

# やはり俺の 青春ラブコメは まちがっていい

My youth romantic comedy  
was wrong as I expected.

渡 航【wataru wataru】

illustration ぽんかん⑧

14  
fourteen





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【wataru watari】  
illustration  
ぽんかん⑧





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Saika  
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Haruno  
Yukimochi



My youth romantic comedy is wrong as I expected.

*Haruno and Yukino*





# やはり俺の 青春ラブコメは まちがっている。

My youth romantic comedy is  
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## 登場人物【character】

fourteen

**比企谷八幡**.....主人公。高二。性格がひねくれている。  
【ひきがやーはちまん】

**雪ノ下 雪乃**.....奉仕部部长。完璧主義者。  
【ゆきのしたーゆきの】

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**戸塚 彩加**.....テニス部。とても可愛い男子。  
【とつかーさいか】

**川崎 沙希**.....八幡のクラスメイト。ちょっと不良っぽい。  
【かわさきーさき】

**葉山 隼人**.....八幡のクラスメイト。人気者。サッカー部。  
【はやまーはやと】

**三浦 優美子**.....八幡のクラスメイト。クラスの女子の頂点に君臨する。  
【みうらーゆみこ】

**海老名 姫菜**.....八幡のクラスメイト。三浦グループだが腐女子。  
【えびなーひな】

**一色 いろは**.....サッカー部マネージャー。一年生で生徒会長に当選。  
【いっしきーいろは】

**材木 座 義輝**.....オタク。ラノベ作家になることを夢見る。  
【ざいもくざーよしてる】

**折本 乃 かり**.....八幡と同じ中学。海浜幕張総合高校生。  
【おりもとーかり】

**平塚 静**.....国語教師。生活指導担当。  
【ひらつかーしずか】

**雪ノ下 陽乃**.....雪乃の姉。大学生。  
【ゆきのしたーはるの】

**比企谷 小町**.....八幡の妹。中学三年生。  
【ひきがやーこまち】

design:numata rina

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## Prelude 1

It was only just a few words I needed to send, yet, it took a rather long time to do so.

As I dilly-dallied in the boisterous crowd at the front of the station, the warm evening sun sank below the horizon of the sea, and my exposed fingers grew numb and cold to the touch.

I gripped my cellphone in my hands. If the time displayed was accurate, it had been only an hour and fifteen minutes since I had left the school. My eyes were glued to the screen. But I found myself letting out a shallow sigh for every minute increment of the clock.

Before long, the lights of the streets and various stores began to gleam brilliantly, along with the disappearance of uniform-clad students, replaced, instead, by an increasing number of people in their business suits.

I moved my stiff fingers to the screen of my cellphone, carefully inputting one character after the other in the unfamiliar messenger application, carefully confirming each one. Upon finishing, I pressed my finger against the icon of the paper airplane with a strength so weak that made me question whether I truly had pressed it or not, the hope of the message never getting sent plaguing my thoughts all the meanwhile.

But the contents of my message were immediately displayed, only the following words typed in, "Can we meet?" There was no meaning to a mere three words. But I was sure she'd still be able to notice my intentions.

I looked at the message that took me so long to send. As I pondered if a minute, or two minutes, had passed, the displayed time continued to stay static, never changing.

It was then I remembered being taught how to recall a sent message. My finger moved on its own, but it ultimately never touched the screen. If I wasn't mistaken, the recipient would be informed if a message was recalled. Knowing her, she would've seen that, and contacted me. Either way, the result would've been the same.

While stuck in thought, the screen was updated with a "seen" message. A few seconds later, a reply came in. All it contained was that she'd be on her way, asking nothing of my reasons, whereabouts, or anything. I unknowingly smiled as I read the message full of her usual cheerfulness. I then sent a corresponding message to relay my current location that wasn't too far from her home, a distance that shouldn't take too long to cover.

As I waited, I closed my eyes, and strained my ears to the many surrounding sounds: the rustling of leaves, the departure bell of the trains, the engine roars of automobiles, the hawkers of izakaya bars<sup>1</sup>, the leaking BGM from the shopping mall, the voices of passing people, and the playing melody of the pedestrian crossing<sup>2</sup>. And in that pool of sounds was the occasional sound of my trembling sighs. Soon enough, I could hear her footsteps. Initially light and noisy like that of a polka dance, it transitioned to a serene waltz, and eventually stopped.

Now, what should I talk about? How much should I talk about? I slowly opened my eyes, and looked at her as she stood before me. She wore a thick trench coat with an open knitted shoulder and cuffed jeans. Though rough in appearance, it was well-suited for someone as energetic as her. On the other hand, the muffler that loosely wrapped around her showed a glimpse of the tenderness a girl would have. I truly believed she was an adorable and charming person.

"Good evening."

She smiled to my greeting, and nodded, her hair, tied into a single bun, fluttering. It looked like she had run over as she continued to gasp for air. Although she had responded to me, she wasn't quite able to form any coherent words with her voice. She lightly fanned her face, and then removed her muffler.

In watching her, it made me realize that the season was over.

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<sup>1</sup> Casual Japanese pubs for drinking, typically occupied by people after work.

<sup>2</sup> A melody played when the Japanese pedestrian crossings turn green: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R8WLpyv\\_XvE](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R8WLpyv_XvE)



## Chapter 1: Even so, Hikigaya Hachiman's daily life continues.

Drops of water ran down my cheeks, and caused a series of small ripples on the surface below. It was an eerily, silent morning with only the echoing plopping sounds of water.

I slightly opened my drenched eyelids, and caught a blurry glimpse of the water surface glittering from the sunlight shining through the window. Living in the filled wash basin was a familiar set of melancholic and drowsy eyes. I removed the cork stopper, and the faint cloudy water slowly disappeared together with the oscillating reflection of my human image.

I roughly rubbed my face dry with a towel, and let out a deep breath. The odor of menthol from the facial cleanser drifted through the air of the room. I looked in the mirror ahead, was met with a face that carried its usual listless feature. However, it looked rather refreshed, partly due to the cooling sensation of the water. My expression looked far better than it did compared to last night. Perhaps, it was just that simple whenever something had ended.

Yesterday, the contest that dragged on for almost a year in the Service Club finally ended with my loss. My faint breaths that penetrated the towel at my mouth appeared tinged with a sense of relief instead of resignation. Now, it was all over.

The only thing left for me to do was to grant the wish I was entrusted with, or rather, to fulfill my final obligation in my contract.

Yukinoshita Yukino's wish was to grant Yuigahama Yui's wish, the very one thing that only I could do.

I patted my face with Nivea face lotion to prepare myself for what lie ahead and quickly rinsed my hands. The season transitioned in accordance with the calendar, where it was natural for water to become lukewarm, and for washing your face early in the morning to not feel like a hassle. My fingers, however, were still cold to the touch. I wrapped them with my towel to warm them, and left the washroom.

The interior of my house, while not particularly extravagant in size, was in a serene slumber, with not even the slightest of a sound to be heard. Only the distinct ticking sounds of the wall clock populated the empty living room.

On any other day at this time, I would normally be glued to my bed. As for my parents, they were either still asleep, or had already gone to work due to the upcoming end-of-term hysteria at their companies. I wasn't quite sure, but one way or the other, it didn't pose much of a problem.

I made my way to the kitchen, and flipped on the electric kettle. As I waited for the water to boil, I shook a bottle of instant coffee powder into a mug, shaking one, and then shaking twice. Suddenly, a large thump came from the living room door that then creaked open.

"Whoa... scary..." I whispered, taking a deep breath to relax my nerves from the scare. I timidly turned my head towards the door and then spotted our beloved cat, Kamakura, yawning and stretching boldly. I wasn't sure when, but he somehow acquired the ability to open the door by pouncing and hanging onto the knob. It scared the hell out of me whenever he did it late at night.

I turned back to my mug, only to see a heap of instant coffee powder inside, the scare from earlier apparently affecting my hand.

"Can you enter more quietly next time...? If this was a job interview, you'd fail instantly."

Kamakura, of course, paid no heed to my warning, and proceeded to clean his face with his paws. I looked at him in disdain until I saw Komachi entering the room from behind him in her pajamas. Upon noticing, she rubbed her eyes and greeted me with a yawn.

"Oh, morning, onii-chan."

"Yeah, morning," I replied, nodding.

Komachi made her way to the refrigerator and took out a carton of milk. Meanwhile, I grabbed a cup from the hanging cabinet, and silently offered it to her. She took the cup, thanking me in a mumbled voice, and drowsily made her way to the kotatsu table. Kamakura followed suit while pestering her for milk. Komachi toyed with him with her feet as he rubbed his head against her. She then filled her cup with milk, and drank it in large gulps. After exhaling briefly, she appeared to have woken up entirely. She opened her eyes, turned towards me, and did a double take.

"Wha!? You're up so early! Like, really early!"

"Wha... You're so slow... Like, really slow..."



Komachi narrowed her eyes, and with her milk mustache, asked, “What’s going on? Is there something happening today?”

“No, nothing. I just woke up early, that’s all...” I answered, dividing the excess mountain of coffee powder from the first cup to the second. I then filled both cups with hot water from the kettle. A waft of fragrance and the steam ascended from the cup while the inside was swirling with a bitter-looking and undissolved substance. Both cups still looked somewhat too thick, but the addition of milk and sugar would rectify that. I held both mugs and headed to the kotatsu.

Komachi shuffled into the kotatsu, lifted Kamakura onto her lap, and watched me in fixation with her milk mustache.

“Mmhmm...”

She stared at me in examination, or perhaps, in admiration. Finding that uncomfortable, I reached for a tissue box to pull out two to three sheets and offered them to her.

“Mustache.”

“Oh, oops.”

As she wiped the area around her mouth, I took the milk atop the kotatsu, and slowly poured it into the mugs. After making two servings of café au laits, I pushed one cup to Komachi. She had a blank look, but then happily accepted my offer.

“Thanks.”

I accepted her gratitude, and gripped my own mug to warm my fingers. I made shallow breaths to cool down the drink, and sipped. Similarly, Komachi gripped her mug with both hands and began blowing while sending furtive glances in my direction. When our eyes met, she nodded.

“...Okay, so you did get some sleep. Your eyes are so rotten, it’s kinda hard to tell,” she joked, commenting more than she needed to.

It wasn’t very often that I would wake up early, so Komachi thought my health was a cause for concern. Gosh, Komachi-chan, you’re so nice... To show my gratitude for her thoughtful consideration, I gave her a deliberate smile of self-importance. I was a shy person, after all! I just couldn’t get myself to say thank you! I shy away from it, get it?

“Get outta here, I’ll have you know I slept like a log. It might even be a new record-high in my entire history of sleeping. Just feast your eyes on these crisp eyes of mine,” I said, opening my eyes widely with a glint that looked like I was about to fire off a Starburst Stream<sup>3</sup>. Well, that’s more of a Kirito thing, if I had to say.

In contrast, Komachi looked at me dubiously with a squint. She then placed her hand on her chin and went into thought. Soon after, she tilted her head inquisitively.

“...Crisp, as in?” she asked, sounding unconvinced. Seeing that, I, too, started to feel a little unconvinced myself. My mouth deformed into a wave shape, and she smiled broadly. “Well, as long you’re healthy, that’s all that matters.”

“Yeah, don’t worry. I slept fine, although not for long.”

As it turned out, I did indeed get a good night’s worth of sleep. I went out like a battery that lost its charge, either because I was freed from all of the stress from my busy workload or the exhaustion from being pulled around as of late. It was a sleep so deep that offered me no opportunity to dream.

That being said, it took a considerable amount of time to actually reach the point of falling asleep. This was because I spent most of last night staring at my smartphone while tossing in bed after getting home. I was undecided on contacting Yuigahama about the outcome of the recent events. I was stuck in a loop of constantly typing test mails that were either too short, or too long, and constantly erasing them, and then rewriting them. Ultimately, my eyelids grew heavy and I eventually fell unconscious while thinking how it’d be rude to contact her so late, and that I should discuss the matter with her in person.

I recalled the time on the clock before falling into my deep slumber, and a rough calculation netted me about three hours of rest.

According to one theory, a person’s sleep cycle was approximately ninety minutes long and was comprised of two stages of sleep: REM sleep, which dealt with mental fatigue, and non-REM sleep, which dealt with physical fatigue. To wake up feeling refreshed, it’s recommended to wake up around the time a REM cycle ends, or during the stage of light sleep.

If you’re able to master this sleeping process and you managed to find a job, you’re guaranteed to

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<sup>3</sup> A skill performed by Kirito from Sword Art Online.



be a safe, secure, and inexpensive human resource and become a wonderful corporate slave. All you need was an hour and a half of sleep every day, and you'd be able to work forever! Bleh... that would kill me...

Well, I'd more or less be dead in that future, but that future wasn't now. As a matter of fact, I was brimming with more energy than normal. Komachi, who had been living together with me, seemed to have taken notice.

"Uh-huh... I guess you do look refreshed somehow," Komachi whispered, carrying her slightly bitter café au lait to her mouth.

"I managed to finish up my work, after all."

I placed my hand on my shoulder, and bobbed my head right and left, quietly cracking my neck in satisfaction. Komachi inquired further with a tilt of her head.

"I talked to you about the prom, remember? Well, we'll be going forward with it."

"Oh, right. I see, I see. That sounds super fun!" she exclaimed, smiling.

If the prom became an established yearly event, Komachi, who was officially set to attend Sobu High School, would eventually be able to participate near graduation. Perhaps, she was looking forward to it after hearing about it. The thought made me feel a little happy.

"It's a little too early to be talking about graduation, don't you think...? You've got the entrance ceremony coming up soon, or wait, before that, you have your middle school graduation, right?" I asked in realization.

"Yep, that's next week," Komachi succinctly answered.

"Seriously? That was quick. Wait, when is it? Where? Is there a reception for family?"

"Oh, no, no, no, you can't come, that's just weird, you know. No one's asking you to, you know. You've got school, you know," she repeated in rapid fashion, shaking her hands with a serious look. Her gestures left me wordless and I could only muster a groan instead.

This should be obvious to anyone, but if no one asked you, then you shouldn't go. Consider the following: suppose there's a class reunion, an alumni meeting, or even a simple outing with a group of friends. If someone who wasn't specifically invited were to tag along like it was nobody's business, the mood was guaranteed to be ruined. And then, after everyone called it a day, someone would ask both in person, and on a social network, "Uh, so, I'm gonna ask everyone 'why did he come again?' Please answer the question. Okay, Enraku-san, you're the first." The conversation would start off in that fashion and then undoubtedly segue into a tournament of who could throw out the best insults, marking it as the final entertainment of the day.

Well, some criticism was to be expected when an outsider decided to barge in on a gathering of friends. I mean, people who came along even though they weren't invited? Just the worst. You know, sort of like that guy named Deadlines. Now, this guy had absolutely no idea to read between the lines. He'd call you, "Hello, it's Deadlines... I am standing right behind you..." and when you turned around, he'd actually be there. It had to be a psychological horror at that point. He was pretty much a ghost or a demon, an existence of the occult... But wait, doesn't that mean Deadlines wasn't real?

Such thoughts swirled in my head, but based on my past experiences, deadlines and delivery days did indeed exist. Deadlines do exist!<sup>4</sup> What didn't exist was the possibility of attending Komachi's graduation ceremony.

I groaned and glanced over at Komachi. She was crossing her arms, and let out a discontent sigh. If the wrinkle forming at her brow was anything to go by, this was clearly not the time to be obstinate and run my mouth off, as in, "It's okay! Onii-chan's typically never invited to anything, so I'll be fine! Even if everyone gives me the death stare, I'll be fine! I'm totally used to that!"

"...Yeah, yeah, I got it. I won't go," I said, after moaning. Komachi breathed out in relief and closed her eyes, nodding to my resignation.

"As long as you understand... but to honest, I'll probably be bawling my eyes out, and it'll be embarrassing if you saw me," she uttered quickly, averting her eyes.

As her brother, I was all too familiar with her crying face, so it didn't give me much to think about, but I suppose the same didn't apply to her considering her age. Wait, no. Of course, there was a lot for me to think about. Like how super cute she'd be! I mean, she didn't have to cry, because she's always, and I mean, always cute. Look at her, the way she's trying to change the subject with her fake coughs was just cute. And the way she's smiling so sweetly to hide her embarrassment was cute, too. And lastly, the way she cutely opens her mouth was cute!

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<sup>4</sup> A parody of the bogus claim of STAP cells existing by Obokata Haruko.



“So, I'm fine with celebrating my graduation in another way!”

“Right... there's more I'd like to do, though. We didn't get to do anything for your birthday, either,” I said, wearing an apologetic smile. Recently, I had been so swamped with work that I had to postpone a number of things, and her birthday celebration was my biggest regret in particular.

Komachi shook her head lightly. “It's okay, you don't need to push yourself. I'm fine with whenever you have time. Everyone's still busy, right? Like, with the prom.”

Hearing that gave me pause, though she likely only mentioned it in passing.

“...Yeah, you're right. Yeah... Wait, I've got a ton of time, though. Sure, I've got things to do, but I haven't planned any of those things out yet,” I spoke briskly, and shrugged my shoulders in jest, trying to play off my hesitation. However, my desperate attempt to play dumb had no effect. As my little sister for the past fifteen years, she knew all of my tendencies and personality inside-out. Even if I didn't stutter, or if I didn't drone on with excuses, she'd still take notice of something.

“Hey...” she said with difficulty, looking skeptical. However, she stopped midway, and carried her mug to her mouth. She drank her café au lait to moisten her lips, and appeared unsure of pursuing the subject further.

There wasn't a need for me to say anything, because I knew what she wanted to ask. I waited for her to continue, and licked my cooling café au lait. I waited in silence, giving her my full attention with my eyes. She looked back, and placed her cup down.

“Onii-chan, did something happen?” she carefully asked, giving me an examining look.

It wasn't that long ago that she had asked me something similar. It was strikingly close to the same questioning words she gave me on the day shortly after my school trip that took place some time in the late autumn or the early winter. She asked in a joking manner back then, but that wasn't the case this time. Her hesitation likely stemmed from the sibling fight that broke out between us, a quarrel we had not had for some time. However, she had no choice but to ask, and it wasn't out of interest or enjoyment, but because she wanted to take that step for me, even if it meant another fight. Her concern and kindness forced my mouth into relaxation.

“...Yeah, something did,” I muttered, the words rushing out of my mouth.

Komachi's mouth was agape, finding surprise in my response. She blinked two to three times, still in shock, and said half-witted, “Something did, huh?”

“Yeah, a lot happened...” I said with a wry smile. My voice was unknowingly tender in tone, as if I was feeling nostalgic for the home I couldn't return to. Accompanying my words was the realization that the good days were over.

“A lot happened, huh?”

“Yeah,” I answered, my voice surprisingly steadier than I had thought. I met Komachi's gaze without the slightest of indecision and hesitation.

“I see,” she replied innocently, and went quiet. She continued to stare at me while in thought.

“Huh? What?” I asked, unable to handle her silence.

“Oh no, I just thought it was kind of gross how honest you were being,” she promptly replied without so much of a twitch of her eyebrows.

“Wow... you're the one that asked,” I weakly stated.

“I mean, I never thought you'd actually answer me,” she said, pouting.

“Oh, right... Well, yeah, you're right,” I said, convinced, and she nodded in agreement.

She was right. I could've easily just went off on a spiel about nothing. I could've also just taken up a passive-aggressive attitude and signaled to her to stop bringing up the subject. But this time, I chose not to brush it off, and let my words spill out the moment I smiled. For that reason, she looked suspicious, and even now, she appeared worried.

“...Can I ask what happened?” she carefully chose her words as she looked up at me. I made a thinking gesture and glanced over at the clock on the wall. She followed my gaze for only a moment before immediately looking back at me, and waited for my reply with sealed lips.

There was still plenty of time before I had to get to school, but if I were to kick off the conversation now, it would take too long. On top of that, it wasn't a conversation to be had so early in the morning. And more importantly, there were things I needed to take care of. Given the situation, talking to her now would be a halfhearted thing to do, and would only make it more difficult to explain to her the core aspects of recent events. For now, there weren't many words that I could actually say,



but there was something.

“Once everything's over, we can talk,” I said.

When the moment everything was over, I was sure I would talk to her about it all without any falsehood. But that time wasn't now, but some time in the unknown future.

“...Okay, got it,” Komachi replied with a smile, after taking a few moments in consideration. That she decided to not pursue any further was a kindness I knew all too well.

“...Sorry. So, it might not be possible to celebrate with everyone,” I added, feeling guilty from taking advantage of her kindness. Just the other day, I made the request to celebrate Komachi's birthday, but it's likely that wouldn't come to pass. At the very least, I wanted to let her know beforehand. I felt it would've been insincere to keep it unsaid, knowing fully well this was just to satisfy my own ego.

There wasn't much to understand from something so vague and non-committed. Her eyes, however, still contained a resigned kindness as she looked at me.

“Oh, okay... well, if that happens, there isn't much we can do about it,” she answered, smiling. Though cheerful in tone, there was a hint of loneliness to her voice, but that lasted for only a moment.

She let out an exasperated sigh, and then thrust her finger at me. She spun her finger as if trying to catch a dragonfly, and thoughtfully stated, “Remember what I told you? I don't care if you become the worst onii-chan ever.”

“R-Right...”

I flinched from her audacity, and she proceeded to poke my cheek with her finger.

“If anything, it's actually more convenient if it's just us, because then I'd get to surprise you with a present of my own! I mean, imagine how embarrassing it would be if other people were watching!” she rambled, feigning ignorance and fanned her face while trying to look flustered.

“Wha... what surprise is that? You already ruined it, but I'm still moved to tears...” I replied jokingly, playing along with her outburst.

“Right? It's so high in Komachi points!”

“Yeah... it's also high in Hachiman hurdles, though... I'm not sure if I'll be able to act surprised now...”

As I stood looking anxious, Komachi's expression turned stern, and she then muttered in a joking manner, “Well, okay, we'll just have to hold a depressing ceremony with only our relatives this time.”

“Why'd you put it like that? Is this some kind of private burial? That sounds like a funeral, doesn't it...? I grumbled, and Komachi grinned in return.

“Anywho, let's have breakfast,” she stated. She rose from her seat and made her way to the kitchen while humming. Kamakura followed her out of the kotatsu, seemingly in time for his breakfast. His claws would retract and extend from his overflowing appetite, and they would scrape the floor as he walked. Hey, stop that, you'll scratch the floors.

I strained my ears to the scratching sounds as head of the house while looking at him as his owner, considering if it was time to trim his claws. Suddenly, the sound stopped. Upon looking, he was facing me and demanding my attention with his purring.

“Oh, onii-chan, can you take out the stick of tulles<sup>5</sup>?” Komachi asked, poking her head out from the kitchen after hearing him.

“Sure thing.”

I pushed myself off the floor, and Kamakura hit his head against my leg as he purred. Since Komachi was occupied, he decided to come to me instead. Gosh, what a clever child...

I glanced at the time, and it looked like I was going to have breakfast far earlier than I was used to. But it's not too often that I would get up this early in the morning. It's been a while, but today, I'll spend some time with our beloved household cat.

X X X

It was early in the afternoon as I stared at my fingertips in class.

The sun rose high overhead through the sky, cloudless since the morning, along with the increasing

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<sup>5</sup> [Japanese cat food supplement sticks.](#)



temperature. The wind was blowing strongly today, carrying a humid warmth from the south. The warmth was amplified even further by the running heater in the class, making the environment even more comfortable than before. After arriving at school, the lack of sleep from the previous night caused me to be repeatedly assaulted by an onset of sleepiness, making me put my head down on my desk.

I had just woken up from a gratifying nap, yet my fingertips were still strangely cold to the touch, perhaps due the applied pressure from taking odd sleeping positions while using my arms as a pillow.

Today, and yesterday, were blessed with beautiful weather, but the next two days were likely to see a drop in temperature. As this change in winter continued to cycle, signs of spring inched closer and closer.

On my way to school, the cherry blossom trees along the river had yet to show any signs of blossoming, their leaves and branches looking bleak in appearance. However, given a month in time, they'd be in full bloom, providing authenticity to the name of Hanamigawa<sup>6</sup> River that they were erected along. I let out an unassuming sigh, picturing my map of the future part two<sup>7</sup>, where Komachi, too, would be taking that route to school at around that time.

Following my sigh, I looked at the clock through my watery eyes and noticed that class was nearing its end. As this was the sixth period, the concentration of a majority of the students had been cut in half, with me being the leading runner. As such, the room was permeated with a sense of relaxation, which worsened due to class subject of mathematics. As someone set on attending a private liberal arts institution, a third year had no mathematics courses. On top of that, I had no plans on utilizing them on my exams, so there wasn't much need for me to absorb it all.

I used my free time to look around the class, and everyone was similarly absorbed in their own activities to stave off the boredom: people dozing off, people fiddling with their smartphones at their desk, or people just blankly staring out the window. On the other hand, with upcoming semester exams, there were individuals who focused on studying and ignored class, almost as if they were working a side job. Some were thoughtful enough to at least pretend they were engaged in class by stacking their textbooks, which was enough to overlook them. But then, you had the bold ones, who would flap their red check sheet and defiantly ask, "Um, am I doing something wrong? I'm clearly studying, see?" I won't say names, but Sagami Minami's definitely the type to do that. Though in her case, she came off as someone who was just trying to look like she was putting in the effort by studying rather than someone who had their eyes set on the future. Otherwise, her nonchalant blabbering while acting like a victim, as in, "Oh no! There's no colleges I can go to! I got a C on my last mock exam, I totally won't get in anywhere!" wouldn't obviously look like she was trying to fish some words of comfort from her friend, as in, "That's not true!" Nowadays, a C would get you in most schools. I just wanted to yell at her to go to the first school she chose. I wonder if her friend, Manami-chan, and she were like this at home... Sucks to be her little brother...

Oh my, speaking of which, Kawasomething-san, too, had a little brother, didn't she? A thought an aunt would have crossed my mind, and I looked over at the front of the class near the windows. I could see her blue-tinged dark ponytail with her back rounded, sewing something together. In her case, she was clearly working a side job... It was only around Kawasomething-san that it felt like we were back in the Showa period...

That being said, there were, of course, people who engaged in class seriously, which was the majority. One person, in particular, who was slightly behind me in a jersey was participating very earnestly in a very adorable manner. He was none other than my friend, Totsuka Saika... Maybe I'll say that one more time. My friend, Totsuka Saika...

Totsuka nodded his head as he looked at the blackboard. Just when I thought he was about to jot down some notes with his mechanical pencil, he'd stop, and then proceeded to press it against his lips. When he noticed me, he waved his pencil at me. With the rays of the sun beaming down on him through the window, his hair glimmered like strands of silk, his smile dazzling all the same. Gosh, what is that? So cute. Was that his idea of lighting up the night sky with the secret moonlight<sup>8</sup>? That's too much Star Twinkle for me... Still, the fact he saw me staring got me a little embarrassed, and I nodded back before turning back to the front of the class.

With class just about to end, I opened my neglected notebook and copied the written material on the blackboard enough to avoid getting scolded. At this rate, if I kept looking around, people would start thinking I was weird. Not that they weren't already.

As I scrambled to get my notes down, the bell rang, signifying the end of class. Homeroom, too, passed quickly with only a short message from the teacher.

<sup>6</sup> Hanamigawa in Japanese means "flower-watching river".

<sup>7</sup> A song by DREAMS COME TRUE: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nGl2la0Q6LA>

<sup>8</sup> Cure Selene's transformation motto from Star Twinkle Precure.



There was only one thing I had planned for after school: talk to Yuigahama about yesterday and the outcome of recent events, and ask her what her wish was.

I began readying myself to leave for the day while listening to the noise-filled classroom. That being said, there wasn't much for me to pack. I ran my arms through the sleeves of my coat, loosely wrapped my muffler around, and nothing more. As I pretended to think about what else was left to pack, repeatedly opening my empty bag, I discretely looked at Yuigahama.

Most of my classmates left in pairs of twos and threes, but the usual suspects gathered near the window corner that was exposed to the sun. Miura sat on her own desk, crossing her long and pretty legs, and served as the core between Yuigahama and Ebina-san, who were in their coats, and were sitting in chairs they pulled from nearby, and were chatting. Watching over them with a mature smile and responding as needed was Hayama Hayato. And then, there were the three idiots, Tobe, Ooka, and Yamato, who blew up the conversation further. It was a familiar scenery you'd see from this group every day.

They exuded a showy aura that always made it difficult for others to approach, even more so because their conversations were heating up.

This, of course, made it difficult for me to talk to Yuigahama. I was met with a similar situation before, and while I was able to successfully pull her away from the group, I was lambasted and told, "Talk to me normally." Which is pretty much the hardest thing to do...

As such, let's approach it from a different angle. If I utilized the wisdom of mankind, I could resolve this problem without having to talk to her. If it's too hard to say, then you could just use a letter instead. That's what Murasaki Shikibu-senpai<sup>9</sup> said, anyway!

I took out my smartphone, and tapped the mail icon. The screen then displayed a incomplete mail. There wasn't a subject or a body, but the recipient line was populated. I spent all of last night trying to type some semblance of a message, but ultimately couldn't figure out what and never sent anything. What remained was an unfinished draft.

I typed in the body, "Are you free today?" and tapped the send button. Shortly, Yuigahama reached into her pocket for her phone. She made a gesture to the rest of the group, and dropped her gaze to her hand. Then, she glanced over at me. I nodded back, and she let out a sigh.

"Oh, I'll be right back," she said smiling, keeping quiet of what she was going to do. She excused herself from the conversation by letting Miura and the others know. As she walked over, her face grew discontent with every step. By the time she made it to my seat, her cheeks were fully swollen.

"Didn't I tell you to talk to me normally!?" she exclaimed with a remonstrative tone, keeping her voice reserved to avoid any attention.

"...Uh, I chose the best way, though."

"You don't find it weird sending a message when we're this close to each other!?"

"The good thing about mails is that distance doesn't matter."

With the power of the internet, any shy person could run their mouth off no matter how offensive they were being ☆! Even recently, you'd even see socialites and normal people go nuts on there...

Random thoughts ran through my mind, and Yuigahama's eyes narrowed as she looked down on me. I coughed in response to get away from her cold gaze. So, this time, I asked her normally, "...Do you have time today?"

"Today...?" Yuigahama repeated, freezing in place. She unconsciously extended her right hand to rub her hair bun, looking a little troubled from my question. Seeing that, it looked like today wasn't convenient for her.

"Umm..." She paused and made a momentarily glance in the direction of Miura's group. She then wore a problematic smile. "I might not. I might be hanging out with Yumiko and the others."

She said "might" twice. Weren't you just a little too unsure there? She just might go to Sea World in Kamogawa after seeing the commercial at this rate... Still, Yuigahama likely didn't have anything planned for the day. It was possible her conversation with Miura and the others involved stopping by somewhere on the way home. I certainly didn't want to get in the way if that was the case.

For me, it didn't matter if it was today. What mattered was that as long I had the chance to talk to her. Even if it wasn't today, I was determined to do so at some point. The calendar that displayed on my smartphone was more or less empty. That being the case, it was only reasonable that I adjusted my schedule to match hers.

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<sup>9</sup> The author of The Tale of Genji.



“Well, it doesn't have to be today. We can talk tomorrow, the day after tomorrow, or the day after that day, and so forth.”

“That's too many to choose from! Just how much free time do you have, Hikki...?” Yuigahama said, looking half-astonished and half-sad.

Of course, I wanted to correct her, because she undoubtedly made a small mistake.

“I don't have any, actually. I have a lot of things I have to do,” I said. Examples being: the stack of recorded videos I needed to watch, or the stack of books I needed to go through, or the builders game I needed to play because I unlocked an island at the very start but never touched, or the muscle training I needed to do, which didn't last longer than three days, after buying some protein, or the solo-screening party I needed to have for Aikatsu that was going to be broadcast on a streaming platform. Needless to say, there were lots of things that needed to be done and my entire life wouldn't be enough to get through them all. At that point, I'd rather just watch Aikatsu on repeat forever. Man, if only I had five lives instead! Because then, I'd be able to watch Aikatsu five times in parallel. I wanted to spout out the thoughts, but I lost the timing when Yuigahama made an impressed look.

“Ohh, like what?” she asked, tilting her head while looking at me with her large eyes. They were filled with curiosity, and it looked like she was merely interested in what they were. Confronted with her pure gaze, I kept my inner ramblings from earlier to myself.

“...W-Well, you know, a lot of stuff. There's a lot, you know? I have to get them done... but they can be done at any time,” I mumbled, averting my gaze to cut the conversation short. Subsequently, I coughed to gain back my composure, and returned my gaze back to Yuigahama. “So, I'll just work with your schedule. Let me know whenever you have a day available.”

She folded her arms in thought while wearing a slightly anxious expression. But eventually, she nodded with a smile. “Mm, okay, today's fine with me, then.”

“Really?” I asked, glancing over at Miura and the others, wondering if that would cause any conflict.

“Yep. It's not like we decided on anything, anyway,” she responded, smiling.

“Alright, sorry about that,” I said, bowing my head, and Yuigahama shook her head.

“Okay, I'll go grab my stuff,” she said, and trotted over to Miura and the others, likely to tell them goodbye for the day.

I decided to step outside into the hallway since I'd feel a little bit awkward if I was seen leaving the class with Yuigahama. The doors were closed, likely due to the heater, and I opened them, only to close them again from behind.

The instant my fingers left the door, I was assaulted by a sudden chill. A coldness remained on my fingertips like an irremovable splinter. In hopes of forgetting the sensation, I plunged my hands into my pockets, and then leaned against the wall.

The windows were firmly closed shut, and the wafting heat leaking from every class made the hallway far warmer than expected. However, my fingertips that were in contact with the door moments ago were still cold to the touch.

X X X

A colorful range of sounds reverberated after school: the sound of clanking metal bats, the yells of a called ball, and the timbre of the brass band. The farther they sounded, the clearer they became.

We made our way out from the school gate, just barely missing the peak of the traffic of students heading home. Not very many of them crossed paths with us. The small street that led to the residential area as well as the nearby park were empty, and only the rustling of leaves by the chilling wind before evening could be seen. I pushed my bike along the empty street, taking smaller strides than I normally did to match Yuigahama's pace.

“Sorry for taking up your time.”

“Oh, it's okay,” she replied, energetically, and shook her head. I nodded thankfully in return. My attempt to speak with her earlier was rather unsightly, but I was able to setup some time to take settle things once and for all.

Now, what should I talk about first? If I got started on the circumstances, that would take time. Having a quiet place for this discussion would be best, because if there were people around, they'd be distracting, and it'd be hard to actually talk about anything. So, taking those conditions into account, a



place like Saizeriya or a cafe would be out of the question. Hmm...

Mulling over my thoughts, Yuigahama let out a gasp as if remembering something and said, "Oh yeah, I heard from Yukinon yesterday. The prom's been green-lighted, right?"

Her sudden statement startled me, which almost caused me to stop in place. However, my legs carried forward, and I spat out to bury the silence, "Y-Yeah... she told you, huh?"

"Yep, at night. She contacted me through LINE, we met up, and then we talked," Yuigahama said while maintaining her smile, her gaze slowly gliding downwards.

"I see..." I said, letting out an ironic smile. There was nothing strange about her already knowing considering their relationship. Yuigahama herself was concerned about whether we'd be able to hold the prom or not, so it was perfectly natural to expect her to get in touch regarding the outcome.

However, the promptness of Yukinoshita Yukino certainly did resemble how she used to be back then. On one hand, she was quick and decisive. On the other, she'd rush to her own conclusion without giving any thought to a person's circumstances, expectations, or considerations. And that was nostalgic.

Thinking back on it, I wasn't that much different. I was just indecisive as always. Every time, I had to attach some kind of reason to get something done, as evident in my inability to send a simple mail. It was only after a whole night that I was finally able to talk to her in person, putting me in our current situation. But that allowed me to finally make my decision.

"Can we stop by over there?" I said, pointing to the park.

"...Sure," Yuigahama replied, making a momentary frown. She then nodded.

If I didn't talk to her about our situation now, I was sure I'd end up postponing it to another day.

I purchased a cold can of coffee and a warm bottle of tea from the nearest vending machine, and headed for the park. I parked my bike close to the bench under the street light and took a seat. I urged Yuigahama to have a seat with a look, and Yuigahama squeezed the strap of her backpack. Her expression appeared tense, but her cheeks loosened as soon as she briskly made her way over. But just when I thought she was going to take a seat, she ended up setting down her backpack instead.

"Wow, I haven't been to a park for so long." Yuigahama looked around the run-of-the-mill park as if it was something she had never seen before. Her gaze then stopped at a single location. I looked over to see she was gazing at the swings, playground equipment that you could find anywhere. There was nothing special to them, but Yuigahama hurried over to them, anyway.

"Um, what? Hello?" I called out to stop her, but she was already fiddling with the chains. Her action killed my enthusiasm, and I found myself going to her.

"Whoa, swings are so small. Were they always like this?" Yuigahama exclaimed, timidly taking a seat on the swing. As soon as she accelerated forward with a kick, the chains rattled and began colliding. "Oh my god, wow! It's been a while since I rode on these, but it's a lot more scary than I thought!"

She planted her feet onto the ground in a frantic, and let out a relieved breath. I used that moment to hand her the bottle of tea.

"You don't really worry about that when you're a kid. I used to jump off the swing and get scratches on my knees all the time."

Yuigahama accepted the bottle with a word of thanks, and took a sip.

"Ohh, I did that too, I think... Then again, I didn't think you were the kind of guy to do that, Hikki," she said, wrapping her arms around the chains. She looked up at me, kicking the ground with her feet, slowly rocking back and forth on the swing. She made a teasing look at the swing beside her, urging me to take a seat. However, I didn't go along with her invitation. Instead, I took a seat at the surrounding fence instead. I snapped open the can of coffee, and hydrated my mouth.

"Yuigahama," I said, swallowing the bitter taste left on my tongue. "Tell me what your wish is."

She took a moment, seemingly missing my intentions, and pursed her lips with a stumped smile. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"Let me rephrase it. Is there anything you want me to do, or anything you want me to grant you?" I asked.

"Ehh?" she clapped her hands together, placed them between her inner thighs, and began thinking as she swayed her body left and right. Then, she immediately came up with a thought. "There's a lot. Like, I want you to act more natural when you talk to me, or I want you to stop peeking at me, or I want you to answer your texts faster, or I want you to stop being so picky, oh, and, also—"

“Okay, okay, sorry for being born, alright? Then again, I'm really bad news, aren't I? I'm pretty damn gross...”

Yuigahama folded her fingers one by one as she listed out everything, and I stopped her in advance before she could increase the list. Had she brought up any more, I would've gone into full depression. I grew disgusted with myself, and Yuigahama tilted her head with a grave look.

“Took you this long to notice...?”

“It hurts a lot more when you hear those things from someone else. I mean, you listed out so many, and they're all long, and they're all clearly criticizing me, and now it just hurts... Though believe it or not, I do want to fix them.”

“I don't think you ever will, so just forget it...” she said in resignation, shrugging her shoulders.

Aww, she gave up on me... Everything you pointed out were things I was aware of, and I was going to do my best to work on them... Then again, they were things that wouldn't change if I tackled them gradually, so I was left with an ironic smile.

“Oh, also, I think it'd be nice if you could fix your habit of planning things so suddenly like today. It's fine when I'm free, but I want to prepare myself, and everything.”

“Ah, right. Sorry.”

It's true that recently, I had been only been talking to her on short notice. It looked like she was figuring out today's after school plans with Miura and the others, so I felt guilty and apologized. She then nodded in acceptance.

“And also...”

“There's still more? You sure have a lot, huh? I'm really sorry for everything, okay?” I said. Yuigahama laughed, and I followed suit.

I could only imagine how much easier it could've been if we were always able to talk like this; always avoiding to say what's important, pretending everything's normal, and never touching on what truly mattered. But allowing myself such luxuries would only betray what I believed in.

I gulped down the canned coffee in my hand, and squeezed it to trap the warmth in the tips of my fingers. The aluminum can deformed inwards, and I rotated the metal around in my hand in hopes of fixing them. However, that served to only give birth to more dents in other areas.

“...That's not what I was asking you,” I said, my voice sounding softer and gentler than I had thought. I lifted my eyes and looked at Yuigahama.

“What is it, then?”

“It's about the contest from before. The one where you can make someone do whatever you want if you win.”

“...But it's not over yet.”

Her tone sounded like she was sulking, sounding more innocent than usual, and that caused the corners of my mouth to deform upwards. For someone who would always try to assume an air of maturity, she looked rather childish this time. I couldn't help but find it amusing.

“Well, yeah... but I already accepted my loss. The contest is a done deal.”

“You're the only one who thinks that.”

The western sky, extending far beyond her, grew dark, and the very first star was quick to twinkle through the changing ratios of the mixing colors of rose madder and ultramarine.

“No, it's my loss. It actually feels pretty good how badly I lost,” I said, gazing up at the sky. In truth, I really did feel refreshed. The issue of whether the prom could be realized unexpectedly became the subject of our final contest. Yukinoshita immediately discerned that my proposed prom was merely a dummy to elevate hers, and decided to accept our match knowing fully well that was my plan. In other words, I read her cards wrong; I didn't misread Yukinoshita Yukno's strategy and thought process, but her determination.

I let out a big sigh, releasing the tension from my entire body, only for it disappear into thin air without leaving so much of a trace of vapor.

As long a loser, not a winner, was determined, the contest was over.

“That's why, let me grant you your wish,” I finished stating, finally releasing the words that had been lodged in my chest this entire time. Just trying to get these words out took some considerable amount of time. And that wasn't limited to just this situation. The moment our contest began, I continued to mull over, from the bottom of my heart, when I could finally be out with it, something I



spent almost a whole year on.

Yuigahama planted her feet on the ground to stop her swing. She pursed her lips, waiting for the sounds of the creaking chains to stop, and eventually whispered, “I’m pretty greedy, so I can’t really decide on one... Would that work? Can I have everything granted?”

She lifted her head, turning towards me, and she wore a playful smile. I shrugged in response.

“That’s pretty standard... well, as long as it’s something I can do, I’ll try.”

“I think you should stop doing that,” she said firmly, while looking away. I choked on my words upon seeing her sad profile.

“You’re always like this, Hikki. You obviously can’t do something, but then you say you’ll try doing what you can, and then you just end up doing it, anyway. And you’re always pushing yourself,” she said, kicking herself back into gradual motion. “That’s why, I’m thinking of asking for something simple. I’m not too sure what I want for a wish, but there are things I want to do.”

“Uh-huh, what could those be?” I followed her with my eyes as her swinging accelerated.

“First... I want to help Yukinon. I want to see the prom through to the end.”

“I see.”

“I also want to celebrate with the... game club? And the chuuni, and also Yumiko, and Hina and...”

“Right...”

“I also want to do a celebration for Komachi-chan, too.”

“Totally.”

“And I also want to hang out somewhere.”

“Makes sense.”

She would approach closer, and then go farther. Every time, her words would fly at me, and I would respond in kind. The things Yuigahama wanted to do were nothing surprising. I could see why she wanted to help with the prom. I also recalled her talking about holding a party before. As for Komachi’s celebration, I had nothing but gratitude. I wasn’t particularly knowledgeable about going out for fun, but if she was fine with me, then I would gladly accompany her.

The force of the swing slowly weakened, and her voice turned quiet.

“And also...” she whispered, but eventually stopped.

Coming from a nearby street past the hedges of the park were clamorous voices. Upon looking, a group of boys and girls wearing our school uniform was passing by. A quick glance, and it didn’t look like they were anyone we were familiar with. Yuigahama stayed silent until they left. What remained was the lonely sounds of the dying chains as the swing came to a complete halt.

I said nothing, simply looking at her, waiting for her next words. She seemed to have noticed, and raised her face to me with a smile.

“And also, I guess... I want to grant your wish, Hikki,” she smiled as the the sunset glow bore down on her from behind. Within the darkness tinged with the color of ultramarine, the light weaved from the afterglow of the sky and the street lights beautifully illuminated her slender countenance.

I was unable to give her an acknowledging response. Because the reason I was here in the first place was to grant Yukinoshita Yukino’s wish. Her wish was to grant Yuigahama’s wish. But she said she wanted to grant mine. At this rate, we would be in a never-ending loop.

“My wish, huh? That’s a tough one...” I responded meaninglessly, pondering over how to answer.

“Right? So, take some time to think about it while you’re granting mine. And I’ll think about it, too,” Yuigahama said, forcibly kicking the floor, and got up. She took a step away from the unsteadily, shaking swing, and turned to me, blocking the sunset glow.

“...And I’ll make sure to tell you. That’s why, I want you to tell me what it is you want to do, Hikki.”

I squinted as the burning red of the setting sun penetrated my eyes. With my sight blurred by the light source ahead, I nodded. After she ascertained my response, I could make out her beautiful smile.

## Prelude 2

The vibration that shook only my hand immediately made its way to my heart. I was sure something had happened, so I wasn't surprised at all. I resigned myself, knowing that it would come eventually, and that made my heart tremble.

Today, after school, he was called by the teacher. I saw him leave the classroom, and was confident he wouldn't come back to the classroom.

I was in no mood to hang out with anyone. As soon as I got home, I collapsed onto the living room sofa in my uniform, and stared at the ceiling. My mom warned me over and over about how my skirt and blazer would get wrinkled. Eventually, I dragged my feet and got changed, only to sink into the depths of my bed. I covered myself with a fluffy blanket and my body was wedged into place, unable to move.

My smartphone vibrated once, and only once. Was it from him, or was it from her? I wasn't sure, but it probably wasn't going to be anything good.

I moved my arms and carried my smartphone to my face, hoping the sender was someone else entirely. At the very top, a message from her was displayed. There was no need to even open the application, because it was a mere single line, fully viewable in the notifications alone. I read it in its entirety without having to leave the "seen" notice.

"Can we meet?"

That was all that was written with nothing else mentioned. But I knew something had happened.

I could've just ignored it, and waited until later to respond. Because by doing that, I was sure we could've continued our relationship for a little longer. Such unfair thoughts ran through my mind. But above all else, she had something she wanted to tell me, and that made me so happy I cried. My feelings were a total mess.

It's because I think I had been waiting this entire time, waiting for the moment she would be ready to tell me. And because I was too scared to say it myself.

That's why, I responded to her message, saying that I'd be on my way, and put on the coat I had flung aside. As I tapped my sneakers into place at the entrance, I received a reply confirming our meeting location.

It was a place that we had to go to. It wasn't that far, and it was fairly close, even. And soon, things would end.

I had no intention of running at all, but as soon as I stepped outside, the pacing of my legs gradually grew faster and faster.

The front of the station was considerably crowded. Even so, I was still easily able to spot her sitting on a bench under a street light.

Sitting upright with closed eyes, her hands rested atop her skirt, and she appeared so still as though she would melt into her surroundings. She was wearing her coat, and while it was still so cold out, it looked like it didn't bother her in the least.

Upon hearing my footsteps, she slowly opened her eyes. Then, she wore a smile so clear and beautiful that rivaled the night, winter sky.

"Good evening."

Her smile was so stunning that I found myself at a loss for words. When they said something beautiful takes your breath away, I think this was what they meant.

I nodded back, unable to say anything due to catching my breath from running. I immediately removed my muffler and sat beside her. Because if I didn't do that, I wouldn't have been able to take my eyes off of her.

I had never seen a girl as beautiful as her. I always thought I knew what a cute or beautiful girl looked like, but she was the first girl that left me gasping.

I took a deep breath in place of a sigh, and asked, "What's up?"

"I just wanted to talk to you for a bit," she answered, taking a moment. Then, she continued, carefully choosing her words, "We'll be holding the prom."

"Oh, great, that's good to hear..." I said, finally finding some peace of mind. It was something that had been on my mind for a while. For just a moment, his twisted eyes flashed through my mind, and I



let out a relieved sigh. It must've been louder than it sounded because she giggled.

"It's thanks to you."

"I didn't do—"

Anything at all. I couldn't do a single thing.

I interrupted myself with a nod. She looked at me, and then suddenly into the distance, and whispered, "...And also thanks to him."

Upon hearing her utterance, my body quivered. I dragged my sight to the floor, unable to look at her directly.

"...That's not true. You did your best, too."

"It's okay, I'm fully aware that isn't the case."

My words sounded like a diversion, or an excuse, but she shook her head.

"I relied on him again..." she said, jestingly. Unlike her typical mature manner of speaking, she sounded just so childish in comparison that it caught me off guard. She then quickly lifted her gaze with a bashful smile as though to hide her embarrassment.

"I knew what he was planning to do, but I couldn't refuse him," she said, raising her eyes slightly upwards, and looking far, far away. I followed her gaze, but could only make out tall buildings.

"But that's over now."

The night city bustled with noise, but I could still hear her voice clearly, despite sounding so soft and frail, almost as if they resembled the building lights afar. It was like how a fleeting red light would appear as a blot, but then gradually disperse into the darkness. That voice rode along the fiercely, blowing wind.

"I told him everything."

Her long hair fluttered and obscured her face like a veil. When it settled down, she combed her hair with one hand, and slowly placed it to her ear.

Then, she smiled; a smile that was so pristine in appearance, as if the night, spring wind had done away with all kinds of things. It was a smile that I had always loved, and a beautiful smile that I would continue to love.

In seeing that, it made me realize that this relationship was going to be over.

## Chapter 2: Eventually, the time will come when we will also grow accustomed to this relationship.

It was a peaceful afternoon under the gentle rays of the sun as I engaged in my chewing time at the usual spot on campus. I absentmindedly consumed my lunch while taking in the ambient cheering voices of the tennis club.

Today was several degrees cooler than yesterday, but that didn't make being outside any less pleasant. The mornings and evenings were expected to be chilly, but not during the daytime, removing the need for a coat. Sunbathing under the partly cloudy sky was truly a delight.

A few days' time, and the town had passed over the season, and now spring inched closer and closer.

I casually shoved my leftover bread from the school store into my mouth and washed it down with tea. I let out a satisfied sigh and rested my chin in my hands. As I soaked in the warmth of the sun, I shut my eyes.

I strained my ears to listen to the bouncing tennis balls from the courts and the voice of the tennis club captain, Totsuka. Suddenly, a crunching step from the ground blended in with the noise. I reflexively turned to the source, and I was greeted with a bouncing peach-colored bun of hair. The owner, Yuigahama, noticed me and lifted her hand to about the level of her chest and waved.

"Ohh, what's up?"

"Just thought I'd give you this after getting a drink, here," she said. After she offered me a can of MAX Coffee, she smoothed down her skirt and sat beside me. I took the warm can and juggled it, unsure of what to do with it.

"Huh, what's this for? I can have it? How much?"

"It's okay, since you got me something yesterday."

"Oh, makes sense. I'll take it, then."

"Sure."

To think she'd go out of her way to return the favor, she's quite the upright girl...

I lifted the pull-tab and sipped at the warm, sugary can of MAX Coffee. I nodded as the warmth began to envelop my body, and there, I felt a gaze. I glanced to my side, and Yuigahama was watching me, grasping her knees to her chest and her head tilted. Her gaze felt like an awfully warm, sunny spot. Finding that a little uncomfortable, I redirected my focus from her to the nutrition label of the can in my hand.

You feeling okay? I've been feeling strangely euphoric for a while now. Don't tell me... was the MAX Coffee being utilized for nefarious reasons? Like say, to transport some kind of dangerous white powder of the sort...? Who am I kidding? Of course, that's in there! It's a white powder that can make anyone feel euphoric, and its name was sugar!

I regained my composure through a moment of worthless thoughts. Then, Yuigahama spoke to me.

"So, when should we hold the party?"

"Ahh..." I said, trying to fill the silence, and then took a moment to think. The party was something she brought up last night and also happened to be one of the wishes she wanted granted.

The purpose of the party was to show appreciation for all the people who helped with my dummy prom proposal from the other day: Zaimokuza, the two members of the United Gamers Club, Miura, and Ebina-san.

Of course, the only problem was those three guys wouldn't be too happy with that turnout... Either way, since Yuigahama was eager to do it, I couldn't refuse.

Taking my silence as consent, she began tapping on her smartphone and seemed to be confirming things. "Yumiko and Hina said they're free today, and I am, too. Think we can do it today?"

"And why aren't you asking about my schedule?" I asked.

"Weren't you the one who said you were free? Like tomorrow, or the day after tomorrow, or the day after that day?" Yuigahama said, and pouted.

"Yes, I did..." I could only shrug because I wasn't expecting her to finalize my commitment in that manner. I had better watch what I say next time! I couldn't really give a retort since I was indeed free



for the day.

“Now, we just need to check if Chuuni and his friends are available...” she said, implying that I should get the confirmation from them.

“Today's fine,” I said, answering instantly.

“Huh? Really?” she asked with surprise, tilting her head.

I nodded. “Yeah, those guys are definitely free. I'm an expert.”

“Someone's confident...”

I had doubts the UG Club was actually busy with any substantial club activities, or whatever it was that they do, and it goes without saying that Zaimokuza was available. I could tell, since I, too, was in a club that was involved in enigmatic activities. I was an expert.

Yuigahama, who typically had her schedule planned out, didn't seem to understand as she sullenly pursed her lips and looked at me with narrowed eyes. “Just so you know, you'll be the only guy there if they don't come.”

“That sounds super scary...”

The situation they called harem was a luxury only kings could enjoy. In reality, vomiting would be the first thing on your mind if you were the only boy in a space full of girls. On top of that, you'd be sweating as much as the condensation you'd find on a glass of ice tea during summer. It was all fun and games if they ignored you entirely, but if they didn't and asked “You look pretty sweaty, you okay? Is it too hot?”, the sweat from your armpits would be the least of your worries. At that point, the Niagara Falls would be forming at your mouth. If it was a club you were familiar with, you could prepare all sorts of excuses to fool yourself into having one. But in an unknown environment, you'd be like a rental cat, and your fate would be serving time as a Jizo statue<sup>10</sup>. So, what if we were to add Zaimokuza and the two UG Club members into the mix? Wow! Now, there's three more statues to make a total of four!

Well, there's the saying that half a loaf was better than none, so them being present was better than not being present at all. Putting aside what Miura and the others thought of them, having them there would help with my emotional health.

“I'm going to have think about how to invite them... they'll just refuse if I ask them normally.”

