. White dishes galore. You must have gone there at least once. Here’s their [2019 campaign page](#).
47. » Sneaking in someone’s room to do morning pranks is a classic thing to

do in Japanese entertainment TV programmes in Japan.

48. » 'Rock and uproar', or どったんばったん大騒ぎ, comes from the opening theme of Kemono Friends.
49. » This is a line from a Werther's Original commercial that I must have watched many years ago, dubbed in Japanese. If anyone else wants to relive their childhood, here you go. [US English version](#), the [Japanese dubbed version](#). The line can be heard towards the end of the commercial. Here I use the line from the original English version and hope that it rings a bell to you.
50. » HouRenSou is a Japanese abbreviation for Reporting, Contacting, and Consulting.
51. » Yui Yumekawa is a character from Idol Time PriPara. The anime was aired in April 2017.
52. » Another Idol Time PriPara reference. The main heroine Laala Manaka makes this lasting impression. So I had to use her catchphrase Kashikoma! (Capisce!) somehow.
53. » A reference to the main band of the series K-ON!, Ho-kago Tea Time. You are disqualified if you don't get this reference.
54. » This sentence is a (mis)quote from the Japanese-dubbed version of [Commando \(1985\)](#) and the [original clip](#).
55. » Apologems after servers go down for maintenance is a Fate/Grand Order game reference. Apparently WW is being very salty in that regard haha. You should understand what I'm talking about if you play the game, at least if you play on the Japanese server.
56. » Another Kemono Friends reference. It was taken from the short clips inserted in [commercial breaks](#). You can refer to at around 16 seconds in, where the exposition on Serval, the main mascot of the Kemono Friends Franchise, is not-so-confidently narrated by the caretaker Shinzaki-oniisan.
57. » Respectively referring to Columbia Pictures, MGM Leo the Lion, 20th Century Fox, and Toei intro logo. You are probably familiar with the first three, but the last one looks like [this](#).
58. » Peach is Momo in Japanese. Cherry is Sakuranbou in Japanese. The original sentence in Japanese reads like a tongue twister - すもももも、すもももももさくらんぼう/Sumomo mo momo, Sumomo mo Momo mo Sakuranbou.
59. » 'Disoriented' reads さくらん/Sakuran in Japanese, which makes it sound

like Cherry. It's a pun.

60. » MBV-04-G Temjin is a robot featured in Cyber Troopers Virtual-On: Operation Moongate. The ending of 'Limousine' sounds similar to that of 'Temjin' in Japanese.
61. » Juicy! Party! Yeah! is voice actress Takahashi Chiaki's signature greeting phrase.
62. » Ronin/浪人 refers to those third year high school students who fail the college entrance exam and thus have to stay in high school for another year. Special Student Discount/学割 refers to price discounts that are only offered to students, such as cell phone plans, monthly train passes and restaurant coupons. Her argument is weak because most of these benefits are also applicable to college students.
63. » Kushiya Monogatari is a restaurant chain in Japan that sells various kinds of food hooked in skewers. Typically the foods on skewers are deep-fried, which are called Kushi-age.
64. » Kushi-age Discussion, or Kushiage Katari in Japanese, sounds a little bit similar to Uchiage Hanabi, which is the Japanese title for Shinbou's movie Fireworks. The full title of the movie is "Fireworks, Should We See It from the Side or the Bottom?"
65. » 'Numbered games' refers to big game franchises that have numbers in their titles, such as Monster Hunter and Sakura Wars.
66. » Neta Green Green by The New Christy Minstrels. The sound of circling one's waist in Japanese is somehow close to Green in its spelling.
67. » 'the happiness and sadness of living in this world' comes from the Japanese version of the 'Green Green' lyrics.
68. » "Eh? Who did you hear from that I hadn't been sleeping~? Who gave you that info~?" the reference comes from Jigoku No Misawa's manga [here](#).
69. » 'Let's have a dual bearing the rules in mind!'. or ルールを守って楽しくデュエル in Japanese, is a catchphrase from Yu-Gi-Oh DM that serves as an eyecatch before the opening theme is played.
70. » Patrasche is a reference to [A Dog Of Flanders](#).
71. » Kiss and warn differ only by one character in Japanese.
72. » "A Century on Film" or 映像の世紀 was a documentary that was compiled commemorating 50 years after the end of World War II, and 70 years after the beginning of NHK's broadcasting service and 100

years since the invention of film, to video. In that sense it was a very special documentary program for Japan. Apparently it was so big that they did a joint programming with the American broadcasting network ABC as well. You can visit the [NHK page](#) where there is a 2006 remake