“Really?” she said, still unconvinced.

Again, I nodded. “Absolutely. If they know someone like Miura is going, they'll definitely refuse to go. Forcing people to party with flamboyant people for the first time is pure torture. For the whole two hours, they'll just be staring at the clock and getting refills. Heck, the time they spend in the restroom will feel even longer. I'm an expert.”

“You're too much of one! You're clearly speaking from experience!” Yuigahama exclaimed in grief.

I rubbed my chin, and stated, “The problem is that they're not direct acquaintances.”

“Oh, well, I guess that's true...” Yuigahama mumbled, finally understanding the situation. I was well aware that Miura's a good person, but her haughty attitude would make anyone draw back in fear on their first meeting. I mean, I still do even now!

However, from the perspective of someone who was used to her, it didn't seem like a big deal. Yuigahama clapped her hands, turned to me, and wagged her finger as she began to explain. “Oh, but hey, doesn't Chuuni already know Yumiko and Hina? He just needs to smooth things over and...”

“The problem is that they're not direct acquaintances...”

“Again!?”

“You kidding me? I'm not even sure if *I'm* an acquaintance of theirs, so Zaimokuza clearly has to be less than that. Also, there's no way he'd able to smooth anything over.”

“Well, that's where you come in... you can do it, Hikki.” Yuigahama made closed fists and raised them in front of her chest in encouragement and smiled innocently. I could only force a smile back.

Thanks for the encouragement, but I don't think that's going to happen... Why would you go out of your way to gather creatures from different habitats into a single place? I mean, are you trying to set up a Colosseum for some kind of Miulion and Zaimokuslave showdown? Did history never teach you that was just grounds for a cruel one-sided slaughter show?

Putting my thoughts aside, the decree of Emperor Gahama was absolute, so I had no choice but to obey.

“...Alright, I'll see what I can do to invite them. Where are we holding the party?”

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<sup>10</sup> Also known as [Ksitigarbha](#), Jizo statues are statues all over Japan that act as a guardian for a variety things which include travelers, children, and so forth.

“Karaoke, I guess... or something,” she said, thinking as she looked up at the sky. Then, she brought her gaze back down to me for confirmation.

“All right... things might work out, then,” I said after taking a moment. I ran some ideas through my head about how I should convince them to accept my invitation. Then, I continued, “I’ll ask them after school.”

“Okay, got it,” she said, nodding.

She held her knees together again and adjusted her sitting position as she moved a few centimeters closer. The chilly wind blew past her soft hair and after holding it down with her hand, she moved it to her ear. As I watched her with a sidelong glance, I squeezed the warm can with my chilly fingertips, and carried the sugary coffee to my mouth.

I was under the impression she’d leave after finalizing the details of the party, but that didn’t seem to be the case. But, well, the weather was good today, and this spot wasn’t exclusively just for me. If she wanted to relax here for a bit, I didn’t mind one bit.

Feeling a little restless, I looked over to the tennis courts. The sounds of the bouncing balls from earlier had stopped, and the members of the club were packing up to leave. Having just practiced, the boorish group looked filthy, but there was one conspicuous person in that group. He was like the Greek goddess of the moon, Selene, and served as the pretty and cure captain of the tennis club, Totsuka Saika. How glitterific<sup>11</sup>!

I waved at Totsuka as he wiped his sweat and readjusted his tennis bag on his back. When he noticed me, he returned my wave with a smaller one.

The way we exchanged signs to avoid standing out is just the best... For example, it’s similar to when you go to a voice actor’s live concert, and while everyone around you is busy waving their penlight sticks and calling out their chants, you take a step back and then pose like Vega with the air of a boyfriend. We might as well be dating, right? Except the person’s usually just some random stranger...

Spotting the both of us, Totsuka spoke to his fellow members, and came jogging over. Yuigahama waved in response.

“Oh, yahallo, Sai-chan!”

“Oh, yahallo.”

Totsuka was out of breath as he repeated after her and returned her big wave. Then, he also gave me a nice smile.

What a wonderful greeting that is... I couldn’t help but be moved by the beauty of our language... Wait, no. Is it even a part of our language? Let’s see, what language did the word “yahallo” originate from?

While I was engaged in a philosophical mental struggle, Yuigahama raised her voice in admiration.

“Busy with club? Wow, you look so slim.”

“Sl-Slim...? Hmm, I’m not really sure about that,” he said with an embarrassed smile.

“Oh, trust me, Sai-chan, you’re super slim. You really need more meat on you, it’s unfair.” Yuigahama exclaimed and shook her hands with a grave expression.

“R-Really...?” Totsuka asked. Yuigahama then began poking his sides. “Oh, st-stop it...”

“See! You’re so thin! Look, Hikki, he’s so thin!”

Totsuka squirmed in hopes of escaping, but Yuigahama took on a teasing attitude, and beckoned me over.

Oh? Doth I get the honor of touching, too?

I reached out with my hand. Or at least, I tried to.

“Hachiman... stop her...” Totsuka cried, begging for help. In that instant, I was locked into place. My chest was pierced by an arrow, you see... Instead, I decided to change the subject. I’ll do something about her, don’t worry!

“Totsuka, are you free tonight?” I asked. He tilted his head in surprise. Yuigahama stopped her poking, and similarly bobbed her head. I continued, “We were talking about going to karaoke, and you know how I asked you for help with the prom? That went well, so we’re thinking of celebrating...”

To see the dummy prom proposal through, I consulted with Totsuka. As a matter of fact, if it wasn’t for him being there at the time, I wouldn’t have talked about any of the circumstances and details at all. Since I hadn’t thanked him yet for his help, I wanted him to come to the party.

<sup>11</sup> Cure Star’s catchphrase from Star Twinkle Pretty Cure.



“Right, right! You should come, Sai-chan!” Yuigahama said, clapping her hands.

Finding it difficult to refuse, Totsuka said, “If you don't mind me coming after club, then...”

I nodded back to his bashful smile. And then, the bell chimed to signify the end of our lunch.

“Let's go back to class,” said Yuigahama. She stood up, and wiped the grit off her skirt. I followed suit, and finished the remainder of my drink. I got rid of the bread packaging and can on the way to the school building, my chilled fingers in my pockets.

Our plans were now set for the day. I wasn't feeling particularly enthused about the party initially, but now, I was kind of looking forward to it.

X X X

The spring sun began to incline and fill the tranquil hallway, echoing throughout was two people's worth of footsteps; no more, no less.

It was after school, and Yuigahama inexplicably came along and hurried her pace to my side. I thought, “Why are you tagging along?” but ultimately kept it to myself.

“Is Chuuni at the club, too?” she asked.

“Probably,” I answered. I had asked Zaimokuza and the two members of the UG Club to create a website and social network account for my dummy prom proposal, and it was likely still under their management. I was going to inform them that their mission was over and hopefully get their agreement to come to the evening party at the same time.

The closer we got to the special building, the quieter the hustle and bustle of after school activities became, which stopped at the corner that led to the UG Club. I flung the door open, and Zaimokuza trotted over to welcome us.

“Hm, Hachiman. Finally come, have you? Yahallo!” he exclaimed, flapping his trench coat. Sagami's brother and Hatano pushed their glasses up as they poked their head out from behind and greeted us.

“Oh, yahallo there.”

“Hello, and yahallo.”

“Yes, quite the wonderful greetings you have there!” I thought. I wanted to exclaim out loud, but a rather upsetting sigh came creeping up on me from behind.

“...”

I turned around and... uh oh, Gahama-san looks so scary... She was clearly in a bad mood, as she gave me a half-closed glare.

“Hikki, make them stop.” She lowered her voice and pulled on my sleeve. She wasn't this upset when Totsuka said it... Obviously! Totsuka's a cutie, that's why! These guys were not.

I motioned her towards a seat with my hands while trying to placate her. After she reluctantly took her seat, I sat on a nearby chair as well.

“Right, so I've got something to tell you guys today,” I said. The three turned to me. “I'm happy to report that we will be going through with the planning of the prom partly because of your cooperation. We worked together only for a short amount of time, but great work to all involved. You guys helped me a lot, so thanks.”

I bowed my head, and Yuigahama did the same.

“And so, as of today, all managerial affairs in regards to the dummy prom will now end.”

Sagami's brother and Hatano showed surprise when they saw my bow and then breathed out with a smile.

“I see.”

“That's good to hear.”

“Indeed, and so, the curtain closes on another case! Or so Yoshiteru thought...” Zaimokuza mumbled and made a distant look.

Ignoring him, I coughed, and made a straight face. “Therefore, effective immediately, this executive committee is now dissolved. Going forward, usage of the 'yahallo' greeting is now banned.”

A period of silence befell the room and following a few dead moments later, Sagami's brother and

Hatano's glasses slid down their noses.

“Ehh...?”

“N-No way...”

“Why are you guys so disappointed...?” Yuigahama looked at them apathetically and sighed in irritation.

The “yahallo” ban was in effect, and that resulted in plunging everyone's excitement. I decided to take advantage of the situation. When you're trying to deceive someone, the best time to strike is when they're agitated or vulnerable!

“Now that's all settled, let's go to karaoke,” I said, casually sounding like I was calling my mom. The two UG members looked at me with gloomy eyes.

“...With who?”

“With your friends?”

“Hachiman doesn't have any.”

“Speak for yourself...”

Still showing signs of life, Zaimokuza interjected unnecessarily. I gave him an immediate retort, but he returned it with a dauntless laugh, “Muhaha, totally.”

“Chuuni, you're not friends with those two, huh?”

Yuigahama worded her question, as if in surprise, but her voice had a clear lack of interest. The two UG members made an aghast expression.

“Eh?”

“Ehh...”

“Why the surprise...? Does it hurt to be told you weren't his friends? Shouldn't that actually make you happy?” I thought, puzzled. I looked at them, and both of them mumbled “those” and “two...” in succession and in shock; it looked like what hurt them was actually not being remembered by Yuigahama. As if linked to their emotional state, their glasses slid down even more.

Hmm, I get that. Considering how Princess Gahama was acting recently, they probably thought they were somehow getting along... But she's never actually called me by my full name, so I'm just waiting for verification that she doesn't actually remember it.

“All right, all right, but let's go to karaoke after this.” I told them in a hurry, hoping to get their consent before they regained the ability to make rational decisions.

However, Sagami's brother and Hatano frowned, finding my invitation questionable. Hatano pushed up his glasses that hung at his ears like CHEMISTRY Kawabata's sunglasses<sup>12</sup>. “Wait, after this? You're pretty shady to be inviting us so suddenly like that...”

In similar fashion, Sagami's brother recovered from his shock. He brushed his bangs up like Raven<sup>13</sup>, and pushed his glasses up higher and higher, looking high in spirits.

“He's definitely a little crazy...”

“Only a little, you say?” Zaimokuza joined in and began insulting my character with the other two in a huddle.

Unable to stay quiet any longer, Yuigahama added, “Um, it's kind of like a party. Do you guys have any plans later? I heard you guys were free today...” She gave me a piercing look, clearly saying, “They're obviously not free...” Then, she hit me with her knee under the table asking what to do next.

I brought my shoulders together in shame, looking as thin as a northern white-faced owl before its predator... I started thinking about the excuses I could give her. Then, I glanced to see the two UG members polishing their glasses.

“Uhh... if it's already been planned, I guess I'll have to go.”

“Hm, well, it's not like I can't find some free time or anything, you know?”

They averted their gaze with slightly flushed cheeks and put back on their glasses. Their tone was a little curt, sounding like a caller in puberty who grew overexcited on a live voice actor radio show.

“For real? Yay,” Yuigahama said, smiling. The two cleared their throats and politely mumbled in agreement.

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<sup>12</sup> Member of the CHEMISTRY band. Often seen with his glasses [hanging at the tip of his ears](#).

<sup>13</sup> Fire Emblem Heroes character.



“Hey, boys! Aren't you, like, acting totally different with Yui here?” I thought, looking to voice my complaints. But it wasn't hard for me to imagine doing the same if I were in their position, and the thought made me squirm.

“Karaoke? Then, karaoke we shall, and that necessitates shiny things,” Zaimokuza said somberly, and the other two nodded. Yuigahama, however, was just one beat slower in understanding.

“Shiny things... Oh, like shiny fish.”

“No.”

Why did you look so convinced there? Acting like you know what's going is a little weird, don't you think? If someone decided to wave around horse mackerel and gizzard shad at a concert, they'd be a nuisance. What kind of ritual was that, anyway?<sup>14</sup> The staff would instantly eject them from the venue for that.

Sagami's brother and Hatano, of course, didn't need an explanation on what they were.

“I don't have my penla sticks with me today.”

“Guess I'll buy some lume sticks from Daiso.”

That exchanged finally caused Yuigahama to tilt her head in confusion. Yep, this girl needs help with foreign words!

“Penla? Lume?”

“They're referring to penlight and cyalume glowsticks.”

By the way, for some reason, voice actor otakus abbreviated penlights as PENLa while idol otakus abbreviated cyalume as CYA (according to my research).

People were inclined to think, “Why would you ever bring small light objects just for karaoke?” but I've heard about people competing with them. People would gather in a large party room and start going into a frenzy like they would at a live concert.

It's not particularly strange that otakus were compatible with karaoke. If you browsed the play history on a SmartDAM tablet, you'd come across primarily Showa ballads and anime theme songs. Karaoke was definitely a pastime for otakus and old people alike, and for times you needed to spice things up with close friends, it was one of the best places to go.

Now, our problem today was that one group of attendees didn't even register the other as acquaintances, let alone their names... Since the three of them were frolicking over what they were going to do, I didn't have it in me to say anything. If I did, there's no way they would come.

Before the cat got out of the bag, I decided to take my leave. I gave Yuigahama a suggestive look and got up.

“We'll let you guys know when we find a place.”

“See you later!” Yuigahama said. She got up, and we were about to take our leave until a third of the glass lenses stopped us.

“Oh, one question. Should we delete this site?”

I turned around, and Sagami's brother was pointing the computer screen at me. The screen displayed the official site of the dummy prom. Since the dummy prom was merely a throw-away concept to realize Yukinoshita and her group's prom, the site had served its purpose. There was no longer a reason to continue maintaining it. As a matter of fact, deleting it before it could cause any unnecessary confusion would be ideal.

Everything written there, and everything that wasn't written on there, was all over. That's why, all of it should be deleted. No, all of it *needs* to be deleted as soon as possible.

“Well, there's no rush, so delete it when you have time.”

And what spilled out of my mouth were words that contradicted those thoughts entirely. Even if we chose not to delete it now, it would eventually disappear into the sea of electronics, no longer maintained by any one. But, if I were to delete it on my own terms, it felt like those painful days I had never happened. That made me hesitate.

I couldn't help but smile bitterly to my lingering thoughts, letting out a sigh in mockery of myself. I wasn't sure how Sagami's brother and Hatano interpreted that sigh of mine, but after exchanging looks, they gave their acknowledgment.

I nodded with a word of appreciation and turned my back. And in doing so, I turned my eyes away

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<sup>14</sup> There was an incident at an anime song live concert that involved an otaku waving fishes instead of chemical glowsticks. Fishes, like “aji” or horse mackerel, can also be referred to as “shiny things” or “hikarimono” (光物) in Japanese.

from the monitor—from the sight of the girls standing before the evening sea.

X X X

We walked down the silent after-school hallway. The campus was quiet, many students having either gone to their clubs or gone home for the day.

After leaving the UG Club, Yuigahama and I made our way to the student council and passed by the entrance of the school building while discussing where to go for karaoke. As we got closer, the door opened, and a beige bob cut came hopping out; it was the student council president Isshiki Iroha. Shuffling out of the room from behind her was the remaining members. Upon catching sight of the long black hair swaying in that group, Yuigahama ran towards it.

“Oh, it's Yukinon.”

The person she approached with a wave was Yukinoshita. Though perplexed, she accepted the jumping embrace from Yuigahama.

“You know the thing from yesterday? I'll have a lot of time during spring break.”

“That's good. I'll have ample enough time to spare in the later half of break,” Yukinoshita answered, slowly pushing away Yuigahama who was close enough for their cheeks to touch.

I was able to infer from a distance that they were discussing their plans over spring break, but I couldn't get myself to mingle in out of awkwardness. If I were to stop, I would get a moment long enough for needless thoughts to fill my head. I mulled over what would be the best way to act natural, but slowly continued my pace, understanding that stopping in place wasn't in my best interest.

Noticing me, Isshiki quickly faced me. “Oh, senpai, you were here, too?”

“Yeah. Looks like you're working hard,” I said. Yukinoshita acknowledged me with a look from the corner of her eye, and our eyes met. She quickly averted her gaze, however. I slid my sight to the side in the moment she blinked. As a result, Isshiki, who was positioned diagonally from me, was the only one who spoke to me.

“Things are going well, I take it?” I asked, and Isshiki made a puzzled look, blinking several times.

“It's hard to say... right?” Isshiki answered. She smiled and redirected the conversation to Yukinoshita.

“Y-Yes, I suppose so.” She whispered, surprised from the sudden question, and closed her eyes in thought. “As of now, there aren't any major problems to be concerned with, though that isn't to say the particulars of our planning are as optimal as they could be.”

Yuigahama and I exchanged glances after hearing her roundabout answer, our silence asking, “So, that means...?”

“We're getting by, I think,” Isshiki said, filling in the silence. She wore a wry smile and shrugged.

I see, I see. It was absurdly difficult to understand what she said, but simply put, progress was normal, I thought, feeling convinced. Yuigahama, however, wasn't and shook Yukinoshita's arm.

“Yukinon, your explanation's a mess! It's bad!”

“I-I'm sorry. I wasn't quite sure how to word it because we're not exactly proceeding along well enough to say we're on track...” Yukinoshita said, turning red. She dropped her gaze in embarrassment, accelerating the fiddling of her front bangs, and her face could hardly be seen.

“You're too honest! But I guess that's pretty typical of you, Yukinon,” Yuigahama said, smiling.

She then strengthened her grip on Yukinoshita's arm. Yukinoshita whispered, “Too close...” but ultimately let her have her way.





The distance between the two appeared like it had always been, like it had been to this day, or perhaps more closer than ever before. I felt relieved in seeing that.

“Looks like everything's going smoothly, then,” I said, quietly.

“We're doing okay right now, at least. We're still a little unsure, though,” Isshiki said, looking at Yukinoshita for agreement.

“We plan on finishing on time.”

“Basically, what she said.”

“Hmm, well, don't work too hard.”

“You're kidding, of course, we're going to work hard. If we don't, we're not going to make it on time. We totally could use some extra helping hands if I had to be honest,” said Isshiki. She looked again at Yukinoshita who then placed her hand to her mouth, taking a moment to think. What followed was a torrent of words.

“Today and tomorrow will be critical junctures for us, so we'll see an increase in our workload, but it's not an amount we can't handle with our current staff, and it's thanks to your hard work, Isshiki-san.”

Upon finishing, she directed a smile to Isshiki, who groaned with flushed cheeks.

“Well, today doesn't seem like a good day, but if you need help tomorrow, just let me know.”

“Really!?”

“Isshiki-san, tomorrow will be primarily technical rehearsal, so we don't expect there to be any more work beyond that. I don't believe there's a reason why would we need more personnel.”

“Oh, okay...” Yukinoshita and I had our gazes concentrated on Isshiki. Looking stumped, she raised her hand. “Um, I'm not your interpreter, you know...”

“My bad, I'm not too confident with my Japanese, so I don't think I'll be able to talk to another Japanese person.”

“I don't think language is your problem here! It's your communication skills! Using another language definitely isn't going to change anything...” Yuigahama declared.

Rude... I'll have you know I'm quite skilled with body language. I was confident I could tell everyone in the world that “I want to go home” with a forced smile and excessive sweating.

And so, with a forced smile and excessive sweating, I sighed. Isshiki dropped her shoulders in resignation.

“Well, I suppose there's nothing we can do, then... Yukino-senpai also sucks at communication, anyway,” she said.

Yukinoshita's brow twitched. “Isshiki-san? You're mistaken. Are you aware that it's disrespectful to speak directly to an individual that's above your social standing?”

“Eh? Scary...”

Yukinoshita flicked the hair at her shoulder with the back of her hand and flashed a smile at Isshiki who drew back in fear.

But, well, I guess that kind of culture exists, too! I see, I see. Modern day society still did have a disparity between social classes, after all. As it turns out, you could pretty much get away with anything if you were an upper-class citizen with a service medal. That was convincing to me, at least.

Then, the secretary, who was a few steps away, timidly spoke up. “Um, it's almost time for us to move to the gym...”

“Oh, my apologies,” Yukinoshita said. She then gently left Yuigahama's hold. “We need to get going, so see you later...”

“Okay.”

Yuigahama waved her hand, and Yukinoshita nodded. She then gestured to Isshiki and the others to proceed. As they were about to leave, Isshiki trotted over. She placed her hand on my shoulder to lift herself up and moved to my ear.

“Please help us on the day of the event, though I'll welcome your help at any time.”

“If I have nothing to do, maybe...”

“Of course you won't have anything to do. Gosh, just be honest with yourself and say you want to help. You're such a pain,” said Isshiki. Her sweet breaths floated around my ears, and I bent backwards to avoid them. She then puffed her cheeks. Grumbling, she chased after Yukinoshita and the others.



After seeing them off, we turned back to head to the school entrance.

“I’m glad everything’s going well.”

“Yeah.”

She stated cheerfully, and I answered.

Then, I questioned myself. Will things really go that well? And will I truly be able to conduct myself as well as I should?

I started walking, and the distance between us grew farther and farther. The places we were aiming for were already on separate paths.

Our relationship was merely a temporary byproduct of the special circumstances we were put in. Now that those were gone, it was only a given that Yukinoshita and I would grow farther apart.

Just like how we grew accustomed to that time, and that room, this relationship of ours would eventually stop feeling out of place. And just like how we grew accustomed to the hollow shell of what used to be our friendly relationship, the growing distance between us, too, was something we would eventually become accustomed to.

## Prelude 3

I finished speaking, and she sighed.

"I see..." Her voiced trailed off.

The night grew, and the wind began to blow with a frigid chill. I listened to the susurrating leaves and found myself holding my arms. The sensation that pierced my skin wasn't just because of the wind, but because of the brief moment of silence.

I directed my gaze to her, wondering what she would say, and our suddenly eyes met. She smiled and slid over on the bench closer to me. Then, she gently asked, "What did you talk about?"

Her round eyes impishly shook and looked up at me from below. Her gaze was gentle, visible with curiosity, but in reality, an intellectual spark was embedded within its depths. Her eyes misted over, as if to hide her shrewd nature. It was this kindness that I loved.

Confronted with those eyes, I wasn't confident I could ever try to pretend like nothing happened. I slowly formed my words, words without any semblance of falsehood, just like I did with him.

"We talked about how fun this year was... all the things the three of us did together this entire year were all things new to me and things I didn't know about... I had so much fun."

My rambled on vaguely, but she nodded her head to every word I uttered with closed eyes.

"Me, too. It's kind of weird, it's almost like this is the end..." She lifted her head and smiled. However, her words were dressed with a feeling of lamentation, contrary to her bashful giggle. Unknowingly, I lowered my eyes.

"Yes, because this is the end."

"Huh?"

Her reaction looked surprised, but her expression said otherwise. But I thought that was to be expected. We were always conscious of the end ever since the beginning of the winter.

"Our contest is over."

Like turning off the lights, her expression darkened.

"I wish you wouldn't just try end it like that, because I don't feel the same... at all..."

"I'm sorry... I really am. But, I want to put an end to this."

The words came stumbling out of my mouth, and I was unable to keep them from being blunt. I wish I could've worded it better, but I couldn't lie. I couldn't tell her in a way without telling the truth, because it was too difficult. Instead, I strengthened the grip on her hand.

"That's why, at the very least, I want to fulfill your request. Beacuse your wish is also my wish."

"I didn't ask for that." She returned my grip. While it lacked strength, her warmth made up for it. She looked up with shivering brows, and locked her gaze onto mine. "I want everything, everything to be like it's always been."

Those were the very same words she told us on that snowy day, the very words that set me into motion. Ever since I heard those words, and ever since he rejected those words, I had always been moving...

Her wish was something the three of us shared and dreamed of. Those days were just so unbelievably comfortable that the thought would force itself into my head. But that's why I understood, that granting her entire wish would be too difficult.

"I don't think I can give you exactly what you want, but I think I can at least give you something close." My voice hushed, I prayed that this was how things should be, that this was the way things should end. "But he'll be able to grant your entire wish without fail."

She was the one and only person whom I could call a friend, and that's why, I wanted her wish to come true. I kept such a self-centered sentiment to myself in shame and looked at her in silence.

"I'm not so sure..." She tilted her head with a forced laugh and rubbed the bun of her hair. "I get the feeling he'll grant it in such an indirect way, it's kind of hard to ask him."

A chuckle escaped my lips. Oh, how right she was. Based on our past experiences, it was just so easy to imagine happening. To this day, he would always find a way to realize someone's request in a way we wouldn't have expected, or in a way we wouldn't have wanted. That made me recall a short



story I had read long ago.

“I understand. He's like the *Monkey's Paw*.”

“Monkey? Why?”

She blinked her eyes with her head tilted. That appeared so adorable that my face broke into a smile.

“It's nothing... I'm just talking about how twisted people aren't honest.”

“I get that. He's always doing things in such a weird way when he could just be them normally...” She sighed in exhaustion.

I smiled. “Agreed. He needs to consider what it's like to be in our shoes.”

“I know.”

We both laughed. But a sudden pain pricked my chest. I no longer needed to deal with his ridiculous way of doing things anymore. When that reality came down on me, my laughter tapered off. She gave me a concerned look after I abruptly fell silent, asking me what could be wrong.

I shook my head. “Do you want to go somewhere for spring break?”

I forced a smile to the best of my ability and responded with something completely unrelated. I knew my smile was unnatural, poor, and even awkward. But starting tomorrow, I had to get better at it.

I truly didn't know what kind of face I needed to make. I wasn't even sure if I should be making eye contact, either. I had no absolutely confidence I could speak naturally, nor did I have any idea of what I could talk about, and I just couldn't remember how I used to behave.

But even so.

I was sure, one day, I would be able to do it all better, and more properly, than I do now.

### Chapter 3: Surely, there will be a season that you'll remember every time you take a whiff of that smell.

Near the station, there was a single karaoke room. The muffled noise from the neighboring room shook the interior. I looked up at the ceiling and rested the back of my head against the wall, which made the noise sound even louder.

Not even louder, heck, it was the only thing I could hear. Truly strange, because there were seven people in this room right now...

For a mere seven people, the room was too spacious, but even so, the only things that filled the room were the sounds of coughing, sighing, and straw-sipping of the drinks from the drink bar; singing or talking were both nonexistent. If there was one noticeable sound to mention, it was the inorganic taps of plastic. I looked in the direction of the sound, and Miura Yumiko was resting her chin in one hand, tapping on her smartphone in irritation.

Our seating arrangements formed a one-sided open square. Ebina-san occupied Miura's left while Yuigahama occupied her right. A little farther to the right of Yuigahama sat me, Zaimokuza, Sagami's brother, and Hatano.

I sat directly in the middle and served as the border that segregated the genders, making me feel a little like Moses. Such a position allowed me a vantage point for both sides. On one side, Miura was irritated, Ebina-san looked indifferent, and Yuigahama had an awkward smile. On the other, Zaimokuza and the two UG Club members were restlessly darting their eyes around the room.

This get-together was to celebrate the success of the dummy prom plan, or it was supposed to be, but the mood in the room saw no signs of improving with our consciousnesses passing on to the next world.

Despite their initial excitement in the UG Club room, the three stooges were dead silent. Um, guys? What happened? Did you some depression-inducing drugs? Or maybe you ate something from Gekiochi-kun?

Nonetheless, it wasn't entirely their fault. This was their first contact with Miura's group. For people like us to meet others of the same species, it's a natural reaction to assume an air of arrogance. But before girls, the first level of our shyness would surface. For someone of my caliber, I'd skip straight to level two and three. I was a newcomer back then, and a newcomer now, a freshman for life. As a result, I, too, didn't say a word in front of Miura and Ebina-san.

With not a soul desiring to sing, the tension in the room dipped further.

Yuigahama tugged my sleeve and whispered into my ear. "H-Hikki, it's kind of awkward in here..."

My sense of smell was aroused by a citrus note fragrance, and her whispers playfully tickled the edges of my ear.

"No kidding..." This may have been the very first time I had ever agreed to something from the bottom of my heart. I sighed and also writhed.

She's too close... Why can't she understand how embarrassing this is!? In front of other people, no less! Look, Miura and Ebina-san glanced at us just now! But I can't say I dislike that, so please do it again some other time!

I warned Yuigahama with my eyes and proceeded to back away for space. She made a perplexed look, but averted her eyes when she finally caught wind of my action. I breathed out in relief, only for her to start tugging at my sleeve again. She then moved closer and closed the distance I had just opened. Um, why?

"Hikki, do something..."

"Yeah, not happening..." I said and stiffened my smile. As I retained my composure, I leaned forward. Yuigahama lost her grip on my sleeve, and I silently assumed a Gendo pose.

In this situation, no matter how hard I tried to liven up the mood, what awaited me was a grand champion title of a one-man tournament. Then, I could just smash Zaimokuza with the SmartDAM tablet and retire.

"So, what did you even tell those two?"

"Huh? I just mentioned you, karaoke, and stuff..." She tilted her head and acted like it was nothing unusual.

“That's all you said, and they still showed up? Miura's niceness scales to infinity...”

“It's not like you told those three anything, either...”

“Because they wouldn't be here if I did.”

Speaking of those three, they were staring daggers at me. In any case, I couldn't let this mood continue on forever. To prepare myself for when I needed to whack Zaimokuza, I reached for the SmartDAM tablet. In that moment, my arm was stopped from the opposite of Yuigahama.

I turned to look and Zaimokuza was pulling on my sleeve. His eyes were moist like that of an abandoned puppy. “H-Hachiman...”

“Shut up, Zaimokuza, just shut up. Stay quiet.”

“Even more than I am now!? You do realize I have yet to utter a single word, yes? Surely you understand how awkward it is right now?”

His voice traveled needlessly well in spite of how restrained it sounded. This led the other two, who were idling in their seats, to twist in our direction.

“Seriously. Is this some kind of wake? If you asked 100 people, 108 of them would say the same thing.”

“You're including sales tax...?”

“I expect that figure to go up...”

Hatano and Sagami's brother scrunched up their faces with bitterness and expressed their mutual agreement. Oh, look, now the figure increased to 110 people! The sales tax was now 10%!

Our restrained chatter lasted for only a moment. The oppressive air that stifled the room killed off any remaining snickering, which transformed into low-spirited sighs. All of us boys nervously directed our eyes to the other side.

What awaited us at the end of our gazes was Miura rocking her leg and using her fingertips to fiddle with the curls of her hair. She wasn't even remotely trying to hide her boredom, which only caused the boys to sink into their seats.

At a glance, Miura's attitude was intimidating, but depending on how you looked at it, you could call it a form of kindness. By wholly expressing her displeasure and exuding an aura to keep away, it made dealing with her simple. The less we had to get involved with her, the better off we were.

Yuigahama scooted over to her out of concern, sticking to her side, and began operating the SmartDAM. “Yumiko, wanna sing something?”

“Mm...”

Yuigahama playfully bumped shoulders with Miura. Unable to ignore her, she reluctantly dropped her gaze to the SmartDAM. They both brought their faces together and began whispering. In time, Miura began to lighten up, letting out occasional giggles and slapping Yuigahama's thigh. To an outsider, they appeared to be nothing more than close girl friends, a precious sight.

Miura was in good hands now that Yuigahama was giving her attention. The other problem was the remaining one... I glanced at Ebina-san. Although she had a smile the entire time we arrived, it contained an invisible shallowness that was reflected in the depths of her eyes. That was the most frightening thing here... The people who acted maturely were the hardest to deal with because you had no idea what was going through their minds.

As I sat there, anxious of what could happen, she suddenly spoke up.

“The UG Club plays games, right?”

“Oh, yes.”

Hatano, who had been uncomfortable in his seat, replied in a fluster. Sagami's brother didn't say anything, but nodded his head with hyper speed. After their responses, Ebina-san continued.

“Ohh, what kind?”

“Um, like board games...”

“Ooh, board games, huh? I dabble in them a lot myself.”

“Oh, right.”

“They've been getting pretty popular, too.”

“Right.”

“Like the werewolf one.”



“Right...”

“And the escape-the-room ones?”

“Right...”

Hatano and Sagami's brother took turns answering Ebina-san. Right, right, rightrighttright. They continued to repeat the same response over and over until their voices trailed off. Were they trying to recite a popular song or something?

As a result of Ebina-san's thoughtfulness, they were able to establish some form of communication and manage some semblance of a conversation. The oppressive atmosphere didn't change in the least, however. I could feel the air stagnating, and I let out a long, shallow sigh.

I glanced to my side to see Zaimokuza's mouth popping open like a goldfish. I knew the feeling; it's like we were under the hallucination that the oxygen was getting thinner. We both made side glances to each other and nodded. Our eyes met for only an instant.

“This is painful.” “It is.” “Should we add something to the conversation?” “Won't you just be adding to the pain?” “Totally.”

Our voices were so quiet, to the point you couldn't tell if our vocal chords were vibrating, but they eventually went silent. Instead of exchanging acknowledging interjections, we let out shallow breaths.

Conversations that failed to take off were worse than silence, and Zaimokuza and I were Seagull-level professionals when it came to silence. We went into a half-meditative state to wait out the worthless conversations that you'd have at a mixer you didn't want to be at, only for us to be immediately broken out of it.

“Board games really are a lot of fun. Do you guys play anything else?” Ebina-san said, smiling.

Sagami's brother and Hatano exchanged a look, and their glasses flashed. That caused Zaimokuza to perceive something, and he muttered in a panic, “D-Don't do it!” while making small shaking motions with his hands. But his actions were so minimal that they didn't reach either of the UG Club members.

Sagami's brother readjusted his glasses. “W-Well, we don't only play major ones like Catan and Scotland Yard. We also play classical games like chess, shogi, and othello. For games that don't have physical components, we engage in lateral thinking puzzles as well.”

“We also visit the Game Market for new titles. As for other games, we play TRPG games like CoC, which is Call of Cthulu, by the way. Anyway, since our end goal is to design our own game, we dabble in all sorts of different games. If you're interested, we have plenty of games in our club room, and you can come by any time to play.” Hatano pushed up his glasses and ended with a sneer. Despite their earlier stammers, they didn't flub a single word in their rants.

...What was it that drove us to break into rants whenever it was concerning something we were experts in? It's a bad habit of ours. When the other person showed even a semblance of interest in our hobbies, we'd use that as an opportunity to act superior and talk them down.

Although the two UG Club members were beaming with satisfaction and snorted, Zaimokuza and I were holding our heads in mutual shame. Of course, Ebina-san who seemed familiar with this side of the world only nodded back and didn't react in the least.

“Oh, yeah, sure.”

Ebina-san's response was as neutral as it could've been. On the other hand, the two beside her had their mouths open in shock.

“That was some fast talking...”

“Ugh...”

Their responses were brief, but their reactions were visibly showing their aversion. Heck, Miura was physically backing away. Please spare them from that, okay?

When Sagami's brother and Hatano noticed their reactions, they broke into a muddled laughter—either trying to laugh off the embarrassment or bear the shame—and their shoulders sank. In the end, the room was once again filled with gloom. Well, they're done for, I thought.

Then, knocks came from the door. I looked, wondering if the food we had ordered had finally arrived, and before any of us could answer, the door flung open.

“Yaaay!”

“Yaaay!”

One disgusting and noisy voice came from Tobe Kakeru while the other incredibly beautiful and glittering voice came from Totsuka Saika. They said the same thing, but why was one so much cuter

than the other? Totsuka-Totsuka was clearly too cute, don't you think? Glitterific ★!

While those thoughts filled my head, appearing from behind them was Hayama Hayato. He came in with a tray with a variety of beverages from the drink bar.

“Hachiman, sorry for the wait.”

“Ohh, Totsuka, you made it,” I said, shoving Zaimokuza to the side. By opening up space this way, I could make it very natural for Totsuka to sit next to me. I couldn't help but be in awe at my genius plan!

I certainly did extend an invitation to Totsuka, but the other two... I gave them a dubious look as they took their seats on Miura's side.

Totsuka made a strained laugh. “Oh, I met them on the way, and when I mentioned karaoke, Tobe suggested to tag along.”

“Oh, makes sense...”

I looked at Tobe, and he had secured a seat next to Ebina-san and excitedly played with the hair at his nape. “Oh snap? Yumiko and Ebina-san, you're both here, too? Damn, wasn't expecting that. Some crazy coincidence, eh?”

A terrible act, indeed. But I did want to reward him a Nice Stick bread for his efforts.

With Hayama and Tobe present, Miura was finally able to ease up, and their side began to relax. The UG Club members looked uncomfortable, on the other hand. Either way, it was far better than the frozen space we were occupying earlier. With conversations springing up around the room, it was starting to look like an actual party.

Yuigahama tapped on my shoulder. “Are you going to raise a toast?”

“Raise a whaaat...?”

“Wow, you really don't want to do it, huh...?”

My mouth twisted, and Totsuka let out a strained laugh.

“People who are suited for that kind of thing should do it,” I said, looking at the person in question. Hayama seemed to have heard our exchange and shrugged his shoulders after returning my look. Then, he went back to talking to Miura. Hayama-senpai really wasn't kind, after all...

Anyway, the reason this party was being held in the first place was because of my dummy prom proposal. If it's to reward their efforts for their cooperation, then it was only right that I did the toast.

“Fine, I'll say something.”

Yuigahama nodded her head happily, and Totsuka did a small clap. With their generous support, I cleared my throat and stood with a glass in hand.

“Pardon the interruption, but I would like to take this moment to say something...”

Yuigahama and Totsuka energetically applauded, causing everyone else to follow along despite their confusion.

Having no experience with this kind of role, I awkwardly started, “Uhh, this was a wonderful party, and I'd like to thank you all for—”

“Save that for when the party's over.” Hayama interrupted in disbelief.

I made a gesture with my hand, telling him to shut up and not to cut me off.

“Everything was resolved without issue because of everyone's cooperation the other day,” I said, briskly. “Thank you, and cheers.”

After I raised a toast, everyone cheered in unison and clinked their glasses with their neighbors. It looked like this party was finally starting to feel like one. I breathed out in relief and sank into the sofa, leaving everyone to their devices in their fun little worlds.

X X X

It would've been a perfect time to wrap up the party with a closing joke, but the party was in full swing.

The disharmony that initially existed between the UG Club and Miura's group vanished because of Hayama's skillful intervention. As a result, conversations began to bounce back and forth between the two groups. Tobe kick-started the singing rotation, followed by an embarrassed Totsuka and then everyone else. Of course, this meant the eventual turns of Zaimokuza and the two UG Club members...

However, Hayama, again, was able to ease them in. He'd find an anime tie-up song with a famous Chiba band, and then proceed to sing the intro line. He'd then ask, "Do you know this?" and nonchalantly hand over the microphone to them. Zaimokuza and the two UG Club members reluctantly accepted, but this gave birth to an environment where everyone could sing.

Occasionally, he would redirect the conversation to the three, so they could enjoy themselves, and so they could share some common interest with songs they might both know; it was a high-level technique.

Hayama was as shrewd as ever. He was, without a doubt, a genius when it came to superficial socialization. I looked at him with a face contorted by respect and disgust. Another individual was similarly looking at him.

"Hayama-senpai is a crazy good person..."

"He's the very first person who I can truly call my senpai..."

Hatano and Sagami's brother tearfully gazed at him in admiration. Their expressions immediately transformed into disdain when they made comparative glances at Zaimokuza and me.

There wasn't any need for me to be upset at this point. After all, I was very aware of the difference in our specs. But, you know? I wasn't quite fond of their apparent disgust. It's not very nice. As their senpai, this was where I needed to reprimand them with a snide remark of my own. I was their senpai, after all, and that's what we're supposed to do!

Since Sagami's brother happened to be closer, I tapped on his shoulder. "Hmm, quite fond of Hayama, aren't you? You've got the same preferences as your sister, two peas in a pod."

"Tch!" He frowned with a loud click of his tongue.

Yep, that's more like it. He looked exactly like his sister. Ufufu, that's the face I wanted to see... I chuckled from a dark feeling of gratification.

Zaimokuza shrugged his shoulders and sighed. "Hachiman, that's exactly why."

And now, he was getting on my case... Come on, you were getting the same poor treatment too, you know?

However, I did feel a little guilty for giving them a nasty attitude, since I did trick them into coming. If they had an insult or two, it was just my desserts. I went into thought and wondered what kind of compensation I could give them. Suddenly, Totsuka tapped my thighs with a soft touch. Desperately forcing down my horrific squeal, I looked at him.

"I'm going to grab refills," he said, tilting his head and shaking the empty glass cups. It looked like he wanted to get through to go to the drink bar, but that was when a light bulb went off in my head.

"Oh, I can do it. I'll grab drinks for everyone while I'm at it."

"You sure?" Totsuka sounded a little concerned. I gave him a wink, saying to entrust the job to me. Otherwise, he would've tagged along.

"Yeah, might as well."

I immediately got up to keep him from saying any more, took all the empty glasses on the table and left the room. I placed them on a tray and dragged my feet to the drink bar. When I arrived, I came across Miura twirling her loose blonde ringlet hair with her fingers and standing in front of the espresso. It looked like she was contemplating what to drink.

When she noticed me, she gave me a quick glance but didn't say a word. It's not like I had anything to say to her either, so we're even!

I approached the neighboring dispenser and began dispensing cold drinks. Miura stood about half a step behind me but then slowly extended her hand to the cappuccino button. The espresso machine whined with the brewing sounds of coffee and steam. I glanced over, and the black surface of the espresso was being covered with white foam.

"You know..." she said, quietly. I wasn't sure who she was speaking to, but it was a little too loud to be her talking to herself.

On the assumption the person was me, I turned my head, and Miura's gaze was focused on the cup in the espresso machine. The bubbles popped one by one as it expanded across the surface.

"What's your deal?"

"What do you mean?" I answered only after making sure the question was for me. However, her vague wording left me unsure of what she wanted. In the meantime, I continued to fill the glass cups with cola one by one.



Although the interior of the store was bustling with all sorts of noise like the cable broadcast, singing leaking from other rooms, the whirring of the dispensers, and the bumping clinks of glass, it was eerily quiet. And in that pool of noise came a shallow sigh.

“With Yui, I mean.”

I stopped my hand from her sudden statement, or rather, it made me stop.

“Right...”

The only thing I could muster was a meaningless response to fill the silence, a decision I regretted. I could've easily just played dumb. I could've just ignored her altogether. Neither of which I could've done, because something internally pulled at me. That caused me to react in surprise.

Miura quietly swallowed her breath and waited for me to continue. Nothing, however, left my mouth, not even a word of sincerity. I knew it was cowardly of me to stay quiet, but I felt it would've been just as cowardly to verbally convince her to understand.

Irritated by my silence, she forced her cup onto the tray, and sighed. “Look, Hikio, you're not my friend, so I don't really care about you or what happens to you... but it's a different story for Yui.”

Though frank at first, her words trailed off into a kind whisper as she took shallow breaths. I couldn't help but turn to her because it sounded like she was on the verge of tears. Contrary to my expectations, her eyes were burning with intensity.

“Don't half-ass things with her, all right? People who do that piss me off.”

Her resolute glare caused me to swallow my breath. I might've been overwhelmed, not out of fear or intimidation, but by her kindness.

In retrospect, Miura had always kept watch on those close to her; it was a sincerity so strong that it could be mistaken for arrogance. It didn't need to be said about Hayama and Ebina-san, but Yuigahama, too, was a target of her concern, perhaps even more so recently. They were spending more time together with the lack of Service Club activities, and Miura must've had thoughts on the matter.

Her gaze was by no means meant for me, but it contained a strength that was enough to lock me into place. If I tried to gloss over her concern with an indifferent answer, she would see right through me.

“I'll do what I can...” I said, nodding. My words contained no lie, but they rung hollow. I couldn't think of anything appropriate to say.

Miura glared at me. Then, she brushed aside the hair at her shoulder and grunted in disinterest, turning to end the conversation. “That's all. See you.”

As I watched her back, I whispered to myself, or at least, I thought it was low enough to be a whisper. “She's such a good person...”

Miura stopped and twisted the upper half of her body back to me. “Huh? What's that about? Gross.”

Her face distorted in disgust, and she rushed off with the ringlets of her blonde hair wrapped around her fingertips. Between the openings of her swaying hair, the flushed color of her cheeks could be seen, and I repeated my earlier words in my mouth.

X X X

I returned to the room, and Hayama was singing. It looked like Hatano and Sagami's brother had provided everyone with cyalume sticks to wave up and down. On top of that, they did calls, mixes, and chanted “yeah tiger,” or what have you. Coupled with the shining mirror ball, the room was ridiculously gaudy. Tobe seemed to have gone off the deep end as he sweatily waved a towel around for some reason. Needless to say, the excitement in the room was off the charts.

Miura, in particular, was waving her penlight left and right in a daze. Unlike earlier, her face was full of bliss. I'm glad our queen was having fun...

I slipped into the room while ignoring the fervor dominating the room. I set all the glass cups onto the table and sat uncomfortably on the sofa. I always found it difficult to play along in this kind of situation, so I was at a loss.

Tobe, Yuigahama, and Miura's group were obviously used to this. Similarly, Zaimokuza and the two UG Club members' frequent attendance of otaku events gave them some familiarity as well. So, they were able to have fun when the time called for it. For me, the best I could do was just tap or rock my

knees along rhythmically. I wasn't trying to ruin the fun or anything, but it just felt awkward. If anything, the thought of frolicking in a stupor was embarrassing, and that made me act weirdly standoffish. I was well aware of this problem, but it's quite hard to fix!

Forever staring at the thighs of Totsuka, who was banging the tambourines, was the only thing I could do. I sipped my coffee with my cheek in one hand and watched him absentmindedly.

Yuigahama noticed and came over. "This is kind of nice, huh?"

"What is?" I asked.

She observed the room. Her face relaxed into a smile, and she let out a breath. "It's like everyone's getting along, so it's kind of fun."

"Well, people will get along as long the opportunity presents itself. The cognitive structure of mild delinquents and arrogant otakus are mostly the same, after all" I said. I looked at the guys, in particular, Tobe, and the UG Club members. While we're at it, Zaimokuza, too.

Yuigahama frowned. "We're not delinquents... Are you sure you don't mean exact opposites?"

"They have a lot of things in common. For example, they act arrogant when they're in groups, they like shiny things, and they have a tendency to wear black clothes..."

"Are they crows or something...?"

"Crows are probably smarter."

"That's mean!" Yuigahama raised her voice with reproach.

Tobe was yelling, "Yay! Yay!" as he waved his towel around. On the other hand, Zaimokuza was chanting "yeah tiger" while polluting the room with the light of his UO sticks. Any one who saw these two would think crows were better...

To be honest, the theory that the cognitive structures of mild delinquents and arrogant otakus were mostly the same didn't seem totally incorrect. After all, delinquents were very fond of anime and manga, too.

I've heard stories of delinquents getting hooked on manga brought to school by otakus. They'd borrow more volumes from them after finishing older ones in class. If we moved the age bracket a little higher, there were people who got into an anime because of the images on pachinko or slot gaming machines.

With anime and manga gradually becoming a cornerstone of our pop culture in present-day, the word "otaku" was seeing its inherent discriminatory and derogatory meanings diminish. Delinquents and otakus were becoming more similar than ever before.

In addition, there's been an increase in collaborations between general companies and anime products. Even variety shows were beginning to feature the otaku culture in a positive light. There's no denying that marketing was a primary factor in many of these things, but general acceptance was undoubtedly on the rise.

Putting the older generation aside, we were finally moving away from the period when younger people wouldn't get criticized for merely declaring their fondness of anime and games. Even fashion would see the integration of fads and trends on social network sites and streaming platforms.

It was now the age when fad-sensitive high school girls would engage in popular FPS games on their smartphones, or we would see anime game terms trending on social network sites, or we could see e-Sports become a potential candidate for the Olympics. Otaku culture had a reputation for being highly criticized, but it was slowly losing its offensive image as time went on. That being said, anime, or moe anime, in particular, were still a little too far from being truly accepted by the general public.

Even so, anime culture was slowly integrating into the lives of the younger generation. Music, for instance, was a leading example. Hit chart rankings and live events demonstrated this tendency very clearly. There were also famous DJs and composers who composed for voice actors and anime song singers. This was just one subculture symbol in a sample size of precedents. Anime song club events were on the rise as well. Club events was the last thing you'd expect to be associated with the otaku world, but there were videos of otakus partying as long as the venue or DJ were playing some kind of anime song.

Music, in particular, saw no contradiction between socialites and otakus. Genres didn't discriminate between the two, for there was no problem as long as the socialites and clubbers just livened up the mood. As long as you were with friends or your man, then anything could be fun; such was what we called a socialite, clubbing "yay"er.

I mean, just look at Tobe, he was having the time of his life...

While I was on a lengthy rant in my head, Yuigahama brought her shoulder closer. I tried to maintain some distance, but her grip on my sleeve didn't allow me that luxury. I tried to twist my body away instead, but Yuigahama placed her hand to her mouth, looking to have a secret chat, and that meant I had to listen. I moved my ear closer.

As loud as the thunderous roars of the speakers and everybody's strange screams were, her voice was still audible enough that it tickled the inside of my chest.

"Do you want to come to my place on Saturday...?"

I doubted my eyes and looked at her with a side glance. Yuigahama was bashfully fiddling with the bun on her head.

"No, I don't..." I reflexively spat out before I could grasp the meaning of her words.

Yuigahama puffed her cheeks. "You said you were free."

"Right, I guess I am?"

There's no reason for me to go, I thought, hoping to finish, but Yuigahama cut me off.

"Remember how we talked about baking a cake for Komachi-chan's birthday? So, I was wondering if you wanted to do it."

"Oh, I see... well, if that's the reason, I guess I'll go... Thanks."

Previously, I asked her for advice regarding Komachi's birthday present, but it was postponed because of the events of the prom. Since she was considerate enough to remember, I couldn't reject her with a reason like, "I'm not going, it's too embarrassing."

I groaned as I answered, and Yuigahama energetically nodded her head with a giggle. "Okay! My mom will be home, so she'll teach us some things, too."

"You're just making it harder to go..."

I didn't hate GahaMama by any means, in fact, I liked her a lot, personally. But it only made me more self-conscious if I thought of her as the mother of a girl classmate. I was a rather happy and shy seventeen-year-old, you see.

My shoulders sank, and my words were drowned out by the cheers in the room. Upon checking, Hayama had just finished his turn. I clapped along with everyone, and he gave an exaggerated bow like that of a prince to his curtain call. He was unexpectedly good at playing along.

The room relaxed for only a moment when the song's outro faded. In the next moment, the next track began to play.

Tobe glanced around the room. "Who's next? Who's next?"

"Oh, me, me!" Yuigahama said, standing up. She went over to Miura and Ebina-san to take the microphone.

The girls sat side-by-side and swayed left and right as they sang a popular song in unison. The boys similarly waved their cyalume sticks in the same way. I honestly had no idea what song it was, but Miura looking embarrassed from the gazes of the guys as she sung was cute, so whatever!

With nothing to do, I looked around the room to see if I could get a cyalume stick or tambourine to use. Then, my eyes met with Hayama's. The corners of his mouth curved upwards, and he took a cyalume stick from Sagami's brother and sat next to me. He offered me the stick in silence, and I accepted it silently as well. Although I broke off a piece, I didn't feel like waving it anymore.

...Awkward. I appreciated the stick, but why did he have to sit next to me? Could you, like, go away since you're done here? Actually, why didn't he just toss it over from the beginning?

I swung the sticks in a subdued matter while pressuring him with my silence. However, whether he noticed or not, Hayama took a drink from the tray and adjusted his seating, indicating he was going to stay.

"You're not going to sing?" he said, after removing his mouth from his straw. His gaze was still focused on Miura and the others.

"I'm not getting paid, so no."

"You've got some nerve to say that considering you've been working for free so far."

"I've been on a negative streak since I've been providing from my own pocket."

We carried on a meaningless conversation, never giving each other a glance; it was just to keep our minds off of the awkwardness. But Hayama suddenly showed interest. He leaned forward and faced me with a mean-spirited smile.



“So, the reason you went so far was your *pride as a man*?”

My hand with the cyalume stick suddenly stopped. Then, I covered my face with my hands as if I was caught red-handed. “Why are you remembering that boring crap? Talk about embarrassing, just stop. Forget you ever heard that, and don’t ever bring it up ever again, I swear I’ll kill you.”

Deep regrets along with my words leaked out of my mouth as I held my head. Hayama placed his hand to his mouth and made a heartily chuckle. Yeah, this guy’s got a great personality, seriously.

A few moments later, he retracted his smile, and he gave me a mature look. “You can still make up for your loss.”

“That might be hard since I don’t think I’ll be getting any more opportunities...” I shrugged to escape his eyes, and shot my gaze forward. I ended the conversation by picking up my glass and sipping my coffee for an inordinate amount of time.

At the front, Yuigahama had gotten up to sing. The song was reaching its climax, and everyone around, including Totsuka, Zaimokuza, and the UG members, were ramping up their voltage. Tobe was hitting his tambourine while yelling “yay, yay.”

“Hey, aren’t you...”

In the sea of noise, Hayama’s voice was too difficult to hear. I looked away, expressing no desire to answer him or read his lips. Instead of repeating himself, he merely sighed.

“Annoying...”

My words, directed to no one, disappeared into the torrential racket, a whisper heard by no one.

Only the cheerful music, the gorgeous singing, and the upbeat rhythm reached my ears, almost as if they all had come from a different room. Because of that, it made me remember the words of the person who was drunk, or pretended to be.

That’s why, I waited for the call that would mark the end of this party.

X X X

It was the Saturday following the rambunctious after-party, a day that I would normally idle in the comforts of my home. But today was not such a day.

As I promised the other day, I nervously made way to Yuigahama’s home. This was my second visit. The first time, I was with Yukinoshita, and we only had been in Yuigahama’s room. But this time, I was alone and in the living room. I did not feel at home in the least.

The living room decor was very different in a lot of ways from my home: there was folded laundry, decorative plants with names I didn’t know, tissue boxes with a flower-designed cover, dried flower bouquets hanging on the glass cupboards, planters on the balcony, and a faint woody note fragrance.

Living spaces, especially ones that were occupied by a family, required courage to enter as a complete stranger. Not to say Yuigahama’s room required any; quite the opposite, it required a lot. And I mean, a lot of it.

But for living rooms, there was another reason that kept you on your toes, and that was... the lack of any other family members. Wait a minute. I was told GahaMama was going to be here today...?

Ever since I entered the living room, I was frozen in place and was restlessly darting my eyes around the room. No matter how much I looked, it was silent and Yuigahama and I were the only ones present. I could really only hear Yuigahama in front of the kitchen island noisily going through a cupboard shelf.

Yuigahama was sporting a casual outfit, which may have doubled as her lounge wear, and was wearing a white A-line one-piece parker sweater and fluffy indoor slippers. Along with her loose dressing, it was certainly an appearance you’d expect on a holiday.

As for me, I was wearing a navy oxford shirt and chino pants. It was a selection of clothes picked out by Komachi some time ago to avoid shaming myself in public, or rather, to avoid embarrassing her whenever I was with her in public. With a simple jacket, I could come off as business casual.

I wasn’t trying to dress for the occasion, but on the off chance that I encountered GahaPapa, I wanted to be as presentable as possible to avoid any ill-will. In other words, my outfit was a reflection of my nervousness.

In contrast, Yuigahama was happily humming to herself. “I’ll pour you some tea, so have a seat.”

“R-Right...”

The dining table had four chairs, and I sat on the one closest to the door. Atop the table were several confections recipe books.

Today, the reason for my visit was to make some confections, and if possible, have the guidance of GahaMama. But she was nowhere to be seen. I was also prepared to meet GahaPapa since it was a Saturday, but he wasn't present, either.

...You know what that meant? It was just the two of us, all alone in this house, right? No, wait, there's one more family member, or rather, family pet here. As I looked around, Yuigahama carried a tray with tea and cookies over. She sat on the chair beside mine and handed me a cup of tea.

“Oh, thanks... where's Sablé today?”

“Out on a walk with my mom. They should be back soon, though.”

“I see...”

Yuigahama rested her cheek in one hand and began flipping through one of the cook books and reached out for a cookie. This was what it meant to “be at home.” Well, it's her home, so that's expected. The way she was relaxing made it evident that she spent a lot of time lounging around in the very same chair.

My chair, on the other hand, felt hollow in comparison. Of the four seats, it didn't feel like it was used very often, which meant that the chairs across from us were likely utilized by her parents. And speaking of her parents, I couldn't quite get them off my mind, especially her father.

“Okay, so, I've got a question...”

“What's up?” Yuigahama tilted her head with her eyes still on the recipe book in her hands while chewing her second cookie.

“May I ask the whereabouts of your father today?”

“Why are you talking like that? Gross.”

Yuigahama cackled with amusement, but I was not amused in the least. I didn't mind meeting GahaMama—in fact, I couldn't wait to meet her—but GahaPapa was a different story. I had no idea what I would do. I would kill me if I was in his position. It didn't matter what my relationship with his daughter was because I was already out the moment I got close to her; it was the mind to kill at the slightest of doubts.

“Dad's at work, I guess? No idea,” she said indifferently, paying no heed to my anxiety.

Thank goodness, I wasn't even sure how I was going to greet him... I massaged my chest and sighed in relief.

Yuigahama nosily dragged her chair over to my side. I slid my bottom in the opposite direction to make up the distance, and this resulted in a small space between us. She pushed her recipe book into that space and wanted to look at it together.

“So, I've been thinking, but we can't do anything too hard, right?”

“That so much. Pick something we can't fail at.”

I placed my weight in the opposite direction of Yuigahama, resting my cheek in my hand, and flipped through the pages with my available hand. Photos of gorgeous confections jumped out at us every time we turned a page as we wondered what to make. There were muffins, macarons, tarte tatins, canelés, and florentine biscuits... They all looked gaudy and delicious. Komachi was guaranteed to be happy with any of these.

The only problem was whether I could make any of them. Duh, no way... How exactly were you suppose to separate the egg yolk from the egg whites? And what were you supposed to do with the egg whites? Smear it? Just smear it, right?

Looking at the same book, Yuigahama groaned and mumbled. “I can... make... cookies... maybe?”

What an unreliable statement... She tilted her head for a total of five times. She then did one last tilt and looked up at me.

“I see... I should be able to make those, then.” I gave her a fixed look, emphasizing the importance of my statement.

“What's that supposed to mean?” Yuigahama slapped my shoulder.

“Ow...” I said, mumbling. It didn't hurt really hurt, but I rubbed my shoulders, anyway.

Suddenly, a face peeked in from over my shoulder. It was Yuigahama's mother, who had just

returned from walking their dog. She wore a springtime pale colored spring sweater and a long skirt. In her arms was Sablé.

“Oh, I'm against cookies! You should pick something that'll leave a lasting impression.” She poked her head through the gap between Yuigahama and me and looked down at the recipe book.

Because of that, she was really close, warm, soft, and smelled good—it's over for me. I'm sorry for the outburst, but it's true. Also, Sablé panting into my ear was super annoying. He's even licking me...

“Thank you for having me today... and for your guidance...” I managed to muster out a greeting, even with Sablé licking me.

GahaMama smiled. “Leave it to me! Mama will do her best!”

“Mom, we'll call you later, so go away...” Yuigahama stood up with a sigh and began pushing her away.

“You're the one that asked me to teach you, Yui!”

“Like I said, we'll call you when we need you!”

The resisting GahaMama and the pushing Yuigahama. The result was the two of them pushing against each other with their backs. The playful banter between a mother and her daughter was quite the sight to behold...

“W-Well, if we need something, she can tell us, so...”

The sight unfolding before me was lovely, and it was something I could watch for ages. They would've been at it indefinitely, so I ended up intervening.

As if gaining an ally, GahaMama's face glowed. “That's right! It'd better to think things over with me, you know?”

Yuigahama frowned and let out a sigh. “Okay, fine. So, what do you think we should make, mom?”

Yuigahama reluctantly took her seat and pointed to the chair across from her. Her mom giggled and sat as instructed.

“Since you're making sweets by hand, maybe something thoughtful might be good.”

“Something thoughtful...” Yuigahama looked up at the ceiling in a daze.

“Hikki-kun, what kind of sweets do think is good?” GahaMama lifted Sablé up from her lap and inclined her upper body, pulling Sablé along at her chest. I was on the verge of grinning from her innocent gesture, but I stopped it with my hand.

“Something thoughtful... which means something that is gaudy, that can be instagrammed, is expensive-looking, and can be used as bragging rights with mom friends...”

“Language!”

“You're thinking from the perspective of a wife!?”

GahaMama's smile tightened while Yuigahama gave me a look of pity. I was reproached for my statement, but I wasn't truly refuted. Adult women were frightening.

I paused to think. Then, while looking at Sablé, I answered, “How about... macarons, then?”

I was only looking at Sablé and nothing more. I could see nothing behind Sablé. Only Sablé himself. Whatever else that came into my line of sight was entirely out of my hands.

“Bzzt!”

I looked up to see GahaMama forming a cross with her fingers. Wow, what's with this person? She's adorable...

She cleared her throat and assumed a serious expression. “Macarons are to be given, not to be made.”

“Yep, receiving them makes me happy.”

“But making them is a lot of work.”

Yuigahama giggled innocently while her mom sighed in exhaustion with her hand to her cheek.

Was it really that much of a pain to make? I thought, and looked at the recipe book. The word “macraonage” was written, and it did look considerably difficult. The price was high, too. So, buying or making them was out of the question. I cocked my head wondering what we should make.

GahaMama coughed. “So, I have a recommendation! And that would be a fruit tarts!”

“Huh? Isn't that hard to make?”



Yuigahama made a dumbfounded face. As did I, and I nodded in agreement.

Wasn't that just a little out of our league? I barely had any experience in baking sweets, and Yuigahama was clearly ill-equipped for the job. If you tasked us with making one, the best we could manage would be a failure of a fruit tarts, you know? I thought, giving GahaMama a dubious look.

She shot back a smile, did a sideways peace sign, winked, and stuck out her tongue. Then, she said, "It's okay, it's okay! You can buy tart crusts at the store, so that just leaves the filling, so it'll be easy! Once you remember how to make the fruit tarts, you can apply any fruit to it."

"That sounds like something I can do!" Yuigahama's eyes shined. If we were allowed to use ready-made products, then that should drop the difficulty somewhat. Her explanation was convincing enough.

"Yeah, it does... does it?" A looming sense of dread crossed my mind, and I looked to my neighbor.

"I-I can do it! I really can! I think..." She declared with clenched fists and nodded fiercely.

The only problem was how her voice trailed off. That's exactly why I was feeling worried. She always messed things up at the end by adding an unnecessary flavor or something to that effect. But that just meant I needed to keep an eye on her, that's all.

"All right, let's do it."

"Okay!"

We exchanged nods, and GahaMama smiled. "Okay, let's go shopping."

When Yuigahama and I replied in agreement, Sablé barked as well. Hmm, sorry, Sablé, you're going to be watching the house...

X X X

It was right before dinner time, and the grocery department of the AEON near Yuigahama's house was bustling with activity.

The interior of the store was lively. Yuigahama and her mom walked in front and I followed them behind with a cart. The upper basket of the cart was loaded with rice, meat, sweets, and other things that weighed down on the handle. Not only were we buying ingredients for our confections, we were also doing the shopping for the Yuigahama household.

GahaMama turned back to me with a smile. "I'm so sorry, we've only been getting heavy things for you to carry."

"No problem, I'm used to it."

I had accompanied my mom and Komachi on their shopping trips before. When I was younger, I'd often tag along to try to sneak sweets into the cart without getting caught by my parents... which was exactly what Yuigahama-san did just now right in front of me!

In any case, this might be the very first time I had the luxury to look around the grocery department. I was typically a bag holder for my mom and Komachi when we went grocery shopping. I merely listened to every order they gave me. The times when I was by myself were mostly just because I was told to buy one thing or another. Then, when I got back, they'd give me a stern look and ask, "So, why did you buy this?" How was I supposed to know the difference between cotton tofu and silk tofu<sup>15</sup>? They're both good...

With such an abysmally low shopping skill level, my only real use was holding their bags, and so, I committed myself to following GahaMama from three steps behind.

"It really is nice to have a boy around, it's kind of refreshing!"

We'd have those kinds of conversations as we made our rounds in the store. Eventually, we arrived at the produce corner containing a variety of vegetables and fruits, the latter being our goal today. The fruits ranged from the standard like bananas, oranges, and apples to tropical ones rare enough to make you ask, "Hey, you guys are kiwi, papaya, and mango, right?"<sup>16</sup>

"What fruits should we buy?" GahaMama walked up to the shelves and crossed her arm. She placed one hand on her cheek and went into thought.

Yuigahama shot her hand up. "Peaches!"

"Peaches won't be in season until summer, okay?" Her mom quickly but gently rejected her

<sup>15</sup> Cotton and silk are also called *momen* and *kinugoshi* in Japanese respectively.

<sup>16</sup> A [single album](#) released by Nakahara Meiko, a vocalist from Chiba.

suggestion.

“Oh, okay... I thought they already were...”

“Well, they do feel like a spring fruit...”

The cart was actually already packed with sweets of the peach variety that were thrown in by Yuigahama.

The Peach Festival might be the reason why peaches were associated with spring. There were some food companies that made use of this image in their marketing to release white peach juices, shochu highballs, and limited edition sweets during March. This made the idea of “seasonals” a difficult concept to grasp.

Similarly, in this day and age when imports and greenhouse cultivation were the norm, it made seasonal foods even harder to wrap your head around. A comic strip author who I know would claim “it's the food companies of Japan that are at fault.” Who was the one came up with the white peach flavor<sup>17</sup>!?

As I was stuck in my thoughts, GahaMama stepped up to the display shelves. “The best fruit for the current season is... strawberry!”

The shelves had a variety of fruits on display, and she pointed at the shelf that was closest to the front and also the most conspicuous. Packs of strawberries were closely lined together on the shelf decorated with gaudy banners and cute pop signs, almost as if this was the Big StarMiya Ichigo Festival<sup>18</sup>.

“Ohh, I wasn't expecting that. Strawberries feel more like a winter thing, if you ask me.” Yuigahama leaned forward to smell the strawberries and giggled. “They smell so good...”

“Let's get strawberries, then.”

Just as I was about to take a pack, GahaMama held my arm in place. “Nope.”

She softly whispered near my ears causing me to bend backwards. Combined with the sweet smell wafting in the produce area, my entire body was assaulted by a ticklish sensation. I managed to keep myself from letting out a weird yelp and gave her a questioning look.

With a stern face and the raise of a finger, she said, “Strawberries are unsuitable for handmade sweets.”

“I-I see...”

How strange. There's all sorts of sweets made with strawberries in the world, you know? How strange, indeed. Just how long was this person going to hold onto my hand? So strange. I didn't hate it at all, though.

My head inclined to the side in confusion, and Yuigahama pulled on her mom's hand.

“Why not? There's a lot of strawberry sweets out there.”

“That's why. You're practically eating it most of the time, right? You need to pick something that'll leave a much more lasting impression.”

I gave Yuigahama a glance indicating, “What's that even mean?” and she shook her head going, “I dunno.” We then looked at GahaMama for the answer.

Instead of answering, she smiled and asked a different question. “Hikki-kun, what fruits do you like?”

I wasn't able to answer immediately. I went into thought, but for some reason, Yuigahama answered for me.

“Peanuts, right!?”

“Why are you answering for me? We're talking about fruits right now, fruits.”

“I mean, you like Chiba, so...”

“Hey, you're not thinking every person in Chiba should just go eat peanuts or something<sup>19</sup>, are you?”

Hey, did you know? Peanuts weren't classified as a general fruit, or a fruit of a tree, or even a fruit of Kinomi Nana. They were actually classified as a legume crop. Just some crop trivia for you.

I was hoping to educate her with a smug look, but Yuigahama pouted and grumbled. “What do you

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17 A quote from a character named Yuzan Kaibara from the Oishinbo cooking manga.

18 An event in the Aikatsu movie.

19 A quote from a character in the movie “Tonde Saitama.”

like, then?”

“If I had to say... asian pears. Chiba's pears are the best in Japan, no, the best in the world.”

“It still ended up being something related to Chiba!”

“Well, I won't deny Chiba is partly the reason, but I like pears in general. Kosui pears are especially good. Not just the taste, but the texture. It's super good. We get whole boxes of them during the summer at our place.”

“Wow, you're a lot more serious about them than I thought! Scary!”

I wasn't even being particularly passionate about it, but Yuigahama was still reeling back in disapproval... Strange, all I did was answer her question...

Her mom didn't seem particularly fazed, on the other hand, and was in serious contemplation with her chin resting in her hand.

“Pears aren't in season right now, either... Well, there are canned peaches, though.”

“Ooo, canned peaches, sounds yummy...” Yuigahama giggled happily.

You like peaches way too much, I thought, and gave her a side glance. Then, her mom nodded, appearing to have arrived at a conclusion for something.

“Okay, that actually might work. We won't have to do a compote since they're canned, too.”

“Might, huh...?” I tilted my head, wonder what that could actually mean.

Yuigahama similarly did the same while groaning. “Compote... I see, reassuring and easy...”

“Exactly!”

Exactly not, because that was just the meaning of comfort. GahaMama swept her lovely daughter's mistake under the rug with a smile.

Now, it made sense. Yuigahama turned out to be a bounteous person because of her mom's method of raising. I won't say where in particular, but she was raised very well, yes. A person's environment, not just their genes, was important. I pray that she'll continue to grow healthily... I tenderly looked at Yuigahama.

Noticing my attention, Yuigahama turned to me. “Canned peaches, huh...? What about you, Hikki?”

“I'm fine with anything. Komachi's not that picky, so peaches should be good.”

Pears were a common delicacy at the Hikigaya household during summer. If I took Komachi's preferences into account, she should like peaches, too. I wasn't against peaches, either. In fact, I liked tawawa peaches a lot!

The choice of canned food, however, did leave me with a concern.

“If we're using canned peaches, the season doesn't really matter anymore, right?” I said, looking at GahaMama.

She gave me a blank look but then quickly formed a gentle smile. “You're right about that... but the season will come around again.”

Though very kind in tone, her voice contained a hint of loneliness. Her profile as she looked down looked just like hers in the evening, teeming with an indistinct feeling of sorrow. It was an expression that only adults would make.

“When years pass, you become an adult, and eat a peach, you'll think on the things that happened long time ago, right? That's what makes handmade sweets so wonderful.” GahaMama slowly closed one eye and whispered like she was sharing a secret. Her voice was imbued with a mysterious magical charm that left me convinced by her words.

“That sounds kinda nice!” Yuigahama said, eyes sparkling.

With the revering gaze of her daughter, GahaMama placed her hand to her mouth with a giggle and made a mischievous wink. “Right? It'll work wonders with the boys.”

“Aw, you ruined it! Now it just comes off as calculating...”

As I listened to their conversation, I made a wry smile. She was right, it definitely would work wonders with the guys.

Every time you caught whiff of a vibrant and fresh smell, and every time you basked in a comforting sweetness, you would recall that season. That's why, I was sure I would never forget about today.

GahaMama was wise, indeed; the mama of the Gahas. As both mother and daughter headed to the canned foods section, I watched them with respect, awe, or possible fear and followed.

They intimately linked arms, proceeding with light steps and engaging in idle chatter.

“Did you do something like that, mom?”

“I sure did! Your papa still remembers how back then—”

Before she could continue, Yuigahama interrupted with a sigh. “Uhh, yeah, nevermind. I don't really wanna hear stories like that about dad, it's kinda gross...”

Poor papa...

X X X

In a kitchen that wasn't yours, a lot of things worked differently. Whether it was the placement of the sink, the faucet handle, the boiler switch, the organization of the dishes, the grip of the kitchen mats, or the smell of detergent, every single one contributed to a new feeling of freshness.

But what was most refreshing of all was the apron appearance.

I found myself unexpectedly in a flutter from the sight of GahaMama. She held a hairpin, decorated with a small flower, with her glossy lips as she tied her milk tea hair into a hair bun behind her neck. Then, she held her hair in place with the hairpin. She put her arms through the sleeves of the frilly pinafore apron and tied the string behind her back.

It was rare to ever see the apron used in the Hikigaya household.

The scenery of our kitchen was from another world altogether. Komachi would be in her disgustingly lame track suit while shaking a frying pan. My mom would be in her casual attire with dead eyes and be throwing ingredients into a pot or boiling somen noodles for who knows how long. My dad, who rarely step foot into the kitchen, would put on airs and happily make hot milk using the microwave in his pajamas. For someone of my caliber, I was more or less half-naked. Not once had I ever been asked, “Is your equipment okay?”

Having been raised in such a sloppy environment, I couldn't help but yearn for the proper usage of aprons (aproning) in the kitchen. I wonder if this was what it was like to live an earnest life...

As I stood there in a daze, GahaMama smiled. She took my hand and placed a dark blue sarong apron in it.

“I'm sorry, the only apron we have left is papa's.”

“Oh no, it's okay...”

If anything, I didn't need the apron. I was fine with being naked, yes, naked... I thought, hoping to finish my sentence, but I couldn't quite refuse her insistence.

I reluctantly put the apron on and could sense that it was used often. Because of that, it felt just right. It was evident that even the father was a frequent user in the kitchen for the Yuigahama family.

Which begs the question: why was it that both parents could seemingly cook, but not the daughter? I looked at Yuigahama with skepticism.

Yuigahama was wearing a fluffy and loose girlish apron, something she had bought together with Yukinoshita at some point. Compared to when it was hung for display at the store, it looked clearly broken in, though carefully taken care of.

Yuigahama pinched the frilly hems and lifted them up and made an elated smile. “How is it? I look like I can cook, right?”





“...”

Unexpectedly, she really did.

The angled rays of the sun that poured through the skylights combined with the indirect lighting on the walls to produce a warming light that enveloped the kitchen. It was a picturesque scenery imbued with euphoria that you could see on a catalog. Because of that, a ridiculous fantasy flashed through my mind.

As if to shake the thought out of my head, I quickly added, “Yeah, yeah, you look good. I look pretty good too, right?” I said, patting the sarong apron at my waist.

Yuigahama raised her brow and frowned. “Hmm... sure, I guess.”

“Um, what's with the pause?”

“Huh? Oh, I mean, you look like a store clerk in a way, but the apron looks...” Yuigahama distorted her face and quickly spat out. “Smelly.”

“Harsh much? And I don't just mean me. This belongs to your dad, doesn't it?”

“It does, so...”

“Don't worry, it's been cleaned!” GahaMama giggled. “Let's get started, shall we?”

“Yeah!” Yuigahama said, pumping her fist.

“Y-Yeah...” I lifted my hand like that of a beckoning cat. How embarrassing...

All of our ingredients were laid out on top of the kitchen tabletop. The main ones included the tart crusts, canned peaches and the fresh cream. The miscellaneous ones included chocolate toppings, various fruits, and other sundry items for customization.

Once we got started, the recommended fruit tarts recipe turned out to be easier than I initially thought. GahaMama must've taken into account my inexperience and chose accordingly.

I covered the tart crust with a thin cut layer of frozen sponge cake, coated it with fresh cream and decorated the top with peaches. For the finishing touches, I applied a nappage, which was some kind of gelatin substance like PePee Lotion, and a glaze. Apparently, peaches would change colors in reaction to the air, so the use of nappage would help them retain their pretty colors.

Everything went smoothly, something I hadn't expected at the beginning.

“Seeing that we have all of these ingredients, let's try some variations.”

GahaMama peeked in from behind to see my progress, and as she suggested, I proceeded to make several more. However, when things were too easy, it was human nature to go the extra mile. And so, a light bulb went off in Gahama-san's head.

“Oh! I get the feeling this will be super tasty if you coat this with chocolate.” She clapped her hands, as if she had made a breakthrough.

Seeing her break the chocolate bars left me apprehensive, and I just had to interject.

“Why are you like this? Can't you just make things normally?”

“Huh? I mean... wouldn't it look cuter and taste better?”

As she was speaking, she jammed the broken chocolate into the mountain of fruits on her tart. The white peaches wobbled before collapsing into an ominous mess, far from what you could call cute. The combination she sought was an unfortunate harmony of dissonance, destined to never be a match made in heaven.

“You can start improvising after you have the basics down.”

“That's what Yukinon always says...”

My expression stiffened when she suddenly brought up her name.

“Yeah, I imagine... It's common sense,” I said, somehow managing to maintain my composure.

It didn't seem to bother Yuigahama, however, as she continued to hum and break up the chocolate. “Last time when I stayed over at her place, we cooked together. If you mix delicious things together, it should come out just as delicious, right?”

“You need to get rid of that mindset this instant...”

“Huh? Really...?”

Cola and hamburg steaks were both good individually, but if you tried frying the steak with cola, it's definitely going to turn out disgusting... There's a process to these things, you know...

I was at a loss for words and my mouth was agape in shock. Yuigahama took the opportunity to

throw pieces of chocolate into my mouth along with peaches from a fork.

Somehow, I was going “ahh” without thinking. N-No, your mom's watching... I didn't have the chance to even feel embarrassed as I chewed away and wiped the syrup at my mouth with my fingers.

“See, delicious, right?”

“Look here, missy...”

I glared at her with half-closed eyes. It's not like I was unhappy or anything, but I really could use an advance notice for these things. That way, I could prepare my heart, or even prepare some excuses to refuse... Before I could think of continuing my words, my mouth was visited by a feeling of discomfort.

The refreshing taste of the peaches and the fragrance of the chocolate was... hmm... a mismatch...

“This is where you should be tasting your own stuff, okay?” It wasn't totally inedible, so I was able to swallow it whole, but I gave Yuigahama some extremely reserved criticism.

Yuigahama, however, didn't seem to catch my meaning and tilted her head. “Huh? I thought for sure it'd taste good.”

She took a moment to try the combination herself, and a few seconds later, a sour look showed on her face. She nodded and stayed silent. I told you, it was a total mismatch! I was relieved that her taste buds were still functional, but her thought process on the other hand...

GahaMama, who had been watching from the side, placed her hand to her mouth and giggled. “If you want to use chocolate, then it might be better to use it this way.”

She immediately began a demonstration. She took a palm-sized portion from the remaining tart crust, covered it with chocolate, and decorated it with fruit. In a flash, she had completed a mini-sized fruit tarts.

She took the tart and slowly carried it to my mouth. “Say 'ahh'.”

“Th-Thank you very much, but I can eat it myself.”

Nothingness. I entered a state of nothingness. In spite of the sweat from my armpits, and the sweat forming on my scalp, I did my best to maintain my composure. I carefully took the tart without making contact with her fingers.

“Grr...”

GahaMama's lips curved into a sulky and adorable pout. Hahaha, I, Hikigaya Hachiman, could suppress my emotions as long I was given prior notice, hahaha, still, she sure was cute, hahaha. The unknown cuteness assaulted me, but I somehow managed to repel it and focus on the taste of the tart.

“It's good, it's really good...”

Unlike the mess of a flavor that resembled a treasure island murder case<sup>20</sup>, the mini tart was crunchy in texture and had a fruity peach flavor that was accented by the chocolate. It felt like I could hear the sounds of the wind...

When I blurted out my impression, GahaMama made a broad smile and rubbed her chest in relief. “Great! Okay, Yui, say 'ahh'.”

“Ahh.”

Though busy, Yuigahama immediately ate the tart that her mom carried to her mouth. I gave them a fuzzy look, wondering if this was what they always did at home. When Yuigahama noticed, she was brought back to reality and began shaking her hands in a frantic, blushing from ear to ear. Since her mouth was occupied, she couldn't utter a word, but her gestures were obviously telling of her denial.

It's okay, it's okay, that's nice, there's nothing wrong with that, I nodded back having been witness to the peaceful and heartwarming sight of being fed. Yuigahama still didn't seem particularly enthused about my reaction as she chewed, but then her eyes glittered with surprise.

“Oh, it really is good.”

“For chocolate, you should use it as filling for the tart instead of applying it as a layer. That way, you can keep it crunchy and make it taste even better.”

“Ohhh, that makes sense.”

Yuigahama then quickly proceeded to spread chocolate over a tart crust. Seeing her in action left

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me impressed. Tell, show, let one do it, and offer praise; if not, people would not act...<sup>21</sup> I was able to observe with my very own eyes just how exactly a person was raised.

“Ohh... you really are an expert...” I muttered.

GahaMama puffed her chest with a chuckle. “Right? I'm really confident in my cooking, just so you know!”

No, I actually meant in regards to your daughter, but... okay, it didn't matter either way! Her jubilated smile was super cute, after all!

“There isn't a designated way to make a fruit tarts, so you can just add whatever you like. You might even come across some combinations that end up very tasty.”

“Is that how it works?”

“It sure is!” GahaMama said, smiling.

I could understand where she was coming from, but I still felt that should only be done by people who had a grasp on the fundamentals of cooking, people who could actually bring the flavors in their minds to life...

While I was talking with GahaMama, my mind was occupied with Yuigahama, who I could see from the corner of my eye, improvising on her tart. Just what in the world was she putting in there...?

“Mom, how's this?”

“Mhmm, that looks great. Just add a secret ingredient, and you're all done.”

“Secret ingredient?”

“Right, it's the best seasoning you can add,” GahaMama said, and then whispered into Yuigahama's ear.

Yuigahama turned red afterwards. “God! If you're going to say that stuff, go over there!”

“Aww!”

Yuigahama angrily pushed her towards me. Since her daughter refused to entertain her, she shifted her attention to me.

“Hey, Hikki-kun, what do you think it is?”

“Hmm, what could it be? Haha, hunger, maybe?”

I acted like I was busy with squeezing out the fresh cream and gave a stock answer, pretending to listen to the conversation, but GahaMama's smile had stopped time. Crap, this was one of those quests in Dragon Quest that wouldn't progress unless you gave the desired answer.

“How about... a meal someone paid for... that's delicious,” I said, carefully.

GahaMama placed her hand to her cheek, and had an odd smile. Yuigahama, in contrast, was completely perturbed.

“Hikki, you're getting kind of worse...”

“Well, it is delicious, though.”

“Don't enable him, mom!”

Remonstrated by her daughter, GahaMama coughed. “I'd like to hear an answer in terms of home cooking.”

The best kind of seasoning to make your cooking delicious was obviously an empty stomach, free food, or some munchies when you're smoking (opinions vary). Personally, garlic, lard, or Ajinomoto salt would make a majority of things delicious. But I suppose those didn't apply to making sweets. The answer she sought was as clear as day.

“Sincerity... I suppose,” I said, feeling a little embarrassed.

GahaMama affirmed my answer with a smile.

X X X

“Let's wait for the tarts to get cold,” said GahaMama, closing the refrigerator.

Nappage, or Banagher, whatever it was, we had to refrigerate the fruit tarts so they could harden. Well, in general, fruits tasted better when refrigerated.

<sup>21</sup> A twist on one of Admira Yamamoto Isoroku's quotes.



Once we finished with the preparations, I removed my apron and headed for the living room. The recipe wasn't particularly difficult, but it did leave me feeling exhausted. That being said, I felt a sense of satisfaction despite being unfamiliar with the process.

In hopes of resting for the rest of the day, I made staggering steps to the sofa, and there, I felt my sleeve get pulled on. I turned to see Yuigahama with Sablé in her arms pulling at my shirt.

"Um, over here..." she whispered, squeezing Sablé to hide her voice. She then pulled me in the direction of where to go.

"R-Right... oh, we'll be away for a bit." I bowed to GahaMama and was pulled away from the living room.

"Okay, take your time. I'll let you know when the tarts are done." Her bell-like laughter called to us from behind, and I quickly followed Yuigahama. The destination was her room.

She urged me to sit on a cushion while she sat on her bed with Sablé on her lap.

"Um... so, what should we do in the meantime?" she asked awkwardly.

Her question brought back memories of the time she asked me during the fireworks festival. That caused me to blurt out a similarly, nonsensical answer.

"Well... what should we do? Go home for now?"

"No, we won't! I'm already home, anyway! And this is my room!" Yuigahama barked, as did Sablé.

"Hey, it's not like there's anything better to do."

"Ahh, right, I guess... wanna look at my school yearbook?" Yuigahama stretched over to the shelf next to her bed and pulled out a velvet-colored album.

"What are we going to do with that...? The only thing I can think of is who can give the best nicknames to the ugliest people."

"We're not gonna do that! You're the worst! The worst!" she repeated with a quiet voice.

Having to hear that multiple times was starting to hurt.

"Look, that's how guys are. According to what I've heard, they also use it as a catalog of the sorts to try to introduce the girls to each other. It's like a matching app."

"That's terrible, too!"

I recited my insufficient knowledge, something I acquired from eavesdropping on Tobe in class, and Yuigahama clamped her teeth.

"Did you do stuff like that too, Hikki? Asking to be introduced to somebody, or whatever..."

"For me, I needed someone to introduce me to someone who would introduce someone to me."

"Ah, right, I can see that..."

Thanks for the understanding.

"Oh, I wouldn't mind seeing what you looked like in middle school, though."

"Forget it, that's too embarrassing. We're done with this." Yuigahama let go of Sablé and slid the album back into the shelf.

That's a shame... I shrugged, and then Sablé tackled me. "Whoa, what's up?"

I received his tackle and he came huffing and panting at me. As I brushed him, his fur started to stick all over my clothes. He was apparently in his seasonal shedding period, which made sense why he wasn't allowed into the kitchen...

Yuigahama yelped when she saw me covered in fur. "Oh, shoot! Sorry! Sablé, come over here!"

"It's fine, I'm used to it because of my cat. Give me a brush."

"S-Sure..."

I took the brush from her, crossed my legs, rested Sablé on my knee, and began to brush his spine. Sablé calmed down and began to pant in comfort. As I focused on brushing, Yuigahama sat down beside me and watched in interest.

"Wow, you really are used to it."

"It happens when you own a pet. I've come to the point that finding fur in my miso soup doesn't bother me anymore."

"That's not something to feel good about..." Yuigahama dropped her shoulders. Then, she suddenly rose up with something in mind, walked to her closet and back. She sat beside me again and

presented, “Ta-dah, here, use this.”

What she gave me was a sticky tape roller, one used for carpet cleaning. For households that owned a pet, or a family with an old man reaching his peak age, it was an essential tool. They all shed a lot, after all... and their pillows were stinky.

Rollers were particularly useful for cleaning, but they were extremely convenient for fur on clothes.

“Thanks, I’ll use it later.”

“I’ll do it for you.” Yuigahama removed the bar fastener and began to roll the roller against my shoulder and back.

“I’m good, I’m good, stop, it tickles.”

I struggled, trying to avoid her, but this caused her to wear a wicked grin and become more aggressive. The more I tried to get away, the more it stimulated her sadism. She was having a fun time with me in pursuit.

“Take that. And that.”

She started aiming for areas I wasn’t expecting. It was ticklish, embarrassing, soft, smelt good, and whatever; I couldn’t handle it. But if I struggled too much, that could’ve led to unforeseen skin contact, so struggling added stress to my nerves, in particular, my sympathetic nerves, so I was sweating obscenely.

“Um? Can you stop? I’m more of a banger than a roller. Agh! Ah, n-no, no...”

N-Nooooo! I was just about to let out a horrific scream, as if the standard average dropped seven trillion points, until there was a sudden knock on the door.

Yuigahama immediately stopped and took some distance.

“Yui, can I come in?”

“Sure.”

She spat out a response to her mom’s gentle voice. Her voice was reserved compared to moments ago, and she acted like nothing had happened. On the other hand, I was hugging Sablé and looked like a dangerous, panting kemono man.

After I managed to calm my breathing, GahaMama pushed the door open slightly and looked down. “Hey, Hikki-kun, are you staying for dinner?”

“Um, I was planning to leave before it got too late...”

I didn’t want to impose on them any further. A good man knew when to make his exit.

“Really?” GahaMama looked disappointed. But within the next instant, her face glowed. “But too bad, I already made dinner!”

She stuck out her tongue and winked (sideways peace sign).

Unlike Yukinoshita’s mom, she brought peace to my heart... then again, she was just as much as a schemer as she was!

X X X

The night breeze was pleasant as it brushed against my flushed cheeks.

After having dinner at Yuigahama’s home, I took my leave. The city was blanketed with the shades of night on my way out. Our exercise in making sweets ended without issue, and I now had a box of fruit tarts. I carefully walked along the street to avoid shaking the box.

Yuigahama, who came along to see me off for the day, looked at me with concern. “Hikki, didn’t you eat a little too much? You okay?”

“Yeah, it wasn’t that much...”

The feeling of fullness would visit me as I talked. The dinner I had with Yuigahama and her mom was really delicious, but I was nervous from start to end because I wasn’t sure when GahaPapa would appear. Because of that, I was restless, responded only when spoken to, and could only stuff my mouth with rice like in the folk tales of Japan.

...I couldn’t help it, the more I ate, the happier it made GahaMama.

Every time my cheeks were stuffed with rice, she'd make an expression saying, "Now, that's a boy's appetite!" and I couldn't stop myself from asking for refills. The result: I ate too much. Just walking had me scowling from the bloating.

Yuigahama apologetically clapped her hands. "Sorry, my mom got too excited. I guess seeing a guy eat a lot makes her really happy."

"That's just how moms are... whenever we visit our grandparents, my dad and I get stuffed with food. We pretty much become Stamina-Taros."

"That much!?" Yuigahama made a sick look.

I nodded in emphasis. But I didn't hate it. The food grandma made and Stamina-Taro meat were really good! I love you Stamina-Taro! I loved him so much I could crush a magnifying glass with my butt.

We made our way towards the station while engaging in idle chatter. Yuigahama walked alongside me and spoke in a small voice. "Thanks for today."

"That's my line."

"Right, but I had fun... When we're making things together, it's really fun."

"It'd probably be more efficient alone, though." I mistakenly let out a spiteful comment, and Yuigahama fumed with the puff of her cheeks. I made a sarcastic chuckle. "But once we got started, it didn't feel like work or anything. So, yeah, doing things together was pretty fun."

"Yep, I think so, too." Yuigahama smiled.

I nodded again, and carefully switched my holding arm while checking the content of the box. Then, I slowly continued. "I think Komachi might be happier that way. She likes chores a lot, too."

Hands-on events were getting popular these days, and even live entertainment was starting to thrive. Maybe the best present for Komachi was giving her those kinds of experiences? There are some things money can't buy. For everything else, there's your parents' money. MasterNEET.

Nonsense filled my head, and Yuigahama spoke up in admiration. "That's right. Maybe making something together might be perfect!"

"Right, so about this..." I said, and offered her the box of fruit tarts. Yuigahama looked at it curiously and tilted her head. I continued. "The cookies were good, so, this is kind of like thanks for them, though it's a little early."

As I tried to give her the box, Yuigahama giggled. "We used the same ingredients for these, didn't we?"

"Not true. There's a secret ingredient in there..."

She wasn't wrong, because everything we used was in the kitchen. But I did my best to add my own secret ingredient as I was taught by her mom.

Yuigahama stared at the box and then gave me a teasing look from below. "Uh huh... what did you put in it?"

"It's not a secret if I tell you."

"True." Yuigahama laughed and accepted the box.

"All right, I'm fine here. See you."

"Okay, see you at school." Yuigahama waved her hand.

I nodded back and headed toward the station. After covering some distance, I turned back to see Yuigahama was still waving, but with her arms. I lifted my hand up and continued walking.

The cold subsided at the front of the station, and its main street was crowded with numerous people celebrating their holiday night. The winter that continued for so long was starting to feel like it was going to end.

The passing of the seasons was embodied by the illumination of the city, and the fleeting lights of the street lamps, neon signs, buildings, and apartment complexes all seemed to glisten so brightly.

Perhaps, this was the daily life that awaited me hereafter.

A semblance of an answer to the question Miura posed flashed through my mind; if I could go day to day while granting her every wish, then...

Such an impossible thought crossed my mind.

## **Prelude 4**

We talked about all sorts of things, like our plans over spring break, or places we'd like to visit.

For someone as awkward as her, I knew it was just her way of trying to change the subject, but she really was bad at it. Even her smile looked unnatural. She really was an awkward person.

She could pretty much do everything well. But when it came to lying, playing things off, or saying the truth, she really was no good at them.

I would've liked it if we had stayed like that forever. But the time went by so quickly. It got a little colder, less people could be seen at the front of the station, we started talking less, and eventually, the trains stopped running. And now, we couldn't go anywhere. But I pretended not to notice any of these things.

All I wanted was to enjoy talking about random things with her like how we've always had.

If only we could've stayed like this forever, I would've been fine with that. If just my wish was granted like she had wanted, I would've been fine with that, too. But that wouldn't have been enough for me nor would it have satisfied me.

"There's so much I want to do..." I whispered. I looked up at the large building that had its lights disappearing one by one.

She let out a breath and smiled. "You're right."

"Yep, I want to do everything. And I want everything."

I moved just a little closer to her, more than earlier, and pushed my shoulder against hers. Then, I rested my head on her as if I was falling asleep.

"I'm a greedy person, so I'm going to take everything, okay? I'm going to take all of your feelings, Yukinon."

I was a greedy person, after all.

Fun things, happy things, yummy things; I loved them all. I wasn't good at cooking or making sweets, but I didn't hate doing them. I wanted to try all sorts of toppings and combinations. I didn't care if they turned out badly. Spicy or bitter, I didn't mind either.

That's why, I would ask her, but only once.

If she didn't say anything, then I wouldn't say anything. But if she did, then I would, too.

It was unfair, I know. But the three of us were all the same; we were all unfair. We were all greedy, because we wanted that wish to be granted. Even if we knew we couldn't make it happen. Even if we knew it wouldn't ever be granted.

But I was probably the greediest one.

Sweet things, bitter things, painful things, stressful things, scars, and injuries; I wanted them all.

I lifted my head so I could face her head-on, and I gazed into her eyes. We were so close our faces could've touched.

"So, Yukinon, please tell me what your feelings are."

The second I told her, she breathed out. She seemed hesitant and even confused, and her eyes wavered in anxiety. Her soft lips were slightly open, her long eyelashes trembled, and she looked like she was going to burst into tears.

But I just couldn't avert my eyes anymore. I used to always act like I didn't see anything, acted as if I hadn't noticed anything, and acted as if I didn't know anything, but now, I couldn't anymore. I sat there and continued to look at her.

Her beautiful hair, her moist eyes, and her pale cheeks were all things I had always looked at.

She closed her lips a single time, as if biting them, and looked around. It was mostly just the two of us at the front of the station, and there wasn't anyone close enough to overhear us. But nonetheless, still seemingly concerned of strangers watching us, she slowly moved her shoulders closer. The way she was so shy in touching me was just like a kitten.

She placed her hand to her mouth to whisper just a few words, the words that I probably didn't want to hear.

But I still ended up smiling anyway. I was just so hopeless that my cheeks, my mouth, and even my



gaze all softened in response.

She suddenly moved her body away. Even though her face looked worried and scared, her cheeks were still visibly flushed within the darkness.

When she made such a face, I truly didn't know what to do. Because it would've been easier on me had I come to hate it instead.

X X X

I said it. I really said it, even though I was never planning to.

It's because I knew that if I had put it into words and acknowledged it, things would never be the same. All the things that had been layered with a thin film would split open like the overflowing of water in a vessel and the bursting of a balloon that had a needle ran across it.

That's why, I sealed my lips tightly. Had I just swallowed down my words, things could continue as they were. But her eyes didn't allow me that luxury.

This was first time I had ever told anyone something like this, and I was sure it'd be the last.

I opened my trembling lips to tell her, my voice both feeble and trembling, as if I was repenting.

What kind of face would she make? What would she tell me? These questions filled my head as I looked at her, and she gave me a warm smile. She merely accepted my words with a nod, not uttering a single word.

It was my first time these kinds of words had ever left my mouth, but it looked like she had always noticed how I felt a long time ago. But she still chose to wait until I was ready to tell her.

“Okay, I'll say it, too.”

She slowly closed her eyes, placed her hand on my shoulder, and used her other hand to cover her mouth. She then moved her face closer.

The gel nail that extended from her thin fingers, her pink cheeks colored with a light rouge, her glossy and puffy lips, and her gently curved eyebrows; all of her cute, fashionable, and beautiful parts inched closer, as if she was going to kiss me.

When such an inappropriate thought came to mind, I suddenly became embarrassed and was on the verge of backing away. I held back the urge and leaned forward.

And then, she whispered into my ear, as if she was play-biting like a puppy.

I was sure her words were what I wanted to hear. I sighed with relief and quietly moved my chin away to keep myself from letting my thought slip out.

She removed her hand from my shoulder and distanced herself. When our eyes met, she laughed embarrassingly and rubbed the bun on her head.

“I think our wishes are probably the same.”

“You're right...”

At the very least, I think that was the one thing we were sure of.

But I knew it would've been difficult to have it granted as exactly as we would've wanted. That's why I chose what would've been the closest to it. I wanted to believe that it would be granted one day, perhaps, the day I could finally be able to handle things better.

With something of a prayer in mind, I nodded. However, she shook her head.

I was unsure of what she was shaking her head to. I gave her an inquisitive look, only for her to talk about something completely different.

“I think it's the same for Hikki, too.”

When she suddenly brought up his name, my body froze. As if to relieve my body from the tension, she gently overlapped her hand with mine.

“I don't think he wants to give up on anything.”

She whispered nonchalantly, but it pricked my chest. Unbeknownst to me, my shoulders sank. When I looked up, her unblinking gaze was directed toward the distant starry sky.

“The distance between us isn't something physical. No matter how far we go, no matter how long it's been since we last saw each other, the distance between our feelings won't change, I think.”

“Is that how it works...?”

“Uh huh, I think so... But if our feelings change, we'll feel incredibly far apart no matter how close we are to each other.”

I listened to her words in a place closer than anyone else. But at some point our overlapped hands had joined together. We locked just our pinkies, as if we were making a promise. There was only so much of our hands that touched. Our body heat wasn't particular high, just like how the temperature around us wasn't that particularly low.

But I could definitely feel the touch of her warmth.

“If your wish and my wish are the same, can you take all of my feelings?”

“Yes, one day, I will for sure.”

She would say in a few words: By doing that, we could stay as we were without anything ever changing.

If nothing changed, just how wonderful would that have been?

As our words transformed into heat, I quietly closed my eyes with a wishful feeling.

I was sure I would never forget this warmth. That's why, I would also never be able to forget this coldness from when our hands came apart.

## Chapter 4: And so, Yukinoshita Yukino quietly waves her hand.

The early spring glow penetrated the windows, and a sense of formality filled the air along with the occasional bouts of sniffing. Before me were rows of people clad in black uniforms. With a short turn of my head, I could see I was enclosed by many in formal wear. Were it not for the fact that this was my school's gymnasium, this gathering could've been mistaken for a funeral service.

However, the banner that gravitated over the stage above, displaying the words “Graduation Award Ceremony”, and the soft colored artificial flower corsages worn by all of those who lined up at the front made it clear this was a ceremonious occasion.

The sight of all the female students letting out stifling, short breaths, holding hands and leaning shoulder to shoulder with their friends was the very manifestation of partings. Reluctant to break free from their youth spanning three years of their lives in high school, it was only natural that such a solemn mood would dominate. Nonetheless, only those related to this event could truly appreciate the grandeur of this atmosphere. Outsiders like myself were merely forced to be witness to the deplorable sights of strangers. In my case, my nonexistent connection to the graduates meant this this was just a two to three hour period of being chained to a folding chair as I struggled to keep my eyes open.

There wasn't a need to feel sentimental about the boys and girls who would embark on a new life on this fine day. After all, this event was just a screening of their long-awaited freedom from the shackles of scrutiny. That's not to say I was fully void of attachment or interest; I certainly did possess some sympathy for them. Once they left this building, they would be stripped of their titles as high school students, their social status as children. Whether they were troublesome brats since their younger days, called a delinquent over ten times, or hurt everyone who touched them because they were as sharp as a knife, it didn't matter. Even if their passion was bound to their seats, or their dreams had been chipped away at their desks, they had to graduate from this domain. Going forward, they would become different from when they were pictured in their graduation album, swept along by the wave of humanity.

That being said, many of the students here were advancing to college, which meant they could enjoy a moratorium of a few years, but regardless, high school students and college students were still treated differently in society. Nothing would change the fact that receiving a suspended sentence would be enough to lose the right to guardianship and patronage. With that in mind, the sight of everyone in lines was almost as if they were waiting to be shipped out after getting stamped under a consolidated standard, which made the silence all the more eerie.

I recalled having similar thoughts the previous year. There's only so much you could do to stave off boredom when you were in a situation that made it difficult to use your smartphone, and that's why my mind was filled with such nonsense. Last year, I played rock-paper-scissors by myself, but how should I spend the time next year...? I thought. Then, I had the realization that it would be my graduation ceremony next year.

Now, things made sense. There was a reason why our school made the current students attend, and I always wondered why; it was to make us aware of our limited time.

An esteemed individual on the stage began presenting their honorary speech. I ignored it while turning my head. It was almost certainly, probably, or very likely that after I graduate, all of those I could see were people I would never see again.

The rows were broken up by gender and classes in the order of their names based on the Japanese syllabary<sup>22</sup>. Just how many of these people would I actually see again after graduation?

If I had personally gotten their contact addresses, then things could work out, but given my personality, I wouldn't bother doing that. The more you integrated into a new environment, the less you would reminisce. It's questionable whether I'd actually get used to that new environment, but it certainly applied to a large majority.

If there's one example in particular, it would be Totsuka Saika. In his case, after an exchange or two, we'd probably try to stay in touch somehow. Heck, he was the first person that came into view just now! Tobe happened to be in my line of sight since he was next to Totsuka, but I was pretty sure I wouldn't ever contact him. I mean, I didn't even know his contact address in the first place.

Now, for Hayama Hayato, who was next to Tobe, or my immediate left, he was able to get my info unilaterally, but I had doubts he would go out of his way to contact me. On the off chance that he did, after going through a blubbing adolescent phase thinking, “I wonder if he'll think I'm desperate if I

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<sup>22</sup> An ordering system based on the hiragana system in Japanese called [gojuun](#), and is roughly analogous to English alphabetical order.

respond right away,” it's clear as day I would just ignore his call and never respond. It was never my intention to give him my info in the first place. I only gave him my number to get through the annoying mess that he caused during my coincidental reunion with Orimoto Kaori, so, as of now, I didn't even have his info. Later on, he foolishly gave Haruno-san my info, and I was basically dealing with unneeded stress.

Feeling nauseated from recalling the series of events, I gave him a glare of contempt. I might've been doing it for too long, because he sent back a “What” with his eyes. I shook my head and looked farther out. In one of the front rows where class C was sitting, I could see Zaimokuza's large body. For him, well, I had the feeling I'd probably see him again after graduation.

What about the others?

When that came to mind, I felt oddly out of place and darted my eyes from place to place again. What came into view were a bobbing dark blue ponytail, a suspicion reflection of a pair of glasses, and a reddish brown short bob head. It was Ebina-san, Kawasaki, and Sagami Minami in that order. This was a refreshing piece of information, mainly because it's something you'd only learn about during events like this. But it didn't really matter at this point, because we only had about two weeks left in the same class. The information was even more useless when it came to Sagami who I was absolutely not related to in the present and even further in the past, and this of course, included our graduation and class change for next year.

In Kawasaki's case, we're likely to meet a few times at cram school, but our interactions would, at best, amount to short greetings and nods. Similarly, I doubt I'd ever see Ebina-san again unless there was someone to mediate. At the end of the day, the only thing connecting us was a shallow one, and that was Yuigahama Yui. Without her, it's more than likely we'd never meet again. Of course, this wasn't a special case for Ebina-san, because it applied to almost all of the people I could call acquaintances today.

I shook my stiff shoulders and hips for relief and stretched my neck. In that moment, I inadvertently caught glimpse of a bouncing pink hair bun with a neighboring blond hair swaying like a wave. Yuigahama Yui and Miura Yumiko were sitting side by side, and though it was hard to make out, they appeared to be holding hands.

Miura was sniffing and wiping her tears with her sleeves, either emotional from the atmosphere, or emotional from the realization of different classes next year Yuigahama offered her tissues with a wry smile, and when she did that, they started whispering. Gradually, Yuigahama began to press against her eyes. As I watched her calmly wipe her tears, a sudden thought came to mind.

Would I see her again after graduation?

It was a consideration that was only a year away, but it was hard to imagine. Our connection was maintained only because we had club and class together right now, but once those were out of the equation, would we be able to maintain the same kind of relationship?

Just as I was about to turn my head even more... I stopped. I doubt I could see the classes that sat farther behind me. Even worse, because of the sitting order by syllabary, there's no way I could see the people who were sitting at the far end of the rows.

Just what kind of expression was she, with her refreshing black hair and slender countenance, making right now? It's something I would likely never see again.

I let out a short sigh and meekly faced forward. Then, a whisper that closed in on me from my left entered my ear. Though it was vocally delightful, and tonally refreshing, the voice somehow came off as detached.

“You can't sit still, can you...?”

“I'm bored... If you're not sitting next to people you're close with, there's nothing to do during an event like this.”

“You make it sound like it's normal for you to have someone you're close with.”

I gave his sarcasm a shrug. Then, I fixed my posture and deliberately looked forward, not giving him a single glance with the intention of ending the conversation there. However, his voice from my left didn't stop.

“Are you searching?”

“For what?” I snapped back in irritation, along with a sidelong glare, feeling he had seen through my mind when I tried to turn around in my seat earlier. Then, Hayama pointed his chin diagonally to the front. I followed with my eyes, and what I was met with was the sight of adults in formal wear, and not the students; it was the seating area for visitors.



In that area, I spotted Yukinoshita's mother. Dressed in black traditional Japanese clothing, and along with her visual features, my eyes were able to easily pick her out despite how far she was.

“Why is she here...?”

“It's not uncommon for members of the local government to attend these ceremonies, but a lot of them in the area tend to have overlap in their schedules. She's likely here as their sole representative.”

“Uh-huh...”

I gave him an indifferent response while finding sense in his explanation. Just earlier, some local government member was on stage. A little bit back further, and I think the teacher who served as the master of ceremonies respectfully read aloud congratulatory telegrams from a number of people, and omitted the rest after going through a majority of them.

“Now that you mention it, there was something like that in middle school, too.”

“It's especially common for public institutions. When they have the opportunity, they'll use entrance ceremonies and graduation ceremonies to promote themselves.”

The words I casually whispered to myself (special skill) were met with a sign from Hayama. He was apparently planning to pass the time with me. Our eyes were fixed to the front without ever turning to the other, and we continued our meaningless exchange for this one occasion.

“Right, I doubt any of the students or parents are actually listening, though... I suppose they're just doing it out of obligation,” I said.

Tired of my attitude, Hayama sighed. “That's a terrible way to put it... Call it tradition. There's meaning in doing it, since teachers and parents are all potential voters.”

“That sounds way worse than what I said...”

I was similarly fed up with his attitude and sighed. Then, I could hear a proud chuckle coming from my neighbor. He had to be wearing that twisted and refreshing smile that he wouldn't ever show to anyone else. I didn't even need to look at him, which just got on my nerves. And if there's one more thing that got me even more annoyed, it was the person I noticed sitting beside Yukinoshita's mother who was alike in appearance. It was Yukinoshita Haruno dressed in a black suit. She rested her hands on the bag on her lap and was gracefully casting her eyes downwards.

“And the reason for her being here is...?”

“Who knows? It's either because of her position, or a courtesy call... something along those lines.”

“Uh-huh...”

I gave him another meaningless response, but at the time, I had a very unpleasant premonition clawing at me internally. Did this mean she would be present at the prom later? I was completely unrelated, but even so, the words she left me lurked as dregs inside my chest.

As I sat there unable to verbalize my feelings, Hayama let out a dry laugh. “I guess that explanation isn't enough for you.”

“No, sounds like it makes sense. Not that I'd know.” I abruptly answered, feeling unknowingly perturbed.

Just past my shoulder, Hayama was wearing a thin smile. “Don't say what you don't mean.”