73. » Hey Watari, who are you actually referring to here?”
74. » He is probably referring to when someone is speaking about their “specialty”, usually an obscure or unusual hobby. For example, Otaku ppl largely give people the impression of being very shy and introverted, yet when it comes to anime they suddenly become rather talkative.
75. » Both ‘Guilty pleasure’, or 背徳感, and ‘Uplifting feeling, or 高揚感, might be references that come from Sound! Euphonium.
76. » Somehow in this paragraph he talks like Tobe, with a bunch of ‘crap’s mixing in his monologues.
77. » Judging from the original text, they seem to be talking about Dragon Quest VII. WW might have already spoiled shit on readers’ face...
Oops, did I just spoil it for you guys? ;)
78. » NHK Taiga Drama is a saga drama series on Japanese history, mostly on samurais and shoguns.
79. » Apart from referring to a masterless samurai, ronin also refers to high school students who fail their college entrance exams and have to retake the exam next year.
80. » He makes reference to a short poem written by [Sugawara Michizane](#), that more or less translates to: If the first wind of spring has already blown, continue to give us beautiful flowers again, oh plum blossoms, even if you don’t find your master, don’t forget to make the flowers bloom throughout spring.”
81. » “The plum blossoms rose ... sakura flowers hadn’t yet.”, or 梅は咲いたか 桜はまだかいな, was an Edo period Hauta and was adopted into a song by Metis in 2007. As a song that embodies ‘passing the exam’, it is very popular among students who took or are about to take important entrance exams.
82. » ‘it’s okay, don’t worry’, or ‘平気、へっちゃら’, comes from Lilka Eleniak from [WILD ARMS 2nd IGNITION](#)
83. » Here’s my [gift](#) for the readers.
84. » よかった not only can mean ‘glad’, but can also imply ‘feeling relieved’.
85. » [Tatsuya Fujiwara](#) is a famous Japanese actor, well known for his over

the top performances; crying/making a fool of himself. Amongst his main roles he has played as Light Yagami from death note in a live action film. Here's a video of a Japanese entertainment show where they do a mock segment of his acting. If you want an idea of how his [screaming sounds](#).

86. » The phrase used in Japanese is む、麦わらぁ… The variation of it is a reference to [Luffy's line](#) from One Piece.
87. » Sakura blooms, or サクラサク, implies that the student has passed the exam. If the student fails the exam, the phrase would be Sakura falls, or サクラチル. Back in 1950s, students who live in rural cities in Japan would ask their friends who live close to the universities to send their exam results via telegraph. These two succinct phrases were, and still are, widely used to convey the message.
88. » On the vending machines in Japan, hot beverages are usually labeled waaaarm~/あったか~い, or coooold~/冷た~い.
89. » Zenzenzense is the opening theme of Your Name. 'A Sister is All You Need' is a GAGAGA light novel series written by Hirasaka Yomi and was adapted into a TV animation series in Fall 2017.
90. » A reference to Yokoyama Mitsuteru's manga Sangokushi.
91. » Hou-Ren-Sou, which plainly means Spinach, is an abbreviated business term for Report (Hou-koku/報告), Contact (Ren-raku/連絡), and Discussion (Sou-dan/相談).
92. » 'Let's rock and uproar!/みんなでどったんぼったん大騒ぎ' comes from 'Welcome to Japari Park', the opening theme of Animal Friends.
93. » "Ponkotsu", a "junk car" is an anime trope of a seemingly perfect girl with hidden flaws.
94. » Refers to Kamen Rider Black RX.
95. » You can take a look at an example of a schedule table to track the production of a TV anime [here](#).
96. » 'We won! Gahaha!/勝ったな! ガハハ!' is a famous catchphrase by Karasuma Chitose from Girlish Number, which is also screenplayed by Watari Wataru.
97. » Casual mood is a way of speech that Japanese people use to talk to usually close friends of the similar ages. Also Watari, I'm very unhappy about the implication of her revelation here.
98. » Refers to Tuxedo Mask from Sailor Moon.
99. » Originally 薄幸の美人, or Unfortunate Woman, used to describe a

beautiful woman who unfortunately possesses a tragic life.