“Speak for yourself,” I said, glaring.

Unflinching, he ignored it and looked at the visitors. “I'm guessing she's here to see things through...”

“Uh-huh, I see.”

I retracted my chin and gave him a reply that was meant to end the discussion. Typically, most conversations ended after an “I see.” It was a sign to the other person that you had absolutely no interest in what they had to say and wanted to be done with the conversation. But Hayama didn't back down, and this time, continued with a quieter voice.

“You're not going to ask 'for what' this time, huh?”

Though his voice was calm, it reeked of provocation. Whenever Hayama Hayato, or the one who influenced him, Yukinoshita Haruno, tried to rile you up in this way, staying quiet didn't do anything for you. They would use their gazes and the atmosphere to wring the words out of you. The part I hated about Hayama and Haruno-san were so awfully similar. Although I rarely caught glimpse of them talking to each other, I was sure they had thrilling conversations whenever they did. But their methods were something I had gotten used to recently. As a rule of thumb, this was the time to throw a smokescreen and end the conversation.

“If you have to ask, then I have an idea. When it comes to her, it's usually to see what her little sister is up to. Seriously, she's got way too much time on her hands...” I said, looking annoyed.

Hayama unconditionally spat out. “You're right. On the other hand, she's taking time out of her own schedule to check up on her, so she's concerned to some extent.”

“Uhh, that's just scary... she's just as clingy as I am when it comes to my little sister...”

She had as much free time as me? If it's for Komachi, I would open up my schedule at any time, though I haven't had the opportunity lately. If you bother her too much, she'll end up hating you, you know! Are you listening, Yukinoshita's older sister!? She'll start hating you if you keep bothering her! Also, Hikigaya-san's older brother, make sure you listen, too!

I let out a dry laugh as did Hayama. In that way, I would try to end the conversation with a joke, but Hayama was no longer smiling.

“But she's not here just for her sister. I'm sure she's here to see the decision you'll make.”

“...”

I couldn't give him an answer this time, because what he said was likely to be true. As I sat there unable to reply, he lightly bumped me with his elbow to see if I still had his attention. I clicked my tongue and gave him a mouthful out of spite.

“You can't sit still, can you? You'll get marked down on your report card, you know.”

“I'm bored... If you're not sitting next to people you're close with, there's nothing to do during an event like this.”

I frowned at his sarcasm. Um, you realize you were saying you weren't close to Tobe, right?

Then, Tobe, who he wasn't apparently close with, poked his face out from Hayama's side. “What, what's up? Something going on over here?”

“It's nothing, Tobe. You're too loud, settle down,” Hayama said instantly with a beaming smile. Tobe had a bewildered look and returned his head back to its original position.

Once we quieted down, I looked to the front toward the stage, and the guests of honor had finished their honorary speeches. The master of ceremonies advanced the ceremony along.

“Next, the student body representative will present her farewell address.”

Upon being called, an adorable, candy voice responded in acknowledgment. This deliberate foxy and cute response was... I thought, and Isshiki Iroha stepped onto the stage.

Oh, speaking of which, she mentioned something about having to do the farewell address... she was in discussion about it with Hiratsuka-sensei at some point, but then tried to run away from the job... In any case, let's see what the combined efforts of Irohasu and Hiratsuka-sensei, though mostly the latter, could do. I straightened my posture and looked at Isshiki as she bowed in front of the microphone.

“The relentless winter has come to an end, and under the gentle warmth of the sun, we are welcomed by a faint aroma of the new season of spring.”

The microphone picked up crumpling noises as she unfolded her paper that was folded like an accordion. Then, Isshiki calmly assumed the demeanor of an honors student and began her speech. The impish behavior she usually flaunted was tucked away, and she answered to the expectations of the teachers and parents of what an exemplary student council president should be. As she progressed through her address, boldly retelling the memories she shared with her upperclassmen, her voice suddenly choked up.

“In looking back on my memories, my upperclassmen had always been supporting me...”

Occasionally, she would sniff and pretend to wipe the nonexistent tears at her eyes. As foxy as ever, Irohasu...

In all the events we've worked on so far, I had always been observing her like a producer from backstage. But today, I was part of the audience. When your seat as the viewer changed, so would your perspective. And of course, the correct pose to make in the audience of an arena was the Vega pose with the attitude of a boyfriend. But everyone would think I was crazy if I suddenly stood up now. So, for today, I'd pretend to be a related person and act like an ex-boyfriend from long ago while playing a BGM by Yamazaki Masayoshi in my head and going, “Looks like you found the place you belong, huh? You're shining brighter than you ever did before.” Yeah, you've got a few screws loose doing that, too.

But regardless of your position, the sight of someone holding back their tears as they presented their farewell address pulled on your emotional strings. Even if it was just fake crying to rouse the

audience, her commendable behavior scored a lot of Hachiman points.

Yep, yep, Isshiki, you did your best. Cute, very cute. Even when Hiratsuka-sensei was angry at you, and you tried to skip out on your responsibilities, or just ran away with excuses, you still did your best. Or did you?

I watched over her with the eyes of a father and brother, and I suddenly felt tears welling up. I slightly stuck out my chin and looked up at the ceiling, so Hayama wouldn't notice.

If she ended up as the student council president again next year, then that would mean she'd give the farewell address for my graduation. So, the sight I was witnessing right now may very well be the same one next year. As I felt moved by the thought, the farewell address proceeded to its conclusion. She folded her paper and waited for the applause. Then, she faced forward, wiped the tear at the corner of her eye with the tip of her finger and smiled.

"Last but not least, I would like to pray for your continued health and wish you the best of luck in your future endeavors. I end my farewell address as the representative of the current student body, Isshiki Iroha..."

After concluding with the enunciation of her name, she bowed. With an upright posture and poised expression, she elegantly descended the stage. To see a first year handle such a heavy responsibility with dignity caused the audience and me to give a thunderous round of applause.

The applause gradually simmered, and my excitement reached its peak. After this, I was stuck watching the awards ceremony where the socialities would mistaken the calls of their names as roll call and dumbly respond, "Yes, I'm healthy!" and trip over themselves.

A graduation ceremony where you had no emotional connection with the people involved was truly the peak of boredom.

X X X

...There was a time in my life when I had such a mindset.

"Next, the graduate representative will present her formal response."

The former student council president Shiromeguri Meguri-senpai energetically answered her summon and ascended the stage. She bowed at the center, and then examined the students below her, as if making eye contact with each one. I had the feeling she even looked at me as well. Then, she beamed, wearing a soft and warm smile that she had shown me in the past before, and began her speech, speaking in a voice that was smooth enough to dissolve the formality permeating the ceremony.

"Today is a wonderful day as the sun showers us with its warmth..."

As she progressed through her speech, her voice began to crack, and she bit her lips that formed her initial smile in grief, almost as if she was trying to tell herself not to cry. Such a sight couldn't be described as nothing other than emotional. I was even muttering to myself, "Oh god, oh god, this is so emotional..."

A problematic thing with otakus was that they were proprietors of the term "emotional," and were prone to becoming emotional as well. The simple act of attending a live concert would have them in tears. On top of that, they'd start bawling again while tweeting their experience in a poetic fashion on their way home. And the process would repeat when the live concert had a BD release. In other words, they were hardwired to becoming emotional at a moment's notice. It was a testament to their love for all things that invoked emotion. They were indigenous emoskis who hailed from tsundere regions<sup>23</sup> and were predisposed to becoming pretentious on live call-in shows, at handshake events, or on a voice actor's radio program.

The thoughts that filled my head were absurd, but truthfully, I was on the verge of tears.

"My most irreplaceable experiences were the student council activities over the course of my high school career. Because of the cooperation of all the classes, clubs, and volunteers, we were able to hold many events. There were two in particular that had the biggest impact on me, and they were the culture festival and the sports festival... Boy, they were a lot of work!"

Her face glowed like a flower that waited for its moment to blossom. That tingled my nasals, and my vision began to blur.

Looking back on the past year, a lot of things happened. I had a flashback of all the emotional memories like a revolving lantern. Wait, this sounds like I died, didn't it?

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<sup>23</sup> Tundra sometimes gets mixed up as tsundere as a joke.

If there was one person I could truly call my senpai, it was the person on stage. In listening to her trembling voice and her act of wiping her tears, I sniffed over and over. Suddenly, my shoulder was tapped by my sitting neighbor.

My face distorted with disgust saying, “The hell do you want, I’m busy, can’t you see I’m soaking up the atmosphere right now, I’ll kill you,” and I turned to see Hayama was making a similar look. He pointed his index finger to his side, and I could see Totsuka, the neighbor of Hayama’s neighbor, taking out tissues from his pocket.

“Hachiman, you okay?” he whispered, sounding worried. He passed the tissues down the row like a bucket relay. When they reached Tobe, he also gave me a concerning look.

“Yo, Hikitan-kun, got hay fever? Hay fever, right? It’s pretty bad, yeah.”

Wrong. Shut up. I don’t have hay fever. Sure, my eyes and nose tended to get all itchy around the beginning of spring and the early parts of summer, but that’s just my imagination at work. It’s my loss if I acknowledged it. I groaned at him, which prompted Tobe to add even more tissues.

“Here, pass this over to Hikitan-kun. But nah, I’ve got hay fever too, you know? Especially around the beginning of spring, it really kills me.”

“Tobe, you’re too loud...” Hayama said, reprimanding him

Reprimanded, Tobe let out a voiceless groan or something to that effect. He was whispering, yet he was still loud and obnoxious. How did that even work? I mean, he’s a good guy, but he’s really obnoxious. Anyway, I shouldn’t have expected less from someone with hay fever. Boys who had tissues handy scored high in Hachiman points. People who didn’t, like me, scored low in Hachiman points.

By the time the tissues reached Hayama, there was a large stack. Hayama took some from his breast pocket and pushed the bag of tissues onto me. I accepted and blew my nose.

“Changs...” I said with a sobbing voice, and passed back the tissues.

Hayama was appalled. “You’re crying way too much...”

“No, you’ve got it wrong. It’s just the older I get, the more susceptible I am to crying... Nowadays, I cry just from the start of a Precure episode...”

“Are you crying every Saturday morning...?”

“Weekdays too, because of reruns.”

“R-Really...” Hayama looked even more appalled.

My tear glands were trained by the kids anime, Precure and Aikatsu, and I could activate them within zero frames. And so, I would find myself in a blubbing mess every Saturday and Sunday, two times a week. If we included the reruns on the MX and Chiba TV stations, that would make it four times a week. Once the opening of Aikatsu on Parade started, I’d shed a gallon’s worth of tears. As I continued to sob, Meguri-senpai continued with her speech.

“From this point onward, we will take one step at a time toward our individual futures. Even if we encounter an insurmountable wall, the memories, lessons, and pride we gained from Sobu High School will serve as the backbone that propels us to live strongly. I truly thank you from the bottom of my heart.”

And so, she moved on to the conclusion of her speech. If this was a live concert, the tension would be similar to the final song. Though for me, I felt like I had only just arrived. Every live concert regardless of the wishes of the audience would always end just like Meguri-senpai’s speech marched on to its finale.

“In honor of all those who gave us a supporting hand... I end my formal response as the graduate representative, Shiromeguri Meguri.”

She lowered her head and maintained a beautiful bow. A long period of silence followed as did the lamenting wails of the audience.

“Everyone, thank you! I had a blast! I had the best time ever! Thank you so much!”

Soon after, she lifted her face and sported her special Megu-Megu-Megurin☆Megurin smile.

“Hey, you guys, are you ready to culture!?”

Before descending the stage, she gripped the microphone and loudly declared causing a stir in the audience. Those who were seated in the visitors’ area were bewildered, but the students responded in kind after recalling her words with a “Yaaaah!”

Meguri-senpai sweetly smiled and took a deep breath.



“Chiba's specialties!”  
“Festivals and dancing!”  
“Since we're all fools!”  
“We'll dance!”  
“And sing a song!”

Both graduate and enrolled students alike performed the mysterious call and response, or CaR, with idiotic voices. Everyone broke into smiles after remembering that memorable moment from the culture festival. The atmosphere that was stifled by grief moments ago was instantly turned upside-down, and of course, in a good way.

This was the kind of atmosphere that only Meguri-senpai was able to build during her time as the student council president. While I didn't know a single thing about the majority of my upperclassmen, nor do I care to, I thought this turned out to be a great graduation ceremony. Just being able to witness Meguri-senpai's glowing smile was enough to make participating all the worthwhile.

Phew, could anything ever top this? As soon as I get home, I'm going to poetically recite my experience on Twitter!

X X X

The school day ended after we had a simple homeroom following the ceremony.

Today wasn't just an emotional day of parting for the graduates, but also for the remaining students. Many had already left the classrooms to see their upperclassmen, either because they were in the same club or something else. Even Hayama and the extra three idiots, the usual suspects who'd stay behind in class, were already gone. Similarly, Totsuka had left with heavy luggage as the captain of the tennis club.

As for me, heading straight home was the only thing I could do, since I had nothing to do with my upperclassmen. The classroom proceeded to empty, and I made my preparations to head home until Yuigahama came by.

“Do you wanna stop by the student council? Meguri-senpai's there.”

“Ah... well, I'd like to say hello if possible, but...”

This might be the last time I could get to see her. Considering how much she's done for me, it was only proper I should say my goodbye at least. But after all the bawling I did during the ceremony, seeing her face to face was a little embarrassing.

Will I be okay? My eyes aren't swollen or anything, right? God, there's no way I can meet Meguri-senpai looking like this... There's this commercial with an office lady on her third year as a working adult who sat against a refrigerator and pressed a chilled spoon against her eyelids and whispered to herself, “Don't lose, me...” I need to act like that!

Yuigahama made a clueless head tilt to my hesitant pause. “But...?”

“No, forget it. It's nothing. Let's go.”

There's nothing more shameful than explaining why my girlishy maiden heart, full of maiden circuits<sup>24</sup>, was on the verge of short-circuiting. I ended the conversation abruptly and stood up with my coat and bag in hand. I started walking, and Yuigahama, still clueless, followed. Then, just as I was about to exit the class, she overtook me by a few steps and turned to examine my eyes.

“Ohh... Hikki, you cried a lot, didn't you? That's hilarious. Are you embarrassed?” she said, trying to hold in her laughter. She gave me a teasing look, acting like an older sister, and the shame and embarrassment caused me to stammer.

“Am not,” I said, trying to be blunt. That only made her giggle more, however.

“Yumiko actually cried a lot, too. She was so embarrassed afterwards, and it was the cutest thing ever...” she smiled in satisfaction after recalling the sight. I see, that explained why Miura-san immediately went home, because she was too embarrassed, huh? What a cute person... Nonetheless, I was on the same boat, so she had my sympathies...

“Come on, anyone would cry if they were there... I mean, Isshiki did really well with her farewell address, and we all know how hopeless she can be. More importantly, don't even get me started on Meguri-senpai. The way she tried so hard to keep smiling but still kept crying, and then that smile she

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<sup>24</sup> Saber Marionette

made after her speech? Amazing. Oh, and the CaR they did? That was definitely done on the spot. Simply ama—d”

“You're talking too much! Wow, that's gross... freaky... just no...”

Well, that's a normal reaction. Otakus had the tendency to claim something was improvised and get emotional. The fact they would do that even when it was all according to an actual script made them suitable for spectating professional wrestling. Therefore, Bushiroad<sup>25</sup> was amazing for realizing the compatibility of otakus and professional wrestling. What's amazing? The spirit of “I won't stop until I win.” It's one of the most essential policies to have as a content owner these days.

I was eager to outwit her with my logic, but there was a far more effective choice of words I could use. There were a few words that proved to be far more effective.

“Speak for yourself, you were obviously crying, too...” I said, giving her a fixated stare.

“I mean, it's because Yumiko kept crying... and when I thought about how our classes are gonna change and how we're gonna graduate soon, I couldn't help it.” Yuigahama tried to make excuses for herself, looking flushed with embarrassment and vexed. She looked away and continued, “Actually, could you not watch me when I'm like that...?”

“Same goes to you...”

We made our way down the stairs while chatting, and the number of people we came across began to increase. The third year classes were on the first two floors of the main building, and as soon we entered the hallway, there were students idly chatting and taking photos with each other. Even after standing shoulder to shoulder and taking a picture, some catalyst would lead them into continuing their conversations instead of leaving. I wasn't sure if it was because they were reluctant, or they were garbage communicators that couldn't find the timing to leave, but either way, it was a difficult to do.

We walked down the hallway while avoiding being a hindrance to the graduates, and we passed by a group with the flower corsages pinned to their breast pockets. They were holding a graduation album, and seemed to be collecting autographs from people to fill in the final blank pages.

“I'm definitely gonna be a crying mess next year...” Yuigahama whispered just as we passed by the group. The words seemed to be for herself, so I just mindlessly gave her an acknowledging breath.

It's very probable she was going to cry next year. Together with Miura and Ebina-san, shoulder to shoulder, hands linked, and intimately whispering to each other, they would no doubt lament their separation.

The tears they had shed today weren't solely because of the proliferating influence of the graduation ceremony, nor was it the overlapping realization that what they witnessed today was a road they would eventually travel down. I think it's because they were aware that their parting was in fact closing in on them right before their eyes in reality. Our acts of opening the door of class 2-F, which we had just left, was numbered.

It wasn't too long until our routine classes, listless lunch breaks, and the deserted but serene after-school campus would be all gone. Even if they were all similar after becoming third years, the people we see in them would be all different.

In Miura's case, she had an emotional attachment to our class. Hayama Hayato was self-explanatory, but the friendships she forged in our class weren't things you could come across easily. The conflict she once had with Yuigahama, for example, made it all the more important to her. In that sense, this made Yuigahama similar to Miura.

Conversely, how was it for me? I wouldn't just write it off as a simple class change, but it never really did invoke any significant emotions from me to this day. I never went out of my way to stay in touch, nor did I put in the effort to stay close, or even maintain, a close relationship with anyone. Orimoto Kaori was the only one who I saw again after graduating from middle school, and that was merely a byproduct of coincidences.

It's a universal truth that people who don't meet would fall out of contact, and if they established new relationships, they would maintain a similar distance. People were quick to adapt to a change in environments. They would get used to it, be friendly, and then go their separate ways again. If a bye was good, then it was a goodbye.

We were always in the middle of saying goodbye no matter when and where.

Perhaps, changing classes and graduation ceremonies were to help us practice. We were given a finite amount of time, and our partings were prepared for us regardless of our individual feelings and consent. It's a generous plan that allowed even the worst garbage communicators to say a clean

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<sup>25</sup> Japanese entertainment company that owns a number of franchises. They also acquired New Japan Pro-Wrestling back in 2012.

goodbye. It also came with an after service bonus in the form of two excuses, “We graduated, that's why,” and “We changed classes, that's why,” in case we wondered why people never saw each other again.

Having experienced many short-lived partings, I was a professional. My technique in the art of farewells had already reached the level of mastery that allowed me to flawlessly and wordlessly end a relationship. It was a natural conclusion that the other party would fail to be conscious of; the skill of a technician. The speed at which my partings happened was frighteningly fast that only I could notice. Living while erasing my existence was a part of me now.

So, basically, if you looked at it from another perspective, I never went through a proper parting before. I was someone who would act out a memorable parting after skipping out on work at a part-time job and then sending back the uniform in a COD package<sup>26</sup> on another day.

Now, just what could I talk about with Meguri-senpai...? As I mulled over the thought, we arrived at the door of the student council. Feeling somewhat nervous, I knocked.

“C-Come in...”

The knock was answered by a disjointed voice. Since it came from the other side of the door, it was a little hard to understand, but it was likely Isshiki. I opened the door, curious about her exhausted voice, and my question was immediately answered.

At the center of the room, Meguri-senpai was bear hugging Yukinoshita and Isshiki in tears. “Thank you! Thank you so much! Gosh, I just love the student council so much!”

“So close...”

On one hand, Yukinoshita was at a loss, while on the other, Isshiki looked away and sighed in annoyance. Yep, yep, you earned some brownie points for making sure Meguri-senpai didn't see that. I was able to see something good today...

As I watched them, Meguri-senpai noticed us. “Oh! Yuigahama-san, Hikigaya-kun! You came!”

This time, she pounced at Yuigahama. Accustomed to the physical intimacy between girls, she hugged her back. A real natural, indeed... As for me? My heart was pounding, and I was thinking, “Hawawa! What should I do if she hugged me, too!?”

“Thank you so much, you two! A lot happened along the way, but I had a ton of fun!”

“Me too!”

Meguri-senpai and Yuigahama held hands and began to hit it off. Finally released from her embrace, Yukinoshita massaged her chest in relief. I couldn't help but break into a smile after seeing such a nostalgic gesture from her. Then, our eyes met for just an instant, before she averted them to the clock.

She said to Isshiki, “The vendors will arriving soon, so I should get going.”

“Hmm, isn't it a bit early?” Isshiki dubiously turned her head. She took out a piece of paper that looked like a progress schedule. “Hmm, it's kind of a weird time for you to go, but I guess it's better to be early than be late. Should I tag along?”

Yukinoshita shook her head. “I'll just be supervising, so I can do it alone. Shiromeguri-senpai, I'll be on my way now, so I'll see you again at the prom.”

“Sure! See you later!” Meguri-senpai said with a smile, and waved as Yukinoshtia left the room. After seeing her off, she glanced at the clock, and whispered, “There's prom preparations to take care of, huh? I should get changed and get going, too...”

Yuigahama sparkled. “Oh! What kind of dress are you wearing?”

“It's really amazing, I tell you. Like, it's just so erotic.”

“Erotic...?”

Hearing such a frank declaration, Yuigahama faltered for just an instant. However, Meguri-senpai assumed an oddly look of elation as she took out her smartphone. When Yuigahama looked at the screen, they began whispering.

“It shows a lot of skin, but the way it outlines my silhouette is just so erotic, and I mean, super erotic.”

“Ohh... it is really is erotic.”

As the two engaged in their chatter, Isshiki peeked in. “You're picking one that just barely skirts the dress code, huh? Like you're trying to fetishize your natural cuteness in a way.”

<sup>26</sup> It's considered bad etiquette to send your uniform back to the workplace. You should be handing them back in person.

“Right? The moment I saw it on the catalog, I just knew I had to try it!”

“Wow, you went with the other third years? That sounds like a lot of fun!”

“Yep, yep. I contacted a few people just in case, and things just turned out that way while we were talking.”

As Meguri-senpai slid her fingers on her smartphone, Yuigahama gave her astonished glitterrific ☆ reactions. Isshiki, on the other hand, was composed.

“Oh, I see. Also, thank you for spreading the word about our dress code.”

“Oh, don't sweat it! It's been a while since I got to participate in an event, so I had a lot of fun!”

The young ladies were truly having the time of their lives looking at their smartphones, while I was acting suspiciously with the hope of catching a glimpse. This kind of situation was something a boy couldn't nonchalantly participate. Rather, it's wiser to stay out of it entirely. Even if I could manage a “Hey, let me see, too!” I don't think I had it in me to provide impressions that didn't violate the ethics code. I guess the most I could say was “Huh, that's pretty lewd.” At that point, it'd be better not say anything at all.

While lending an ear to the frolicking noise of the girls, I entered Jizou time. I assumed a stillness that would net me offerings, and Meguri-senpai sent me a smile after putting her phone away, apparently not forgetting about me.

“I don't get very many opportunities to wear dresses like that, so I'm so happy you guys are doing the prom. Thank you, Hikigaya-kun.”

“Oh, no... It doesn't have much to do with me, since Yukinoshita and the others are the ones doing it.”

“Oh...”

Flustered when she suddenly brought me into the conversation, I gave her an awkward laugh. This caused her face to slightly cloud with melancholy. Upon seeing such a face, I was attacked with guilt, and my chest stung. Because of that, I unknowingly added onto my statement.

“Well... I plan on helping at least, so I'll be there.”

“Really? That's great! I was just thinking how nice it'd be to see you all again, since it'll be the last time.” Meguri-senpai smiled with reassurance. Her ending words, however, sounded lonely, something she seemed to be aware of.

“I didn't think I'd actually be graduating...” She whispered as she made a loving look around the student council room. It's likely her words weren't meant for us. With everyone unable to say anything, she quickly interjected with a jolly shake of her hands, and added, “Oh, don't get me wrong! I was going to graduate for sure, and I'm definitely going to college! But, I mean, it's just...”

The warm and soft smile she had always worn began to break down along with her words, and her eyes suddenly misted over. “It's just... it's just, you know?” As if to hide the tears welling at her eyes, she let out a bashful giggle.

Yuigahama nodded tenderly. “I think I kind of get it.”

Meguri-senpai gave her appreciation and faced us. “You guys should all try to do something fun again... I'll be gone, but you all still have a lot of time left!”

“Yes...”

“I'll do what I can...”

Yuigahama answered, and I followed. We didn't think that was possible, but there wasn't any point in saying that now. I think Yuigahama and I had the same expression, one that looked like we were trying not to smile, as if we were trying to put up with something. Our eyes were downcast as we lightly bit our lips.

Meguri-senpai watched us with a gentle gaze and said nothing more. Then, she turned to Isshiki.

“Isshiki-san, the Sobu High School student council is in your hands,” she said, and then did a beautiful bow.

Isshiki made baffled blinks in a daze. But she immediately straightened her posture and looked at Meguri-senpai head on.

“Yes.... though it's been in my hands for a while now,” Isshiki said with a wry smile.

“Ahaha, that's true.” Meguri-senpai made a nonchalant laugh. Then, she slapped her cheeks for motivation. “Okay, that's it! Goodbye time is over!” She took a step. “I'll see you later at the prom! Let's



talk more there! That's a promise!"

She energetically waved her hands as she made her way out. Right before the door closed, she peeked her face in the opening and waved again. I wanted her to stop, because she looked just like Jack Nicholson from *The Shining*. Not to mention, it just made me want to wave back, too... When the door finally closed completely, I was able to drop my arms and let out an exhausted sigh.

Isshiki who had been watching our interaction blurted out. "Is it just me, or do you like Meguri-senpai a lot?"

"Oh, I was thinking the same thing."

"Excuse me...? You're saying there are people who don't like her?"

"Ahh, it's hard to imagine. Wait, why do you sound a little angry...?"

Yuigahama laughed. But Irohasu, why were you being quiet? It's not nice to be crossing your arms with a face saying, "Uh, I'm sure pretty sure there are..." That's the problem with you!

I gave her an admonishing look, and upon noticing, she cleared her throat. Then, she changed the subject and made an unpleasant grin. "Well, anyway, for the Meguri-senpai you love so much, why don't we go get some work done?"

Hmm... Putting it that way kind of bothers me...

X X X

Isshiki headed to the venue of the prom, the school gymnasium, with us in tow. The bending rays of the sun dyed the floor and walls with a pale orange. The heater placed at the rear blazed with a bright red and kept the open space surprisingly warm.

I made a sweeping glance to see the decoration of the venue was proceeding smoothly, and the various arrangements of the balloon art, flower stands, and disco balls made for a flourishing interior. It wasn't too long ago that the gym was permeated with a stifled atmosphere of the graduation ceremony, but now, it was as festive as far as the eye could see.

In such a brilliant interior, only the place Yukinoshita Yukino stood had a frigid professionalism. She was engaged in a meeting with the vendors in workwear jumpsuits. Isshiki watched afar and waited for their meeting to end before leaving us behind.

"Yukino-senpai! It's almost time."

Yukinoshita courteously bowed to the vendors after noticing Isshiki and hurried toward her. But then, she stopped. "Hikigaya-kun..."

She gripped the collar of her blazer, and looked as if she wanted to say something more, but swallowed them instead. The corner of her brows curled downwards, and her downcast eyes questioned why I was even here.

Maybe it would've been better if I had given her an excuse. Sadly, I didn't have one that could convince her. On the other hand, there was no point in forcing my random logic on her, either. At the end of the day, I was swept along in recent events and had pushed the responsibility onto someone else and ultimately ended up here by coincidence. Unable to respond, I pulled my head back and could only nod with a moment of eye contact.

"Hey, Yukinon! We're here to help out!" Yuigahama stepped forward when the two of us stood in silence.

Yukinoshita made a penitent bow. "I see... I'm sorry for the trouble."

"It's fine! Don't worry about it! I was always planning to help," Yuigahama said, brightly.

"Thank you."

Finally, she smiled. I was just about to open my mouth, because I felt I needed to say something as well, but Isshiki tapped my shoulder in deliberate interruption.

"Well, it doesn't hurt to have more helping hands. Senpai, thanks for the help."

Although Isshiki stated casually, I could tell she didn't want our back-and-forth to escalate into anything bigger. Her decision to immediately begin distributing the event schedule was a physical manifestation of her concern.

"In any case, let's start our meeting."

Once everyone received a copy, Isshiki retrieved a pen from her breast pocket and started the

meeting.

“Yukino-senpai will be supervising the event in its entirety, and I'll be the MC as well as the sound operator. Our vice president will handle the stage lighting while secretary-chan will be in charge of catering. The soccer club grunts will take care most of the odd jobs with some helpers from various clubs.”

Half of what Isshiki said went in one ear and out the other as I looked around the gym, and I certainly did spot unfamiliar faces that weren't apart of the student council. With Hayama's cooperation as an execute of the club captains' association, they were able to secure extra personnel for the miscellaneous jobs. This meant Yukinoshita and the student council could focus on their responsibilities as the main staff of this event. The planning was meticulous, I thought.

Isshiki quickly added, “Oh, we also have a scary person scheduled to handle any wardrobe issues.”

What? Did she mean Kawasaki? She sounded like she belonged to an influential criminal organization or something. Kawasaki's such a good person, too... I stood there in shock.

Meanwhile, Isshiki made notes on her schedule. Afterwards, she looked up at Yukinoshita. “What should we assign these two?”

Yukinoshita placed her hand to her mouth and went into thought.

“Since they're offering, we can have them help with the reception, the sound, or the lighting.”

“I'll do the reception. We can't really leave that to Hikki, so...” Yuigahama raised her hand and quickly volunteered, though her words started trailing off near the end. Isshiki continued after her with an agreeable nod.

“That's true.”

Great job, Gahama-san, Irohasu, you two understood me well. Since I, too, understood myself very well, I nodded along. Yukinoshita didn't, however, and faced Yuigahama.

“We're not expecting a large turnout, but there will be parents visiting, so make sure to register their names. For students, check their student ID.”

“We'll station Tobe-senpai and the other grunts at the reception, so if there's any trouble, let them handle it, and please call either Yukino-senpai or me.”

“Okay-dokey.”

Yuigahama casually acknowledged Isshiki's additional instruction. Wait, Tobe's just a grunt...? And you're making him stand the entire time...?

“As for senpai...”

“Let's see...”

Isshiki looked at Yukinoshita and me in turn. Yukinoshita didn't say anything more, but she was weakly biting her lip and seemed to be in thought. That being said, she didn't provide me with a designation. Based on our discussion so far, only the sound or the lighting were available.

“The lighting seems pretty integrated throughout the event, so that might be too difficult to do if I don't have an idea how everything works,” I said, looking at Isshiki.

Isshiki nodded. “That's true. Please help as a sound assistant, then. It'll be my main responsibility, but I'll still have to go in and out during the event. Having a stand-in would help a lot.”

“Roger that. Anything I need to keep in mind?”

“Music numbers are printed on the event schedule, so there shouldn't be any issues as long as you follow the playlist. We'll also call the song cues, so I think we should be okay.”

“Uh-huh, I see.”

A playlist was built in advance, and the songs had also been secured. On top of that, they would call the cues for each song. The only remaining concern was the technical aspect.

“Do you mind if we do a quick test run?”

I pointed my index finger at the control booth on the mezzanine floor located in the wing of the stage to my right, or the stage left. She said I just needed to help as an assistant, but anything could happen during the event. It stood to reason that I had the basics down on operating the controls.

“Oh, sure. Let's go take a look,” she said, and politely led the way. We followed her to the control booth. After we ascended the dimly lit stairs from the wing, we entered a small room. Yukinoshita entered, followed by Yuigahama who looked around the room in interest. It's certainly a place you wouldn't visit normally. There was the one time during the culture festival where I had a rough overview

of the sound facilities as part of my odd jobs, but I never actually had the chance to fiddle with them.

Feeling a little concerned I could fulfill my duties, I looked at the PA sound mixer near the wall with a small window, and there was a faintly lit red lamp. I took a seat in front of the mixer as Isshiki recommended. Above the mixer was a laminated user manual along with a written playlist. Paper tape was clearly pasted on the mixer's meters that looked related to the sound levels to make it easier for students to operate. The sliders of the faders were wrapped with colored tape that could easily be utilized with a single glance. With this much preparation, the controls shouldn't be a problem.

"I'm going to play a song."

"Sure."

After attaining Isshiki's permission, I pressed the button. Then, an EDM track began to play, making beats<sup>27</sup> that someone like Tobe would make. Next, I checked the event schedule and the playlist, and verified that each song was available using the playback controls to get a rough overview of how the controls worked. So far, so good.

I stared at the schedule and mixer thinking of any remaining items, and a realization hit me. Sound operators didn't only play the music. They also handled everything else that involved sound, which included the microphones.

"What about the mics? How many do we need, and where do we put them?"

"Huh? Oh, give me one second..." Isshiki flipped through the event schedule. There, Yukinoshita spoke up.

"A wired one for me at the stage right, a wireless one for Isshiki-san, and a spare one at the stage left," she said while taking out white masking tape from her blazer's pocket. She cut three small pieces and put each one under their respective fader sliders.

I grabbed a sign pen that was on the mixer, and wrote down "Yukinoshita," "Isshiki", and "Spare" one by one. The microphones were now accounted for. Next was... I flipped through the event schedule, and I came across an unfamiliar word.

"What's this 'slideshow' about...?" I asked, tapping on the booklet.

Isshiki looked down. "Oh, this? It's a picture compilation of the graduates from all sorts of people. It wasn't really edited, though."

"Uh-huh.."

It looked like the details of the prom had changed without my knowledge. We were now in a period when slideshows could easily be produced on a smartphone. I couldn't say much about the quality, but it didn't require much effort, and if it's enough to make the graduates happy and even excite them, it's a very cost-effective program item. The thoroughness had me impressed, and I checked over the relevant sections on the schedule while marking them in red circles.

"So, the most annoying item is the slideshow, huh? What are we using to play it?" I rotated my seat, and Isshiki was in front of me. However, my question was immediately answered by a voice beside her.

"We'll be using the PC's line out for sound. We've also confirmed the lighting during technical rehearsal, so you only need to worry about the faders. We'll take care of playing the video on our end." She began preparing a PC as she spoke, looking to give me a demonstration. With that out of the way, that cleared up any of my remaining doubts.

"Roger that. Will the video start with a black screen? How many seconds?"

"It'll be an initial ten seconds followed by another ten for the countdown."

"Can we give that a try?"

"Yes. Isshiki-san, can I ask you to run through the process?"

"Huh...? Oh, yes!" Isshiki snapped out of her daze when her name suddenly came up. Yukinoshita gave her a confused look.

"What's wrong?"

"Um, I was just thinking how you two were talking a lot..." She looked at Yuigahama for agreement.

Yuigahama made a nervous laugh. "Well, it happens all the time, so..."

Seeing Yuigahama rubbing her hair bun with a troubled smile, both Yukinoshita and I went quiet, and it got awkward. Any longer, and the control booth would've been dominated by silence. Unable to

<sup>27</sup> The original sound is "pon pon pooon", which was popularized by a comedian over [Twitter](#).

stand it, I spat out a response.

“I'm sorry, okay? I barely talk, and when I do, it's only at times like this, so it's kind of gross, right?”

“Well, yes, but...”

...Really? Irohasu, you thought I was gross this entire time?

When I gave her a resentful glare, she coughed as if to check her throat. Then, she pretended to hold an air microphone in one hand. Looking ready to begin a rehearsal, she opened her mouth.

“Okay. Next, we have a slideshow. Yay! Clap, clap, clap.”

“After that, Isshiki-san will exit the stage. The lighting will slowly black out, and the video will play.”

Yukinoshita continued to explain the rest of the proceedings like a stage director while operating the PC. When she finished, she tapped the enter key. A screen lowered over the stage and displayed a silent black screen. In the meantime, I lowered the fader slider for the BGM and microphones while increasing the slider for the PC's audio.

I looked at the stage from the small window, and the screen transitioned to a countdown. The numbers made a rolling film sound as it ticked down. Once it reached zero, an emotional song that was commonly used for commercials accompanied the slideshow. With a melody that evoked tears, images depicting the daily lives of the graduates displayed one by one.

As I indifferently watched the slideshow thinking how well done it was, it made me realize something. This was the first time I had ever seen this video. Yet, I could feel some kind of emotion welling up inside of me...

The question popped up in my mind, but Yuigahama whispered the answer. “It kinda feels like I've seen this before...”

“Well, that's what happens when you use this kind of music...”

Unable to verbalize the *déjà vu*, Isshiki, who was apparently in charge of the creation of the slideshow, sulked. “It's better this way. We wanted to prioritize simplicity, so it's okay to cry.”

“They might just laugh it off as a parody, though...” Yukinoshita made a hopeless smile.

Isshiki had a point, though. The video wasn't exactly put together well or had any sense of direction. It was just a successive display of photos of the graduates or photos taken from someone's smartphone. But the music was enough to get people emotional, which would be a guaranteed hit with the graduates. I'm sure they'd find it difficult to put their feelings into words.

Eventually, the music faded out, and the video ended on a frame with a fancy background that read, “Congratulations on your graduation,” and so forth.

“After the video ends, the lighting will come back on, and the MC will take the stage again.”

As I nodded to Yukinoshita's voice, I made memos of the video's duration on my schedule.

“I think I've got it mostly down now, so I should be able to handle the controls when the video plays...”

“That would save us a lot of trouble if you could. We had someone available do it during the technical rehearsal, but once the event begins, we might not have that luxury...”

“Hm, well, I'll probably be here for most of the night, so I can do it. Do you mind if I fiddle around with the controls while checking a few things? I'll probably play a few songs.”

“You're free to do so until the venue opens.”

“Roger that. Is that about it for our meeting?”

I flipped through the schedule, verifying there wasn't anything else that we could've missed, and looked up. When I did, Yukinoshita and my eyes met. Even though she was smiling with narrowed eyes, there was just something so distant about it that I found myself looking away.

“Yes, that should be it... Thank you, and please take care of the rest. Isshiki-san, let's head to the lighting area.”

Yukinoshita called out to Isshiki, turned, and began walking away. Isshiki went after her in a panic.

“Huh? Oh, roger. Okay, senpai, see you later.”

I lifted my hand in response and turned my chair toward the sound mixer. The hurried footsteps behind me grew farther and farther. And then, there was the creaking noise of a chair. I looked over to see Yuigahama was sitting next to me.



“Everything okay?” she asked with concern.

I shrugged. “Yeah... We should be fine.”

She then made a slight anxious face. “Oh, okay... the conversation was a little hard to follow, so I was wondering.”

“Things will work out once we get used to it,” I said, smiling. Then, my eyes sank to my hands.

Right, I wasn't used to things yet. So, to make that happen faster, I extended my hand to the playback button on the mixer. I raised the fader with my cold fingertip, and an unknown track, an EDM that I had never heard before, began to play. It was the kind of modern song you'd find at any club, and my eyebrows unknowingly formed a frown. But the more I listened to it, the more I would get used to it.

Whether it was the usage of the mixer, the unfamiliar EDM, the grating test blows of the air horns, or the low bass from the backside of the speakers, they were all things I would eventually get used to, as if they were the most natural thing in the world.

X X X

The light of the setting sun peeked through the openings of the blackout curtains that hung at the catwalk, and the intermingled strobes of spotlight and diffused reflection of the disco balls glistened. Presumably, they were performing final checks on the lighting. It wasn't long until the venue was open. As the sound operator, I also went through my remaining work.

“Test, test... ahh, test, test...”

I verified the connection of the stage right's wired microphone with a voice test, which the speakers shot back at me. I looked up at the small window of the control booth in the stage to see the person with the same responsibilities as me, Isshiki, peeking out the window. I signaled to her using my hands to form a large circle. In return, Isshiki slightly leaned out and formed a similar shape like the Hakutsuru circle with her arms. Such a foxy and adorable gesture...

“Hikigaya-kun.”

I turned around to see Yukinoshita approaching. She was holding a black object corded with a microphone and an earphone, or also known as an intercom headset.

“We'll use this to call the cues.”

“Ooh, that's a little nostalgic.”

After accepting the headset from her, I inspected it. I blurted out my honest feelings having recalled its usage back during the events of the culture festival.

Yukinoshita didn't say a word and turned. “Can you give the other one to Isshiki-san?”

“Y-Yeah.”

That marked the end of our conversation. Words were flowing right out of our mouths in the earlier meeting, but now, there was just silence suffocating the air as we stood in the dark wing of the stage. It wouldn't have bothered me so much if I was working on something, but once I looked at my hand, I realized I was still holding the wired microphone.

“Oh, right, you're going to use a stand, right?” I asked when the thought came to mind. She turned back, and she had an addled expression.

“Y-Yes, that's the plan...”

Upon her acknowledgment, I went to grab the stand that was farther in the wing. I walked back to Yukinoshita and began setting it.

“How high should it be? About this much?”

I bent over to make the adjustments, and Yukinoshita let out an awkward sigh overhead.

“That's perfect, but... I can do this much by myself,” she whispered, angling her head downwards.

My hands stopped. As much as I wanted to do away with the awkwardness, a bitter taste filled my mouth from self-disgust for almost sticking my nose where it didn't belong again.

“Right... sorry.” I released the stand, stood up, and took two steps back.

“No, you've got nothing to apologize for...”

“Ahh... right.”

In the wing shrouded in darkness, excluded from the overhead lighting, our wordless breaths were like solids that clogged the air and made it difficult to move. Not much time had passed, yet it felt like we had been frozen for ages. Similarly feeling the same discomfort, Yukinoshita let out a shallow sigh and reluctantly spoke up.

“Um... if my attitude's been unpleasant in any way, I apologize.”

“Huh? Oh, no, I thought you were just acting normal...”

Her words were so abrupt, it caused me to respond strangely.

“I wasn't really sure what kind of face I should make when talking to you.”

Wow, she's something else... Of all the things she could say in this awkward mood, she went with that...?

But that's really just like her. She wasn't exactly the type of person who could read between the lines. Heck, she couldn't, period. Or perhaps, it might be more accurate to say she was never put in a situation where that was necessary. At the very least, in the past year she's spent with Yuigahama and me, I think she was starting to get the hang of it. Whether that was a good thing or not, I wasn't sure. After all, I was someone who read between the lines too much, to the point I felt it was second-nature, but that at times strangely left me in the same position I was initially.

Truthfully speaking, I had no idea how I was supposed to interact with her, either. And when she made an expression that looked confused or embarrassed, and was seconds away from breaking into tears, it only made it harder. What exactly was I supposed to say when she kept constantly adjusting her bangs, combing the hair at her shoulder, and restlessly moving her eyes? I just didn't know.

“Oh, okay... I think you can just act like normal...?”

After such a long period of hesitation, I could only give her a lazy, unreliable answer.

“Normal... R-Right.”

She nodded as if digesting the concept, and I similarly nodded back in silence. If someone had been watching us, it would've looked like we were pigeons embroiled in a turf war. She repeatedly whispered “normal” to herself to regain her composure. That conversely made me calm down instead. The corners of my mouth grew lax and enabled me to speak freely.

“Well, things are a little hectic right now, so I doubt you had the time to relax and think things through. You'll get better at being normal in time. Not that I'd know.”

“Y-You're right. Once things settle down, I should be able to improve and be more natural at it...”

We believed this was what it meant to be normal. That's why we were trying to be normal, because we wanted to believe this relationship wasn't abnormal.

Yukinoshita was eventually able to regain her composure after finding some sense in my words. She lightly coughed and tried to start over.

“I wasn't trying to be mean or anything earlier... Um, it's true we're short-handed, and in that respect, I appreciate your help, so...”

“Mm, yeah, I got it. I wasn't really thinking when I came here to help... things just turned out this way. It's not like I can just sit around doing nothing, anyway,” I said, wryly smiling.

Yukinoshita shook her head. “I don't think that's your fault. Isshiki-san's also depending on you.”

Finally, she smiled. It's been a while, but I could even feel a bit of teasing coming from her. Anyway, “depending on you” was a wonderful choice of words. Was this the recent trending political correctness I had been hearing about?

“Isshiki's gotten pretty reliable lately, so we'll probably be relieved of our posts eventually. And that means we won't be getting these kinds of jobs anymore.”

“That's debatable. I don't think she'll let you go very easily.”

“Oh boy, that's a frightening thought, very scary...”

The stiffness left my body once I was able to talk more freely, and I continued my work. I reeled in the wire of the microphone while ensuring it didn't get entangled. Interjecting into the sliding noise of the cord was a muffled vibration.

“Excuse me for a moment.” She took out her smartphone. After seeing the screen, she let out an exhausted sigh. The brightness illuminated her wrinkling brow, and she looked up toward the small window of the voice room. My eyes followed, and I could see Isshiki near the window of the control booth clapping her hands together with a bow of her head.

“What's up? Did something happen?”

“It's nothing important,” she said, and left the wing in a hurry.

Wondering if something had happened, I followed after her and stuck my face out from the wing. Below the stage, I could see Yukinoshita and Hiratsuka-sensei in a discussion. Approaching them from behind was Yukinoshita's mother and Haruno-san.

I had a suspicious look, questioning why Hiratsuka-sensei, or rather, why the other two were here. Then, Hiratsuka-sensei's eyes met with mine.

“Oh, Hikigaya, you were here? Sorry for interrupting your preparations.”

“Ahh, not at all...”

She gave me a casual wave. Then, Yukinoshita's mother noticed me and did a similar gesture. “Hikigaya-kun, I'm happy to see you again.”

“Haha, hello...”

I wanted to be on my way after a quick exchange of pleasantries. Unfortunately, she beckoned me over and had every intention of continuing the conversation. With Haruno-san staring, I had no room to flee. I resigned myself to fate and made several sluggish steps closer, and Yukinoshita's mother cheerfully began talking.

“I see you'll be attending the prom. I'm rather excited to see your excellent dancing.”

“Hahaha...” I let out a dry laugh.

Haruno-san gave me a dubious half-smile. “You can dance? Really?”

“I hear he's quite the dancer, enough to make me want to dance myself,” Yukinoshita's mother jested, showing an unexpected innocent side.

“Ooh...” Haruno-san had an impressed tone, but her eyes were indifferent. As I stood there entrapped by her connotative eyes, Yukinoshita intervened.

“I believe you're here to inspect the venue, correct? We're rather hard-pressed with our backlog, so can you make this quick?”

“You're right.”

In response to her daughter's impatient sigh, she retracted her smile and examined the interior. Judging by the conversation just now, she was here to assess if the prom venue was at an acceptable standard for high school students. Isshiki was given notice, but she left the negotiations to Yukinoshita. As the event planner, it was only natural.

“It's impressive you were able to accomplish so much in such a short amount of time. It seems your throw-away plan to buy time is paying out in spades.” Yukinoshita's mother surveyed the walls to the ceilings and nodded. Then, her gaze slid into my line of sight. “Considering how extravagant your initial plan was, there's really no room for us to voice our complaints. I suspect even the most meticulous individuals will find this up to standard... You did your research, I must say.”

“Oh no, it's not like I did anything. Everything was all because of—”

Your daughter. I wanted to finish, but when I caught glimpse of Haruno-san's narrowing eyes, as if she was testing me, behind her, I stopped. It wasn't my place to say anything more. There wasn't any meaning in asserting my contributions. Even worse, it could backfire.

Yukinoshita's mother tilted her head when I went quiet and waited for me to continue. I merely looked at Yukinoshita. No matter how trivial their exchange was, she was the one who ought to confront her mother, not me. After all, the person we were dealing with was someone who was quick to point out the little things but was also quick to turn every one of them upside down on their heads. If I didn't maneuver around this person carefully, I could hinder Yukinoshita.

Taking notice of the silence, or my gaze, Hiratsuka-sensei let out a chuckle. “This was all because of the generous understanding and cooperation of the parents. Don't you agree, executive chairman?”

She took a joking tone and patted Yukinoshita on the back with a smile. Suddenly thrown into the conversation, Yukinoshita had a bewildered look, but quickly composed herself after realizing Hiratsuka-sensei's intention from her initially polite sentence and trailing words.

“Y-Yes. As the planner, I would like to express my gratitude.”

She expressed her appreciation and performed a beautiful bow to her mother with a formality that was unlike the crudeness she had moments ago.

“I believe there may be some things that may not be up to standard, but as this is a joyous

occasion, I would be most grateful if you could watch over this event in kind. Should there be any claims from our dear guests, I will see to it that they are all handled with the utmost urgency.”

She slowly raised her head and met her mother's eyes directly. Both her gestures and expressions exuded a tangible feeling of reservation and tension.

“I see. I may be your mother, but it's important to maintain your dignity at times like this. I'm glad to see you're finally showing a look befitting your position... In any case, as the director of the parents association, I would like to proceed with my inspection.”

“By all means.”

After seeing her daughter's resolute attitude, her lips teared at the seams and formed an intrepid smile. She quickly hid her mouth with her folding fan and cheerfully whispered like the tumbling of a bell.

“Let's get down to business, shall we? First, I'd like to look over the closing schedule and the procedures after the event ends...”

“Yes. This is in regards to venue security, correct? I have the documents prepared over there. May I have you accompany me?”

Yukinoshita led the way and was followed by her mother and then Hiratsuka-sensei. After a delay of a couple of steps, Haruno-san started after them. Upon passing me, she tapped my shoulder and whispered into my ear. “Good job on holding yourself back... that's how things should be.”

Her gentle voice was laden with a sweetness that sent chills down my spine, but accompanying it was a proportionally higher sense of loneliness. Not bothering to wait for a response, she continued on.

Left behind, I stood there alone. I let out a tired exhale and pushed my sight to the ceiling.

X X X

Had things been like always, I was sure I would've come up with something pretentious and stuck my nose in where it didn't belong. But that was no longer necessary. Correction, I finally understood that I mustn't do it anymore.

The things I could do—the things I was allowed to do—were extremely limited. In terms of the present, there was only one thing I could do—work.

I let out a hearty breath and made my way to the control booth. I noisily climbed the narrow stairs and opened the door.

“Good work out there.”

Isshiki was leaning against her office swivel chair and was spinning out of boredom. I took the seat beside her in front of the PA mixer while handing her the headset in my hand.

“Yeah. Here's the headset.”

“Okay, thanksies.”

Isshiki rolled her seat over and accepted. On top of that, she leaned closer to my ear and whispered, “Is everything okay? Did that hag say anything?”

“Ha—look here, missy...”

She looked quite young despite her age, you know, not that I knew her age or anything. She was the mother of those two daughters, so it was only natural that she was just as beautiful. Of course, she's outright scary, but she's got this adorable side to her too, you know? Though that just made her even scarier.

I considered giving her a retort, but I felt it didn't even matter. Isshiki didn't seem to have a good opinion of her after their last bout. What a coincidence! I felt the same way!

So, instead of defending her, I answered her first question. “Yukinoshita took care of it, so we're fine.”

“Ohh,” Isshiki said indifferently, and rested her cheek in her hand with her elbow against the table. Then, she continued with a grumble. “I guess you two won't need an interpreter anymore.”

“Huh?”

“You were talking just fine with Yukino-senpai, weren't you? Like, when we had the meeting and earlier.” She directed her chin in the direction of the small window, apparently witness to our exchange in the other wing.



“Oh... yeah, well, we don't need one if it's for work. It's really just because I'm bad at conversations and idle talk. If anything, I'm good at business calls.”

“Uh, I'm not sure why you're so proud of that...” Isshiki shook her hands in disagreement. Then, she placed that hand on her cheek and sighed. “Well, there are guys who think they had a conversation just because of a business call.”

“Hey, stop it. There are guys who need excuses to even talk to girls. Don't you feel bad for them? Stop it.” I attempted to keep her from continuing, but she wasn't listening.

“Those people are usually the ones who start calling you by your first name after they talk to you for about three times. Then, around the fifth time, they start inviting you out. But after they confess, they just stop talking to you.”

“Stop, stop, stop. Really, just stop. Wait, did you go to my middle school?”

“No... But that's exactly what you do, senpai. You do something like that and use it as an excuse to...”

Isshiki looked at me apathetically, but on immediate realization of something, she jumped back.

“Oh! Don't tell me you were trying to use business calls as an excuse to get closer to me so you can confess? I'm fine with hanging out, but you'll have to wait until this is all over if you want to do anything more, I'm sorry.”

She then courteously bowed.

“Yeah, yeah, after this is over. Now, do your job. Otherwise, this will never end.”

“There he goes again... he's not even listening...”

You'd be crazy to actually listen to that spiel in the first place...

“It's not like I hate doing the work here, though.”

Isshiki wore her headset while fuming and opened the event schedule with exaggeration. Then, she pulled the laptop closer and began clacking away. I went over the controls of the PA mixer while watching her from the corner of my eye.

Suddenly, she let out a chuckle. “I'm actually pretty fond of spending our time like this...”

“Well, the backstage is fun in its own way.”

As a matter of fact, operating a mixer and wearing a headset made me feel like an assistant director, so it was oddly fulfilling. I thrust the earphone into my ear to check its status, and Isshiki rotated her seat toward me.

“Do you want to do it next year, too?”

“I'll be leaving next year, you know...”

This work didn't bother me as much as I thought, but continuing until graduation wasn't my idea of fun... I had an averse smile, but Isshiki didn't.

“I didn't mean that. I was talking about the Service Club.” Isshiki had an emotive tone, wearing an earnest look, and assumed an upright position with her hands on her lap. Her suggestion had a number of implications, but my answer wouldn't have changed even if I thought through them all.

“You'll have to ask the president about that. I don't have jurisdiction in our activities,” I said, but her eyes wouldn't let me end with this ambiguity. I turned away from her pressure. “Plus, the club will be gone.”

This might've been the first time I was able to put that reality into words. Yukinoshita, Yuigahama, and even Hiratsuka-sensei were vaguely aware of it themselves, but they had never really affirmed it up until now. There were occasions where we casually alluded to it in playful conversations, but there had never been a moment where we had put it in tangible terms. That's why, we could avert our eyes from it. But now that I had finally verbalized it, it became an unavoidable truth.

“There won't be any reason for me to work.” I asserted, and could finally look back at Isshiki's eyes. Her gaze softly turned into a sympathetic one, and her lips relaxed into an indifferent smile.

“I knew you'd say that, but it's not that big of a deal, right?”

“Wha... how is it not...?”

“I mean, you don't need a club. That's not the issue. You can still work as part of the student council,” she said, wearing a determined grin. Then, she jokingly added. “To tell you the truth, there's an open spot right now.”

I smiled. “Talk to Yukinoshita then. That's definitely right up her alley.”

“That's the plan. I also plan on inviting Yui-senpai, too. It's fine as long as everyone's in.”

“That's crazy talk. There's only one opening, right?”

Isshiki puffed her chest with a smug laugh. “That's where I'll fire the vice president.”

“That's just mean...”

He's been working so hard, too... I was going to break down in tears from the pity. No, wait, hasn't he been hitting it off with the secretary lately? Forget the pity. Don't screw with me, do your damn job.

I knew her words were a joke, and I knew they were an unattainable dream. That's why I wouldn't outright reject it, because it was something that should be kept as a pleasant and enjoyable topic for later. If I didn't do that, I would end up thinking “it might not be a bad idea.” I figured I was making a decent smile, but as I thought, it was one of the things I just wasn't good at.

She wore a faint smile and looked at me with a gentle gaze. Her expression, her hair, and her hand on her ear made her look just like an adult. No, she was more of an adult than I could ever be.

“I honestly think it's the most realistic option, though. I mean, keeping a relationship that lets you have fun with your cute little junior while listening to every one of her cute demands doesn't sound too bad, right?”

It was an awfully attractive offer. Perhaps, it might've been the most ideal of all the options. My heart wavered for an instant. As if discerning that moment, she made an alluring smile and thrust herself from her seat.

Her beige hair swayed against my cheeks, and I could make out the smell of shampoo along with a sweet perfume arousing my sense of smell. She placed one hand on my chair's armrest and used her other hand to support her mouth and whispered into my ear. “I can give you an excuse if you want...?”



I instinctively pulled away, causing the rattling of the casters of my chair, and opened some distance. Isshiki sat back in her seat.

My heart was beating, I was sweating, and I was flustered. On the other hand, she was collected, as if she was confident nothing had happened.

If she had truly asked for my help, it's likely I would've lent her a hand, whether it was as vice president or general affairs for the student council. But the position didn't matter, because I was willing to lend a hand personally. This was Isshiki we were talking about, someone I treated on a similar level as my little sister, Komachi. I knew that at least. I had a reputation for being weak when it came to my little sister and her. If she had seriously asked, there's no doubt I'd end up helping at the end of the day despite my complaints. That's how it had always been, and she should've been aware of this. But the intention of her coaxing act just now was something even I could understand.

"You really are a good person..." I let out a deep breath and smiled.

Isshiki did a side peace sign and winked. "I know, right? In case you haven't noticed, I'm a pretty convenient woman."

Her expression and gestures were truly cute, foxy, and deliberate. With her demeanor, she did her utmost to be there as my junior, as our Isshiki Iroha. I wasn't sure about her convenience, but at the very least, she was a good woman. I had to give her an answer that only I would say.

"I'll do what I can to see if I can optimistically take your proposal into consideration."

"That's the kind of answer you'd say when you're definitely not going to do something... That's just like you, though." Isshiki hopelessly sighed, but transitioned to an unpleasant smile. "But in case you haven't noticed, I'm the kind of woman who's bad at giving up."

"Yeah, that's easy to notice..."

We faced each other and smiled. Then, she looked at the clock. "Looks like it's almost time..."

Static filled the earphone of our headset, and a calm voiced followed.

"This is Yukinoshita. We'll be proceeding as scheduled, and the venue will be opened to the guests."

"Isshiki here, roger. Playing venue BGM."

She made eye contact with me, and I nodded. I pressed the play button on the PA and slowly raised the fader. No problems so far. My current job was to loop the song that served to energize the venue while everyone was on standby.

With the entry of the guests, the interior grew noisier. If we had at least one monitor, we could get an idea on the situation out there, but we didn't have that luxury. I leaned over the small window and poked my face out. Expanding below me was a scenery of extravagance. The fluttering of all the gorgeous dresses looked like cherry blossom petals from afar.

Fully bloomed flowers were beautiful precisely because they would scatter. Perhaps, because this was the end that the sight expanding before me was so stunning.

And so, the event for our finale would begin at last.

X X X

We had a lot of back-and-forth struggles in order to reach this point, but as soon as the prom began, we flew through the program with flying colors. The opening went well, and we progressed along without any problems. The slideshow that was the most concerning item in the program ended without issue. After a moment of respite, it was almost time for dancing.

Isshiki spent some time ramping up the excitement in the venue as the MC, and I played through the music playlist in accordance to Yukinoshita's cues. The music was all queued up for the dancing period, so there wasn't any need to do any more operation.

I leaned against my chair. I was stationed here for a fairly long time, so I did a stretch to relieve the stiffness from my back. The chair creaked along with the satisfying cracking of my hipbone.

"Good job so far."

I turned to the voice to see Isshiki had just returned from her MC responsibility.

"Hm, yeah, same to you out there," I said, casually praising her.

Isshiki made a "this person sure is hopeless" face and pulled a seat next to me. "Why don't you go



take a break? I'll cover for you.”

I could only imagine she had heard me cracking my hips, because she was giving me some time. I wasn't actually that tired, but I did want to go pick some flowers. I accepted her offer.

“Mm, I'll be back in a bit, then.”

“Sure thing.”

After her listless reply, I left the room. I rotated my stiff arms while removing the earphone from my ear, and briskly descended the stairs with light steps. The successive soft, metallic taps converged with the stomach-shaking bass of the club music. When I made it to the ground floor, the venue was engulfed by the fervor of the crowded center. As an onlooker, it was probably safe to say the event was booming.

Within such a dressy crowd, people in uniforms were conspicuous. I was able to see Yuigahama sitting at the end of the long table for food and drink catering at the corner of this floor level. She beckoned me over as soon as she noticed me and I nodded while making my way there.

“Hey there, Hikki.” Yuigahama stood up right next to me to avoid having her voice drowned out by the explosive sounds of the speakers.

“Yeah, how's the reception going?”

“Pretty good, it's pretty late now, so I don't think anyone else is coming. We've been taking turns going on break.”

“Makes sense, the prom's almost over.”

“Hey, I'm getting kinda hungry. You are too, right?” She began amassing sweets and other things on the table. “You're going to eat some, right?”

I was going to tell her I wasn't hungry, but she didn't wait, and before long, a kingdom of sweets was constructed before me. Erected at its center was the honey toast palace. I see, it was a very delightful selection... Unlike what we had from students during the culture festival, this one was topped off with fruits and cream and was visually-appealing. But this was bread, wasn't it? Yeah, it's definitely bread. No matter the toppings, bread was still bread. Surely they could've put more effort into hiding the fact that was it bread. Just look at how much bread it was. It's so bread.

“Here!”

Yuigahama let out an unexpected perky yelp that sounded like when she was distributing her cooking and gave me a piece of the bread on a paper plate. You used your hands, huh...? Not that it's a big deal or anything. As I was in a state of stupor, Yuigahama began eating.

“So good! The fresh cream's so good!”

As always, she's always enjoying the heck out of her food... Seeing that only made the honey toast look even better. The one we tried last time was made by amateurs, but this time, we had one procured through food delivery or some service called UBEReats, so it was professionally made. It clearly had to be good...

With that belief in mind, I took a bite. Om, nom, nom. Hmm... tastes like bread...

A patchy texture spread throughout the inside of my mouth. Some time had passed since this was put out, hadn't it...? It might've been better to eat it a lot earlier. Well, the cream and honey were delicious, so I guess that's okay... As I gnawed at my food, Yuigahama giggled.

“You have the same face as last time.”

What did you expect? It's just bread and more bread... My eyes stated as such while the inside of my mouth was stuffed with an absorbent sweet body of mass that had a hardness between a sponge and gritty sand. Once I managed to swallow it down, I was finally at ease. I extended my hand out to the table for some coffee, but in that moment, the music playing on the floor changed as did the colors of the lighting.

The spectrum of red and green lights bounced off of the slowly spinning disco balls matching the house music tempo, and the strobe lights rained down on the floor like a faint, burning white beam. It looked almost like Yuigahama's smile was hidden in my flicking field of vision.

“Did you figure out what you want for your request...?”

I moved my face so I could make out her hushed words. “No... I haven't thought of anything yet. You?”

“Um... you already did most of what I told you before, like helping out with the prom, going to the party, and celebrating Komachi-chan's birthday... Oh, I forgot we still need to hang out.” Yuigahama

folded her fingers one by one, but then unfolded the last finger after remembering.

“Do you want to go somewhere after finals?”

“After finals, huh...? Oh, that might actually motivate me more!”

Her shoulders sank upon hearing “finals,” but the plans for after left her happily smiling. For being such an honest girl, I just had to give her some extra service.

“If you have any other requests, please feel free to let me know at any time.”

“Really? Maybe I'll ask for one more then,” she said, and took a delicate step away from me. Then, with the hems of her skirt in her hands, she drew her right foot backwards, slightly bent her knees and her waist. “May I have this dance?”

She bowed, and the bouncing bun on her hair resembled a tiny tiara. I was taken aback by the sight. No, I was captivated.

In time, Yuigahama lifted her head. Despite looking collected, I could tell how flushed her face was in the darkness.

“O-Or something like that,ahaha...” She fiddled with intense velocity in an attempt to hide her embarrassment.

That freed me from my stiffness, and I made a bittersweet smile. “This isn't exactly the place for that kind of dance...”

“I-I know, right? Ahh, god, so embarrassing...” Yuigahama fanned her face with her hands, only for her to immediately look up at the ceiling, and fan even harder with her palms.

Good grief, she was getting too influenced by the atmosphere. Why were you letting it make you dance instead of doing the dancing yourself? I let out a deep sigh along with a feeling of astonishment. I really was astonished... astonished at what I was going to do.

I exhaled one more time, not in astonishment of myself, but as encouragement. I took some distance from the catering table and twisted half of my body. Yuigahama had a puzzled look.

“May I have your hand...?” I said. I placed my left hand on my chest, bent my waist, and extended out my right.

She gave me a blank stare for a moment, but then quickly burst into a laughter. She held her mouth back with her fingers and teasingly looked up at me. “Even though this isn't the place for this kind of dance?”

“You started it...”

I was merely returning the favor after her earlier act. Still this was super embarrassing. I shouldn't have done it... When I started to feel the regret and remorse, my extended hand dropped. But before it went all the way, Yuigahama gripped my hand.

“Let's go!”

She pulled me by the hand and made our way to the center of the floor while avoiding the waves of people. The spotlights and the disco balls bounced from spot to spot, and the people on the dance floor rivaled that irregularity with their bodies.

The song playing was upbeat and hip in tone. I had no idea what kind of song it was because the genre it was a part of was broken up into so many subgenres, but I suppose there wasn't any issue classifying it as club music. At the very least, it wasn't the kind of music male and female pairs would dance cheek-to-cheek to.

My hand still held by her was flung all over, my body spinning in response, and I stamped in place of a foot bellow. Surrounded by all the noise, fervor, and lights, I was jostled in all directions by the masses, performing a messy dance that was far from what you could call stylish.

But it didn't matter how terrible I looked. Everyone here was merely content with having the time of their lives. Whether I danced or posed like Vega, no one would care. No one would see me. Only one person was looking at me, and that was Yuigahama.

The overhead lights flashed place to place indiscriminately and moved only to the beat of the music, making our expressions difficult to make out. But her smile, and our connected hands were things I could see clearly.

In the mass of extravagantly-dressed people, those who were clad in uniforms were a visual abnormality, but no one paid any attention. They were all engrossed in the moment, and this allowed Yuigahama and me to mingle among them. On the dance floor overflowing with people with their backs against each other, Yuigahama and I continued to dance, occasionally moving my hand around her

shoulders, occasionally follow the momentum of the crowd, and occasionally turn to avoid the people.

As we showered in the booming sounds raining down on us from high overhead, our knees would tap to the beat and our shoulders would flounder with the rhythm, and we would toss our hands up in celebration.

Despite how much of a mess my dancing was, there was a big difference between watching and actually doing it. It was painful exercise. I began to feel fatigued, and my eyes met with Yuigahama's. She then burst into laughter.

"You must really hate this!"

"This kind of request is actually really painful..."

"Sorry, sorry! I won't ask for this anymore!" Her voiced mixed with the music and disappeared together. Then, she interjected a whisper. "My next one will be the last."

She was right next to me, within the bounds of my arms, and bumped her forehead against the tip of my shoulder. I thought I could answer her back with my disjointed voice, but it, too, was drowned out by the music.

In time, the music faded out and transitioned to a different song. It was slower in tempo, as if indicating the end to the dancing. In terms of the playlist, the next song would be a high tension standard number and that would set the stage for the finale. In other words, it was the timing for the final chill out, and also the timing for me to return to my post

"I should get going."

"Okay, I'll head back, too."

Our hands went undone, it being unclear who let go first, and we both retreated backwards one step at a time. Before long, a low frequency noise that resembled the chimes of a bell spelled the end of this magical moment.

X X X

Soft taps echoed as I climbed the stairs to the control booth. I made my steps, not with glass slippers or beautiful naked feet, but with my dirty and frayed indoor slippers. The magical moment was long over as I made my return to the dusty room that appeared blanketed in ash.

What awaited Cinderella after the dissipation of the spell were her malicious stepmother and stepsisters, but what awaited me? I opened the door with that question in mind.

"Welcome back! You're late, you know! Do you want to work? Or do you want to work? Or maybe... work?"

What awaited me was my junior acting like a clearly upset demon wife despite displaying a glowing foxy and cute smile that a new wife would have on my return. She played the role of a new wife so well, yet the three choices I was given had absolutely little to do with the family household.

"Okay, I'm sorry. I'll do work..."

"You know I've been calling you over the headset, right? Well, whatever, you made it back on time, so that's fine." She mumbled her complaints and stood up. "Anyway, I need to get ready for my closing speech, so please take care of the rest."

"Will do. Good luck."

"Sure."

After watching her upbeat exit, I was the only one left in the room accompanied by the speaker's heavy bass.

I used the time to refer to the event schedule. While there was some pressure, after making adjustments as needed, we were able to proceed as scheduled toward the ending. Once Isshiki finished her speech, it would be time for the long-awaited grand finale. I put back on the headset I took off earlier for my break. A brief static of noise filled the earphone, and a collected voice followed.

"—Isshiki-san, are you on standby?"

Yukinoshita, who was in charge of coordinating the event, called for a status. Seconds later, a response came.

"—Isshiki here, I arrived at the stage left. I'm ready. Removing headset."

"—Understood. Standby for your cue from the backstage narration."

“—Roger. Talk to you in a bit.”

All communication over the headset went silent since then.

I leaned against my chair with my hands behind my head and looked up at the ceiling. Then, the playing music transitioned to its next phrase. It must've been a well-known club number, because the voices from the ground floor grew animated. The playlist marched on to its final track.

I gripped the mic of the headset clipped at my chest and pressed the button, an operation I had already known how to do. I waited a few seconds to make sure my entire voice was picked up and started.

“—PA reporting, this is the last number.”

“—Understood. I'll call the ending cue from the stage right. Don't miss it.”

After her response, I stuck my head out the small window. Yukinoshita was standing behind the drapes at the stage right. I rested my chin in my hand as I watched her, and she glanced up at me. She then slowly moved the microphone at her collar to her mouth.

“—Can you see me?”

“—Yeah, I can see you.”

“—Okay. So, where are you? In the audience?”

Yukinoshita peeked her face out onto the stage and enacted a search.

“—I'm up here. Look up. Wait, you looked at me earlier, didn't you?”

I answered her back with a deplorable tone. Then, she withdrew back into the wing, and her back was rounded with her shoulders trembling. Her voice wasn't captured on her microphone, because she wasn't pressing the button, but I could see she was laughing. Eventually, she looked up at the control booth, still smiling.

“—I'm not used to looking up at you, so I couldn't help it.”

“—You're used to looking down at me? But that's okay, I'm used to being looked down at.”

“—Your subservience is certainly something to look up to. My neck and shoulders might get sore, though.”

You're not even big enough for that to happen... I won't say what, though!

Then, she gave me a stern glare and gripped the mic at her lonely bosom.

“—Did you say something just now? I didn't catch it. Can you say it one time?”

“I didn't say anything...”

I instinctively retorted, making it possible that part of my words didn't get picked up by the microphone. I broke into a smile when I recalled a similar conversation we once had over these headsets. Though at the time, there were other people listening to us, so it made for an embarrassing memory.

Now, it was just the two of us. With enough distance, equipment, and a worthless topic, we were able to talk just like this. It's possible we could've kept on going forever. But time itself would put an end to it for us. The seconds above the table displayed the remaining playtime of the song. Only a few seconds left until it was time for the end.

I shifted my gaze from the monitor and stuck my face out the window again. Yukinoshita looked up at me while bending her head slightly to the side, and wordlessly asked me if something was wrong. She must've found it suspicious when I suddenly disappeared from the window.

I whispered, “Nothing at all” but I didn't say it into my microphone, and my lips barely even opened, so there was no way she could have possibly heard the words.

Still curious, Yukinoshita tilted her head. I shook my head in response, and she nodded back after looking convinced.

The stage wings were enshrouded in darkness, but when they occasionally brightened up from the light of the disco balls, I could easily make out her fine features, innocent gestures, and beautiful smile. The backlight of the control booth, however, must've made it somewhat hard for her to see from her position. But thanks to that, she wouldn't be able to see the face I was making right now. There's no way I could show her this idiotic face; I was smiling from the ridiculousness of the thought that flashed through my head.

I'm sure the absurd thought only came to me because of how we were positioned, composed of two segregated stage wings with one person looking up and the other looking down. Almost as if it was a

stage play I once watched long ago.

The height of the window on the balcony was extremely different from the small window of the control booth, and even our gender positions were the complete opposite. Our whispers were far from what you would call affectionate, and our business talk wasn't similar in the least. That's why, the end that awaited us would most certainly not be the same.

The thought left me smiling. Although it wouldn't be anywhere close to that happy ending, we waited for the end to this time to come.

After calculating the remaining length of the song from the clock display, I squeezed my microphone.

“—The song's ending momentarily.”

We couldn't avoid the time lag over the headset. Yukinoshita pressed her earphone with her fingertips and dropped her eyes.

“—Understood.”

A brief reply followed by static, indicating that she was still pressing down the button of her mic. Two seconds passed. Then, three. She squeezed her collar together with the microphone and softly whispered.

“Hey, Hikigaya-kun...”

I waited, and waited, but the rest never came, only the static and her quiet breathing.

“Make sure you grant her wish, okay...?”

And then, her voice cut off. I wasn't able to see her expression.

There was a small time difference and distance between us, and the static was a one-way street. We had a meeting over work, bounced some worthless jokes off of each other, but never touched upon anything else. Without a doubt, this must've been the correct distance for us. And so, my answer was already set in stone.

“—I know.”

In just a few moments, the song would end. After the final explosive sound, the remaining outro gradually transitioned to silence. The lighting faded in conjunction, and the guests interpreted that to be the end of the dance, and pepped up for the party of partings. Applause, whistling, and cheers filled the ground floor.

“—Thank you. Let's end this.”

After waiting for the clamor to subside, she raised her hand to signal.

“Got it.”

I answered to myself, and not over the headset.

Once the song chosen for the ensemble on stage began, the boisterous audience grew silent. After waiting for that, I gradually raised the fader. This made for an emotional ending.

After pressing the button on the headset, I waited a few seconds before speaking.

“—Music's playing.”

“—Understood. After the backstage narration, lower the fader when Isshiki-san arrives at her position. I'll handle the timing.”

After the song went through one phrase, the guests settled down and waited for the ending. Then, Yukinoshita began the backstage narration.

“Graduates, thank you all for attending the Sobu High School prom. I would like to express our warmest congratulations on your graduation. Next, the chairman of the executive committee will present her closing remarks.”

Together with a round of applause, Isshiki took the stage with the spotlight focusing on her. The trail of the light eventually halted at the center.

Yukinoshita looked up at me. In the glittering space of scattering particles and within the depths of the shadows, she quietly raised her hand. Her slender arm was brought halfway up, unsure of whether to go higher or to go lower.

With a seemingly sad smile, she gave the signal for the end. And then, she quietly waved her hand.

And I, in accordance, gently lowered the fader, as if to draw the curtains on a play.





## Interlude

The small window of the control booth was so far up from the darkness that my hand just didn't seem like it could reach. Reaching out up toward the unreachable window towering overhead was like a situation directly from Shakespeare.

It came to mind because the composition of this situation was exactly the same, even though our relationship and our positions were completely different. The thought put a self-loathing smile on my face.

Our relationship wouldn't end on such a straightforward and blissful manner. It would remain a relationship that we would never know how to define. For me, for him, and for her.

The relationship between the three of us had no name. No matter what you called a rose, it would still have the same sweet fragrance, and perhaps, our relationship was exactly that. Even if we were able to give it a name, it wouldn't change. I was sure of it. It had to be.

I didn't believe those words at all, yet I swallowed them as if they were sweet poison. In that way, I could put myself to rest.

The lighting behind him made it difficult for me to perceive his expression, but it looked as if he was smiling.

The moment I tried to ask if anything had happened, I was interrupted by static from my earphone. And it informed me of the end.

The time for our fun chatter was over.

This was the end.

I replied with an acknowledgment and briefly added to it. Then, I released the microphone of my headset from my hand.

I used the microphone on its stand located in the wing of the stage behind the drapes to read out an announcement. The closing ceremony began, and the music increased in intensity. Once the performers took the stage, that was the end. What remained was to send the signal.

I raised my hand toward the control booth. But I didn't extend it any farther because I knew it wouldn't reach the elevated window. With that very same hand that lost its destination and had naught else to go, I quietly waved.

## Chapter 5: Gallantly, Hiratsuka Shizuka walks ahead.

The prom was held according to schedule. By the time we finished cleaning up the venue, it had gotten late. We left the vacant gymnasium and moved to the conference room of the main building. Everyone involved in the logistics of the prom were gathering there.

It wasn't a particularly large group. It included the following: the main staff consisting of the student council and Yukinoshita, helper grunts from various clubs, Yuigahama, Hiratsuka-sensei, individuals from the parents association, and me.

To acknowledge the achievements of all related persons such as the performers, staff, and others, a quick and modest celebration, more akin to a milestone celebration, was held to acknowledge their efforts.

Everyone surrounded a long table that was loaded with easy meals and beverages. Isshiki stood at the front and darted her eyes around the room, confirming that everyone had a paper cup. Then, she poked Yukinoshita beside her with her elbow.

"Yukino-senpai, can you raise a toast?"

"M-Me?" Yukinoshita said in befuddlement.

Isshiki nodded while silently pressuring her to get the formalities over with. The two engaged in a brief unspoken back-and-forth staring contest, but eventually, Yukinoshita faltered with a sigh.

"Then, I would like to take this moment to say a few things..." Her eyebrows curved against each other, and her mouth formed a bit of a pout. Looking reluctant, she took a step forward with her paper cup. Then, she raised her face with an invigorated smile. "We were able to successfully hold the prom due to the support of everyone here. To the collaborators, I truly thank you for your cooperation. And I would like to express my gratitude to the involved staff as well. Going forward, the prom will be adopted as another tradition of Sobu High School, and I pray that we, the third years, can be sent off in a similar fashion next year as well... Cheers."

Her long-winded toast indicated she was in fairly high-spirits as opposed to her visible reluctance earlier. Afterwards, everyone cheered in unison. I held my cup up at a moderate height, and my neighbor Yuigahama extended out her cup.

"Great work today!"

"Yeah, you, too," I said, and touched cups. The conversation, however, died from there...

Embarrassed and feeling awkward from the dance we had, I wasn't able to make eye contact with her. I looked at her from the corner of my eye to see that she was sharing the same sentiment and was sipping her cup while fiddling with her smartphone. Then, in recollection of something, she tapped my shoulder.

"Oh, by the way, Orimoto-san sent me a message over LINE. She wanted to know what your plans are."

"Huh...? Oh."

I had no idea what she was referring to when she asked, but seconds later, I remembered. I had dragged Kaihin Sogo High School into my dummy prom proposal, so I could make it sound realistic. I had one meeting with them to discuss the appeal of the plan as well as the accomplishments it would give them, but had them on indefinite hold due to the busyness of the prom.

Shoot, I totally forgot about them...

Now that the prom had ended without incident, I needed to clean up after my dummy prom. Specifically speaking, as the planner, I needed to apologize in prostration, or in a well-done prostration, or in a juicy, fried prostration.

"I'll talk to her. Can you get her mailing address, number, or whatever for me?"

"Mm, roger," she said, and immediately contacted Orimoto. A melody played from her smartphone after receiving a correspondence within moments.

"Okay, sent."

"Thanks..."

I checked my smartphone to see Yuigahama's mail. I began pondering how I should go about apologizing until I realized my conversation with Yuigahama had stopped again. The fact that we were

focused on our phones despite being right next to each other was like a miniature of modern Japan. But regardless, even this close-range silence was starting to bother me. I couldn't think of a tasteful and witty topic to talk about.

As I groaned, Isshiki advanced to the center of the drawing room and called for everyone's attention by raising her hand.

"Everyone, we have light snacks prepared for you, though I'm sorry to say they're just leftovers from catering. We'll have to throw them out if there's any remaining, so please help yourselves and then some!" She merrily announced with a guts pose. However, that candid announcement caused everyone to shrink back.

"No one's going to get hungry if you put it that way..."

"Ahaha... I think I'll grab something, though." Yuigahama formed a wry smile, and hurried over to the table. I rested my back against the wall as I watched her leave.

Well, when conversations weren't going anywhere, food or tea were helpful in filling your lonely mouth. That way, you could have excuses like, "My mouth's full right now! That's why I can't talk!" Cigarettes had a similar effect, because there's data indicating that 80% of smokers took a puff when it was silent, or when they had nothing to say (self-research). These thoughts might've been the reason why I could make out the permeating heavy smell of tar in the air.

"Good job with the prom today. I had a lot of fun watching you." Hiratsuka-sensei approached with the wave of her hand and looked to have finished smoking elsewhere.

"You were only watching? You should've just joined, then. It's the prom and all."

The prom was planned for all the people who were leaving the school. I felt Hiratsuka-sensei, and not just the students, also had the right to participate.

She shrugged. "My stage will be the farewell ceremony. I'll be the star there."

When she acted in theatrical jest, I let out a bitter laugh. Her farewell ceremony was scheduled at the beginning of April and was indeed a stage specifically prepared for her. Since it was classified as a school event, we wouldn't be able to act as informally as we do now. We were one teacher and one student, and we would merely part ways in silence. That's not to say that didn't make me lonely, but there's no point in bringing it up. I made the same sarcastic smile that pulled one cheek upwards like I would usually do.

"I doubt you'll get to dance during that."

"That's true, which is a shame. I wanted to dance with you, too." She smiled.

Something about her statement bothered me. "With you, too..." The instant I understood the implication, ripples formed on the surface of the beverage in my cup.

"You saw us...?" I kept myself from being upset and gave her a reproachful stare. She returned an implicating smile, and that made me realize the hidden meaning behind what she said earlier about having fun watching me. Oh boy, I want to die.

As I held my head from the embarrassment, I could hear upbeat chatter. I lifted my head to see Yukinoshita and Yuigahama walking together this way. Isshiki casually followed them from behind.

"Good work today," said Yukinoshita, and she slightly raised her cup.

I nodded, and similarly raised mine. "Yeah... I'm glad everything worked out."

"Thank you..."

We merely exchanged placid words, never touching our cups together. The liquid's surface of my cup persisted in its stillness. An extremely peaceful period continued as Yuigahama and Isshiki similarly expressed their gratitude with smiles for today's efforts.

With the core staff gathered here, it was only natural that the people making the rounds would find their way to us. One of them was, of course, Yukinoshita's mother.

"It was a wonderful event."

When she approached with Haruno-san in tow, Yukinoshita set her cup on the table, straightened her posture, and courteously lowered her head.

"Thank you very much for your cooperation. We were able to hold the event without any significant problems because of your guidance."

"Not at all. I also want to thank you for listening to my sudden request." Her mother returned with the same formality, and bowed her head. Upon lifting their heads, they looked at each other with a smile.

“You did well in managing the entire event. I'm quite impressed.”

Her mother placed her folding fan to her mouth and made a gentle smile. Her teasing tone caused Yukinoshita to fidget in embarrassment, but after noticing the attention she was attracting from everyone, she coughed. Well, it's a little embarrassing talking to your mom in front of everyone, after all...

As everyone smiled and watched the mother and daughter pair with displaced warmth, a prominent laugh with a cheery tone interjected.

“I had a lot of fun watching, too. Yep, good stuff.”

They were mere pleasantries, nothing more. But since it came from her, from Yukinoshita Haruno, it wasn't possible to take them at face value. I frowned, sensing the unsettling presence underneath her amicable exterior, and she jovially laughed again. She joined her family with a grin that resembled the Cheshire Cat.

“This is the kind of thing Yukino-chan wanted to do, after all. That's your plan for the future too, right?”

“Wanted to do...?” Yukinoshita's mother tilted her head and glanced at Haruno-san.

She sneered, and then immediately looked away. Then she muttered indifferently, “Why don't you ask her?”

Her mother shifted her gaze from the older sister to the younger. Yukinoshita's fingers twitched, a sign of her nervousness.

“About that... I'm interested in father's work, and I want to get involved in the future.”

Her mother placed her hand to her mouth as she listened to her daughter slowly explaining her position, almost as if she had swallowed her words of surprise. Unable to bear her mother's fixed gaze, Yukinoshita looked down.

“I'm aware that what I did today won't directly influence my future, and I know it won't be a guarantee for anything, either. I'm not talking about right now, but some time in the future...” She enunciated each of her words, and took a small breath. “But for the time being, I just want you to know how I feel on the matter.”

She gradually lifted her face to meet her mother's eyes. After listening thoroughly, her mother folded her fan and narrowed her eyes. “Is that truly how you feel...?”

Her tone was chilling, something that even I could tell just from observing. Her gaze was devoid of the tenderness moments ago, almost as if she was sizing down a rival. Everyone present held their breaths from the tension. I could physically feel the icing atmosphere. That prompted me to avert my eyes, only for me to witness Haruno-san ogling her nails in tedium.

Yukinoshita visibly flinched for an instant from her mother's piercing glare, but eventually mustered a nod. Her mother scrutinized her daughter's hardened expression, but suddenly broke into a smile.

“I see... I understand. If that's truly what you want, I'll support your decision. Let's take it slow and think things over from now on, because there's no need to rush.”

Yukinoshita nodded back to her smile. Then, her mother readjusted her posture. “It's gotten rather late, so I should be on my way.” She sent a glance to Haruno-san, who returned her eye contact and indicated to go on ahead. “Have a good night.”

Yukinoshita's mother bowed, and Hiratsuka-sensei accompanied her.

“I'll walk you out.”

“Oh no, here is fine.”

“Please, I insist. I'll walk you to the gates.”

“No, no, thank you for the kind gesture, but there are still many students here.”

“Thank you for your concern. At least allow me to walk you to the door.”

“Oh, my apologies, and thank you. Once again, thank you for taking care of my daughter today.”

Hiratsuka-sensei engaged Yukinoshita's mother in a courteous tug of war, both of them trying to compromise with the other, while slowing, but surely, making way to the door.

“We should call it a night, too. Umm, attention student council members, let's send everyone home and ensure all the doors are locked.” Isshiki clapped her hands, and the student council members dispersed, politely expressing their gratitude to all the helpers while sending them off.



As for the three of us, we were assaulted by a weariness that induced a hearty sigh from us all.

“That was kinda scary...”

“No kidding... Mothernon's frightening...” I said with a substantial tone.

“What do you mean 'mothernon'...?” She made a dry laugh. That, however, dissolved the strain atmosphere, and she smiled at Yukinoshita beside her. “Anyway, it's great things worked out. Right, Yukinon?”

“Y-Yes, you're right... Thank you.”

Yukinoshita still had a stiff smile from her nerve-wrecking confrontation with her mother. But after slowly mustering her words, her shoulders began to relax.

“Nee-san, thank you, too...” Yukinoshita whispered.

Haruno-san acted obtuse and tilted her head. “For?”

“For a lot of things, like putting in a word for me.” Yukinoshita chewed her words out of embarrassment from her questioning clarification. Her sweet, but blunt manner of speech caused Yuigahama to broadly smile.

I recalled the promise that Haruno-san made some time ago to talk to their mother for her. Surprisingly, even she acted like an older sister sometimes.

Yet, when she was thanked, she had a blank look. If anything, she looked annoyed as she combed her hair with her fingers. Then, she opened her mouth indifferently.

“Oh, that? That really wasn't my intention when I said I'd do that for you.”

Her voice was cold and sounded as if she had no recollection of the promise. The amicable attitude she had earlier went through a complete transformation. She ignored our bewildered reactions, and inclined her head to the side with her index finger on her chin. “Hmm, well, I guess mom seemed pretty convinced? I can't say the same for everyone else, though. Right?”

Her words, contrary to her sweet smile, couldn't be construed as anything but malicious.

“Why are you asking us...?” Yuigahama gave her an audacious glare, and Yukinoshita seemingly squeezed Yuigahama's hand out of reflex. In response to the growing hostility, I found myself tensing up.

However, Yukinoshita Haruno was unaffected by the animosity and maintained her cheerful tone. “At the very least, I'm not convinced.”

“What...?”

The words flew out of my mouth. I was sure I had an inane look on my face. Haruno-san let out a ridiculing laugh.

“I can't accept it.”

The voice that uttered those words was undeniably Yukinoshita Haruno's. Yet there was someone else who was afflicted by those very same words. The doubt that had lay dormant in my chest was something I had sought to drag by the wayside, put to rest, and leave to rot, and now, I felt it was verbalized. The hallucination of that doubt being hit on the nose robbed me of the energy to voice my objection.

My silence oralized more than any word ever could, and Haruno-san took that as a sign to add to her words. “I mean, don't get me wrong. I honestly don't care what happens in the family. It's not like I want to take over the family business or anything.”

“Then...”

Yukinoshita's attempt to respond was cut short, and what was reflected in her gaze was Haruno-san's scornful smile. Her lips still resembling that of a smile, Haruno-san continued.

“But you know? I've been treated on the assumption I would the entire time, so you can't expect me to suddenly be okay with it. I resigned myself to the fact since there wasn't much I could do and settled on a compromise. Now this is happens...? Don't you think it's a bit of stretch that I'd be so readily convinced after all that?”

Yukinoshita gritted her teeth, her expression clouded from a mix of bewilderment and grief. She hung her head and reverted to a childish tone. “Why are you saying that now...?”

“That's my line... Why are you saying how you feel *now* after all this time?”

Her admonishing words, stated with a soothing and gentle tone, were drenched with melancholic pity. Yukinoshita Haruno's expression, for the first time, cracked. In seeing that face, Yukinoshita lost her voice. Subject to the gazes that watched with pity, Haruno-san narrowed her eyes to show her

displeasure.

“Do you really think I can accept your decision to be even remotely equivalent to the last twenty years of my life? You're going to have to show me something worthwhile if you seriously want me to relinquish everything to you.”

Her words sounded composed, but the aggression in her tone wasn't subtle in the least. In contrast to her curved lips, her eyes were overwhelming, robbing our ability to even speak. She sneered at the abrupt silence.

“Anyway... I'm going to say hi to Shizuka-chan before going home. See you,” she said, and walked away with light steps. Before closing the door, she waved at me and left the conference room.

Until her faint footsteps disappeared completely, we were unable to lift a finger, nor were we even able to look at each other's faces. It's possible I was the only one with my gaze glued to the floor. With only the three of us now present, the room felt far bigger and colder than a few moments ago.

As silence and unease began to permeate, Yukinoshita muttered. “Um, I'm sorry... for the strange things my sister said.”

“It's nothing new. I'm used to it now.”

“Oh, that's true.” Yuigahama broadly smiled, prompting Yukinoshita to smile as well.

“I see. I'm relieved to hear you two say that.” The mood seemingly grew flaccid, but Yukinoshita still retained a cloudy expression. “But I think she was serious today. It just means those twenty years were that heavy.”

That was something only she could feel as someone who lived in the same space. But for an outsider like myself, I couldn't imagine or even sympathize with the notion.

This clearly wasn't the time to sneak in a boorish joke. I could tell that much. The only thing I could do was nod. However, Yuigahama chose differently.

She closed the distance between Yukinoshita and herself, one step at a time, and nestled by her side.

“Yukinon, the past year for you... for us is just as heavy. I don't think it's about the length.”

Yukinoshita raised her face to her gentle voice, and my eyes were similarly fixed on Yuigahama's poignant expression. Then, Yuigahama inhaled, puffed her chest, and formed a fist with both of her hands.

“The year was just as weird, too!”

“What do you mean by weird...?”

I could feel the strength leaving my shoulders, and even my voice was pathetic by my standards. Yukinoshita also looked absentminded, but gradually began to giggle. In turn, I was able to manage a smile as well.

“Well, it was pretty weird. The Service Club was kind of insane from the beginning.”

Yukinoshita glanced at me. “Most of it was because of you, though.”

“Yep, yep. That's why, it was a lot fun... You kept doing weird stuff all the time, so there were some sad things, some bad things, and some painful things that happened along the way, though.”

Yuigahama's gaze slightly lowered, prompting Yukinoshita and me to follow. What we looked at were not our feet, but the trail that led us to this point. Our respective and unspoken memories populated that path.

Someday, we would reminisce on the time we spent together, a time that lasted for almost a year. We would laugh over it without touching upon what truly mattered, merely searching for the things that made us nostalgic. But for now, we reflected over the memories that strangled our chests, the experiences that agonized our hearts, and our fleeting feelings. And so, our laughter overlapped.

Yuigahama lifted her face and gave us a tender look. “But more than anything else, it was a long year full of fun, happy, and lovable things.”

“You're right... I think I can do that with confidence as well.”

“Yep.”

I retracted my jaw in response to their words. There was no need for me to say it, either. For me, this had to have been the longest year in my life. Soon, it was going to end.

Yukinoshita slowly looked over the empty conference room. “I suppose this wraps up our last job.”

Both her whispers and wandering gaze weren't directed at us, but at various things: the long table

for catering, the unused paper cups, the jet-black space beyond the window, the courtyard lights with their forlorn glow, the special building enshrouded in darkness, and the wall clock that continued to tick endlessly. In time, her gaze returned back to us.

“I think now is as good a time as any to end things once and for all, not because of what nee-san said, but because this is the best time to do so.”

“I think I'd be okay if we could keep continuing like we always have, but if that's what you want, Yukinon, I'm fine with it, too.”

The two's eyes misted over from their earlier transparency and were directed to me. It was as if they were waiting for my answer. But there was no point in posing the question to me, because I never had a say in the first place. I only started because I was forced by Hiratsuka-sensei, who was leaving at the end of the school year. The competition we were thrown into, too, ended on my loss.

That's why, I didn't raise an objection.

“I...”

This was fine. This was correct. There's nothing wrong with this ending. I was convinced with everything. Just like the two said, this was what we wished for, this was the proper way for things to be, and this was our one conclusion.

In spite of all of that, I was unable to eke out another word.

My throat was lodged with my breaths and was in pain. I swallowed my moist breaths at an attempt of hydration, only to simultaneously push my words back into my lungs. I pushed against the back of my neck with my hand in hopes of squeezing out a word, but only my shallow sighs came out.

Both of them patiently waited. In the quiet room where our heavy breaths continuously echoed, I gritted my teeth. And there, a busy clamor interjected from the opening of the door to which we turned.

“Hello, everyone... Err, is something wrong?”

Isshiki returned with the student council and became startled after looking at us, perhaps sensing the abnormal mood in the room.

I shook my head. “Nothing. Are you guys done?”

“We are. We just have this room left. Anyway, thank you for your work today.”

“All right... I'll be on my way, then.”

“Huh? We still need to clean up here...”

I hastily left the conference room without bothering to hear Isshiki's reply. But it didn't take more than a few steps into the hallway for my strides to begin slowing.

It was already completely dark outside, and the hallway was weakly lit by the overhead fluorescent lights. The dim space expanded before me, and I dragged my legs through it. And there, weak footsteps approached me from behind.

“Hikigaya-kun, wait.”

Suddenly, a distressed voice stopped me in my tracks including the weak sensation of a tug at my sleeve. I didn't have it in me to turn around, but I couldn't ignore it or shake it off. The fingertips that gripped my sleeve to keep me from fleeing, and only the sleeve had kept me in place. I stood still, and my lost voice turned to exhaled breaths, and I found myself gazing at the ceiling. After I was able to release everything from my lungs, I settled down before turning half of my body around.

Standing before me was Yukinoshita Yukino. Her hair that streaked darker than the night was disheveled, and she combed it into shape with her hands. She was a little out of breath, looking as if she had hurried after me. She gripped the bosom of uniform to get her breathing in control and slowly spoke.

“Um... I wanted to make sure I told you this.”

Her eyes wandered as she tried to look for her words, and eventually stopped on the windows of the hallway. Unable to look directly at her white slender profile, I looked toward the dark window. The light of the hallway shined against the glass and reflected the two of us. I watched her steadily through the glass.

“Thank you for helping me today... but I don't mean just today, but for everything up until now. I'm sorry for putting you through so much.”

“You don't need to apologize. If anything, I'm the one who put you through a lot more. Why don't we just call it even?”

In the glass reflection, I gave her a half-smile. When our eyes met in the reflection, she smiled.

“You're right, you really were quite the handful. Even it is, then.” She teased with a buoyant voice. However, her expression reflected in the glass looked transient, though that may have been the fault of the lighting.

“Thank you so much for all the times you've helped me. But... I'll be fine now. From now on, I'll do my best to handle things better on my own.”

She strengthened the grip on my sleeve ever so slightly, and that prompted me to turn to her. The high beams of passing cars on the road the main building faced lit the dark hallway for an instant. I narrowed my eyes from the glare, and in that moment, I was able to catch sight of her expression that looked to be on the verge of tears.

“That's why...”

The roar of the engines and the bluish-white lights disappeared into the distance along with her voice. Even though I wasn't able to hear the continuation of her words, I had a rough idea of what idea what they were.

They were the very same words that had been on a repetitive refrain in my chest ever since the day from a few days ago when I had shut the door to the clubroom and released my fingers from the cold knob; the words, “It's fine,” and “Let's put an end to this.”

“Yeah, I understand. Don't worry.” In truth, I really didn't understand a thing, and they were merely words to end the conversation. “See you.”

Even though I gave her my parting words, her fingertips showed no sign of letting go of my sleeve. It wasn't like she was gripping tightly. I could've easily shaken them off with a weak pull of my sleeve. But her fingers appeared so delicate, I didn't have it in me to treat them in a rough manner.

That's why, using my boorish fingers, I did my utmost to be as gentle as possible as if I was handling a broken object when I touched her fingers and gently, but surely, pulled her fingers away. Reluctant from making physical contact with her, my fingertips trembled. Or perhaps, her fingers were the ones that trembled from the sudden contact. But before I could confirm either, our fingers separated.

“Bye...”

I thrust my fingers into my pockets, feeling the chill at the tips, and turned. I left the place without looking back. But no matter how much time had passed, I could only hear the sound of one set of footsteps echoing in the hallway.

X X X

On the second floor of the main building, the lights of the entrance to the office for visitors were switched off. The light in the office that was visible from the left of the doorway was on, but due to its weak intensity, the entrance was dim.

Despite the darkness, the light that poured in through the small window of the reception room allowed me to catch sight of the woman pressing her back against the glass door. There wasn't any need for me to guess who the stature belonged to; it was Yukinoshita Haruno.

Haruno-san looked to be passing the time by occupying herself with her smartphone. The backlight of her screen illuminated her well-kept and beautiful features. But she gave off an impression much colder than usual because of the apathy that filled her face.

Upon hearing my footsteps, she glanced in my direction. Because her eyes were aimed downwards and the glare of the street lights, I wasn't able to perceive her expression, but it looked as if she was giggling.

It was only when she stepped away from the door that I could see her face clearly. With frigid eyes and a gloomy smile, she teasingly said, “You ran away, after all.”

My brow flinched in reaction, and I was on the verge of clicking my tongue. In seeing my distorted expression, Haruno-san cackled.

I really couldn't deal with this person, because it felt like she could always see through my mind and intentions. In hopes of showing some semblance of resistance, I snapped back.

“That's rich, since you're the one that called me here.”

She merely shrugged, neither denying my words or looking fazed.

Right before she left the conference room, she deliberately hinted at where she would be while giving an implicating glance. Any fool would understand those signals. I really could've just ignored her and gone straight home, but then she would've found a different way to get in touch, either through Hayama or through Komachi. That's what she had always done in the past. To save myself the trouble, I decided to confront her now.

At the end of the day, I couldn't ignore this person.

Her penetrating words, her dreadful tone that pricked at your throat, the glint in her eyes that were sharp enough to freeze over, her beautiful profile that resembled her little sister, her mature and cheerful mask, the occasional display of her innocence, and her lamentable kind smile were all things that weighed down my mind, something I was sure she knew as well. But even though I knew I was dancing in the palm of her hands, I still had to ask.

"Why would you say those things? Just what in the world are you trying to do?"

Irritation dyed my question, and I spat out the question that had been lurking in the pits of my stomach.

Yukinoshita Haruno's conduct would always send ripples into my heart, or rather, our hearts. Even when we were finally trying to put an end to things peacefully, she barged in with a rock to introduce even more problems.

I wouldn't stand for her making things messier than they already were.

My words became sharper than I had thought, and my tone turned rough. She confronted my glare with a collected demeanor.

"I already told you. Anything works for me, and I'm okay with one way or the other. I don't really care about my family's situation, either. It really doesn't matter if it's Yukino-chan that succeeds the family, or if it's me." In hearing something she had similarly spat out earlier, I sighed. That prompted her to look beyond the glass window. "I just want to be convinced, no matter the ending."

Her additional words were almost a repetition of what she had just said, so they meant nothing. But there was a lonely timbre in her voice that resembled pity.

Once again, I could no longer understand Yukinoshita Haruno.

There were times where she'd hide her good intentions behind a veil of malice and act as the devil's advocate so she could be detested or disliked. On the other hand, there were times when she'd talk in an extremely gentle way and show a sorrowful side to her. If this contrasting behavior was all an act, I could only throw in the towel. Regardless of what I did, I would always be in the palm of her hand.

"Are you saying we should show our sincerity? Are you the yakuza of feelings...?"

I let out a loud sigh in complete perplexity at her and made a ridiculing smile. Fond of my reaction, she giggled. "I won't deny that, but... I don't think my mother's convinced, either."

"She seemed optimistic, though?" I said, remembering her amicable smile.

Haruno-san burst into laughter, giving me an inane look. "She's not the kind of person who'd be convinced that easily. It's why she only gave a non-answer, which basically confirmed nothing. I'm sure Yukino-chan's aware of it, though."

Her manner of speaking which merely demonstrated her understanding of the situation without a yay or a nay and postponed the issue for later was just like a form of diplomacy. And it seemed Yukinoshita must've caught on to that. It only hit me now that her tense smile and stiff shoulders were indicative of that.

"You're not family for nothing..."

It was only because they had accumulated the time together that they were able to accurately interpret each other's intricate feelings. Komachi and I were a testament to that.

Having known her for less than a year, I couldn't read that far. When it came to her mother and older sister's change in expressions, gestures, and meaningful words, reading them was impossible.

I had the sentiment that there wasn't much I could do about that, but Haruno-san saw through that and added with a laugh. "Anyone could tell if they were there. It doesn't have to be me, her older sister, or her mother, either. I'm sure as her friends, you could tell too, right?"

"We're not close enough to be considered friends, so it's hard to say."

"That's your answer after everything that's happened? You're the best... You really are stubborn." Despite her smile, her gaze was as cold as ever. Losing interest, she let out a bored sigh and opened the



glass door. "I doubt anyone was convinced." She made a passing remark and went outside.

I followed after her and stepped down the floor plank. But I was still wearing my indoor slippers. I gave my footwear a bitter glare and clicked my tongue. Changing my shoes would've been too much work, so I went outside with my indoor slippers and hurried down the stairs.

"Um, why is that?" I caught up to her after descending the stairs and asked.

She stopped and slowly turned around to me. Her black pupils that reflected the glow of the street lights was thinly moist, and the gaze I could see directly looked as if it was in tears. "Because... her wish is just a form of compensation."

That single word alone made me feel my legs shake, and I found myself stumbling.

Compensation; the act of gratifying one's original desire through another goal because the initial goal could not be achieved due to some obstructing factor. In short, it was a form of deceiving yourself with something fake. If her wish was merely a means of deceiving herself over something, would I really be able to acknowledge that?

I stood there speechless. She looked at me, took one step up the stairs to level her eyes with mine, and gently whispered. "The three of you, Yukino-chan, Hikigaya-kun, and Gahama-chan, did your best to convince yourselves, right? You tell yourselves for the sake of it, you find the right words for the sake of it, and you avert your eyes from it..."

Stop it. Don't say anymore. I was well aware of it. But no matter how much I pleaded, she continued further, her gaze turning into pity, and her tone turning into consoling.

"You make excuses for it, and you rationalize it... You do that to look the other way just so you could fool yourselves, right?"

Her recitation was disinterested in any semblance of a reply from me, and I heard it all too well. Her voice, her breaths, and her words penetrated my chest as if it as being eroded by water.

A bellow that I couldn't tell was my inhaling breaths or exhaling breaths clogged my lungs, making me unable to use my voice.

I knew all along. I gloated with some excuse like the pride of a man, yet what I did was ultimately no different from what I had been doing before. No, it was even worse, because I was coercing those two into swallowing a huge lie.

I gritted the back of my teeth with a strength that could shatter them. Haruno-san gently rubbed my cheek, moving her long and slender fingers as if she was handling a broken object.

"That's why, I told you before." She made a faint smile, slipped her finger from my cheek, and poked my chest. "You can't get drunk."

"I guess so..." I said, wringing out my voice.

Haruno-san formed a smile that resembled hers and twisted in sorrow. That ephemeral smile looked like it could even break into tears and stabbed at my chest.

Right before the stage blacked out, I looked down toward the opposing stage wing to see her wave back with a transient smile. The pain that tormented me then was now tormenting me once again.

"If you don't end things properly, it'll fester for the rest of your life. It'll never end. I know, because I've been deceiving myself that way for the past twenty years. I've been living a life like some kind of imitation."

Her repenting monologue was both fragile and fickle, and her eyes that looked into the distance were moist. Her maturity and alluring spontaneity were nowhere to be seen, and she seemed even more childish than me.

It felt like I was able to get a glimpse of who Yukinoshita Haruno truly was for the very first time.

Ignoring my perplexed state, she took a step back and turned her back. "Hey, Hikigaya-kun, does something genuine really exist...?"

The night wind carried her lonely words away into the darkness. She combed her disordered hair and walked away as if pursuing the direction of the wind. She descended the stairs and upon approaching the school gates, she turned back and waved with a gentle smile.

I could only stand there in a daze and watch her beautiful upright figure from behind. I didn't even have the energy to wave back. When she completely disappeared from my sight, my legs buckled and I sank onto the stairs.

All I wanted was for Yukinoshita Yukino to make her choice, to make her decision, and to say her words from the bottom of her heart. But if those were all just part of her wish that amounted to

nothing more than compensation as a result of her resignation, then her answer was wrong.

Her words contained no lies, but it was the process that led to her answer that was twisted. No, the one who twisted it was me, Hikigaya Hachiman.

I was well aware that there could only be one answer, yet I continued to avoid choosing it, I made excuses to push it along, and I forced a twisted deception onto her through an act of fallacious swindling.

I depended on her kindness, I indulged in her sincerity, and I pretended to be drunk on a momentary dream, all so I could insist that it was the right answer.

Calling it wrong at this point was beyond a simple case of being presumptuous. It was a hopeless imitation that disgraced your worth by merely existing.

X X X

As the shades of night covered the school building, I sat on the stairs inattentively, ignoring the chilling breeze. Several cars had driven by on the road in front of me, but beyond that, nothing else had moved. It was long past the time for students to head home, so not a single soul was in sight.

I continued sitting, unable to muster the energy to rise, and the glass door behind me opened. I could hear the loud tapping noise of footsteps and I turned my head. I promptly received a light impact at the top of my head.

“Hey, don't wear your slippers outside.”

I looked up to see Hiratsuka-sensei had just given me a karate chop. I rubbed my head thinking how it had been a while since I received one, and she sighed. She then presented her chopping hand.

“I was just about to lock up. Hurry up and go get your shoes.”

It's gotten late, so I really shouldn't loiter here all day. I didn't check the time, but I knew a fair amount of time had passed. Urged on, I finally got to my feet and brushed off the sand on my coat.

I began climbing one step at a time, and Hiratsuka-sensei crossed her arms with a sigh, making sure I was on my way home. After making to the top, I nodded to her and entered the school building.

The lights of the office and faculty room were still on, though that mostly wasn't the case for the hallway. It was easy to navigate through the darkness because of the glow from outside and the emergency exit lights, but my gait was heavy. With how late it was, it had gotten fairly chilly, so I had to hug myself to stay warm.

“Hikigaya.”

I was called from behind, and I turned to see Hiratsuka-sensei was quietly following me. On closer inspection, she was walking in only her socks and wasn't wearing any footwear. She was prepared to head home with her court shoes in hand. She walked alongside me, wearing a coat instead of her white gown, and lightly patted my back to straighten my back.

She smiled. “It's gotten late, so I'll take you home.”

“No, that's okay. I have my bike.”

“Now, now, don't be modest. Just leave your bike here.”

What's with her? Was she some bike spirit or something? She pushed me along in a hurry without lending an ear to my protest. In the end, we made it to the entrance together, and then I was partly dragged to the parking lot.

The lot was empty with only about two to three cars present. One of them was a foreign luxury car that looked out of place for a school, and its headlights flashed on, activated by Hiratsuka-sensei's smart key. When she walked up to her beloved car, she made furtive looks around and beckoned me over.