- 00. » A bishounen is a “beautiful youth boy” whose androgynous attractiveness transcends gender or sexual orientation.
- 01. » Reference to Madonna of the Corolla/花冠のマドンナ, a manga by Saito Chiho that was published on Shougaku-kan *Shoujo Comic* back in the mid-90s.
- 02. » HAHAAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA.
- 03. » I think cheek-time is Japanglish for slow-dance... It’s the time where the boys and girls pair up and dance to a slow-tempo music in a dancing party.
- 04. » A reference to Welcome to the Ballroom, a manga and TV anime series by Takeuchi Tomo.
- 05. » LINE feed is an instagram-like timeline feature on LINE.
- 06. » What’s a [trackball mouse](#)?
- 07. » In Tobe’s tone.
- 08. » Kachidoki is a station along Toei Oedo Line in Tokyo. LDK is an apartment which consists of living, dining and kitchen or in short, LDK.
- 09. » Kaguya-sama is a animanga series by Akasaka Aka. Furniture store is ‘Kaguya-san’ in Japanese and it’s intended to be a pun....
- 10. » Urayasu is a small city that sits right between Chiba and Tokyo.
- 11. » ‘With a reason, become an idol!’, or ‘理由(わけ)あって！、アイドル！’ is a catchphrase from THE iDOLM@STER: SideM franchise. Supposedly, if Hachiman becomes an idol, he’d be like those SideM guys...
- 12. » Hip/おしゃれ - This is actually a slang in Japan. It is an ironic way to say ‘stylish’. I somehow couldn't find the English words to use for this one.
- 13. » Sweet words, or 甘い言葉, could also mean words that kittenish girls would say when they are pouting or playing cute.
- 14. » Refers to Kirakira PreCure a la Mode. The heroine of the series, Usami Ichika, has the power of the Legendary Patisserie.
- 15. » Kamiza means *the top seat* - in most Japanese guest rooms, kamiza is the seat reserved for guests of honor, and is the most comfortable one. Kamiza is usually placed to be the farthest from the door.
- 16. » LINE also has this timeline feature that’s similar to Instagram and allows you to post and share photos and statuses to your friends.
- 17. » Teachers serving in the public schools in Japan typically rotate every

3-6 years by moving to another public school, depending on their own preferences and situations.

18. » A famous comic singing trio in Japan. The variety show on Fuji TV where the unit was featured is called 'Kin-don! A Good Kid, A Bad Kid, and An Ordinary Kid' - each of whom corresponds to a singer in the trio.
19. » Trivia - 'In the twilight', or 誰彼時(たそがれどき) as transliterated in the original text in Kanji, is however usually written as 黄昏時 in most literature, both having the same reading and meaning of referring to the twilight or dusk time. Notably, the former phrase is used in Your Name, when Yukichan-sensei/Yukino Yukari writes 'the twilight time' on the blackboard and explains its alternative formal and colloquial readings. As she points out in the movie, 誰彼時 literally means 'the moment when you ask 'who is that person there'', because you can't see people's face well at dusk. It's unlikely but it's possible that Watari Wataru uses the term intentionally.
20. » Four-warm-days refers to the four warmer days immediately following the three colder days in a week, a typical climate pattern in the East Asian countries during winter times.

Credits

Illustrations:

Exorcism (aka Spyro) @[Kyakka](#)

Translators:

[/u/FatFluffyFish](#) @ [/r/OreGairuSNAFU](#)

[/u/Hikikomorei](#) @ [/r/OreGairuSNAFU](#)

[/u/YuiYahallo](#) @ [/r/OreGairuSNAFU](#)

goodguytesla

[/u/opie1122](#) @ [/r/OreGairuSNAFU](#)

[takei](#) @ Fanfiction.net

Editor:

[/u/Relicaa](#) @ [/r/OreGairuSNAFU](#)

[/u/oldc00t](#) @ [/r/OreGairuSNAFU](#)

[/u/Fly_guy555](#) @ [/r/OreGairuSNAFU](#)

[/u/Giory26](#) @ [/r/OreGairuSNAFU](#)

Contributors:

[/u/Yumesakihikari](#), [/u/RalphZiggy](#), [/u/Frozen](#) @ [/r/OreGairuSNAFU](#)

ePub Version: johny_dmonic

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