“Get in quick. Like, now.”

“Right...”

I sat in the passenger's seat as she demanded and fastened my seat belt. She quickly took the driver's seat and turned on the engine, which caused a low rumbling noise in my stomach. After pressing the gas pedal, the car accelerated forward. I rested against the seat. It's been a while since she had given me a ride, but the leather seat looked to be well-maintained and was comfortable. The aluminum cover that surrounded the gearshift shined with a polish, making it clear she was taking care of her car.

It made me think of her messy desk in the faculty's office. I was about to let out a sarcastic laugh at the thought, but when I realized that I wouldn't see the mountain of things on there like documents, figures, and cups of ramen anymore, I felt a little empty and looked out the window.

As we traveled from the school to my home, the orange hue of the street lights came and went. Hiratsuka-sensei directed the car knowing where to go and hummed, which then suddenly stopped.

"First things first, good work with the prom."

"Sure. I didn't really do much, though."

"That's not true. You did well. I would love to celebrate over a drink, but I'm driving today."

"I'm not old enough, though..."

She continued looking forward with a chuckle.

"Good point. Something to look forward to in three years, then."

I choked on my voice. I could've just responded with a few words, but my mouth was left open in a dumb way. The car stereo filled the silence with a mellow tune.

"What's wrong? Even I get hurt if you just ignore me."

Her sulking voice snapped me out of it, and I looked over to see she was pouting.

"Oh, sorry, I was having trouble imagining it..." I tried to laugh it off.

She inclined her head and questioned me with a side glance. "You can't imagine what? Becoming an adult? Or that we'll still be in touch after three years?"

I would become an adult eventually, even if nothing happened. But the idea of becoming an adult was hard to swallow.

Working and having a family, to make a living was something that would work out as long you worked hard and had some luck. It was easy to imagine. But was that grounds for being considered an adult? I wasn't really sure. If we accounted the inhumane people out there who had nothing to show except for their age and abused their own children, age and social positions didn't make for good criteria for what constitutes an adult.

But well, you could live out your life without breaking laws or hurting others. Given a range of 10 to 20 years, there would be several occasions in your life where you would see a course correction. But the mention of 3 years made it hard to picture for how realistic of a number it was.

"Well, both... If I had to pick one, then the latter."

It's hard to imagine staying in touch with anyone considering my personality.. She sighed at my honest response.

She decelerated the car to a stop upon hitting a red light. While stopped, she made a small opening in the window with a power switch and used her free hand to place a cigarette in her mouth. There was a brief sound of scraping flint, and a spark lit the interior of the car. The small flame illuminated Hiratsuka-sensei's graceful profile for only a second.

The light eventually turned green, and the puffed smoke escaped through the opening of the window, which in turn was replaced with the chilling night wind and her warm words.

"You don't get it, do you? People don't end their relationships that easily. Even if you don't get to see each other every day, you'll see each other at least once every three months, like at someone's birthday party, or when you go out for drinks."

"Is that how it works?"

Still looking forward, she nodded and continued, "Eventually, you'll only meet once every 6 months to once a year. You'll stop seeing other less and less, and then you'll only ever really meet during family occasions or class reunions. And lastly, you'll stop remembering them ever again."

"I see... Hm? Wait. Things ended pretty easily there, didn't they?"

Her slow and enunciating tone had me convinced, but no matter how I took her words, things clearly ended a lot easier than expected. Based on what she told me, human relationships were quick to end.

"It's only if you don't do anything." She pushed her cigarette into the ash tray and laughed. "Do you mind if we take a quick detour?"

"Whatever you'd like."

I had no right to complain since I was being given a ride. She triggered her signal in response and turned her steering wheel. I looked out the window to see where she was taking me, and we eventually

entered the national highway and headed directly opposite from my home.

Hiratsuka-sensei hummed along with the car stereo in high spirits and pressed on the gas pedal. The engine roared, and all of the street lights, car lights, and tail lights of nearby cars flew behind us.

Large trucks and trailers became more frequent and factories in the distant became visible. She then decelerated and turned on her signal while turning into a facility on the left. We slowly entered a wide parking lot and stopped near something akin to an entrance. She shifted her gear to parking, enabled her emergency brake, and turned off the engine. We arrived at our destination.

“We’re here,” she said, and got off the car.

I examined the building, and it looked to be a large-scale game center. A large green net surrounded a portion of the roof and occasional dull but pleasant cracking noises could be heard from there, which made it evident there was a batting center facility here.

I stood there absentmindedly and Hiratsuka-sensei motioned me over. I followed after her, who walked with a familiar gait. Upon entering the building, all kinds of noises that belonged to a typical game center could be heard. There were arcade cabinets, darts, ping pong, free throw, simulation golf, and all sorts of other games; there was plenty to do here.

However, Hiratsuka-sensei paid them no attention and headed directly for the center stairs, hurrying to the batting center above.

“Oh, we made it just on time for the time slot for metal bats.”

I looked at the information bulletin to see that the metal bats were replaced nightly for noise prevention.

Hiratsuka-sensei quickly purchased a stack of coins, removed her jacket, and tossed it to me.

“Hold it,” she said, and folded her cuffs. She slipped past the green net and into the batting box.

After inserting the coins, she positioned herself in the right batter box, gripped her bat, and practiced swinging. She had a good and balanced form. She then pointed her bat to the front, pulled up her sleeve, and was ready to bat. Ohh, she’s really giving off the image...





The pitcher displayed on the LCD took the windup position... and there goes the first pitch!

“Hatsushiba!” Hiratsuka-sensei shouted as she swung, leading to the cracking sound of her bat. The ball drew a large arc past the machine, and I clapped my hands with a cheering voice. She grinned and assumed her batting stance again for her second pitch.

“Hori! Saburo! Satosaki! Fukuura!”

The pitches came one by one, and every time she made contact, she called out the names of past famous players from the Chiba Marines. In addition, she yelled out Ootsuka, Kuroki, and Julio Franco. The batting order she made was nonsensical, but the lineup was quite refined and was full of great choices.

She was screaming with all her might for every name, but her batting form was the exact same for each one, so it was hard to say if there was any meaning behind any of them. For one thing, Fukuura was a left-handed batter, and Kuroki was a pitcher... More importantly, the people she mentioned all retired from the team, so Hiratsuka-sensei's age was a real head-scratcher!

With how often she was making contact, it looked almost too easy, but the pitches were going at 130 km/h. This person's nuts, she should try going pro. Didn't the Lotte Marines let anyone in? After working up a sweat from 20 hits, she made her way back through the net while flapping her shirt at her bosom. It'd be nice if she could stop doing that because it made it hard to look...

“Why don't you give it a try, Hikigaya?”

“No, that's okay...”

I tried to refuse but was unable to when she flicked a coin over to me. Now, I had to get in there... I had no experience batting, so hitting 130/km pitches was out of the question. Instead, I went to the booth that pitched at 100 km/h. When I started doing practice swings similar to Hiratsuka-sensei, I could see her watching me with crossed arms from behind me and mumbling like some kind of expert. She's just making it more difficult to get into this...

I stood in the batter box, and the first pitch flew by; it was a lot faster than I thought, yeah. I swung with all my strength and completely missed. I couldn't hit it... What was I supposed to do? I thought, and I was given some encouragement from behind.

“Keep your eye on the ball. Choke up on your bat. Your arm's too far out. Don't aim for a large hit. Take it slow as you get the timing down.”

She's so picky... I thought. I tapped the tip of my bat on the home base and assumed my stance. I made adjustments according to Hiratsuka-sensei's advice and made a compact swing. This time, there was a crack of the bat and the colliding metallic noise from the fences. Feeling the tingle in my hands from the impact, I turned around to see her nodding back with a thumbs-up and a wink. Either from glee or shyness, I let out a small laugh.

All right, I think I got the hang of this... I took my stance for the third pitch and got immersed in the batting. After going through all of the pitches, sometimes missing, sometimes making poor contact, and sometimes hearing the pleasant cracks of the bat, I let out a hearty breath. When I left the batter box, I could see Hiratsuka-sensei on the bench beyond the net smoking. In her hands, she had drinks and bakudan-yaki<sup>28</sup> that she went to buy at some point.

“Mm.”

“Oh, thank you.” I accepted the MAX Coffee and sat beside her.

“Feeling better now?”

“If moving your body was enough to make you feel better, athletes wouldn't resort to drugs.”

With her gentle gaze on me, I couldn't help but give her a mean-spirited retort from embarrassment. She took it in stride with a wry smile. “You really aren't cute, you know that?”

“Right... but I do appreciate that you're looking out for me. Sorry for being so much trouble at the very end,” I said.

She stared at me and then sighed. She brushed her long hair aside and placed her hand on my head. “The problem with you is that sometimes you show off that cute side of yours,” she said, and roughly rubbed my head. It was both embarrassing and awkward when she did that, but it was mostly painful. I took about a fist's worth of distance to escape her hand, and she eventually released her hand.

The corner of her lips formed a smile, and she placed a cigarette in between. She snapped the flint on her oil lighter, puffed out a thin layer of smoke, and whispered, “What were you doing back

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<sup>28</sup> Literally known as “bomb fry,” it's essentially a bigger version of takoyaki with more stuffing.

there?”

“Ah... nothing much.” I stumbled over my words from her sudden question, but she gave an all-knowing smile.

“Did Haruno say something to you?”

“Well, a bit.” I uttered in distress, but she continued to gaze at me, waiting for me to continue. Knowing there wasn't any point in trying to dodge the issue anymore, I bared my unsorted thoughts into the open. “She said I can't get drunk, just like her.”

“Well, that's true for Haruno... though it doesn't sound like you're talking about alcohol.”

To her slightly perplexed question, I nodded back. “I guess... she meant something along the lines of the atmosphere or relationships. According to her, our relationship is just a form of codependency. I didn't want to admit it, so I tried to fight back, but... it's hard, to say the least.”

Had she been any other person, I wouldn't have said any of this. I wouldn't have been able to. The thought of my weakness being exposed to anyone was just something I couldn't handle, not because of my cowardly self-esteem, but because of my arrogant sense of shame. It's why no matter how much someone hounded me, I would find a way to play the fool, sidestep the issue, and throw a smoke screen.

But Hiratsuka-sensei was the one person I didn't have to put up a front with, someone I didn't have to step around. She was a far bigger adult than I could ever be, and she would always draw the line for me.

She continued smoking, choosing not interject anything unnecessary, and gave some thought to my words.

“Codependency, huh? It's just like Haruno to use a word like that, but she's using it like a figure of speech. She understands, but she chooses to say it that way, anyway... It sounds like she's pretty fond of you.”

“Haha... that doesn't make me happy at all...”

“I suppose you can interpret in the same way as Haruno if you look at it from a cynical perspective... Oh, then again, the both of you are good at that.” She jested with her trailing remark, and I let out an empty laugh. She smiled, stubbed her cigarette in the ashtray, and turned to me. “But that's not how I see it. Yukinoshita, Yuigahama, and you don't have that kind of relationship.”

Th thin lingering white smoke vanished, leaving only the overwhelming odor of tar, something I had gotten accustomed to. One day, this, too, would turn into something nostalgic, because no one around me smoked.

“Don't get caught up on a simple word like codependency.”

She extended her fingertips, doused with a smell I wouldn't possibly forget, and held my shoulder.

“Maybe you've already convinced yourself that's how things are, but don't let those borrowed words twist a person's feelings... Don't let those feelings be summed up with some simple notation.” She gazed into my eyes and affectionately asked, “Is a single word enough to sum up your feelings?”

“No way... if it did, I wouldn't stand for it. I don't even think words can get them across right in the first place.”

Even now, they couldn't even verbalize any of my thoughts, ideologies, and emotions in the least. If they didn't mean anything, then they were no different from the cries of a beast. It would just be the act of curling your tail saying it's fine that things didn't get across, even though you were howling to not generalize everything into a single emotion and baring your fangs because there was no way things could possibly get across.

I unknowingly squeezed my coffee in vexation. However, Hiratsuka-sensei released her hand from my shoulder and nodded in satisfaction.

“You already have the answer, but you don't know how to express it, that's all. That's the reason why you're trying to put it into simple words that make sense to you. You're trying to apply your answer to those words and leave it at that.”

That may have been true. I clung on to the word of codependency that encompassed all of the good, the bad, love, and hatred, because I felt it could express my emotions in the most straightforward way. I didn't have to think about anything else just by touting the word. This was none other than ceasing thought and running from reality.

“But you see, there isn't just one way to do it. A single word can be expressed in an endless number of ways.” She retrieved a pen from her breast pocket and elatedly waved it like a magician's

wand. She then began writing on a paper napkin. "For example, there's a lot of things I can say about you, like how I think you're a pain, a loser, too complicated, or how I'm worried about your future..." She would scribe each one she stated onto the napkin.

"Ohh, that's a lot of mean stuff you're writing down..."

"These aren't all of them. I've got so much more it'd be too much of a hassle to say them all."

Then, she stopped writing altogether and began to blot the words. She ran the pen across the napkin to smear it in ink. It gradually became stained from one end to the other, leaving only the center white. Before long, the center was also dabbed in the black and the remaining white space slowly took the shape of a word.

"But if I were to lump them all together..." Before I could ascertain what the word would turn into, Hiratsuka-sensei thrust the napkin toward me. "It means I like you."

"Huh? Ah, r-right...?"

I looked at the napkin and in the black canvas was the word "like" written in white. All sorts of emotions welled up me like surprise, bewilderment, happiness, embarrassment, shyness, and many others, but I still couldn't react properly.

"Don't be shy. As far as I'm concerned, you're my best student. In that sense, I really am quite fond of you."

She smiled like a brat who successfully pulled off a prank and roughly rubbed my head again. Phew, close call. Seriously, that's what you meant? Like, really close call. I thought she was being serious, and I was this close to saying I liked her back, too. My scalp was totally sweating.

I twisted my body away to free my head from her hand and felt relieved. She gave me a pleasing look and lit another cigarette.

"If a single word isn't enough, keep looking. If you can't trust words, then let your actions speak for themselves." She exhaled smoke and followed it with her eyes, and past her profile, I did the same. "It doesn't matter what words you find or what actions you take. Just keep at it like you're gathering dots until you're finally able to connect them all to the answer that suits you best. The words etched in white on your black canvas may very well be what you're searching for."

The floating smoke soon disappeared, and beyond it was Hiratsuka-sensei setting her gaze closely on me. "That's why, show me. While I'm still your teacher, show me your answer after baring all of your thoughts and feelings. Show it off to me in a way that'll make me speechless."

"Everything, huh?" I asked.

Hiratsuka-sensei made a fist in front of her chest and pumped her head. "That's right. Show me all the extra-extra toppings."

"What is this, ramen?" I let out a listless sigh, and she smiled, which relieved my body of its stiffness. In turn, I was able to make a lax smile. "Well, I'll give it a try. I'm not too confident it'll make me easier to understand, though."

"No one would have it hard if it was that simple, but if it's you, I'm sure you'll be fine."

Marking the end of the conversation, she patted my shoulder and stretched. "Anyway, let's grab some ramen on the way back. How about Naritake?"

"Oh, that sounds nice."

"Right?"

She made a nihilistic smile, smothered her cigarette, and stood up. I rose from my seat right after. While we were walking back and chatting, Hiratsuka-sensei was always a few steps ahead of me. In seeing her stature from behind, I stopped.

Her dignified upright posture exuded an elegance that I could never hope to reach. But as the one individual whom I respected and could truly call my mentor, I wanted her to watch me and to ascertain with her own eyes the answer I would arrive at.

No matter how unsightly, disgusting, and wretched it was, no matter how despicable and hopelessly pathetic it was, I had to show her the answer of Hikigaya Hachiman.

Indeed, there was nothing wrong with things ending. However, what was wrong was how they ended.

Our relationship that became dependent on borrowed words, accommodated a sham of a compromise, and was twisted beyond repair was something we had truly never wished for, a hopeless imitation.

That's why, the least I could do was inflict enough damage to destroy this imitation, so it could transform into the one and only thing that could truly be called genuine.

I will put an end to my youth—that I made wrong of my own accord.

## Chapter 6: Just like a day in the past, Yuigahama Yui makes a wish.

My second year of high school was coming to a close. With the passing of the graduation ceremony and the prom, the remaining days for students to attend school were numbered. A majority of the days were set aside for final exams while the rest were set aside for the results of the exam and a ceremony to end the school year.

Once the exams were over, a spring-break mood immediately permeated the entire school. The restriction of club activities during the test period was no longer in effect as of today. The campus outside was filled with vigorous yells and metallic batting noises.

Clubs that utilized the school gymnasium were an exception to the rule. Normally, the volleyball club and the badminton club would have poles and nets set up in the gym, but it was now set up with provisional dressing booths and folding chairs. Groups of people consisting of the upcoming freshmen in spring and their guardians were here in place of the club members.

My little sister Komachi and I were one group of the many. An orientation for new students was held today at Sobu High School, which also consisted of taking measurements for the school's uniform. In other words, Komachi was making her debut and wearing our school's uniform for the first time. I voluntarily took the place of my parents and hurried over to the gym to be witness to the moment.

A partition was made for the provisional dressing booth and was covered with a curtain. I sat in a folding chair while Komachi entered the booth. While waiting for her to get measured, the scenery in class flashed through my mind.

The classroom entered a festive mood after being liberated from the testing period. Noisy conversations bounced back and forth as people hurried their preparations to head home. There were people who headed straight home, or people who stayed behind in class and talked about things like the tests such as, "Oh my god, I did sooo bad on the tests, I'm totally gonna have to do make-ups!" This was clearly Sagami, though... As usual, only vapid things came out of her mouth.

On the other hand, Totsuka and the Hayama clique went to their respective clubs that they had been on break from. The remaining three, Miura, Yuigahama, and Ebina-san, gathered at the usual window seats at the back of the class and were discussing places to go later in the day. I made similar plans with Yuigahama for after the tests, but that was likely a discussion for tomorrow. I pondered over the things we could potentially talk about and alternated my crossed legs.

Beyond the curtains of the dressing booth ahead, Komachi was in a discussion with the attendant.

"What do you think of this size?"

"Hmm, it feels okay... Oh, is this the skirt length...?"

"The skirt length is..."

My train of thought was interrupted by their hushed voices and I was brought back into reality. Hearing the words "skirt length" left me feeling queasy... I strained my ears to listen to Komachi's voice, glared at the curtain, and rocked my legs wondering when she would pop out. Soon enough, the curtain was pulled open.

"Ta-da!"

With a leading statement, Komachi made her appearance from the booth in Sobu's uniform.

"Oooh..." I unfolded my arms and clapped.

Komachi stuck out her chest with elation, making a pose with her hands on her hips. "So? How do I look? Am I cute? I'm cute, right?"

"Yeah, yeah, the cutest in the world."

"Wow, there he goes again with his iffy comments."

Her cuteness wasn't limited to just the world, but also in the other world and in the history of mankind. However, and more importantly, there was one too many concerning points that made my compliments rudimentary. Unable to turn a blind eye to them, I frowned and tilted my head.

"Um, isn't your skirt too short? Is that okay? Your brother's very worried."

"Ugh, annoying much?"

Her gleeful expression instantly transformed into disgust, but that didn't discourage me from my fashion check.



“Well, you can adjust your skirt later, but the blazer...”

She moved her hand forward with the same concern as mine and looked over the cuffs of the blazer. The sleeves of the sample blazer were extra long and covered half of her palms. She shook the sleeves and moved her wrists like a beckoning cat. “Oh, you mean this?”

“Yeah, that. It's cute.” I made a pleasant groan in light of her excellent display.

Komachi returned an incredibly unpleasant expression. “Wow, you're gross... but if it's cute, that works for me.”

She made a content shake of the cuffs, but the attendant seemed apprehensive.

“It does appear a little too big for her, but everyone usually orders a size with some leeway.”

“Oh, this is perfect! I'll go with this,” Komachi said in a fluster.

The attendant happily nodded. “Okay, I'll put this in for your order...”

The testing period for trying on the uniform was just about to end, but I still had something left to do.

“Oh, excuse me, would it be okay if I took some pictures?” I asked. “I'd like to show our parents know how she looks.”

The attendant examined our surroundings. “There's no one waiting, so by all means. Please let me know when you're done.”

She smiled back, looking accustomed to the number of people who made a similar request, and went back into the dressing booth. I took out my smartphone and aimed the camera lens at Komachi.

“Okay, time for pictures.”

I switched my phone into camera mode and began the photo shoot. Good, good! Let's be bolder, shall we?

“Okay, change your pose. Now, spin. Now, pose again.”

She followed my instructions and assumed an aloof attitude, changed her standing position, and finally, did a spin in conjunction with a side peace sign and a smile.

“Hm, this should do it. Okay, we're good.”

I took a seat after taking her photos and looked over the images. Hmm, quite usable. I picked out the best looking ones and attached them in a mail to my parents.

Meanwhile, Komachi breathed out in exhaustion. She walked over and sat on a chair next to mine. A satisfied smile floated on her face, and she gently rubbed her uniform and looked around the gym. “I guess I'll be attending this school soon, huh?”

“Finally sinking in?”

“Yep, I can't wait!” Her eyes glittered with unending excitement, and after falling into a dreamy cute state, she went on a tangent. “There's so many things I want to do once I start high school! Like studying... well, I'll just figure that out as I go, but I want to get a part-time job, hang out with friends after school, and participate in all kinds of events like the prom!” I nodded, thinking she should put the same amount of effort in her studies, but her eyes suddenly dropped to the floor. “And also... join a club.”

She gave me an examining look afterwards, and I could tell what she was implying. I choked on my words for an instant, but I had to tell her no matter what.

The day of the graduation ceremony and the prom was the longest day of Hikigaya Hachiman's life. Upon receiving a lesson from my mentor, I had already found my answer. I didn't have the process that led to it, the components that made it, nor anything that could prove it as of now, but the answer was already within my grasp.

“The club—the Service Club is going to disappear.”

Komachi nodded back with a lonely smile. She slowly moved from her forward-leaning position and rested against the chair. Her shoulders slightly sank, and she gazed at her new skirt.

“It'll be gone, huh...?” she whispered to herself and hung her head.

“Yeah... because I'm going to make it disappear.” I patted her rounded back. Then, I pointed my index finger at my face and formed a nihilistic smile.

This was the conclusion I arrived at, for the answer I couldn't give back then. I would make the choice myself, and not leave it to discretion of others.

Komachi had a puzzled look in response to my bluffing declaration, but eventually burst into laughter. “Uh, why are you even trying to show off...?”

When she gave me a hopeless sigh, I said in jest, “If things get awkward, sorry, okay?”

“Oh, don't worry about it. I'll find a way to enjoy myself. It doesn't matter if you or the Service Club are there or not, since I'm Yukino-san and Yui-san's friend, too!” She patted her chest and made a cheerful smile. Then, she rested her head on my shoulder and whispered in a quiet voice. “So, onii-chan, do whatever you need to.”

“Thanks,” I answered.

Komachi grinned and hopped to her feet. “Okay then, time to get changed.”

“Yeah... let's head home.”

I got up, only for her to refuse my suggestion.

“About that, I'm actually going to eat with some of the other freshmen.”

“Huh, come again?”

“Didn't I tell you? High school students nowadays make friends over SNS sites before school starts. So, it's a small social gathering to get to know each other more.”

She made a delightful laugh and headed for the dressing booth. I fell back into my seat as I watched her and thought about the unknown freshmen.

A social gathering before the start of the school year... Wasn't that basically a loner sentence for everyone couldn't attend? In this age of developing SNS platforms, being a modern high school student was what I'd call “hard mode...”

X X X

Komachi made for the social gathering from the gym, and I returned to the main building. Komachi getting her measurements, trying on the uniform, and getting her pictures taken took a surprisingly long amount of time. The angles of the sunlight pouring through the windows steepened, and the hallway began to wear a coat of pale red.

Cheering voices of the various sports clubs from the school grounds and the timbre of band instruments reverberated, but the hallway was etched with only the sound of my footsteps, the long shadows creeping along the way.

It was a mundane and hollow scenery after school. A year earlier, and I wouldn't have thought much of it. But now, I could make out a lonely feeling of nostalgia from it. As I immersed myself in the piercing cold and the vague sentiments, I headed for the entrance. And there, I could see the figure of a person.

The girl was sitting on the umbrella stands, holding a large bag in front of her chest, and was absentmindedly looking outside. The door was left open, inviting the wind inside, and occasionally, her peach hair bundled in a bun would sway with the sunset glow. I couldn't have mistaken her for anyone else other than Yuigahama Yui.

Dust particles sparkled from the light of the sun, and her profile within that sight was filled with an emotion resembling sorrow and solitude. Her expression looked far more mature than it had ever looked before, and was extremely beautiful.

Reluctant in calling her, I swallowed my words. Instead, I went to put my indoor slippers in the shoe box and subsequently dropped my loafers onto the floor. In hearing the plop, Yuigahama glanced at me.

“Oh, Hikki.”

When she called my name, she was wearing her usual smile. Relieved, I put on my shoes and walked over to her. “Oh, what are you doing?”

“Waiting.”

“Huh? Why...? Wait, is something happening?” I panicked at the thought of forgetting something, but she shook her hand.

“Oh, that's not it. Nothing's happening. I saw your shoe box and figured you hadn't gone home yet, so I was just...” Her waving hand gradually slowed to a stop. She moved her idle hand to her eyes, moved her hair over her ear, and looked away in embarrassment. “Waiting...”

“R-Right, I see now...”

The tip of her ears peeking from under her hair and her soft cheeks were streaked with red from the setting sun. Flustered from the sight, I chewed my words. She giggled when she saw my bewilderment and fiddled with the bun on her head.

“We didn't get to talk much during exams, but we did talk about going somewhere afterwards. So, I figured I'd wait for you.”

“My bad, I should've contacted you.”

“No, it's okay!” She shook her head, unconcerned. Though she seemed energetic, her smile looked fragile. “I... just wanted to try waiting for you.”

In seeing her profile as she gazed at the distant sun outside of the window, my voice became lodged in my throat. It's possible she didn't have that much of a reason as she said. Or maybe she just didn't want to put it into words. I really didn't know. But in thinking about it, she was always waiting for me, if not, for us. Having only realized that now, I extended her a short word of appreciation.

“I see... thanks.”

She nodded and hopped to her feet. Following the momentum, she pushed her large bag onto me.

“Help me carry this home.”

She used her free hand to pat her skirt to put and put on her heavy backpack that she always had when commuting to school. It looked jammed pack with all of the things she was taking home after the end of the school year. Since I was going to be carrying her bag, I might as well take that, too. I offered my hand.

“Mm.”

“Hm?” Yuigahama looked at my hand in confusion. She tilted her head and then placed her hand on top of mine.

This time, I tilted my head. Why did she have to do cute stuff like this?

“I don't mean your hand, but your backpack. I'm saying I'll carry it for you.”

“Oh... S-Say that first, then!”

Yuigahama turned red and slapped my hand away. She then shoved her backpack onto me. She whispered a “thanks” and hurried on ahead.

I shook my hand from the impact, and though it didn't hurt, I whispered an “ouch,” anyway. If I didn't say something that pointless, I would've slipped something else instead...

X X X

The sunset afterglow permeated the sky in the west. The evening sun poured on the trees erected along the lane leading to the station. I pushed my bike through the fuzzy light that dripped from the branches and leaves.

Yuigahama walked alongside me while engaging me in various things. Then, she said, “Oh yeah, did you go somewhere earlier?”

“Komachi's orientation. I was with her when she got measured for the uniform, too.”

“Aww, I wish I was there so I could see her, too.”

“You'll get to see her as much as you want in April,” I said, but my voice became slightly restless.

April was right around the corner, yet I couldn't quite imagine what it'd be like. When Yuigahama saw the doubt on my face, her expression turned dark for a moment.

“That's true... Oh, maybe I'll get her a present—like something useful—that'll go with her uniform.” She clapped her hands, perhaps aware of her gloomy tone, and added cheerfully.

I answered, trying to sound as casual as possible. “Yeah, that sounds good. That'll definitely make her happy,” I said.

Yuigahama trotted a few steps ahead of me and put her hand in my bike's basket, containing her large bag and backpack. She rummaged through the latter for her smartphone and began writing a memo.

Kids, using your cellphone while walking is dangerous! Don't do this at home! Rather than give her a verbal warning, I stopped. Understanding my intentions, she halted in place to operate her phone.

After finishing, she put her phone back in the backpack and nodded. I returned her nod and began pushing my bike again, while focusing on the large bag in the basket.

“So, what's the deal with this bag?”

“Oh, that? School's almost over, so I'm just taking all my stuff home. Turns out I had a crazy amount of stuff, though.”

“Uh-huh... Well, that happens pretty often at the end of the school year.”

There's a common sight you'd see right before summer vacation, spring break, or just a regular long vacation, especially with elementary kids. They'd carry so much luggage in their hands and on their back packed with painting tools, drawing boards, and calligraphy supplies on their way home. It's like they were Freedom suits equipped with METEOR units<sup>29</sup> or something. And they'd activate their Full Burst on their bags when they tripped. Back then, I used to have things spill out of my bag all the time...

I indulged in my memories, and Yuigahama glanced at the basket. “You don't seem to have that much stuff, Hikki.”

“I don't really bring anything to school, that's why.”

We eventually approached Yuigahama's home as we talked and stopped in front of the convenience store near the front garden of her condominium. She looked up at it before turning to me and asked shyly, “Um... do you wanna come over?”

A wry smile formed on my face. “No, I'll pass. I might end up staying for dinner again.”

“Right, got it, ahaha... Oh, I know. Give me a second.” Yuigahama made a bashful laugh. Then, after remembering something, she entered the store.

I considered going in with her, but since she told me to wait, I had to obey. In case you hadn't noticed, I was friendlier and more clever than the Gahama household's pet dog.

I stopped pushing my bike and sat on a parking bumper. I turned around to see Yuigahama in the store purchasing cups of coffee at the register and waiting for them to be filled by the dispenser. A few moments later, she returned with the coffee in both hands.

“Here you go, thanks for helping.”

“Oh, really? Thanks.”

A reward for carrying her luggage, I suppose? In that case, I gladly accept.

That being said, I had my bike today, so it'd be too awkward trying to drink the coffee while pedaling. As I wondered what to do, Yuigahama headed straight for the nearby park, which had gazebos and benches. Given the time, the warm weather from the afternoon would begin to cool, making the park a nice place to spend the time, perfect for a coffee break.

Children from the neighborhood were playing tag with rules I wasn't sure of. They ran around in large groups, tripped and cried, and got right back up. Yuigahama and I sat on the nearest bench as we watched them from afar. The wind was pleasant, and it was a peaceful evening.

I sipped my sweet coffee through a straw, and Yuigahama let out a satisfied breath. She then made a distant look beyond the expansive park.

“It's kinda relaxing...”

“Yeah, things have been pretty hectic lately,” I answered while drinking.

Yuigahama turned her body to me. “Right, right. It's a lot of fun hanging out with Yumiko and the others, but we kinda just go to all sorts of places. Like, karaoke, for example, you kinda worry too much about the time, so you end up feeling pretty occupied. It's a lot of fun though, so I don't mind it too much.”

“Ahh, well, that's just how it is when you do things that force you to keep track of time. It's like when you're enjoying yourself or you're in a sauna for 2 hours. By the time you notice, it's been way longer, and you start freaking out,” I said.

“Oh, I totally get that!” Yuigahama patted my shoulder, but then immediately stopped. “Well, maybe not the sauna part.”

“Really? You don't get why for saunas? What country are you from?”

“How should I know...? What country are saunas from, anyway?”

“Saunas originated in Finland... There are various theories on the matter.”

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<sup>29</sup> Gundam SEED mobile suit and optional equipment module.

“Why'd you whisper at the end!?”

“Well, it's hard to explain... The culture of steam rooms is a phenomenon present throughout the world including Japan. If we're talking strictly Finnish saunas, then saunas can indeed be said to have originated in Finland. But if we're tackling the subject through the ambiguous linguistic view that Japanese people have, it's possible to see saunas as an equivalent to steam rooms. With that broad definition in mind, when you're asked about the origin of something like a sauna, the only thing you can really say is there are various theories.”

I made a rapid rant with a mumbling voice while Yuigahama casually acknowledged my words. Then, with a blank look, she slightly retreated away.

“You sure are cr—you sure know a lot. It's kinda creepy...”

“Was there even a point in rephrasing yourself?” I said in dejection.

It would've been better if you had just said it from the start. Being considerate could hurt people at times, you know!

Yuigahama made an amusing laugh and put her straw back in her mouth. Afterwards, she let out a satisfied breath and stretched. “It's kinda nice spending our time like this...” She lowered her arms and looked at me for confirmation.

I slowly nodded. “Only if it's every now and then... if we did this all the time, that means we have literally nothing to do.”

“Oh, nothing to do, huh? I guess we have a lot of time if we don't have club... It's weird since I never really thought about it before.”

“Yeah. We pretty much went to club almost every day right after our second year started. I can't even remember what I did in our first year.”

“So true... I wonder how we should kill time in our third year?” Yuigahama rested her hands on her sides and kicked her legs while looking at the distant sky ahead. On the other hand, I rolled a pebble on the ground with the tip of my shoes.

I stated unpleasantly. “We won't have that luxury since college entrance exams will be right around the corner.”

“I guess.”

She made a bitter smile, and I made one as well. Eventually, one of us retracted it. We were talking about what would happen in the future, yet we couldn't truly see what was important in it. Perhaps, that was because we could only see the pragmatic parts.

No, that's not right. It's because we omitted everything about the present before we started talking about the future. I had no idea if Yuigahama was aware of it, but I, at the very least, realized I was deliberately avoiding talking about it.

Something cold began to mingle with the evening wind, and a children's song<sup>30</sup> played over the speakers in the park. Upon hearing it, the playing kids went home one after the other.

The west sky was scorched by the evening afterglow, and an indigo blue began to dilute the sky in the east. The space in between was dyed with a deep red. In time, the sky would transition to the blue hour.

I looked up without saying anything more, and Yuigahama quietly opened her mouth. “Hey, Hikki...”

“Hm?”

I looked at my neighbor, only to see she was looking down with her lips tightly sucked in. She kept taking breaths, troubled over whether to speak up. But moments later, she lifted her face with determination and looked straight into my eyes.

“Are you really okay with this?”

I wanted to believe I understood the implication of her question.

“Whether I'm okay with it or not—”

—I don't have the right to decide that.

Before I could finish, Yuigahama interrupted with the shake of her head. “Think before you answer me. If you're really okay with this, if things are really over, I'll tell you my wish... it's a very, very important wish.”

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<sup>30</sup> A melody played to indicate the change in time to evening. The name of the song is called “[yuuyake koyake](#)”.



The moment she focused her eyes on me, the thoughtless words I was about to say disappeared. Before I knew it, I was biting my lips with my eyes feebly lowered to the ground. When I saw her tormented gaze, it was telling me that she wouldn't forgive a halfhearted answer.

I couldn't irresponsibly dodge the question, nor could I hide behind a veil of lies. There's no doubt she'd smile and forgive me if I chose to run away, poke fun at the situation, and confuse her, but I couldn't possibly take advantage of that. I couldn't betray her like that. It's because she's the one person in the world I didn't want to hate me.

"I'm not okay with it at all..." I squeezed out the words, and she made a faint smile and urged me to go on with a nod. I continued, "There's nothing we can do about the club ending. Generally speaking, we'll be retiring at some point next year just like the other clubs. Hiratsuka-sensei won't be here anymore, either. So, there's nothing wrong with the club ending, because it'll have to end eventually."

Yuigahama nodded.

"We can't avoid losing the club. I know Yukinoshita doesn't want to continue it, either. We're completely convinced with the reasons for the the club ending... I think it's fine to end the club."

I was finally able to say the words that I couldn't to the two of them back then. Although I was completely aware that the end was nearing, my immaturity kept me from accepting it. But now, I could finally say my goodbye. Being able to voice those words filled me with relief and I let out a loud sigh.



Yuigahama set aside her cup, straightened her back, and clasped her knees together. Then, she turned to me.

“I see... then...” Yuigahama's mouth opened in hesitation, slowly but carefully choosing her words. Her hands that were resting on her thighs fidgeted but in time, they gripped her pleated skirt as if she had made her decision.

“Then...”

I wasn't qualified to hear what she had to say beyond that. Because there were still things I needed to say.

“But... there's one thing I just can't accept.”

I interrupted, and Yuigahama's voice trailed off. Surprise and confusion filled her eyes, but she didn't say anything more and quietly acknowledged my words, urging me to go on.

“If she made her decision to compensate for something she gave up on, pretending as if it's some kind of compromise, then I can't accept that. If I was the reason for twisting her into that decision, then the responsibility should—”

I stopped. Despite what I was saying, I knew that wasn't it. I was just about to fall into the same worthless trap with my words again. Just what was I trying to deflect with this circular reasoning?

There was something more than that—something else that I needed to say.

I suddenly went quiet and she looked at me anxiously, her gaze both suspicious and insecure. I took one large breath and slapped both of my cheeks. Startled, she moved her hand to her chest as if pressing down her heart. Then, she cautiously asked. “Th-That came out of nowhere... What was that for?”

“Sorry, forget what I said. I was just trying to dress up my words.” I said, turning to her.

Her eyes widened and blinked several times. Then, she burst into laughter. “What the heck?” Yuigahama giggled in amusement from my unexpected reaction. Even I had to smile at how lame I was being.

It really was a bad habit of mine. No matter when and where, I was always so excessively self-conscious that it made me end up trying to show off my good side to her.

I carried the bitter coffee to my mouth to dissolve my flowery words, but this time, I decided to blurt out my words without any thought.

“I'm going to say something really gross, but I'll keep it simple. I don't want to lose my connection with her, and that's why, I can't accept it.”

As soon as the words came out, I just realized how hopelessly foolish they were. They were the height of idiocy, a stupidity that left me with a self-deprecating laugh escaping from the corners of my lips.

Yuigahama was taken aback, but she didn't laugh in the least. She affectionately narrowed her eyes and dropped her gaze.

“I don't think you'll lose that...”

“In normal situations, yeah. We can still get along to a certain extent by seeing other, having some small talk, and getting in touch to meet every now and then.” I stated a generalization while recalling the important parts of socialization that Hiratsuka-sensei taught me in her car. But it was exactly that, a generalization. “But I can't do that. I can't stand the thought of having a superficial relationship like that.”

In spitting out the words, I finally understood. By taking the shape of words, for the first time, I could accept it. It was nothing at all. It was nothing more than me not liking the idea of us growing apart like that. After making an insane amount of inane arguments and putting all of my reasons, excuses, environments, and situations together, the words I could finally say were unbelievably hopeless. Even I could see how childish and pathetic I was being. I could only laugh at myself again.

“I can try to keep at it for a while, but I'm absolutely confident we'll grow apart eventually. I'm a professional at cutting off relationships, after all.”

“That's nothing to be proud about...”

Yuigahama made a troubled smile, but didn't deny it. That's expected. We had known each other for close to a year now, so we both understood that. However, there was another person that we knew for just as long.

“While we're at it, Yukinoshita's probably the same.”

“That’s... yep.”

“Right? So, if I give up on my connection with her now, that’ll probably be the end of it... it’s a bit hard for me to accept that.”

I could only make a bitter laugh at my bothersome reasoning, my simple words, and my cowardly inability to think. Yuigahama silently looked at the pathetic look on my face. Eventually, she sighed in exasperation.

“If you don’t tell her that, she’s definitely not going to understand.”

“She wouldn’t understand even if I told her something like that... It makes no sense, and it isn’t a good reason, either. It’s just nonsense.”

For someone as self-centered as me, even I couldn’t wrap my head around my fallacious logic. I had already given up on trying to understand it with any existing words. That abject feeling came out of my lopsided mouth.

“Yep. Honestly, I really don’t get it. It makes no sense. It’s just gross.”

“Exactly. I feel the same way... but did you have to add that last part?”

Even I got a little depressed when she stated in successive fashion like that. Still, her eyes were smiling.

“But... I think I kinda get it somehow. It sounds like something you’d totally say, Hikki.”

“Really?” I said.

Yuigahama moved about a fist’s worth of distance away and readjusted her sitting. She turned her knees to me and looked directly at me. “Yep... That’s why, you definitely need to tell her that.”

“Even if she doesn’t get what I mean?”

In that instant, she punched my shoulder and glared.

“It’s fine even if she doesn’t! If anything, Hikki, you’re the one who’s not putting in the effort to tell her.”

“You hit where it hurts most.”

That really was true. I always gave up on thinking I could ever get things across. It’s why I could never say what was truly important. But she had put it into words for me.

“Some things just won’t get across even if we talk to each other... but that’s fine, because I’ll do my best to understand. I think Yukinon’s the same way.”

Her words passionately came together, her tone was tinged with admonishment, and her eyes were moist and reflected the bright glow of the setting sun.

I see, that’s it. Now, I could understand everything about Yuigahama’s way of doing things. Because right now, I was trying to understand what she was telling me. It may not be logical, it may not be something that could be explained, and it may be just a mix of our subjectivity and intuition, but in trying to understand in that way, we would fill in the differences between us.

“I’ve had my wish for a long time now.”

Yuigahama stood up, turned her back to me, and looked up at the darkening sky. The setting sun beyond her had a color that resembled the very same color back then, the same color of the setting sun beyond the quietly waving sea as it snowed on that day.

“I want everything...”

They were the same words as that day, but without the smell of the sea water and the glittering snow. Yuigahama then took a quiet but large breath and eventually turned back to me.

“That’s why, I want Yukinon to be there on a day like this where there’s nothing after school. I want to be at the place where Yukinon and you are together.”

She faced her back to the sun and under the warm light and in the freezing wind, she whispered as if to make her wish.

“So you need to tell her.”

I burned her beautiful and ephemeral smile and her moist, yet resolute gaze into my eyes in spite of the blinding sunlight.

“Don’t worry, I’ll make sure I do.” I declared clearly, telling myself to be as sincere as possible.

Yuigahama smiled and sat back on the bench. She then looked and asked with a teasing tone. “Really?”

“Yeah. Well, first, I need to make the preparations. It'll be hard, but I'll try.”

My vague answer caused her to make a dubious look. “Preparations?”

“There's a lot I have to do... The both of us tend to prepare all kinds of escape routes like taking precautions, or making excuses, or hiding behind a facade, or trying to make things simple by keeping things business-related... First, I need to block every single one of those.”

Yuigahama made an intricate expression encompassing various emotions such as anxiety, anger, and many others. She sealed her lips in dissatisfaction, and when she opened them again, her voice came out cold.

“I don't think that's what you should be doing.”

“I know... but I don't think I'll have it in me to tell her if I don't go that far. I need to drag her into a place that'll keep us from running.”

Subject to her quiet indignation, I let out a pathetic voice. I really was utterly disgusted at my cowardice. But when you're Hikigaya Hachiman for 17 years, you needed to corner yourself by eliminating all of the factors that could force you into circular logic, or nothing would happen.

I spat out a heavy breath, and Yuigahama made a gentle smile. “You really only need to say one thing, you know.”

“Saying just one thing isn't going to get anything across.”

In any normal situation, that might be enough. But I simply couldn't be convinced with a set of words that fit the mold. I felt it wouldn't be enough, but at the same time, I felt it would've been too much. I just didn't think I'd be able to express it in a way that could ever strike that balance. Above anything else, there's no way I could stand for being satisfied with words of that degree.

My straightforward words didn't seem to get across to Yuigahama based on her absentminded look. Realizing I didn't say enough, I added to my statement.

“Basically, there's someone that looks smart but is actually pretty dumb. He's insanely annoying to deal with, incredibly stubborn, and is way too complicated. Even if you talk to him, he just finds a way to misunderstand and run away, so he just gets you upset and irritated. On top of that, you can't trust anything he says...”

Complaints spilled out of my mouth. Yuigahama had a blank look for a moment but then sighed with a tilt of her head.

“Who are you talking about?”

“Me.”

She then made a hopeless smile.

I really was a hopeless person. I'd always force the troublesome things on her like I was now, and she'd always forgive me every time. I had been taking advantage of her kindness for the longest time. The comfort would cause me to doze off, and I could pretend to not see anything by closing the lid, but she would always help me all the same. Those days were precious, irreplaceable, honestly enjoyable, and were so blissful that made me think of only the convenient things.

“Sorry for putting you through so much.”

“Huh?”

She inclined her head in puzzlement from my abrupt apology.

“One day, I'll get better at this. Eventually, I think I'll be able to say things properly, be able to accept things properly without having to fuss over my words and reasons—”

I slowly voiced my incoherent words. Perhaps, whenever I was able to become a decent adult, a proper man, I might be able to say these words without hesitation. I might be able to properly get things across with words and feelings that were much different than now.

“—But you don't need to wait for that.”

I managed to finish, and Yuigahama gripped her cup while listening. Then, she made a troubled look from my nonsensical rambling.

“What's that about? Of course I won't wait.”

“Right. That was a pretty gross thing to say.”

“Seriously.”

I felt ashamed at my foolishness and tried to play it off with a smile. Yuigahama laughed and then stood up from the bench.



“Okay... we should get going.”

I got up from the bench and pushed my nearby bike after Yuigahama. We left the park and within a meter or so, we arrived at her condominium.

“Thanks for carrying my stuff,” she said at the entrance, and retrieved the large bag from the basket of my bike. “See you again at school.”

“Yeah, see you.”

After seeing her wave, I pushed my bike. For some time, I could only hear the rolling sounds of my bike's tires and the scraping of dirt beneath my loafers. Then, they suddenly stopped. In the crowd on this evening night, people went back and forth, yet only my legs were stuck in place.

But even so, I made the decision to run. I strongly kicked the floor and jumped onto the saddle of my bike. In that moment, I made one glance behind me. I could still see her waving, but when she noticed me looking in that moment, she made a bigger motion with her hand.

I lifted up one hand, and with ragged breathing, I frantically stepped on my pedals without looking back.

## Interlude

I didn't shed any tears, because I already cried a lot.

That's why, during the entire time I was watching him leave, during the entire time I was waving my hand, I closely watched his back and burned the sight into my eyes.

When he finally disappeared, my hand flopped down.

The bulky plastic bag wasn't heavy in the least, but it started to feel that way all of a sudden.

I got onto the elevator. While I was walking back to my place, his words kept echoing in my ears over and over again, as if to mix with the annoying rustling of my plastic bag.

I acted as if I wasn't listening to it and opened the door to my home. Sablé barked and came running at me.

"I'm home."

I crouched at the entrance and patted him. I laughed at the ticklish feeling when he licked my hand. On that hand, there was a drop of water. Even though I was laughing, the tears continued to fall and fall. Sablé looked up at me with curiosity.

It's nothing. Don't worry. I'm fine.

I hugged him tightly while reciting those words. But then I realized that none of them were actually coming out, only my constant hot breaths that welled up in my tight chest from my throat.

When I tried to wipe my eyes to clear my blurry sight, my hand was stopped. I looked up to see mom there.

"Your eyes will get swollen... okay?"

She had a good smell, and when she held me in her warm arms, I was finally able to let out my voice. I didn't need to hold the tears in anymore. But, still, the words didn't come out. The words just didn't.

I couldn't say the simple words, "I like you." It was like that before, but it was also a problem bigger than that. It just wasn't that kind of emotion.

For the first time, I—we had truly fallen in love.

## Interlude...

Prom was over, finals were over, and in the next two days, today and tomorrow, we would get our exam results. Then, we'd get a holiday followed by the year-end ceremony. After that, a super, long vacation awaited.

With Meguri-senpai's graduation, the student council room was now my my castle in name and in reality. I played with my smartphone wondering what to do over spring break and helped the vice president and secretary-chan with wrapping up our work.

What's left was to gather all the documents for Yukino-senpai to process, work the vice president to death, and have secretary-chan revive him. There's a lot more to do, but it was fulfilling to say the least. That's how my first year should've ended.

"I'm coming in."

Until Hiratsuka-sensei decided to enter the student council room... She really never knocks, does she? Well, that's just how she is, so whatever.

"Is there something wrong?"

I could only hope she wasn't bringing in anything annoying. I stood up to meet her. She then pushed her smartphone in my face.

"Do you know about this?"

Let's see... I took a good look at her phone. The screen was displaying something about a prom. I read through the page, casually making impressed remarks, and I encountered some incredibly, ridiculous, and nonsensical information. In particular, there was something I just couldn't avoid focusing on which was, "Sobu High School & Kahin-Sogo High School Joint Prefectural Prom, Open in Spring!"

"Huh...?"

My mouth was agape. What is this?

I pointed at Hiratsuka-sensei's phone with my shaking fingers. By the way, my voice was also shaking, and so were my glossy lips.

"U-Um, what is this? I didn't hear anything about this..."

"I see, you don't know anything, huh? This must be Hikigaya's work, then."

Hiratsuka-sensei undid her folded arms with a look of excitement. Why was she happy...? I was a little bit disturbed, but then she tried to boldly make her exit while humming.

"I'll go ask him directly. Sorry for bothering you."

She waved her hand in a cool way, and I caught it! I managed to hold her back and pulled her hand.

"Wait, wait, wait! What is this!? What's he trying to do!? Um, isn't this asking for trouble? This is totally bad, isn't it!?"

"Oh, right, I guess you don't know."

Hiratsuka-sensei acted as if it didn't matter, but she gave me an explanation. Apparently, the prom we were supposed to have at first got complaints and was stopped. But senpai planned his own prom that was far worse than what we had, which allowed us to hold our prom since it was more proper. Basically, it was a pointless plan that served as a scapegoat or an underdog, or something like that.

"I don't get it..."

The words slipped out of my mouth, and Hiratsuka-sensei agreed with a grin. Okay, so why was she so happy about it...?

"Um, but that shouldn't matter anymore, right? I mean, we had the prom already..."

"That's right, but apparently, this site was updated yesterday and today."

"Apparently...?"

"Well, I didn't know about it until the parents association got in touch."

I gave her a fixated stare, and she scratched her cheek with a troubled expression.

Oh, okay. This was following the same process as last time, which means someone from Yukino-senpai's family came. I had a gist of the situation. The only thing I didn't get was senpai.

“But why is he updating it now...?”

“I'm sure he has his reasons,” Hiratsuka-sensei said, acting like an older sister. Yet, she was still happy.

I seriously don't get it. Was he an idiot, or what? Would anyone go that far? If anything, why didn't he tell me he would do something like that? Well, okay, the last time he did this, it was for us, which I can totally get, kind of, not really, but kind of. Well, he's not doing it just for me, though. I don't get it.

Before I knew it, I pinched my lips out of irritation, and Hiratsuka-sensei patted my shoulder.

“Anyway, I'll get the circumstances from him in person. I'll let you know the details afterwards.”

She had such an affectionate smile and happily made her way out of the room, as if she was going on a date, while I was left behind in shock.

There wasn't any point in standing here doing nothing, though. Regardless of how the joint prom went, the student council would have to take action. I didn't want to be left out, anyway.

First, I needed information. I quickly googled the blog site from earlier, and after staring at it, I could sense the workings of a woman in the design... And there was only one person who would help senpai with this.

So, I copied the page and pasted it on LINE. I also added a “Hey, do you know about this????” and sent the message. I got a quick response saying, “!??y!?!?” The message was full of characters indicating the confusion of the sender. She also added a stamp with a crying dog and a “I have no idea!” message. Looks like she didn't hear anything about this.

I followed up with a “Btw, do you know who made this website???” and this time I got a proper response. “Chuuni. Also, the two first-year gamer guys! They look good with computers! They all have glasses!” She then sent a barrage of glass emoticons. I see. Don't get it. What was so proper about these messages again?

But the circle of friends that senpai had was so stupidly small, just the hint of glasses should be enough to narrow down the suspects. Since Hiratsuka-sensei was already going to interrogate the main culprit, I was going to go squeeze some information out of his accomplices.

I spun my seat around, and I called out to the vice president bawling his eyes out as he finished our remaining business at the corner of the room. “Hey, vice president, do you know who this chuuni person is? He wears glasses. He's also hanging out with two first-year boys who seem to be good at games and computers.”

The vice president stopped and began thinking. That's fine and all, but keep working, okay?

“Chuuni... Oh, it must be that guy. The weird one...”

His wonderfully expressed words were vague, though he seemed to have an idea who they were.

“Can you bring that person here? And also the two first-years.”

“Huh...? I can do that, but I don't know who those other two are....”

Um? Searching for them was your job as the vice president, you know...? Of course, I couldn't say that, so I gave him a troubled smile instead. Then, secretary-chan sitting next to him raised her hand.

“Um...”

“Yes, secretary-chan?” I pointed at her.

She said in a low voice. “I think the two first-years are Hatano-kun and Sagami-kun from the UG Club.”

“UG? Hatano? Sagami?” I inclined my head, having no idea of those names.

She made a bitter smile. “Iroha-chan, they're in your class...”

“Ahh...”

Bleh. Her stare changed from a dreadful one to one of those not-so-great ones. And here I thought we were getting along recently! After all, I had very few female friends, so she was very important! So, I decided to clear my throat, and clap my hands.

“Oh, right, right. Okay, VP, can you please bring Hatagaya-kun and Sagano-kun along, too!?”

I stuck out my tongue, winked with a side peace, and gave the order to the vice president. He was unexpectedly eager when he stood up, perhaps happy to be freed from his work.

“All right, I'll go find them.”

“I'll go with you, Makito-kun. You don't know what they look like, right?”

“Thanks, that'd be great.”

They left the room together. Wow, secretary-chan, casual much? Did you just call the vice president by his first name? You dating? You kidding me? Do your damn work, okay?

X X X

After some time, the vice president and the secretary were able to escort the accomplices back to the student council room. It was a group of three wearing glasses, just like in the information I was given.

The three were forced to sit at the long table. The vice president and the secretary stood at their flanks to block any attempts at escape. The student council room was set up as a courtroom, and the court (judge: me, prosecutor: me, attorney: me, sentence: capital punishment) was now in session.

“Can you explain what this is to me?”

I pointed at the screen of the evidence, the smartphone, and warmly asked. However, the three were shrinking into their seats from fear while exchanging glances between each other.

Zero signs of having any semblance of a conversation... Calm down, me. I was always dealing with someone as annoying as senpai all the time, so I should be able to deal with other people. Go, me. I'm amazing, me.

I took a deep breath and formed the signature Irohasu smile. I wasn't angry at all, okay? I asked nicely, “So, why are you guys trying to hold a joint prom without consulting the student council? Why?”

I brightened my smile as a reminder to their situation, and this time, it caused them to jump in their seats. For some reason, even the vice president flinched. The secretary was whispering, “Scary...”, too. Good, good, let's keep at it. Wait, Scary? Surely you mean cute?

While having those thoughts in mind, the glasses on the far right feebly spoke up.

“I-I would like to exercise my right to stay silent...”

“Rejected!”

This was the student council room, and I was the student council president. In other words, I was the law, and as such, I would not allow you the right to remain silent.

Next, the glasses on the far left raised his hand. “I request the presence of an attorney...”

“Rejected!”

Because I was the attorney here. I was all ears to your case, okay? Only all ears, though.

Breaking from the pressure, the coat-wearing person sitting in the middle, wearing glasses with a large build, raised both of his hands for some reason. He looked familiar, so he was probably Chuuni-san.

“I've got a deadline to meet for my manuscript, so...”

He stood up and attempted to flee, but the vice president placed his hand on his shoulder and casually sat him down.

They really needed to explain themselves while people were still smiling... Unintentionally, I started hitting the table.

“Explain. Right. Now!”

“Okay...” Chuuni-san became despondent and reluctantly nodded.

I looked at them asking for the explanation. The glasses on both ends looked at each other and began mumbling.

“Th-This was... because the brass came out of nowhere yesterday and forced us to...”

“E-Exactly! We were asked, so we couldn't exactly refuse!”

“I-I implore you to get the details from Hachiman! We are merely a third party lending a helping hand!” Chuuni-san stated in a remarkable voice, and the other two nodded in agreement.

“I would love to do that, but he's already booked right now, you see...” I said, and placed my hand on my brow that began to ache. I looked out the window.

“Why is he going out of his way to do something so annoying...? I don't get it.” I whispered to myself while sighing and glared at the smartphone on the table. Then, in response to my words, the



three began whispering like they were engaging in a secret conversation.

“Totally, that guy makes no sense at all. We even told him it's impossible.”

“He even said he'll handle the rest once the information leaks... He's definitely crazy...”

“I believe he said failure was fine, too. 'I don't get it.’”

Chuuni-san started copying my words, as if he thought I wasn't listening. That apparently was humorous to the other two.

I could hear you, damn it. I clicked my tongue, and glared. The two on the side shut their mouths. On the other hand, Chuuni-san didn't seem to get the message and muttered with a hearty voice.

“However... in the face of such desperate pleas, it is only human nature to answer.”

His words suddenly pulled at me. He was desperate enough to beg for help with the joint prom, but was still fine with it failing? Which means, his goal wasn't to make it a success. But he needed some kind of process that would let him hold the prom. That's why, it would work in his favor if information about it leaked?

Grrrr... Wait, wait, I think I was starting to get it now. While I was moaning in thought, the three idiots became rowdy and started whispering.

“True... He was pretty persistent, too. I mean, he was kneeling on the ground. First time I've ever seen someone prostrate.”

“Well, it's not like we could refuse, you know? Since he was going so far, you know? Sort of like how a promise between men didn't need any words?”

“Indeed. However, prostrating is merely another pose for Hachiman. I suspect he only thinks of it as nothing more than yoga.”

“What? That's just terrible.”

“I knew he had no morals...”

Ahh, I totally got that... He always used any means necessary to achieve his goals, after all... In listening to Chuuni-san's words, I slipped out a smile, and then something flashed in my mind.

“Well, after asking us, he kept telling us do retakes on the site over and over again with a straight face. He's definitely nuts.”

“When he asked for three more patterns on the design, I thought he was going to murder us.”

“Indeed, truly nonsensical. It's like he had no heart. He's a demon, a devil, an editor!”

When I looked up from the light bulb going off in my head, the three glasses were having fun insulting senpai.

“You guys are noisy. I'm thinking right now, so please be quiet.”

I roared at them, and they finally went quiet. God, if you wanted to hold a tournament on who could insult him the most, do it some other time. Because I would totally win it.

Exactly. My senpai was the worst person ever, and he was such an incredibly, rotten scumbag. His eyes were mostly rotten, but his personality was even worse.

That's why, he could use any means necessary to achieve his goals. A big event like a joint prom was bound to involve all sorts of parties, but he only saw it as a means to an end.

That means, his goal was...

When I arrived at the answer, a smile formed at my lips, simultaneously leaving it was a whisper.

“I seriously don't get it at all...”

## Chapter 7: Our feelings are conveyed through only the warmth of our touch.

There's never been a time in my life when I was able to have a clean resolution, and I don't expect that to change going forward. My surroundings left me with only experiences that had a horrible aftertaste.

Honestly speaking, I was starting to wonder deep down if I could've approached things differently, that I might've overlooked a simpler way that wouldn't leave anyone with ill feelings. It's just that I couldn't see any value in something that could easily be changed by a few words or a single method.

If things were entirely resolved on a whim or by one insubstantial action, I felt all of the physical pain, mental suffering, and worries could be denied as nothing more than they really were. The pain and worries of the person concerned were by no means as light as strangers would deem them, because there were always only two options between living or dying. Writing them off with a few words just felt too insincere.

If just a few words were enough to change things—no, something that could be reversed only for it be turned back was obviously something you couldn't take back.

That's why, this was the only way I could do things, all the while praying that it's the one I could fall back on while hopelessly hurting all over.

I was well aware of the limits of what I could do. I could do everything I could, but there were still things I wouldn't be able to reach. That's why, I decided to do as much as I could.

As arrogant as this was, as long as I was pursuing something genuine that wouldn't be broken regardless of what happened, if I couldn't confirm its existence through twisting it, smashing it, and damaging it, then I wouldn't be able to believe in it at all.

In the first place, there was very little someone of my caliber could do. Abandoning everything I had would ultimately change nothing. I was generally unprepared, never without the means, tools, or hands to move forward. In the present day, the most I could do was barely anything at all. A single mail, a single act of prostration, and a single call were all I could do.

But through those, I was finally able to get my hands on a single clue. It was just one way of approaching things, let alone being anything complicated, but it was better than nothing.

It was the start of a new week on Monday. After receiving our exam results for the day, it was now after school, and I was sitting in class staring at my smartphone. Displayed on its screen was the banner “Sobu High School & Kaihin Sogo High School Prefectural Joint Prom, Open in Spring!” on the event site of the joint prom between our two schools.

The dummy prom that was supposed to outlasted its usefulness was unknowingly brought back to life. Wrong, I was the one who forced it back.

Yesterday, I sent a mail to Kaihin Sogo High School, outright lying to them that they were free to proceed, made my way to the UG Club and begged them with aggressive prostrations to update the site.

Of course, there was nothing substantial to the plan itself. It was just nonsense, a bluff, a decoration. It was same as it was before when it served as a dummy. As such, the process was like it was before, which meant I needed to call Yukinoshita Haruno and have her leak the information of the joint prom.

Our conversation didn't last very long, but her laughter from over the phone was still ringing in my ears.

“What's even the point in doing this?” She asked.

Nothing; the joint prom itself had no meaning. That's why, I answered her with a half-smile.

—I'll show you what a real prom... what something genuine is really like.

Thinking about it now, it really was an absurd thing to declare. For that reason, she gave me a scornful laugh.

“You're an idiot. We've got an idiot here.”

She snickered which eventually transformed into a guffaw. She hung up the phone on me without any mention of cooperating. I tried calling her back several times, but she never answered. In the end, I wasn't sure if she was going to listen to my request. And that's what led me to this point.

Only God knew what would happen, and when it did, I knew nothing good would come of it. I was poking around in a grove<sup>31</sup> of unknown truths, so what's left was to wait. The die was cast, a towel was thrown, and now I just needed to cross the Rubicon<sup>32</sup>.

And sure enough, the results came within the next couple of days. The school ended as a half-day due to the holiday, and I was in class preparing to head home. Until that person came.

“Hikigaya.” Hiratsuka-sensei called me from the door. She motioned me over with her hand and had a slightly concerned expression.

Upon seeing this, I knew I had won the first of my gambles.

X X X

Hiratsuka-sensei brought me to a room we had visited on a previous day, the reception office. When the door opened, I immediately made eye contact with Yukinoshita's mother in the seat of honor. She returned a radiant smile.

This situation was exactly like the meeting we had a few days before, except the only difference was the presence of a few others. Sitting beside her mother, Haruno-san waved and winked. Despite her boisterous howling over the phone, she had prepared the stage for me, so I was grateful for that. The last person was Yukinoshita sitting on the sofa near the entrance.

“Hikigaya-kun...”

Her expression was colored with apprehension, presumably having been informed of the circumstances moments earlier. I silently nodded back to her worried gaze. I also took the opportunity to shoot furtive glances around the office, scratch my cheek, and make an unceremonious smile.

“Um, is there a reason why I was called here...?”

Of course, I knew exactly why. Regardless, I did my utmost to play the fool. This was going to be the biggest performance in the life Hikigaya Hachiman.

That being said, Yukinoshita's mother made a thin but all-knowing smile to my poor acting. In the awkward silence, Haruno-san was unable to hold back her snickering.

“Just take a seat.” Hiratsuka-sensei let out an agitated sigh and tapped my shoulder. Judging by her expression, my cover was completely blown. Well, whatever...

As instructed, I sat next to Yukinoshita and Hiratsuka-sensei sat next to me. After we took our seats, Yukinoshita's mother on the opposing side maintained her gentle smile and gracefully rummaged through a purse for her smartphone.

“I thought it'd be prudent to come ask for your side of the story on this.” She showed the screen of her phone to me, and on it was the official site of the dummy prom. There was one thing different from before and that was the simplistic site being engraved with the words, “Sobu High School & Kaihin Sogo High School Prefectural Joint Prom, Open This Spring!” in gaudy, primary colors over on cushion seat art.

“This is...” I groaned and feigned surprise while deliberating looking meek and sounding confused.

“This plan looks rather familiar, so I'd like to ask you what this is about.” Yukinoshita's mother pressed her fingers against her temple and let out a tired exhale. “Many parents were very understanding of the prom that was held the other day, but now, we have this, you see? I thought it'd be best to ask the person in charge to explain how this came about.”

Despite the gentle tone in her voice, it was clearly mixed with bafflement. From her perspective, this plan was nothing more than a dummy for the actual Sobu High School prom. She herself saw through the intentions of it instantly but still went along with my sloppy negotiations and approved of it. She even went as far as to convince and address any concerns from a group of parents in the association. On that point, this dummy plan had long served its purpose. Now suddenly, the plan was going to proceed without her knowledge. I could imagine she felt some sense of betrayal.

She looked at me with disappointment. The only thing I could do was choose my words carefully, and be as earnest as possible in my explanation.

“There must've been some kind of mistake... Maybe there was a breakdown in communication?” I feigned as much ignorance as possible.

She giggled. “I see, so it was just a simple mistake. In that case, I ask that you take measures to withdraw and cancel this program as soon as po—”

31 Reference to the book “In a Grove” by Ryunosuke Akutagawa.

32 A metaphor that means “to pass a point of no return” based on Julius Caesar.

“Actually, that may be difficult. It's already been announced to the public, so issuing cancellation will lead to a lot of trouble.” I interrupted her midway and her eyebrow twitched.

“Then, what do you suggest we do?”

I made an insolent smile. “I suppose our only option is to hold it as originally planned, I believe?”

“What in the world are you saying? Stop with your nonsense.”

Before the opposing side could make a retort, my neighbor Yukinoshita reined me in. Then, she faced her mother and assumed a formal attitude.

“If I may, the recent prom was held at our discretion. If it was the cause of any incidents, it should be our responsibility to see that they are addressed.” Her mother agreed, and she continued. “This plan was originally presented to materialize our prom, and nothing more. Fundamentally speaking, we ought to be the ones resolve this. That's why,” Yukinoshita had a pause of hesitation before averting her gaze. “He has nothing to do with this...”

Her mother attentively listened and nodded after processing her statement. “I see... and can you tell me the measures you plan on taking?”

She was no longer focused on me, but Yukinoshita. The sharp glint in her eyes wasn't meant for her beloved daughter, but for the person who was responsible for the situation.

“We will hold a conference with Kaihin Sogo High School as soon as possible and issue a cancellation and an apology. If necessary, we are open to holding a press meeting to fully disclose the particulars that led to this situation.”

“Well... that sounds about right. I don't imagine there's anything else you can do.”

“Yes. The faster we put out the fire, the better.”

In hearing the proposal from the person in charge, and not her daughter, her mother made a convincing nod. Hiratsuka-sensei similarly agreed with no objections. Afterwards, relief visited Yukinoshita's expression.

The situation was on the verge of being resolved and the atmosphere grew lax. I took that opportunity to curve the corners of my mouth up. “Uhh, I'm not sure they'll be so accommodating.”

“Huh?”

Everyone made a face that found my declaration incomprehensible, but I laughed it off. Sorry, but I wasn't going to let this end just like that.

“It'd be unreasonable if we told them we wouldn't cooperate with them because we managed to hold a prom on our own.”

“We just need to explain the situation to them.”

My casual remark was immediately cut down by her indignation, but I returned it back with my own cut. “Do you really think Tamanawa and his friends will accept that? If we told them we can't do it, they'll just want to think of a solution together, you know?”

“That might be true, but...”

Yukinoshita was at a loss for words. Considering the experience she went through during the Christmas joint event, she was fully aware of the difficulty in persuading Tamanawa and his student council at Kaihin Sogo High School. I knew you'd pull through with your overwhelming powers of persuasion, Tamanawa-san. Let me take this moment to borrow your authority and press on.

“Moreover, now that the information's been disclosed, it means they've already gone through the process on the school's side, which also includes the parents association.” I blabbered on as if I was stating common knowledge. But they were lies, of course. Just random nonsense. Tamanawa did nothing of the sort. I wasn't even sure if he even that thorough of a person in the first place. No, I knew for a fact he wouldn't have done anything. But I retained that confidence to myself and showed a smile.

“If we decided to object at this point, wouldn't it be problematic if we got into a dispute with them?”

Based on everything that had happened until now, Yukinoshita's mother sought to avoid any potential disputes with her supporters. Hayama Hayato once said that school affiliates were a constituency for the local government members, so it's likely they wanted to avoid any unnecessary conflict with other schools. If I made it so that the involved parties weren't just limited to our school, they wouldn't be able to shut down this plan on their own terms.

Yukinoshita's mother pressed her fan against her mouth and took a moment to contemplate. Meanwhile, her eyes were vigilantly focused on me. Eventually, she folded her fan to tap her shoulder

and made an exhausted expression. Then, she spoke up.

“Unfortunately, that won't slide... If, for argument's sake, the other school approves of this plan, there are still problems on our end that need to be resolved. Have you forgotten why the prom was rejected in the first place?”

Her wording made it clear she had seen through my lies. On top of that, she identified the fundamental problems with my plan and wouldn't even allow me to move the goalposts. She truly was someone that shouldn't be challenged in negotiation and debate.

“You were close, but not quite.”

She stated outright, as if to make the finishing move, and I could only smile back bitterly. Yukinoshita moved closer to my ear and whispered, “You should know by now that isn't enough to convince my mother.”

“I figured...” I answered with a thin voice. Honestly speaking, I wasn't expecting this level of debate to be enough to convince her. I was well aware of her superiority. But that was just something I needed to factor in as I directed the conversation.

“I do believe we can put the concerns of the parents to rest this time.” I straightened my hunched back and proclaimed. I could feel the attention gather on me because of my bold attitude. I met their gazes with a faint smile and raised the corners of my mouth. “If we just showed them that the students 'tried but failed,' then even the students will give up. At that point, no one will want to talk about holding a prom ever again. That's the kind of development some of the parents want to see, right? If you leave it to me, I'll make sure this plan fails spectacularly.”

Everyone was taken aback upon hearing my audacious boasting.

“What good will making it fail even do...?”

“Hikigaya...”

Yukinoshita placed her hand on her temple as if to ease a headache. Hiratsuka-sensei let out a heavy sigh, and Haruno-san managed to hold in her laughter.

“I thought you were a smarter boy than this.” Yukinoshita's mother sighed with astonishment. Her eyes indicated her disappointment. “Your terms aren't worth considering. You've proposed nothing but risks and no return.”

“I suppose, but I wasn't ever trying to negotiate with the parents association in the first place. I was only expounding on my intentions to move forward with my plan.” I courteously stated with an ironic smile.

She frowned. “I see, regardless of what I say, you still plan on going ahead with this.”

Her intimidating glare and her cold voice sent chills down my spine, but I still nodded. This was the attitude that I needed to convey. This was not a negotiation, but simply an explanation of the circumstances and a declaration of my intent to throw her off. Both parties were aware that this exchange was meaningless.

My playable cards were now gone. The trump cards that could potentially have an unconditional effect against Yukinoshita's mother were all used up. Therefore, I no longer had the means to carry the conversation in a favorable direction with her. But if I didn't have any cards to deal, then I just needed to get more. That's the kind of cheating I was doing.

In our exchange from the other day, I, Hikigaya Hachiman, was nothing more than a scam artist in her eyes. It's highly likely that she only saw me as someone who could provide some semblance of entertainment in discussion, debate, and games. While wishfully thinking that was the case, I decided to bet on the possibility.

If, by chance, I was someone she couldn't completely write off, then she would contemplate Hikigaya Hachiman's attempt to carry out a joint prom event that had slim chances of success and his insistence on his cheap facade.

“I just don't understand why you're doing this.”

Yukinoshita's mother placed her fan to her mouth and rubbed her temple while groaning in thought. As out of place this thought was, I couldn't help but find her actions adorable. Both the mother and daughters were just so similar in their gestures, manner of speech, and other small details. While I was dazzled at the sight, I was poked from the side by an elbow. I looked to my neighbor with the corner of my eye to see Yukinoshita was weakly biting her lips and her brow wrinkling.

“What are you trying to do...?”

“What do you mean?”



When I feigned ignorance, Yukinoshita intensified her glare. I looked away from her menacing eyes to see her mother ahead with a pleasant smile on her beautiful and slender countenance. She displayed an innocence that a child had when solving a puzzle.

“Am I right to assume this was all planned by you?”

“Of course not. This was nothing more than human error, an accidental mistake.” I shrugged.

“Are you sure you don't mean intentional?” Haruno-san chuckled. When she made the frigid retort, everyone displayed their agreement.

At this point, playing dumb any longer would only backfire. Our exchanges thus far were all just to drag the person of interest into the ring of negotiations. In other words, this was the game-defining moment.

“Regardless of how this situation came about, I believe there's meaning in having our school participate in this joint event. There were some individuals who weren't very satisfied with our last prom, after all... Isn't that right?”

I formed a sarcastic smile with the raise of one cheek and directed it at Yukinoshita Haruno. She blinked her eyes in response to my question, but her lips immediately twisted at the corners into a smile. However, that's all she did.

Her reasons aside, the only one who expressed discontent with our school's prom was Yukinoshita Haruno. She was the only way to break out of this situation. I had been dancing to your tune up until now, but at least for this last time, you're going to be dancing to mine.

When it became obvious we were exchanging gazes, her mother followed and looked at Haruno-san. “Was there something you weren't satisfied with?”

“Not really?” Haruno-san played innocent and shrugged. “There's nothing in particular. Yukino-chan seemed satisfied with it as you apparently are. There isn't really much for me to say at this point, right?”

Her mother made a puzzled look at her question, and her reaction caused Yukinoshita to sigh. She maintained her peaceful smile without confirming or denying Haruno-san's claim. But choosing not to deny it was an answer in itself. Yukinoshita seemed to have taken it in stride and wasn't shocked. She already knew what her mother's answer was without needing her to verbalize it.

The sudden silence weighed down the room like heavy tar, but in this situation, my voice traveled well.

“I wasn't satisfied with it, either.”

Everyone focused their attention on me. Yukinoshita's mother narrowed her eyes with interest, Haruno-san grinned, and Hiratsuka-sensei nodded with an attentive look. Only Yukinoshita Yukino's eyes were cast to the floor. Her mother gave her a concerning glance before looking at me.

“May I ask why?”

“I mean, no matter how you look at it, my plan's clearly the better one. It's only natural for me to feel this way if I think about what could've happened if mine had gone through instead, right?” I commented in jest.

Light breaths overlapped, and a painful silence visited the room. It wasn't anything like the passing of an angel. It was more like the silence of many angels passing through all of Doctor Zaizen's hospital rounds<sup>33</sup>.

I received silent protests from Hiratsuka-sensei's thrusts from the right and a firm pinch of my thigh from the left. I writhed from the pain and turned away to see Haruno-san's shoulder trembling. The only one with a serious expression was Yukinoshita's mother who was in thought.

“In other words... you're doing this for selfish reasons?”

“That's what it boils down,” I said with a wry smile.

Still unconvinced, she tilted her head. Her eyes probed me for my intentions. “But this plan doesn't seem feasible at this point in time. That should be clear to you at least...”

Her voice was very distinctly confused. It was an obvious concern to have for her. But for me—or for her—it was very self-evident.

“Even if it doesn't turn out well, I want a clear answer. If we can't resolve this now, it'll haunt me forever,” I said with a deplorable smile.

Haruno-san broke out in laughter. “You're an idiot. We have an idiot here... You're going to hold a

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<sup>33</sup> A character from a Japanese novel called “Shiroi Kyoto” or “The White Tower.” It spawned a number of TV series.

prom just for that? You're an idiot, aren't you?"

That was obvious, and I knew I was being a real idiot. Even I laughed.

"As you can see, it's an extremely selfish reason, so I'm not expecting anyone's understanding or sympathy."

However, this was my only answer, the only one I could offer to Yukinoshita Haruno.

She retracted her laugh, put a finger to her mouth, and slowly stroked her glossy lips. Her gaze at me was inorganic and contained absolutely no warmth. I was assaulted by goosebumps as if my nerves were dragged through shaved ice. I forcibly suppressed the chills and opened my mouth.

"Fortunately, the student council wasn't named in this, so this can be purely considered as community ser—"

"It's not that simple." Haruno-san interrupted. She tapped the table with her finger and scoffed. Then, she continued. "You do realize we're the ones that nullified this plan and gagged the noisy parents, right? If this plan goes through, it's obvious we'll be on the receiving end of their complaints."

Yukinoshita's mother agreed to her statement. The truth of the matter was that the joint prom was associated with nothing but risks. Yukinoshita's mother was dispatched to raise objections to the Sobu High School prom. In reality, she was there to represent a part of the parents association, but could also be seen as an important collaborator who took the role of mediator for us. Should we decide to proceed with the joint prom that ignored the will of the Yukinoshita household, it was the same as dragging their name through the mud.

Haruno-san continued further with a criticizing tone. "This is already our problem. Even the prom was something Yukino-chan decided to do, right? Our mother also expressed her approval." She glanced at Yukinoshita, and then examined my face with dark eyes. "Hikigaya-kun, are you going to deny all of that? Do you understand what it means to stick your nose into our business?"

"That—" Yukinoshita opened her mouth to answer, and I was confident she'd say I had nothing to do with it. But I had no intention of letting her continue. I let out a weary sigh to interrupt her and nodded my head multiple times.

"I do."

I understood just how absurd it was to actually say it. I knew for a long time now. It was something I had been asked numerous times in the past. I was extremely aware of what it implied.

It's why every time I was posed the question, I would run away from answering it, or just sidestep it and sometimes fool myself. But Haruno-san wouldn't tolerate an ambiguous answer and continued to hound, rebuke, and denounce me. Now that the situation had escalated to this point, the Yukinoshita Haruno I knew would undoubtedly pose me the question again, the question I had been waiting for this entire time.

I really couldn't believe I had to say something like this at this place in front of all of these people. I really wanted to tear my head off and my chest out from the embarrassment. But this was the only card I could prepare.

"If there's any responsibility I can take, well, I plan on taking it."

As eager as I was in saying it, all I could do was muster a pathetic mumble. I couldn't handle having my face being stared at, so I looked down. And there, I could hear a chuckle.

"Oh... you really are an idiot."

Her voice was so surprisingly gentle that I jerked up my face. While her eyes were tinged with an extreme sadness, her mouth formed a soft smile.

"You ought to be more brazen and confident when you say things like that."

Yukinoshita's mother opened her fan and hid her mouth behind it. But I could tell she was smiling behind it based on her gaze. But it was by no means one with warmth, but with curiosity and inquisitiveness. It was similar to the characteristic eyes of a feline directed at a toy mouse.

I moved in my seat to escape her gaze and Hiratsuka-sensei interjected. "If this is considered community service, then there's very little the school can do. Of course, we will advise them where appropriate, but we will not provide any direct guidance."

"Yes, that's only natural." Yukinoshita's mother nodded unanimously to her proposal. Then, her eyes shifted to me. "That being said, even if this is just community service, I find it difficult to agree to something that's likely to fail... Do you really believe you can do it?"

"I won't know unless I give it a try." I shrugged, but her eyes wouldn't move elsewhere until I gave

her a tangible answer.

I knew better than anyone here that making this plan work was far from realistic. Unable to find the words to get out of this situation, a shallow sign came from my neighbor.

“You don't even need to bother. Our budget has nearly been used up, and as long as this isn't considered a student council event, we won't be able to leverage it in the first place. There's absolutely no time left, and since the event's bigger in scale, the pending problem of providing an ethical environment is something we won't be able to manage. It's impossible.”

My conclusion for the current status of the plan was voiced by Yukinoshita. Her frigid profile was diluted with resignation. Her mother made a convincing nod while sending me a provocative question.

“And, there you have it?”

“Well, it's impossible for me,” I answered honestly, and she nodded in agreement. Her reaction did kind of hit a nerve, but well, it's the truth. As I sat there at a loss of words, she watched me with pleasure. It was almost as if she was asking me what my next move was.

In response to her quizzical smile that waited for the next answer to compare with, I returned an unpleasant smile. “But luckily for me, I do know someone who has experience with managing a prom. That person is your daughter.”

“Wha—huh? Wait...”

In light of my unexpected answer, Yukinoshita lifted her waist slightly and gripped my shoulder. I held that back with my hand and I locked my gaze ahead.

“Or do you doubt your daughter's qualifications? Was there something not to your liking in the previous prom?” I asked with a mix of politeness and rudeness.

Yukinoshita's mother made a wry smile. “Regardless of my answer, it doesn't seem like you will budge from your conclusion.”

Bingo. If she had no doubts, I would've interpreted that as permission to proceed. Otherwise, all I needed to do was ask her to go into detail of what they were.

My conclusion from the beginning had never changed. I had zero intentions of negotiating with Yukinoshita's mother or Yukinoshita Haruno and was merely leading the conversation to create this situation.

Presumably aware of that, Yukinoshita's mother closed her fan and smiled. “Thank you for your explanation. If this is just community service and does not involve the use of the student council's budget, as representative of the parents association, we do not have much say in the matter.”

Haruno-san laughed and added. “Right, as a representative, but what about your position as a mother?”

“What about it...?” she placed her hand to her cheek with a troubled look and let out a heavy sigh. “Yukino, if you truly wish to pursue your father's work, you need to study in a more appropriate environment, and you need engage in things that will give you hands-on experience. While it's true any experience is good for you, there is absolutely no merit in involving yourself with something that will fail.”

As she enumerated in her cold tone, Yukinoshita's shoulders slowly sank. Because her words were reasonable, there wasn't much room for debate.

“As your mother, I'm against this.”

She wrapped up the conversation on a concise note. Unable to voice an objection, Yukinoshita closed her eyes and hung her head. As if to add another blow to her vulnerable state, she added to her words.

“That's why, Yukino, you need to decide... you're the one responsible, are you not?”

Her question had a harsh tone of criticism. When Yukinoshita raised her head, she was met with her mother's challenging gaze. She was at a loss and her voice was lodged in her throat. However, she immediately shook her head and hardened her expression.

“You don't need to ask me, because the answer's obvious.”

That's it. Yukinoshita Yukino already had her answer and thought everything was over. No matter who posed her the question, I was confident that answer would leave her mouth. That's why, the plan to address that had only ever been one from the start.

The one card I needed to prepare was just this single trump card. My target of negotiations had always been one individual from the beginning.

That person was Yukinoshita Yukino.

“Yukinoshita...” I called her name, and she flinched.

I racked my head over all of the words that I needed to say. But none of them were correct. They were all wrong. That's why, I chose to say the ones that were the worst of them all.

“I'll be honest, I don't have any confidence we can make this plan work. We're lacking in pretty much everything, like time and money, and only annoying problems keep increasing. Frankly, there's a lot of issues to deal with. I can't guarantee there won't be any big problems, either. I'll say this again, but this is all because of my selfish and personal reasons. You don't need to help if you don't want to. I think it's a pretty difficult case, so you don't need to force yourself.”

My audacity was met with snickers from my surroundings. Heck, even I made a bitter chuckle at what I was saying.

But this was how things ought to be for Hikigaya Hachiman and Yukinoshita Yukino.

Clueless of what to do, her eyebrows curved down in dejection. Yukinoshita had a tearful face and looked down

“That's some cheap provocation...”

Her voice was brittle enough to fade away and sounded as if she was sulking or venting. Well, it didn't matter, because I was only here to hear her voice.

“Yeah, sorry, but play along with me. I'm asking you knowing how impossible this is, but please, help me.”

I shook my shoulders quietly and let out a moist breath. After letting out a deep breath, Yukinoshita looked up.

“Fine, I will. I hate losing, after all.” She proclaimed with a dignified voice, smiled, and wiped the corners of her eyes. The faint smile she'd make when the situation was hopeless was something I hadn't seen for a long time. After retracting her smile, she turned to her mother and sister. “I will assume full responsibility for this plan.”

“I see...”

Her resolute words were met with her mother's gentle smile and nod. Then, she calmly shut her eyes. Upon opening them, her expression and her voice made a complete transformation. Her chilly eyes were imbued with a pressure meant to intimidate her opponent. I winced at the sight, but Yukinoshita and Haruno-san didn't budge.

“Yukino... I've said everything I needed to as your mother. But if you still insist on partaking in this endeavor, ensure that you see it through to the end.”

“That goes without saying.”

Yukinoshita flicked the hair at her shoulder away with a daunting and audacious smile. Seeing her this way reminded me of Haruno-san during her frightening moments.

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Some time had passed since the discussion in the reception office. We had a brief meeting of our plans going forward, and by the time we had finished, the sun was already setting. The extreme pressure and fatigue left me staggering to the bicycle parking area from the school building. Even so, I managed to push my bike to the front gates of the school. Just before I was about to pass the gates, I spotted Yukinoshita trudging along slightly ahead.

She was slowly walking with a heavy gait while hesitantly pacing back and forth as she fiddled with her coat and scarf. It was quite the contrast to her normally gallant conduct. It's no wonder I was eventually able to catch up with her even with my bike in tow.

I would've felt guilty if I had just passed her as is, but on the other hand, I wasn't comfortable with just greeting her and leaving, either. I really couldn't find the right words to say, but more importantly, I didn't want it to end on that simple of a note. For the time being, I decided to wait for my opportunity while thinking of ways to engage her.

I slowly pushed my bike beside Yukinoshita as she trudged along. She glanced at me with a short moment of surprise but immediately cast down her eyes. Then, she picked up her pace. I matched her pace so I could chase after her.

Our scraping loafers and the rolling of my bike's tires followed an ebb and flow but ultimately

retained the same rhythm throughout. We continued in that fashion without exchanging a single word for a while. Perhaps, we were both being stubborn, refusing to be the one to speak up since we had been so silent the entire time in such close proximity. But overall, it was simply just a matter of it being too awkward for the either of us.

We passed by numerous bus stops and street corners but ignored them. We didn't pay any attention to the people walking by and merely continued along the street.

In any case, I was the one who requested for help with my annoying problems, so it's only fair that I started the conversation. With that in mind, I decided I would talk to her after we passed the underside of the Keiyou Line tracks.

We took one step and then two steps. Before long, the train zoomed by overhead. In that moment, it felt like the entire city became dead silent. I took a deep breath and called out to Yukinoshita who was a half-step ahead.

"Sorry for getting you involved." I squeezed out my harmless words.

"There wasn't anything else we could've done," Yukinoshita answered in a low tone without turning. "I couldn't have possibly refused in that situation. What's wrong with you? I don't understand you at all." Both the tempo of her voice and pace grew faster as she voiced her complaints. "What you did was essentially what new religious movements or door-to-door sellers would do."

"That's an overstatement. While I did instigate the situation with some facts and lies, I didn't offer an actual solution. I mean, I ended up asking for help at the end, didn't I?"

"That's beyond just a simple scam because you're offering no aid... That's even worse."

Embedding fear through the use of fabricated risks and offering measures against them were perfect examples of a scam. The big difference here was that I didn't provide anything resembling the latter. In that respect, it was indeed worse than a scam, which made mine even more dastardly.

She let out a heavy sigh. "It was terrifying seeing my family be deceived like that."

"I don't think they were... if they were that easy to fool, I wouldn't have bothered with such an absurd lie in the first place. I was more frightened by the fact that they played along." I let a hearty sigh escape from my mouth.

Both Yukinoshita's mother and Haruno-san didn't put any stock into anything I said. The joint prom itself was denied in its entirety. They were likely just entertaining my sloppy bargaining tactics, but even so, the risks associated with my plan were something they didn't need to even consider.

Yukinoshita knew this. Still a half-step ahead, she adjusted her school bag around her shoulder and muttered. "That's true... My mother and sister aren't foolish enough to fall for something that obvious."

"Right? They were super scary at the end, too. Seriously, what are they even thinking?"

"Who knows? There's no way I'd know." she looked away with a pout and briskly moved ahead.

The street we walked along stretched all the way from the coast to the national highway. If I turned left here, I could make it to the street that led to my home. But as we were walking together, I missed the opportunity to part ways with her.

...No, that wasn't it. I had many opportunities to leave, but I chose to ignore them all.

When we approached the overhead bridge to cross the highway, I made determined strides and pushed my bike along without wavering. Yukinoshita climbed the steps without looking back, and I followed her. However, I still fell behind because I was pushing the bike up the slope of the steps. She gradually grew farther and farther with one step, and then two steps, before finally reaching the top. I mustered the strength in my legs and forced my bike up to see her waiting. When she looked at me, I met her eyes with appreciation, and she shook her head. However, it was brief moment of eye contact, before she continued walking forward.

I hastened my legs to avoid falling behind and was finally able to walk alongside her. The half-step distance that separated us earlier and the distance of two whole steps that grew between us on the steps were now gone. Once the sounds of our footsteps overlapped, she continued the conversation from earlier. "My mother looked at me just like she would my sister..."

"Does that mean she acknowledged you?"

"She might've given up on me." She shrugged and let out a self-deprecatd chuckle. "It didn't seem like she saw me in a favorable light with the last prom, and now, we're trying to hold a prom that's even riskier. It's only natural she'd be disappointed."

Her tone sounded she was the one disappointed in herself. Unsure of how to respond, my legs grew heavy for an instant, and she used that opening to pull a few steps ahead.

"Sorry, I know I shouldn't be intruding on your family affairs or your future. I ended up just causing you more problems... I'll make sure to take responsibility for that."

I sped up my pace while meticulously choosing the words I needed to say.

"You don't need to do that. There's no reason for you to take responsibility for my choices. There are other things you should be doing." Before I could catch up to her, her words reached me first. She dulled her pace, and then after a hesitant breath, she whispered, "Why did you say something so unreasonable?"

I wasn't able to make out her expression because she was looking down, but her fading voice contained a timbre of sadness.

Just how should I answer her?

I stopped in place. I had a minuscule amount of time, just the time it would take for just two cars to pass by underneath the bridge and the time it would take for her to advance three steps ahead. It wasn't the time for me to think, but for me to prepare myself.

"That... was only the way for me to get involved with you."

"What?" Yukinoshita stopped her legs and quickly turned to me. Her expression was full of surprise, and it looked like she was going to say she didn't understand from her half-open mouth.

"If the club's gone, there won't be anything to tie us together anymore. I couldn't think of another excuse that could drag you back into it."

"Why would you..."

The distant lights of approaching cars enveloped the overpass bridge and illuminated her face. The faint glow highlighted the astonishment on her expression as she stood shock still, lightly biting her lips.

"What about our promise? I told you to grant her wish, didn't I?"

Her reproachful voice trembled, and her gaze dropped to the floor in regret.

I knew she would say that. I knew she would make that face. But even so, I decided to let my selfishness take over and not look back on those who I caused trouble for.

"This isn't completely unrelated to that." She gave me a confused look and questioned me with the tilt of her head. The orange glow of the overpass lights resembled the shade of the evening glow and strained my eyes. I closed my eyes and continued. "She told me she wanted you be there after school, the place where there's nothing."

When I told Yukinoshita her words, she lost her voice. She averted her face as if to hide her eyes that misted over.

"We can still do that without you needing to go through all this trouble."

"I can't. Whether it's as acquaintances, friends, or classmates, however you want to call it, I don't have the confidence I can continue that kind of relationship."

"That might be true for you, but... I can. I know I'll be able to do it well eventually... that's why, I'll be fine," she said, and she began walking as if to end the conversation, as if to shake off the past. In seeing her put up a tough front, the heartwarming sight had my lips curving into a sarcastic smile.

"I'm not exactly in the position to be saying this, but our communication skills are incredibly bad, and we're too complicated for our own good. On top of that, we absolutely suck at socializing. I don't think I'll ever actually get good at it. In fact, if we're distant already, I'm absolutely sure I'll become even more distant. That's why..."

I was a few steps behind her. As her back began to grow farther away, I reached out with my hand, only to hesitate. If I wanted to keep talking, I knew I could've just stopped her with my voice. It wouldn't have been hard to continue our discussion while walking. In the first place, if I didn't have any a good enough reason, there's no way I could touch her hand.

But... I did have a reason. A single reason that I wouldn't compromise on.

"If I let go of you now, I'll never be able to get you back."

I stated as if I was persuading myself—no, I stated in order to persuade myself, and I reached out to her with my hand. I looked awful because my other hand was pushing my bike, and my hand itself was sweaty. I wasn't even sure how strong my grip was supposed to be. But even so, I grabbed the cuffs of her sleeve. Her wrist was surprisingly slender, enough to fit right into the palm of my hand.

"..."

She flinched and stopped in her tracks. Her face was stunned as she alternated looks between her



hand and my face.

I kicked the kickstand of my bike and skillfully put it down with my available hand. I didn't want to let go of her, because I was afraid she might've run away like a cat unfamiliar with people.

"What I'm about to say is so embarrassing that I want to just drop dead right now, but..." I said, but only a loud sigh came out.

She twisted out of discomfort as a form of resistance in hopes of using that moment to break free from my grip. She was like a cat who didn't like touching water with its paws, and as much as I would've loved to let her go, I wanted to hold onto her until our conversation was over.

"When I said I'd take responsibility, that wasn't enough. I'm not doing this out of obligation or anything. Basically, I want to take responsibility... or I want you to let me take responsibility..."

My self-hatred just kept growing the more I spoke, and it started to loosen my grip. I couldn't help but feel disgusted with myself for letting those words come out of my mouth. My hand slowly released its grip on her wrist and weakly flopped.

However, she didn't run and stayed put. She smoothed out her cuffs with her hand while weakly squeezing the area that I held. Her eyes didn't meet mine, but she seemed willing to listen. Relieved, I slowly opened my mouth.

"I know you might not want this, but... I want to stay connected with you. Not because I have to, but because I want to... That's why, give me the right to mess up your life."

My mouth was on the verge of closing after every word, but even so, I took forceful breaths, and exhaled numerous times, ensuring that I didn't make a mistake in anything I said. Eventually, I was able to finish. Meanwhile, she attentively listened while only staring at her gripped cuffs.

"Mess up...? What exactly do you mean by that?"

After answering me unexpectedly, she sent me an inquisitive look. As if to make up for the long silence prior, words poured from my mouth.

"I don't really have anything that can change your life. I'm sure we could live a decent after we graduate like normal and begrudgingly find a job. But if we get involved with each other, we'll probably make all kinds of detours and stops... so, our lives will get a little messy."

In response to my nonsensical rant, she finally displayed a smile, though it seemed a tad lonely. "My life's already a mess if that's what you mean..."

"I feel the same way. We met, we talked, we learned about each other, and we grew apart... but every time, I think my life got messier."

"Well, you've been a mess since the beginning... not that I'm any different."

Her words prodded at the situation and also at us, and we both made a faint smile.

I was someone who was too twisted, and she was someone who was too honest. To other people, we appeared to have a warped shape. They were just so different they were incompatible, but with respect to what warped them, they were likely the same. Every time those warped parts clashed, our shapes would gradually change, eventually to the point that they couldn't be undone.

"Things will get a lot messier from now on. But the messier your life becomes, the more I'll offer in exchange."

I knew what I said had no value whatsoever.

"Well, I barely have any assets, so the only things I can really give you are vague things like my time, feelings, future, or life."

I understood that such a promise had no meaning, either.

"My life hasn't exactly been the greatest so far, and I don't think my prospects are all that great in the future, but... if I'm going to get involved with someone's life, then it's only fair that I offer what I can."

But even so, as if using a chisel, I scraped out the words I needed to tell her. Even if I knew they wouldn't convey anything to her, I still had to tell her.

"I'll give you everything, so let me be a part of your life."

Her mouth was slightly open, as if she was going to say something, but then she swallowed it down with her breath. She glared at me and forced out words, that I knew were different from what she had wanted to say, with a trembling voice.

"There's no way that will ever be balanced. My future and the direction of my life don't have that

kind of value... But for you, there's a much more..."

Her eyes sank to the floor, and her words trailed off. But in that instant, I let my usual sarcasm lift up one of my cheeks and twisted the corner of my lips into a smile with as much arrogance and pride as possible.

"That's a relief. Because as it turns out, my life doesn't have much value right now, either. My stock's so unpopular that its price is already the lowest it can go. If anything, it's on a bargain sale, and if you get in on it now, I can guarantee a return on your investment."

"That's just like a scam. Your presentation is terrible."

We smiled at each other with tearful expressions. She took one step closer to softly hit my collar, and glared up at me with tears welling up in the corner of her eyes. "Why can you only ever say dumb, rubbish things like that? Isn't there something else you should be telling me?"

"Because I can't... There's no way I'll stand for this being summed up in words."

I made a grimace and let out a laugh with a voice that even I thought was pathetic.

Just a few words weren't enough, that's why. Even if I went through all of my actual thoughts, pretenses, jokes, and stock phrases, I had no confidence I'd be able to convey everything.

It's not that simple of an emotion. It may contain the emotion that could be conveyed with a few words, but if I stuffed that emotion into a single framework, it would be nothing more than a lie. I had gone through so many words, came up with all kinds of crazy logic, put all of my reasons, environments, and situations together, threw out my excuses, removed any obstacles and closed off all of my escape routes to finally make it to where I was now.

There's no way to understand them all with these words. It's fine if they weren't understood. It didn't matter if they didn't convey anything. I wanted to just say them, and nothing more.

She looked at my pathetic smile and reluctantly opened her mouth.

"I think I'm a very difficult person."

"I know."

"I've done nothing but cause you trouble."

"A little too late for that."

"I'm stubborn and not endearing at all."

"Well, yeah."

"You're supposed to deny that."

"Don't ask for the impossible."

"I get the feeling I'll just rely on you all the time and become more and more hopeless."

"That just means I need to be more hopeless than you... If everyone's hopeless, then no one's hopeless."

"And then—"

"It's fine." I interrupted her as she tried to find her words. "No matter how much of a hassle or nuisance you are, it's fine. I might actually like it that way."

"What...? That doesn't make me happy at all." She hit my collar again, still looking down.

"Ouch..." I replied as a matter of courtesy even though it didn't hurt at all.

She then pouted her lips and asked, "You have more than that, right?"

"Sometimes, I honestly have no idea what your deal is, because you're too complicated. There are times where you get on my nerves, but I think those are all things I don't have much control over, since I'm pretty much the same... I'm sure I'll be complaining along the way, but I think we can make things work."

She wordlessly hit me again right as I finished, and I happily received it. Then, I slowly took her slender hand.

I really wish there had been another way to do this. But for me, this was the only way.

If only there were much easier words I could've used to convey everything to her.

If only this emotion was much simpler.

If this was just a simple case of love and affection, I'm sure I would never yearn this much for her. I'm sure I would never have to feel I'd lose her forever if I let her go.

"I don't think I'll have enough to make up for the mess I make in your life, but well, I'll give you everything. If you don't need them, you can throw them away. If they're annoying, forget about them. I'm going to give you everything regardless, so you don't need to answer me."

"No, let me say it."

She sniffed and nodded. Then, she pressed her forehead against my shoulder.

"Please give me your life."

"That's pretty heavy..."

The words slipped out of my mouth, and she bumped her forehead against my shoulder in disapproval.

"I don't know any other way to say it, so what am I supposed to do...?"

She bunted her forehead like a cat and gripped my collar like a play-biting kitten.

Our feelings that couldn't be described no matter how hard we tried were, without a doubt, conveyed through the warmth of our touch.



## **Chapter 8: Once more, that door is opened.**

If a time machine had been invented, I would've gone back in time to murder myself. Just recalling the events of yesterday had me squirming with embarrassment and made me feel both pathetic and inadequate.

Circular thoughts plagued my mind for a long time afterwards. Perhaps I could've chose different words. Perhaps I could've been smarter in my approach. Perhaps I could've been cooler. But no matter where my thoughts led me, I could only arrive at the conclusion that that was the best I could do. It might've not been ideal, but I was confident enough to say that what I did wasn't wrong. If nothing else, I wanted to praise myself for being able to overcome my nature of being extremely self-conscious to this day.

That being said, they were still different matters altogether. Things I couldn't bear with were things I couldn't bear with.

Yesterday, after getting home, I shut myself in the shower and screamed at the top of my lungs against the sound of the spraying shower. Then, I immediately got under my covers and thrashed around in bed. If possible, I wanted nothing more than to take the next three years off, but still, even so—

“See you tomorrow...”

—The words she said wouldn't leave my ears.

It was long past the evening by the time we decided to continue down the street to head home. We barely made eye contact, engaged in only shallow conversations, and ultimately parted ways at the station. However, just before leaving, she lifted her hand like a beckoning cat to make a clumsy wave and told me those words in a meek voice. I really had no option but to go to school at that point.

In all honesty, I had an abundant of reasons why I didn't want to be at school and in class at the time. But now that I had accepted my fate, I could no longer run away, an act that something even my self-conscious nature wouldn't forgive. It's incredibly lame, but it's a vice of mine to endure, keep up appearances, and show off just so I could keep my petty pride intact.

In the end, I settled for a compromise and slipped into the classroom seconds before the bell. I spent most of my time in my classes faced down on my desk, and any other time was spent in the restroom.

Fortunately, there was a holiday tomorrow. I just needed to get through today. The day following that was the ending ceremony, and since it was a half-day, there weren't any classes to attend, and I could go straight home. And then, it was spring break! Therefore, I only had to feel restless for a few days longer.

There weren't any classes left to speak of, leaving only the textbook sale and photo shoots for individuals, events that were limited to the end of the school year. Going through this hysteria made time pass by in a flash, and it didn't take long for half of the day to be over. Once it was after school, the class surged with excitement.

Everyone passed the time in their own respective ways such as going out for lunch, discussing plans for tomorrow's holiday, and rushing to club.

I quietly got up from my seat and left the classroom by merging with the crowd exiting into the hallway. I took a moment to go down to the courtyard and stood in front of a vending machine. I basked in the pleasant spring sunlight and the wind blowing from the south, and my finger traveled a natural arc to the button inscribed with “cold.”

I walked down the hallway to the special building while shaking my MAX Coffee. My throat was feeling parched from my strange nervousness. I sipped my coffee in hopes of relieving myself of the sensation, but the creamy and sweet texture only aggravated the dryness in my throat.

I took my time walking and thought about the face I should make when I saw her. Despite my slow pace, I had already arrived in front of the clubroom. It wasn't that long since I had been here, but it felt like it had been ages, perhaps even a whole year, since I had last laid my eyes on this door.

Standing in front of the door, I took a deep breath to boost my confidence. I repeatedly made a fist with my hand before reaching out to the handle. My fingertips had been afflicted with a chill ever since that day, but now, they were warm. I placed my fingers on the handle and pulled at it forcefully to open it, or at least, I thought I did. The door rattled loudly but didn't open. I made a reattempt, only for it fail again. I let out a heave-ho once more, but it still wouldn't open.

"It's locked, damn it..." I clicked my tongue and dropped to the floor with my back against the door. Upon gulping down the rest of my coffee, I spotted a figure approaching from the hallway.

"Oh, you're here early."

Despite seeing me, Yukinoshita continued to walk at a leisurely pace. Out of some rare occasions, she would always arrive before me first. She was always the first to arrive, so it's rare for her to be late. Unexpectedly, I suppose even she was feeling strangely awkward and embarrassed, making it harder for her to carry on as usual.

"I'm sorry, did you wait long?"

"No... I just got here, too."

Despite knowing how stupid our exchange was, I gave her the standard response. She returned back with a ticklish, wry smile.

"Can you open the door for me?"

She faced me and tossed the key, and I made sure to catch it in my hands. It was the first time I had ever held the key, and it was unsurprisingly metallic to the touch. However, she had been keeping this small key warm in her hand for all this time, and I could feel the remaining warmth in the palm of my hand.

X X X

The clubroom felt somewhat empty after setting foot in it after so long. Yukinoshita and I sat our designated positions at opposite ends of the table. The distance between us was something I thought I had gotten accustomed to, but now, it felt somewhat far.

Feeling restless, I darted my eyes around the room, only to make eye contact with Yukinoshita. That awkward moment left me unable to utter a word, and she quickly averted her gaze. But a few moments later, she began to send peeking glances at me.

*Not good... What's not good? This isn't good. More specifically, I'm detecting a status ailment resembling a cold with symptoms of increased heart rate, profuse sweating, rise in body temperature, palpitation, and shortness of breath. Now, what are you supposed to do when you have a cold? Easy. Just work! Being unable to rest during painful times is the very definition of a Japanese corporate slave! As such, I will now proceed to talk about work.*

"Uh... do you want to start our meeting?"

"Good idea."

I took out a printed copy of my proposal and slid it across the table. However, it stopped halfway. Looking at the documents, she sighed and rose from her seat. Then, she took the documents and moved her chair to a closer position.

"It'll be easier to talk this way..." She muttered with her eyes on the documents.

"O-Oh, yeah, that's true."

Similarly, I shifted my seat beside her. We were separated by a single chair between us, and the odd gap had me feeling even more nervous and made my breathing shallow. Every inhale I made, my nose was tickled by the scent of some variety of soap—it was such a good smell. I turned the cover page of the proposal in hopes of distracting myself.

"This is the proposal I gave to Kaihin Sogo. Most of the basic things should be listed here."

Anyway, work, work. If there's work to do, then there's things to talk about. We could minimize our feelings of embarrassment and awkwardness. She looked through the proposal while nodding. Her long, glossy black hair would flutter with every nod and she would comb it with her hand and tuck it behind her ear. As she continued reading, her flushed earlobes gradually returned to normal.

"At any rate, this proposal's quite sloppy."

"Well, yeah. I didn't have much time, and I was really desperate to get it done."

"Oh, you were desperate, huh?" She whispered happily. Then, she began marking the proposal with a red pen while humming.

*It's great and all that you're in such a happy mood, but it's a little troubling for me to see you mark so many things in red, okay...?*

After a brief inspection of the proposal, she pressed the red pen against her soft lips and nodded.



"I imagine it'll be difficult to execute this proposal as it is considering it was nothing more than a concept. The lack of funds and staffing are the biggest problems."

"Looks like we're at the mercy of Kaihin Sogo's budget, then. As for staffing, I guess we'll have to make the most of our students."

"Right. We'll need to find people willing to help..." She said, looking at the seat between us. It was the seat that Yuigahama would always sit in.

"Well, we can't just keep bothering her all time. I'll see if I can check with some—"

"No, I'll talk to her," said Yukinoshita, interrupting. She placed her hand against her bosom to adjust her ribbon, and dropped her gaze to the empty seat. As if to reassure herself, she slowly continued. "Don't worry, just leave it to me. I think it'll be difficult to explain, but I want to have a proper conversation with her... Otherwise, she might get upset because we didn't ask her."

A tinge of anxiety was present in her voice, and she tried to cover it up with a brave smile.

"Got it... In the meantime, I've got a few leads I can follow up on."

"Sure, that sounds good."

When the smile returned on her face and she answered back cheerfully, I felt relieved and nodded back. Then, I moved my hand that was holding a page of the proposal and could see the items she mentioned marked with memos.

"That solves the issue with staffing. As for the budget... we can use up Kaihin Sogo's funds while looking for a location... Wait? What about the location?"

"We already asserted we'd be doing this as a form of community service, so we can't exactly use our school. Moreover, since this is a collaboration between multiple schools, it'd be better to avoid using any specific school facility in general."

"Ah... that makes sense."

"The budget and staffing will vary depending on the location we choose and the plan we put together, so if possible, we should try to pick out the location first."

"Right. There's no point in figuring out our agenda and other things if we can't secure a place in the first place."

"Exactly. We should produce a list of dates we want to target and search for any available locations that can accommodate them."

"Location, huh...? Still, this proposal just has information I got the first time when I looked around and when I talked with Kaihin Sogo."

I flipped through the proposal while acknowledging her words. When I was putting this proposal together for the dummy prom, I did give some consideration to potential locations. I had absolutely no plans to actually make the event happen at the time, so I just put down whatever came to mind, like a waterfront or a sunset beach.

"Wow, this person actually put this down as a beach event..."

"Except that person was you."

She retorted disapprovingly, and I held my head. *Man, who came up with this development? I'm going to murder you. Could you at least think of the people who would have to put this thing together?*

"It says ocean, but can we just use a beach instead?"

I looked up to see Yukinoshita taking out the club's laptop. Then, she excitedly put on her glasses and began searching something. Her slender and supple fingers freely tapped on the keyboard and eventually came to a stop.

"It looks like there are locations where you can hold events, but... it'll be difficult to use them unless we have permission from the local government, or rather, we'll need some form of sponsorship and financial backing. We'll also need permits for fires and that's issued on a case-by-case basis."

She rotated the laptop in my direction. I inclined my head to look at the screen and took a moment to think.

"From what I remember, the seaside park had a barbecue area. If we can get permission to use the park, we should have a shot at using fires," I said, extending my hand to type on the keyboard. "Oh, right here."

I opened the website of the seaside park located near our school and expanded the campus map. Yukinoshita tilted her head and looked down at the screen.

“Since it's a public facility, it shouldn't strain the budget too much... It's a park abundant with greenery as well, so we could make the event appear as a garden party of the sort.” Her eyes sparkled in light of the discovery. Her expression was just so dazzling, or perhaps too close, that I found myself leaning back with a twist of my body. When she noticed our close proximity, she pulled away. She removed her glasses and added. “In any case... we won't really know unless we go there.”

“R-Right...” I nodded my head and contemplated.

Yeah, that's true. We had a potential candidate, but whether it'd be actually usable or not was something we wouldn't know unless we went to check. That means, we needed to do an inspection in person. Yukinoshita didn't have a complete grasp on the details of the proposal yet, and I couldn't make a good judgment call in regards to the minute numbers and feasibility of the location. Going separately wouldn't amount to much. Therefore, it'd be efficient if the two of us were to go together. Since this was for work, it's only natural that we prioritized efficiency.

*Okay. My excuses are locked and loaded.*

“D-Do you want to go take a look, then? It's pretty close, and tomorrow's a holiday, so...”

But, as soon as the words came out of my mouth, my perfect excuses flew out the window, and my voice trailed off.

“O-Oh, let's see... tomorrow...”

My peculiar intermittent voice caused her voice to similarly dwindle as she nodded. From thereon, a strange period of time continued as I nodded back, unsure of whether her response was in agreement or just a simple interjection.

X X X

There was a staggering turnout of people at the seaside park on a holiday, also partly due to the wonderful weather.

The field with its maintained grass saw the coming and going of sport circles such as soccer and futsal. A dog show being held near the parking lot contributed to heavy road traffic. When we finally managed entry into the park, numerous families and runners roamed as if the facility was their own.

All of the townsfolk were enjoying the present spring season as if they were singing to use the public services or you'd be missing out because the municipal taxes were stupidly high<sup>34</sup>. They were really high, seriously. Strings of kites flew overhead, higher than the taxes. Then again, it wasn't as high as the taxes.

I was resting on a bench in the shades of the trees and indulging in a period of extreme bliss. I drank my can of MAX Coffee while admiring the overhead kites in the clear, blue sky. In contrast, Yukinoshita was recovering from exhaustion beside me and suffering in a period of hell. The wind blew at her along with the leaves on the nearby trees.

Today, her attire was at a glance high-class lady in appearance and consisted of a girlish blue cardigan over a white one-piece dress, a beret, and a basket bag. However, the sight of her sagging shoulders and hunched back only added a feeble quality to her image.

“I've got another MAX Coffee. Do you want it?”

“Thank you...” She reached out with wobbling hands and gripped the can with both hands. After taking a mouthful, the hydration from the liquid or the sugar intake had her feeling refreshed within moments. “Parks are really crowded on holidays... I honestly wasn't expecting this. The park's also big. Really big.”

“You're too tired to even talk properly...”

After letting out a big sigh, she removed her beret and undid the ties that bundled her hair into two. She placed the ties in her mouth and carefully used her hands to straighten her hair. After tying it into two bundles again, she checked her appearance with a hand mirror. A sense of nostalgia visited me as I watched her.

*She's wearing a hat this time, but her hairstyle's just a little different...* Those were my initial thoughts, but I realized she was sporting the same hairstyle she had back when I went out with Komachi. Twintails.

“I haven't seen you with that hairstyle for a while.”

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<sup>34</sup> A reference to the song used in a dance called the “Awa Dance”

“Really...? Well, I don't tie my hair this way at school.”

Instead of putting on her beret again, she lowered it and caressed her hair in contemplation.

“Hmm... it's a holiday thing only, huh? Well, I guess it takes time to do.”

I had absolutely no idea since I never did it before, but balancing the left and right bundles seemed difficult. For someone of my caliber, I was practically in a track suit for all of my holidays. As long as Komachi didn't see me, I'd just have a T-shirt and underpants on. So, seeing her being so conscientious about changing her appearance to keep things fresh depending on the day left me impressed.

As I was keenly examining her, she held her beret against her mouth and spoke with a sheepish voice.



“I don't do it that often on holidays, either...”

*Huh...? What's her deal? That was... really cute just now, it caught me off guard. Wait, for real? So cute. Gosh, what's with this girl? She's super cute. I mean, she's a pain in the butt, but that's cute in its own way. No, wait, if anything, isn't that exactly what makes her cute? Well, it doesn't matter, she's just cute (brain overload).*

“It's nice seeing something you're familiar with because it gives you this sense of security, but on the other hand, seeing something new is nice in its own way. Yes, very nice...”

I abandoned all rationale in my thinking and linguistic ability to partake in the philosophical ramblings of an otaku and chanted in repetition, “Nice...” Finding that uncomfortable, she pulled the beret over her eyes and looked away. *Yep, that's nice, too...*

“Based on what we've seen so far, we can't do anything that could damage the grass. Building a stage with aluminum trusses, for example, would be out of the question.”

Her eyes were focused on the grass field ahead, and it was a facility we could use if we sent in an application. I looked in the same direction, and my thinking and linguistic ability that I threw into the distance came flying back within seconds.

“We also have to consider the sound and electricity. It'd be nice if we could secure a power source, but I imagine we'll be stuck with leasing out a power generator... Weather's another big one, too.”

It'd be nice if we had the 100% sunshine girl, but it's rare to find a child of weather.<sup>35</sup>

“We have the option of setting up a tent, but that can affect the turnout. We can't expect people to walk all the way out here in a dress as well.”

She swung her long legs back and forth while dangling her thick-soled sandals. My eyes were on the verge of gravitating to her white calves, but I managed to keep them at bay by settling for a sidelong glance of them instead. Then, I made an all-knowing nod. “Yeah... Securing walkable routes here might be hard.”

In short, the park wasn't a feasible location for the prom. While thinking of other places we could try, I got up from the bench. I wiped the sand from my bosom, looking in the direction of where the sand could've come from.

“Just in case, let's take a look at the sea.”

“Right, just in case.”

She got after me, and we walked through the park at a leisurely pace. We went past the green grass onto a walkway. Expanding beyond it was the beach. Considering it wasn't the season for swimming, I didn't see anyone swimming as expected, but there were occasional groups of people frolicking at the edge of the water.

The white beach stretched far into the distance, glittering under the vast, translucent blue of the sky. A salty breeze blew down the shores, still somewhat cold to the touch, but was nevertheless pleasant in contrast to the rising temperature. It wasn't a bad season for a peaceful stroll on the beach. With the addition of arbors along the way, it was a fairly scenic location. While it wasn't feasible for the prom based on the information gleaned from the usage sign, it could certainly be a pleasant place to stop by after the event.

I gazed at the horizon beyond the ocean and stretched. “Chiba's sea is the best...”

“It's the Tokyo Bay, though...” she said, walking alongside me. Then, she stopped and held down her beret to keep it from being blown away. She turned to me. “You really do like Chiba, don't you? Do you plan on staying here forever?”

“As long as I don't get chased out, yeah. I'm planning on attending a university that I can commute to from here, too.”

“The places you're applying to mostly have campuses in Tokyo, after all.”

“How the heck do you even know that? Scary...”

I didn't even know where I was applying yet. Why did she say it like it was so obvious...?

When my honest opinion slipped out of my mouth, she pouted. “It's not difficult to figure out when you have grades similar to mine.”

“Well, the careers we're pursuing are similar to some degree.”

“Right... So, we may end up going to the same university.”

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<sup>35</sup> The main character in “Weathering with You” or “Tenki no Ko” has a nickname of 100% Sunshine Girl.

“It's possible.” It's not uncommon for people in high school to attend the same university. I had the opportunity to look at our school's career statistics, and the precedent was clearly there. “But we won't necessarily be in the same department. At that point, our careers are going to be different no matter what we do.”

This was a meaningless scenario to think about, but in the event that we both attended the same university, it's likely we wouldn't inhabit the same commuting space. It wasn't rare for people belonging to different departments to never see each other. On top of that, I had doubts I'd make an earnest effort to commute. For example, I had the feeling I'd skip classes on rainy days and unconditionally fail my first lecture. I even had expectations of getting more credit at “Mahjong University” and “Pig University” than my actual university.

She seemed to have an implicit understanding of that, and nodded. “What about after that?”

“I'm not sure yet, but it'll depend on how my job hunt goes.”

Her eyes widened. “You're actually going to work? I was expecting you to go off on one of those tangents again.”

“I'm truly sorry to say, but it turns out I have the makings of a decent corporate slave... I'm sure I'll be able to work like crazy regardless of my feelings.” I made a hearty sigh.

Yukinoshita made an amusing smile. “I can totally imagine you getting crammed into the Tozai Line every morning with your rotten eyes.”

“Uh, if I have to subject myself to that, I'm just going to leave Tokyo.”

The Tozai Line was the leading rapid transit in Japan that had a 200% chance of rush hour congestion. In the future, the administrative efforts were supposed to reduce it, but at this point in time, I wasn't willing enough to take that line every morning to work. Moreover, getting a job would mean moving out of the house, though it's possible I'd choose to live by myself because commuting as a university student would be too much of a pain. But that wouldn't be only for the sake of convenience, but for the sake of closing a chapter in my life by following through on that rite of service.

Far past the coastline beyond the opposite shore, I could make out the blurry throngs of buildings towering over the city. I gazed at them, aware of my eventual departure over there, and stood in place. Subsequently, the sounds of her steps sinking into sand stopped as well. I turned and made eye contact with Yukinoshita.

“But I think I'll come back here one day. I really do like it here, and it feels like the place where I belong.”

“I see, I'm glad to hear that.” She resumed treading on the sand, smiling. Only this time, her steps were lighter, and her strides shorter. In taking a few steps ahead of me, she turned around. “You really do like Chiba, don't you?”

“Yeah...”

Whether she understood the implications of her statement or not, who could tell? She made a teasing smile as if poking fun at that, and I could only return with a wry smile.

We engraved our footprints side by side in the sand.

At some point, we walked far enough to cover a whole station. As we continued on the path along the ocean, an ostentatious building came into view.

The building was equipped with balcony seats to enjoy the ocean view with glass fences surrounding the second floor, and the walls were made of bare concrete. It was the very image of a fashionable restaurant. A part of the first floor corresponding to a garden was configured as terrace seats. The sign indicated that this was a bakery cafe, and the actual restaurant was located elsewhere. It was an enriching cafe space designed with soft sofas to relax under the blue sky.

Yukinoshita pointed at the cafe and inclined her head, wordlessly asking if I wanted to stop by. I nodded in agreement. Before hurrying to the counter, she glanced back. “Can you grab us some seats?”

“Yeah.”

I took a seat on a sofa closest to the ocean that was exposed to the pleasant passing breeze. I surveyed the store absentmindedly as I waited for Yukinoshita. The menu was rather audacious in its presentation given the slight chicness to the store. There was a trendy selection of drinks such as: different flavored boba drinks including the standard milk tea, non-caffeine rooibos tea, and super fruit and vegetable smoothies.

*Hey, hey, you've got to be kidding, we're in Chiba, you know? Who gave you permission to act all chic here...? Chiba's going to be the forerunner in trends at this rate,*



As I lamented the trending of Chiba, Yukinoshita came over with a tray and took a seat beside me.

“Here you go, this is for earlier.” She handed me a boba milk tea, apparently to pay for the MAX Coffee I gave her earlier.

“Um, this is more expensive... Are you bad at math?”

“Better than you are. You can pay me back by getting me something else next time,” she said in an upbeat mood and began drinking her milk tea.

*Huh, I guess even she likes to drink things girls normally like.* The thought crossed my mind, but then I remembered her preference for cute things like Nyanko and Pan-san. Well, it's hard to say if boba milk tea was considered cute or not, though. In any case, it's a beverage that I rarely get. To celebrate the occasion, I decided to take a picture, acting like I would when I received a bowl of ramen. This was what they mean by instagenic, huh?

“Ah...”

Yukinoshita sounded like she had realized something too late, and I turned to see what was wrong. When I did, she had a dumbfounded stare at her unfinished drink, and the dejection in her face was saying, “I should've taken a picture, too...”

“Um, I haven't started drinking mine yet, so you can take a picture of mine, it's okay...” Feeling sorry, I urged her with a kind suggestion. I extended my cup to her and she took out her smartphone.

“R-Really? Thank you...”

She adjusted her bangs as she spoke, and slightly rose to her feet. She slid over the sofa to the seat directly beside me and unassumingly linked her arm with mine. Then, the front camera of her phone made two shutter sounds.

Her completely unforeseen attack brought me to a standstill. She made a bashful grin after checking the photo, whispered with an incredibly quiet voice, “How's this...?” and showed me her phone. Even though the unedited photo showed us linking arms, the weird gap between us made it clear how awkward we looked.

I let out a heavy exhale after seeing the photo. *Seriously...? This girl went above and beyond my imagination. My heart's killing me...*

“No, that was bad...” I said, fanning my face and my mind going blank halfway through.

In hearing that, she grew flustered and tried her best to rectify the situation. “I-I'm sorry, um...”

“Retake. My eyes are way too dead in this one, it's insane,” I said, taking out my smartphone. When I positioned it, she had a blank look, but then rushed to adjust her bangs over and over, and then readjusted her sitting position. After inching closer, she spread out her arms to brace herself.

“I-I'm ready...”

*Um, you don't have to spread your arms like that. You're just making me nervous, too. Stop it,* I thought while extending my arm like I did earlier, but this time, moving it closer to her by only a few centimeters more.

“Here we go.”

“O-Okay...”

Her voice quavered in contrast to her straight sitting posture. I could tell she was tense because of our touching shoulders, and even her arm seemed to be trembling. But, well, it's not like my arm wasn't shaking like crazy, either. Putting faith in my camera's image stabilization, I snapped a picture and showed her the photo. She timidly looked at it, but then burst into laughter.

“Your eyes didn't change at all. It's still as rotten as ever.”

“No biggie, I can fix it with a little editing. The power of science is almighty.”<sup>36</sup>

I immediately downloaded a photo editing app and began fiddling with the photo. She watched me with keen interest while verbalizing her surprise. *Well, there's really no need to edit her face at all, so...*

As we were playing around like that to waste time, we eventually finished our milk tea. Before we knew it, the sea and the sky were dyed in scarlet, and the round sun that blazed with the color of a furnace had begun to set. This might be the first time I had ever looked at a sunset so closely. Both Yukinoshita and I gazed at it in silence.

Eventually, the chimes of a chapel were carried by the passing wind. We turned our heads toward the sound and the source was closer than we had thought.

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<sup>36</sup> Dr. Stone.

“Let's go take a look.”

She rose to her feet and made her way to the source of the sound on the walkway along the ocean. As we approached, a group of people in vivid and dressy attire came into view. They were taking photos of a male and female couple clad in a white tuxedo and wedding dress respectively with a backdrop of the evening beach in its magic hour.

It was a wedding ceremony based on what we could see from a distance.

Situated beside the restaurant building was another building resembling a chapel, and next to that was another building, which seemed to be an event hall for holding wedding receptions and other things.

Pamphlets were set near the entrance at the corner of the building. After taking a look, the building that was apparently used as an event hall was called the banquet building. The second floor had two event spaces with differing layouts, and the first floor contained a lounge with a wooden interior. Farther in the lounge was a terrace that looked out over the ocean. In taking a peek of the terrace, a fireplace was cut into the center and its warm flame illuminated its surroundings.

*Hmm... they had something like this here, huh? I didn't know at all since wedding ceremonies were so foreign to me,* I thought. I reflected on my inexperience in the ways of Chiba with the pamphlet in one hand. Then, I felt a tug at my other hand.

“What's up?”

“This place is perfect. Let's hold it here.” Yukinoshita's eyes sparkled as she tugged repeatedly at my sleeve. Her expression was mixed with inspiration and excitement, but the intensity of it only made it harder to ask what it was we should hold.

*If I ask, I have the feeling it'll finally be checkmate for me... I mean, this is a wedding hall, after all.*

“Um... don't you think it's a little too early?” I said, deliberately picking my words.

She had a puzzled look as she inclined her head. Upon realizing my implication, she let go of my sleeve and placed her hand on her temple. Then, she let out an astounded sigh. “You already have a bad look in your eye and a bad personality, but if you're bad at figuring things out on top of that, what else do you have? Look closer.” She pointed at various areas on the pamphlet one by one. “This event hall provides proper facilities and has an ocean view and bonfires.”

“Oh... Right, you're talking about the prom.”

*Oh my god, so embarrassing! Dummy! Hachiman, you dummy! You maggot! And here I thought I was composed, but it turns out I was just a tad too excited, huh? Is it time to die? It's time to die now, right?*

My head immediately cooled down as if being splashed with frozen water, bringing back my rationality. The overview of the facility was applicable to all of the fabricated lies on our proposal and made it possible to execute in reality, making this place ideal.

“True, if we're going to hold the prom, it has to be here.”

“Right, this place has to be the closest to what we'll need.” She made a triumphant smile, brimming with confidence.

It wasn't bad to see an unexpected side of her, but the expression she was making that I was so accustomed to was without a doubt the best.

X X X

It was the following day after settling on a location for the joint prom. After the ending ceremony was over, Yukinoshita and I immediately made our way to the Service Club. We worked quickly to request documents, check the availability of the facilities, and get quotes. However, they were all things we wouldn't see correspondence for a few days. In the meantime, there were still numerous other jobs to complete. Aside from the location and the scheduling, the budget and staffing were still pressing problems.

Today, Yukinoshita and I respectively invited people to a meeting to explain the details of the joint prom as well as tackle the issue of staffing.

I stood before a splendid group of customers, three pairs of glasses lined up for a total of six lenses, and cleared my throat.

“Ahem... Picking up where we left off, I'll need the three of you to give up on many things,” I said, hardening my expression. Sagami's younger brother, Hatano, and Zaimokuza respectively pushed up their glasses and let out unconvinced sighs.

“Hmm...”

“Hmph.”

“Mmm...”

*Great, I'm glad to see you're all doing well.*

“And there you have it. These three will be our hopeful war assets.” I presented the three glasses with my right hand.

Yukinoshita stood up. “Hello, it's a pleasure to meet you. My name is Yukinoshita. I apologize for any trouble Hikigaya-kun may have caused you. Thank you, and I look forward to working with you all.”

She made a courteous bow, greeted them politely, and wore a faint, but noble smile. She looked far gentler, completely unthinkable from how she used to be. The UG Club only ever knew her when she was as sharp as a knife that hurt anyone who came in contact with her, so it was only expected that they were in shock. Presently speaking, Sagami's brother and Hatano were trembling.

“She—“

“Doesn't—“

“Remember us!”

While we're at it, Zaimokuza, too, was trembling. Their suspicious behavior caused Yukinoshita to give them a dubious look, her eyes containing a bit of the thorn she had back in the past.

“Um, that person's kinda scary!”

“She really is scary...”

“Ehh... Hey, Hachiman, do something.”

The three went into a huddle and exchanged whispers. Ultimately, Zaimokuza was the one who pulled on my sleeve.

“Well, you get used to it. Honestly, it's addicting. The gap before and after is insane once you're hooked.”

“Excuse me...?”

That was supposed to have been a whisper, but she still gave me a piercing glare. I shrugged it off and made eye contact with the glasses boys going, “See?”

The three raised their voice with lavish praise.

“Totally.”

“I get it.”

“Nothing more, nothing less.”

Once more, we stumbled upon another door of truth as fellow comrades and did high fives. We cheered with an intensity with respect to our tight bonds while wishing you the best of luck<sup>37</sup>. But that intensity, too, vanished like mist within the next instant.

The door was knocked modestly several times and opened without waiting for an answer.

“Hello!”

Making her appearance so casually was none other than Isshiki Iroha herself. Accompanying her were the student council members.

“Isshiki-san, thank you for coming.”

“Oh, no worries. I'm just here to pay you back for all your help.”

Yukinoshita wore a soft smile and Isshiki responded with a dauntless laugh. The vice president and secretary-chan, on the other hand, had gloomy expressions, clearly having been forced along. Possessing a similar degree of dark sentiments were the three glasses.

“Isshiki...”

“Iroha...”

“Irohasu...!”

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<sup>37</sup> Lyrics from a song called “Kanpai” by Tsuyoshi Nagabuchi.

She smiled at the three of them and nodded. Then, she proceeded to ignore them. It was like a reaction from the Summer of Ubume by Kyogoku Natsuhiro where she could see them but didn't, which was worse than just outright ignoring them from the beginning.

In doing so, the three, as expected, adjusted their glasses and displayed new signs of change.

"I can get used to this."

"I think I'm starting to understand..."

"Yes, by all means."

*Is Sagami's brother okay? His fetishes aren't getting more distorted by the second, are they? It's not because of his sister, right?* I thought, feeling worried, and then the new door of truth was knocked again. After the low-key sound, someone peeked through the small opening of the door.

"Come in," Yukinoshita said.

The opening gradually expanded and making an appearance was the face of an angel.

"Excuse me... Hey, Hachiman, I'm here." Totsuka walked over with a smile and waved. He glanced around with curiosity. "What's this gathering for?"

"All the people gathered here are people I can bother without feeling bad."

"R-Right..." Totsuka had a mixed reaction and looked at everyone with a sympathizing gaze. He pointed himself in realization and inclined his head.

I nodded with a wry smile. "Sorry, having you here is a big help. We're going to be doing really annoying stuff, but let me borrow your entire club, Totsuka," I said, lowering my head.

"Entire... sure, no problem." He made a troubled smile, but then lightly pounded his chest.

*Now, with those three...* Before I could see their reaction, the door was opened without reserve.

"Yo, sup!"

An annoying voice belonging to a part-time leader who had no hopes of promotion barged into the room. I sent an irritated gaze in its direction, and seeing Irohasu naturally clicking her tongue was just the best. But she immediately reverted back to her cutesy behavior.

"Oh, Hayama-senpai."

"Hey, Iroha. You came too, huh?"

Hayama entered the room after Tobe and engaged in small talk with Isshiki. He then greeted me with a lift of his hand. *Why are they here...* I thought, looking at them with a dubious gaze. Then, he noticed the three glasses boys and waved. Seeing that, they began to squealing as if they just had the most delightful thing happen to them in the entire day.

"Huh? Wait, I just can't."

"God, no, this is killing me."

"Wait, too precious, I can't."

*Don't you guys like Hayama a little too much?*

However, their merry celebration immediately came to an end, because Miura came in together with Hayama and twirled her blonde curls with her fingertips in an irritable mood. She fired intimidating glares throughout the room. Some people flinched in response, but Yukinoshita had the biggest reaction. She glanced at me, scooted over to my side, and whispered into my ear.

"Hikigaya-kun, did you ask them to come?"

"No... wait, it wasn't you?" I asked back, and she shook her head.

*That means the one who asked them was...* I pondered and rubbed my chin. Then, thanks to Tobe leaving the door open, someone else came in.

"Hello, hello!"

Ebina-san waltzed in with a suspicious glint on her glasses and hiding behind her was Kawasaki. She surveyed the entire room with an incredibly problematic face. Yukinoshita called out to her.

"Kawasaki-san, thank you for coming."

"Oh... yeah, well, I'm just here to hear you out, so..." She twisted uncomfortably while closing the door behind her. When she tried to make her way to the corner of the room, Ebina-san made sure to catch her. Kawasaki gave up on resisting and was dragged by the hand to the center of the room.

As the occupants increased, so did the noise. But there was just one thing missing from this

familiar racket.

Yukinoshita glanced at the clock. It was almost past the appointed time, and she had yet to show.

We were already heading into spring break as soon as the ending ceremony ended, and this applied to everybody in clubs. Helping us with this event would mean imposing on their break. Quite frankly, this was an unreasonable and difficult request to make. She had plenty of reasons to refuse, and it's fine if she did. I didn't want to bother her by forcing her to go along with my selfish whims anymore. That's how I would always make excuses for myself. I made one last glance at the clock.

"We should get started soon," I said, suggesting in a small voice.

Yukinoshita nodded. Although her mouth was open, she didn't say a word, but persuaded me with her warm look. Her gentle gaze was directed at the door, her eyes imbued with a shining confidence, waiting for that moment.

Ten seconds passed. Then, twenty. Before long, the sound of rushing footsteps cut into the rhythmic ticks of the clock. Despite the door separating us, the sight of her came into mind like the bouncing hair bun on her head, her swaying backpack, and her restless flopping slippers.

*Yeah, it's her.* I could tell right away. And so, the door opened after the sliding rattle.

"Yahallo!"

Slightly out of breath and her hand raised high, Yuigahama Yui smiled with a brighter look than she had the other day.

X X X

Preparations for the joint prom began in earnest as soon as we entered spring break. Yukinoshita also got serious and transformed into Seriousnoshita-san. She completed tasks at a frightening pace including arrangements for the prom venue, financial quotes, schedule adjustments, and work allocation for the staff members. At this point, our only pending issue was the general prospects of the budget, something we were expecting to finalize in our meeting with Kaihin Sogo today. The attendees from our school consisted of Yukinoshita, the student council president Isshiki, and me.

The meeting was going to take place at the usual community center. With the official start of spring break and our participation considered as community service, we didn't have the option of using our school. As such, we'd be spending most of our time in the community center going forward. A conference room was reserved up until the day of the event, providing a glimpse of Seriousnoshita's foresight.

Multiple groups were currently working in the conference room. One group included Zaimokuza and the UG Club and they were creating guide signs. Another group centering around Yuigahama and Miura were focused on advertising.

It was unreasonable to have them come every day, so we put together a shift schedule based on our availability throughout the week. We had the borrowed assistance of the grunts from the tennis club, soccer club, and the student council (mostly Tobe and the vice president), so we had sufficient manpower. The combination of Totsuka's charisma, Hayama's leadership, and Isshiki's iron fist allowed us to procure free labor that we could abuse to our heart's content. A wonderful work environment. I had nothing but gratitude for our students!

Anything that could involve the budget was dealt with. Our problem today was dealing with Tamanawa-san. He was tapping on the pamphlet of the venue with his fingers, looking rather pleased.

"This venue is great. I like it. This conforms exactly and compactly with the proposal."

Tamanawa expressed his approval while aiming to rhyme his words "exactly" and "compactly." He passed the pamphlet down to his neighbor Orimoto, and she responded with endorsement, "Ooh, looks good to me." Isshiki and I nodded in agreement as if saying, "I know, right?" Kaihin Sogo's reception was good, So far, so good.

Without giving them much room to think, Yukinoshita kicked the discussion into gear. "The issue is that it's available only on the first week of April... which coincides with our farewell ceremony. Are you fine if we proceeded to reserve this time period?"

"Of course. We'll actually be conducting our farewell ceremony fairly soon, so I expect many of our graduates will be available then. It'll be relatively easier to have them attend."

"Sounds great to me! I mean, we're not gonna get anywhere if we can't get the people." Orimoto fired an eager thumbs-up in response.

*All right, let's get down to business...*

I coughed and nonchalantly interjected. "That leaves the budget, but can we rely on your student council for that?"

"Let's see... Even if we share the expenses evenly, we should be prepared for some personal expenses. Otherwise, I believe we'll have the room to shoulder some of the burden."

"Uhh... actually, we're a little strapped for cash, you see..."

"Hm?" Tamanawa responded as if he didn't catch my statement, his voice extremely calm in tone.

Isshiki twiddled her fingers and giggled. "Um, the thing is, we can't use our budget, so..."

"Hm?" He had the same tone as earlier, her foxy gesture having no effect on him. In light of that peculiar exchange, Yukinoshita inclined her head in confusion.

"Did Hikigaya-kun not inform you? Our student council is participating only as volunteers, not as sponsors for this event."

"Hm... Hmm? So you're saying, we can't make use of your budget?"

The three of us bobbed our head in acknowledgment. There wasn't much we could, let alone any money we could use.

He made an obviously forced smile. "O-Oh, I don't think we can foot the entire bill, I think, h-hahaha..."

"I see, so it sounds like you never came to an agreement on that." Yukinoshita thought out loud in a low voice and then proceeded to pinch my thigh under the table.

Ow, ow, ow! I squirmed in my seat by myself, and Isshiki gave me a dubious stare wondering, "What the heck is he doing, having so much fun by himself...?" But then she nodded with a convinced face saying, "Oh, makes sense, he's always by himself," and nodded.

Isshiki turned to Tamanawa. "Which means, we'll need to include an admission fee."

"That could be a little problematic... There might be some people who might not be so welcoming if they hear of a fee." Tamanawa linked his fingers and frowned.

Well, I could see where he was coming from. An admission fee would mean having to use physical money at the venue. Having the opinion, "This event is supposed to be a celebration for us, so why do we have to pay?" was understandable.

"Then, we can do some crowdfunding. Let's invite some willing investors," I said.

Tamanawa lifted his face and made a contemplative groan. "I see... there's some potential there."

"Totally! Probably." Orimoto casually interjected following his agreement.

Isshiki squinted in confusion. "Is there...? They're still paying in the end, aren't they?"

"They are, but it's how they're feeling when they're paying that matters."

"Um, feeling...? Like, the fish cake from Kibun Foods<sup>38</sup>?" When Isshiki looked at me, her gaze was saying, "What the hell is this guy saying...?" But then she turned to Yukinoshita and asked her the question "What's this person even talking about?" regardless.

"Basically... Hikigaya-kun is talking about psychological barriers and perceived value, right?"

"Well, you could say that. To make it easier to understand, it's like the difference between using an iTunes card and a credit card in mobile apps."

"That's just harder to understand..."

"It's a problem with how we perceive spending cash versus digital money. There are people who are less resistant to making online payments and using credit cards instead physical money, right?"

Yukinoshita continued, and Isshiki could only interject with a mixed understanding. Tamanawa took this as an opportunity to spin his hands. "The merits of CF go beyond those aspects, though. A prominent one is perception of being an investor or a backer. In that respect, patrons are more analogous to collaborators than to clients. In other words, the awareness that they are collaborating will make them more accepting of a standard admission fee."

"Uh-huh." Isshiki dragged her voice without hiding her lack of interest.

"That leaves us with the problem of providing returns for their investments... Admission to the prom can be the bare minimum, but we'll need to provide larger rewards for bigger investments..." Yukinoshita moved her hand to her chin to think.

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<sup>38</sup> The word "kibun" means "feeling" which is also the name of a food company in Japan.



Orimoto shot her hand up in the air. “Oh, I know! How about something like this? We have a limo pick them up or something? You know, those instagrammable ones! That sounds super nice, right?”

“Oh, it does! It's like being a bachelor.”

“We can make the arrangements, but it'll be difficult to ascertain whether the extra costs will keep us out of the red.” Yukinoshita made a wry smile when Isshiki jumped into the conversation.

Nevertheless, opinions from the girls were valuable. No matter how stupid they were, this was an event with a high ratio of women, so they shouldn't be overlooked.

“Limousines and bachelors, huh...?” I mumbled while flipping through the venue's documents. Sure enough, I caught sight of an area that connected those two words together. “The parking lot... Let's add the right to use it as a reward. We're talking about recently graduated students, so I'm sure a lot of them want to come by car.”

“Ahh... something like having your boyfriend come to pick you up, right?”

“There's probably some demand for that kind of thing. Either way, we won't be able to reserve the lot for everybody, so we'll have to limit it to the bigger patrons.”

Chiba was one of the largest cities following Tokyo (self-research) with a prominent motorized society. We were already in the Reiwa era, and a city like Kisarazu still had an abundance of cars in body kits that shined like an excessively decorated squid fishing boat. There were some stories of people who didn't bat an eye at speeding and tailgating people on the highway. Good grief, a society reliant on automobiles was bad news.

Well, looking at it from another angle, it just meant we were attached to our cars. Therefore, cars were a status symbol. It's only natural that people who had expensive cars would want to flaunt them, and what better place to drive them than to a place of celebration? When we're talking about limousines and bachelors, we were talking about the special experience our female customers could have, like the sensation of being a gorgeous celebrity and having the opportunity to lord over others through Instagram. For the men seeking popularity with such ladies, there was no better opportunity to attain that special feeling than this. Oh dear, was that some painting of Hell in the making?

In any case, if there's demand for that kind of thing, then it's obvious what we should offer.

“One more thing we can do is designate one of the waiting rooms as a VIP room and make that another reward. This way, we can add more value without incurring any additional costs.”

“You really would make for an amazing scam artist...”

“I wouldn't say that. I'm just really bad at math, that's all... I really don't know how our expenses will look in the end.”

I honestly wasn't sure if what I suggested would actually be a worthwhile reward. Frankly speaking, in all of our events thus far, all of the business details were completely left to Yukinoshita's discretion. As such, I bowed my head to her, and she returned a smile.

“You can leave that to me. At any rate, let's proceed and have the limousines and other gaudy matters on the table,” Yukinoshita said, writing them down as memos.

After taking a glance, Isshiki coughed. “So, are we good for now?”

“Indeed... I'm feeling more confident than ever.” Tamanawa grinned and blew at his front bags. Motivation and confidence illuminated his face.

*I knew you were a reliable fellow, Tamanawa-san... and since you're so dependable right now, I think I'll ask you to help with a lot of other things, too!*

“All right, we'll leave the rest of the details to you, then. We'll probably need more rewards, so can you take care of that, too? We're not exactly well-versed in the art of CF, you see... you guys seem accustomed to the process, though.”

Tamanawa continuously blinked to my rapid succession of requests and ultimately made a strained smile. “O-Of course...”

He pounded his chest, welcoming any challenges, but he was breaking into a cold sweat. *Will he be okay...? But we have to believe in Tamanawa-san! I'm sure if it's him, then he can do it!*

Of course, we had no idea what he was planning to do, but since he said he would do it, we had to leave it up to him. Nowadays, CF websites allowed people to pledge their support through their smartphones in case they didn't have credit cards, which made it possible for students to participate. If we could dump a majority of the work on the motivated Tamanawa, that would be better for us. We had come this far, so I wasn't going to question the methods or the details.

“If there's nothing else, we'll send you the quotes and an estimated balance sheet. Can you contact us once you have the details finalized on your end?”

“Roger that!”

Yukinoshita bundled the documents together with slight taps on the table and wrapped up the conversation. Orimoto jovially responded and Tamanawa nodded. “We'll try to join you in the preparations within a few days.”

“All right, thanks. Well, you don't need to worry too much about bringing in people since your main responsibility is managing the money. Oh, we'll need people on the day of the event, at least.”

“Okay, we'll ask around.”

Orimoto casually responded, and that marked the end of the first meeting of the joint prom budget committee.

I fell back into my chair as I watched the two leave and let out an exhausted sigh. “Looks like the budget's more or less figured out.”

“That's only if the crowdfunding goes well... what should we do if we don't have enough?” Yukinoshita asked.

Isshiki made an excessively contemplative frown. “Well, if we're off just by a little, and I mean, very little, the student council can maybe, just maybe, cover some of the costs if we really have to...”

“I don't think I've heard anything more unreliable than that... Anyway, it depends on how much, but worse case scenario, I can cover it with my own personal funds,” I said, looking sullen.

Yukinoshita widened her eyes in surprise. “Even though you don't have any savings?”

“I might not have any, but my parents do. I'll get a interest-free loan from them and default on it. I'm that resourceful.”

“I'm not really sure you can call that resourceful...” Yukinoshita wore an astonished smile, and I shrugged.

Truthfully speaking, I was fine with being in the red. I could only imagine the annoying issues we'd get pulled into if we came out with profits. At the end of the day, this was an event hosted by high school students, so it needed to stay as a non-profit event. We wouldn't want the tax bureau coming after us if we had some unintended revenue flowing in, after all... The thoughts that toratanu<sup>39</sup> would have filled my head.

Yukinoshita began playfully using her calculator. “I'd feel guilty for having you burdened with debt at such a young age, so I'll look into cutting costs somewhere.”

“Try not to reduce my labor costs at least, okay?”

“Don't worry, that's been zero since the beginning, so there's nothing to reduce.”

“What a wonderful workplace...”

*Well, I knew from the start that there were zero labor costs, so that's okay...* We engaged in our customary exchange after so long, and Isshiki let out a sigh in exasperation.

“You two sure are close...” She glanced around the room and coughed. Then, she continued in a hushed voice. “...but I'm going to ask just in case. What kind of relationship are you two going to have exactly?”

Upon asking, Yukinoshita and I both froze. Well, right, I knew we were going to get this question one day. From her perspective, Yukinoshita and I were involved in a dispute just the other day. It's only reasonable she wouldn't understand when we suddenly told her we were going to run an event together.

She pressed us for answers with her low-temperature stare.

*We need to say something or else...* I glanced at Yukinoshita and she returned one as well. It was evident in our eyes that we were at a loss for words.

“Wh-What exactly, indeed...”

When I let out a meaningless mumble to fill the silence, Isshiki's glare grew fiercer. I averted my eyes, and Yukinoshita was gasping, trying to figure out what to say.

“Th-This is difficult to explain, but...” Her cheeks turned red and she dropped her gaze. Then, she continued. “I suppose we're something like... p-partners?”

“That's it! Well, you know, when you ask us outright like that, I'm not really sure how to answer, but it's probably something along those lines.”

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<sup>39</sup> Financial blogger.

“Th-That's true. I'm not entirely sure either, but I'm sure it's something along those lines.”

I latched onto Yukinoshita's words, and she subsequently bobbed her head with high frequency. Isshiki continued to give us a quiet, cold stare. Before long, she let out a tired sigh.

“Huh, right. Well, if that's good enough for you two, then okay.” She grinned. “But I think it'd better if you made it clearer than that, though.”

She made a suggestive smile and hopped to her feet from her seat. Then, she walked away from the meeting table while humming, only to be stopped. Coming from the direction she was heading was Miura. She was twirling her wavy and dangling golden hair with her fingertips in displeasure. After walking over to us, she exhaled and asked, “Do you mind if we grab something to eat?”

“N-No.” Yukinoshita answered, surprised by her sudden request.

Even after getting permission, she took a moment to observe Yukinoshita and me. Then, she quickly removed her gaze and looked at Isshiki. “You want to come, too?”

“Wha? Uh, well, I don't know about that...”

Surprised by her invitation, Isshiki struggled to refuse. Normally, she'd do it on the spot, but it looked like her bewilderment was stronger than her rivalry with Miura. *I know, I know, these two aren't on good terms at all... I'd be a little confused too if I had to see Yume x Iro happening in front of me...*

Miura stayed quiet while we were baffled and sent me a momentary glance. Then, she looked at Isshiki and inclined her head for an answer. In seeing that gesture, Isshiki sighed. “Well... I'm a little hungry, so I guess I can tag along.”

“Mm.” Miura nodded and turned, her back declaring her to follow. Isshiki gave us a quick greeting before following after her.

I had an idea of the reason why Miura had that attitude. She didn't say or ask anything, but she was likely being considerate. Not to me, but to the three of us. *She really is a good person...*

Miura took Isshiki to the entrance of the conference room. Waiting for them at the door was Yuigahama, Ebina-san, and Kawasaki. The three of them were wondering where to go, and Zaimokuza and the two UG Club members were also there. It looked like the three glasses boys were invited, too. *She really is a good person...*

As they were leaving the room, I found my eyes chasing them. Ever since preparations began, I caught Yukinoshita and Yuigahama talking about various things, but I never joined in. I was using my work as an excuse to postpone things.

But I felt those things would work out eventually. Once we were done with everything here and returned to the period after school where nothing happened, I believed from the bottom of my heart that things would work out.

As I watched the door with my cheek in my hand, I felt a slight tap on my upper arm. It was such a delicate touch it had me feeling extremely ticklish, but I still ended up flinching from the surprise. I made a sidelong glance to see Yukinoshita making a shy smile.

“Why don't we go get something to eat, too?”

“Good idea...” I answered, and we both rose from our seats.

X X X

With the joint prom closing in on us in a few days, our work had reached a new peak of intensity. The budget that was left entirely in Tamanawa's hands was expected to lean slightly in the red, but our prospects were promising. We were able to secure rights to the venue and needed only to focus on our preparations. That being said, we only had two days to use the venue, which was the day of the event and the day before for unloading. Otherwise, we needed a place to continue working which was ultimately the community center. For the past few days, we had spend days and nights there.

A majority of our time was spent in frequent meetings and the creation of exhibiting display goods, but with both of our schools enlisting their respective students for assistance, we seemed to be on track toward completion... or something to that effect. That was only true as of the other day, however. These past few days, everyone had the tendency to stop working every so often.

The leading cause was the change in the spring climate. The temperature continued to rise and rise as if to match the growing excitement of the staff. As a consequence, the balmy weather brought upon bouts of drowsiness on people doing desk work while people engaged in hard labor were dripping

with sweat. Regardless of the work, the workplace had become a very aggravating environment. To add to that, we were constantly tormented around the clock by an evil of humanity<sup>40</sup>, deadlines.

After finishing a task, my shirt was glued to my chest. I flapped it for ventilation while grumbling. “Sure is hot... Time to call it a day and go home.”

Yukinoshita, who was sitting in across from me, tilted her head with an energy drink in one hand. Today, her hair was done in an upswept style and her nape looked refreshing.

“Didn't you go home the past two days? Are you planning on going home today, too?”

“Is there something wrong with going home everyday? I still have a place I can go home to, and nothing could make me happier.”

*I'm sorry... You'll understand, right? I can go see you anytime, work...*<sup>41</sup> I narrated internally.

She let out a thin breath. “Well... it looks like you're taking your work back with you, so I can't really complain.”

*Oh, damn, she found out. Are you a Newtype, perhaps?*

“Wait, you're doing the same thing, aren't you? Anyway, give me some of your work before you hit your limit,” I said, sounding slightly strict.

She stopped for a moment and hung her head to reflect on her behavior. Unexpectedly, she became docile and nodded. “Okay...”

“Um, 'okay...?'” She's really tired. Her linguistic ability was fading. “You okay? Things are looking kinda bad, aren't they?”

“Yes, they are. I honestly don't know if we're going to make it. This is bad. I could die a little<sup>42</sup>.”

She was completely fatigued. Both her speech and conduct were in dangerous peril. She went back to glaring at her documents, typing on her laptop, and using her calculator. The sight of her working with her blue-light blocking glasses slanted and wearing a cooling patch on her forehead was just so tragic. Chocolate and crackers were stacked in front of her, either for emergency calorie intake or were offered by someone. People in the vicinity who saw her looking busy and looking to be one step away from hitting her limit, or even close to falling forward two steps came over to provide some relief.

“Yukinon, I'll take this.”

“Oh, then, I'll take this.”

Concerned for Yukinoshita, Yuigahama and Isshiki would pick up some snacks while retrieving documents and calculators every time they passed by, evident of the many ordeals they had gone together in the past. Everyone was seemingly on the same page when it came to who to worry about.

As for me, the only thing I could do was initiate her on some life hacks like how “it's faster to intake caffeine pills and glucose powder instead of energy drinks!” I suppose another thing I could do was confiscate her work and force her to rest...

*Now, how should I pull her away from work and get her to rest?* As I contemplated, a dark shadow came approaching from behind. It was Zaimokuza wearing a twisted headband with three nails in his mouth. There was just something mysterious about his appearance with the way he was tapping his shoulder with a hammer and rubbing his chin.

“Hachiman, material supplies are running low.”

“Looks like we'll need to make a trip to MrMax. I'll go, so help me carry stuff.”

“Understood. If you don't mind, can we stop by Surprised Donkey? Worry not, I merely need a glass full,” he said, imitating a gulping gesture.

“Eh... that's fine with me. Are hamburg steaks just drinks to you like curry is?”

*Is this guy okay...?* I gave him a compassionate look, and he responded with a smug face.

“As of late, even tonkatsu is nothing more than a beverage to me...”

*What the heck, that's just scary...* I trembled from the thought, and Isshiki who had been listening nearby trotted over.

“I like the sound of that. It's almost time to eat, after all. Right? Right?” Isshiki said, winking with one eye. *What's with the wink? Is she some kind of lonely tropical fish*<sup>43</sup>? Then, she pounded me in the side as if telling me to get the hint.

40 A Servant class term in the TYPE-MOON universe.

41 A line said by Amuro Ray in the final episode of Mobile Suit GUNDAM 0079.

42 A phrase that's often used by Yuzuki in “A Place Farther From the Universe.” She's also voiced by Hayami Saori.

43 A single album by the band Wink. The Japanese name is “[Samishii Nettaigyo](#).”

*Ouch...* I whispered to myself, and noticed Isshiki pointing her chin at Yukinoshita. I looked to see she was absentmindedly staring at the clock and currently docked in exhaustion mode. *I see, this is the perfect time to pull her away from work...*

Yukinoshita massaged her temple and sighed in exhaustion. "It's that time already, huh...? Let's have a meal break, then. Can you bring something back after you finish your shopping?"

"Yeah... Wait, no, that's not happening, because it's going to take awhile."

"Why?" Yukinoshita inclined her head with a blank look.

I assumed a grave expression and slowly opened my mouth. "Because... we're going to the sauna."

"Huh?" She said, sounding partly furious. Her unspoken message was clearly saying she had no idea what I was saying. But even if I tried to explain to her that she needed to get some rest, she's definitely going to insist on continuing her work and that she was fine. As such, I had to include another reason to convince her.

Fortunately, the street that had MrMax we were heading to also had a public bathhouse called Yukemori Yokochō on the same street. Going somewhere with a sauna nearby and not choosing to enter it was a choice a saunner wouldn't make.

As Yukinoshita's partner and a saunner, I readied myself to persuade her with a detailed argument.

"All right, listen up. It's important for us to go because it's part of our job. By bathing in a sauna, we're able to condition our disordered autonomic nerves and relax our bodies, allowing us to work more efficiently, which is exactly what we need right now. So, in a sense, saunas are like an employee benefit. If anything, they're a necessary expense that should be paid for. I'll go get a blank invoice, so tell me who to write it to."

"O-Oh..."

It practically became my opinion as a saunner halfway through, but after I leaned forward and fervently pitched the idea to her, she shrank back. My passion propagated to my surroundings.

"Saunas have that kind of effect, huh...?"

"I want to feel euphoric."

"I want to be steamed..."

"That's right, they call it löyly. They also call it aufguss from what I hear."

All of the boys, centering on Zaimokuza and the UG Club, expressed their approval. As for Tamanawa, he was already churning the air with his hands like a skillful heat waving specialist<sup>44</sup>. The boys of Kaihin Sogo raised their hands in agreement as if wanting another dose of the hot blast of aufguss.

"We'll be completely hooked on saunas once we understand the wonders of cold baths."

"True. The cold baths are essential in deriving the cultural value of saunas."

"Speaking of cold baths, we ought to visit Shikiji<sup>45</sup> when we get the opportunity."

This was the exact moment saunas saw a rise in popularity among the young. Since it was popular with the young populace who were sensitive to rising trends in the old ages, it was only natural that it would catch the attention of Kaihin Sogo's students who were equipped with sensitive antennas.

How many times did I need to say it? A sauna anime would absolutely be popular! I'd better go get my license as a sauna health advisor and make my preparations to feel that runner's high (as in the sauna). Heck, I already had the qualifications to be a sauna and spa professional, you know?

I got up and the rest of the boys followed suit. After seeing us, Yukinoshita pressed her temple and sighed. "Let's take a break, then. Do you mind giving me the address of that place just in case?" She said, and closed her laptop.

X X X

A brilliant sheen ran across the surface of the water from the inclining rays of the sun.

We assembled outside of the community center together with the tennis club, in charge of the physical labor, and the soccer club helpers and went to enjoy our last substantial break before the final spurt of preparations at Yukemori Yokochō.

<sup>44</sup> There's a contest in Japan where they decide who's the number one heat waving specialist by blowing hot air with a towel to knock things over in a sauna.

<sup>45</sup> Sauna Shikiji is famous for their cold baths.

While everyone was getting comfortable, I was quietly steaming myself. The sauna was installed with a TV, but it wasn't noisy by any means. In fact, the noise level was just perfect. The ambient voices permeated my opened sweat glands and gradually became one with the pulsating beats of my heart. My spirit was alleviated by the the combination of noise and heat.

The steam enveloped my naked body to produce heat, and I began to feel the sensation of my blood boiling throughout. The things that lingered in the corner of my mind melted and flowed outward, leaving only "emptiness."

By staying exposed to the waves of heat for a brief period of time, all ideals, concepts, and generalizations dissipate into nothing, and you would reach an absolute stage of enlightenment that couldn't be expressed in any other way than "it's hot... so hot..." I was thinking about a lot of things at first, but at some point, I stopped caring about everything and could only think about how hot it was.

Conversely, that could be considered as the ultimate form of concentration and the supreme state of relaxation. *It's so hot.*

But the allure of saunas wasn't limited to the room itself. After a supple amount of steaming, you had to wash off your sweat with a douse of warm water, and submerge yourself in a cold bath. What waited for you was a sharp increase in the inner workings of your mind. Nay, all of the cells throughout your body, not just your head, would awaken one by one. In addition, the water warmed from your body heat would wrap your being like an angel's raiment and provide you with overwhelming relief. It was when man tore off those angelic robes with his own hands that he would acquire valor. The will to leave the confines of your warm home and head to the windy, desolate wastelands was the epitome of valor. *Still, it sure is hot...*

To add, the cold bath that followed could be said to be the biggest charm of saunas, otherwise, known as the air bath. The moment in which man rested his body in an open space after a steaming and cooling was the moment he came to know of the feeling of "euphoria..."

By cooling your warm body after steaming in the sauna, your blood vessels would shrink. Then, exposing yourself to the open air would cause your body to generate heat once more, give rise to pulses of your heart, expand your blood vessels, and begin circulating oxygen throughout your body. By repeating this process, everyone would become euphoric.

This was the same as the history of Earth. We transitioned from the age where lava would spew from the earth's mantle, to the ice age where everything was frozen, and finally to our era where we could inhale oxygen without batting an eye. What awaited us at the end of alternating between bathing in the heat and bathing in the cold was the understanding through our body, not our language, of the words "humanity is alive" within the chasm between serenity and zeal. In steaming our body in the sauna, heat would burst forth internally, and in cooling our body in a cold bath, we would contract our bodies to keep that heat from escaping. We would be liberated of everything in the moment we exposed ourselves to the outside air. It's when we were liberated from all kinds of oppression that we experienced true freedom. *So hot.*

Feeling that I had been indulging in the heat for long enough, I glanced at the clock in the sauna to see that almost 5 minutes had passed.

My routine usually followed 3 rotations of one 12-minute set of the following: 7 minutes in the sauna, 2 minutes in the cold bath, and 3 minutes indulging in the open air. This allowed me to utilize the sauna for 12 minutes. But this was merely my ideal. The duration would change depending on the temperature of the room (98 degrees or more preferably), the temperature of the cold bath (16 degrees or less preferably), and the presence of space to become euphoric (a deck chair to rest my body on was preferable). Accounting for the crowd at the sauna, checking one's physical condition, and doing everything possible were proof of an excellent saunner.

*There's an open-air bath and it's pretty clear out there, so bathing in the air should feel good...* Based on the conditions here, I wouldn't have minded spending more time indulging in the outside air. *Ahhh, I want to get the in the cold bath quick, and become euphoric... Hot, hot, it's really hot.*

Before long, my thoughts vanished like mist along with my sweat.

*So hot...*

"Damn! This is freakin' hot! Nope, nope, nope! Super freakin' hot!"

Even the heat vaporized that hoarse voice. *Hot...*

"Wait, wait, Hayato-kun, this is insane! Wait, wait! This is the hottest thing ever! Wait, Hikitani-kun, how are you even okay? You're nuts!"

*Tobe, shut up.* My concentration was broken by all the noise he was making. I slowly opened my eyes to see Tobe coming in, followed by Hayama, Totsuka, and Zaimokuza.



“Hey, Hachiman! Let's sit together!”

Of course, the person calling my name and sitting beside me was Zaimokuza Yoshiteru. *I can see why Totsuka was wearing a towel, but why are you fully armored?* I ignored him and moved my body and face to the other side that had an angel.

“It's really hot in here, huh...? I might pass out.”

Totsuka fanned his face with hands. Every stroke caused his pearl-shaped sweat to slide down his white porcelain skin. His sweat would glitter like a jewel in the instant it stopped in the crevice of his collarbone. He would pull up his towel to wipe the sweat and avert his gaze in embarrassment.

His gesture almost had my mind on the verge of being blown away. Then again, it did get blown away.

“Yo, saunas are pretty boring, yeah?”

Because of the hoarse voice, I was brought back into reality and lost a few seconds of my memories.

“There's nothin' to do, you know? How about we compete to see who can last the longest?”

“Saunas aren't meant for that, shut up.”

*I'm too busy trying to recover the memories I just lost earlier, damn it. Let me concentrate.* Anyway, you weren't supposed to endure in a sauna. How should I put it? It's something to enjoy freely, something to relax in, and something that made you feel like you were being saved.<sup>46</sup> However, punks who didn't clean themselves (entering the cold bath without washing off your sweat) and punks who contaminated löyly with their sweat (wringing your sweaty towel over the sauna stones) were without question guilty and would get an arm lock of death!

Well, I wouldn't go that far, but I reprimanded Tobe and shut down his rash remarks. Unfortunately, he was the type of person to lose his memories from a few seconds prior.

“How about whoever lasts the longest is the champ?”

He started off on his own, and Hayama looked at him with a fed up face. “That wouldn't be fair because everyone came in at separate times.”

“Word! Then, the loser is the one who says it's hot first. Anythin' close to it or means the same thing are out. It wouldn't be a contest, otherwise.”

“Yeah, yeah. Okay, start.”

It became clear Hayama didn't want to deal with him anymore, so he quickly started the game and clapped. Afterwards, the time passed without anyone saying a word. A few seconds later, Tobe grew impatient and fiddled with his long hair.

“Damn... I'm bored. How about we not stay quiet? Gotta talk at least, right?”

“Talk about something then, Tobe.”

“Huh, serious? Uhh...” Tobe began thinking after Hayama's suggestion. Then, he snapped his finger. “Oh, hot damn, Hikitani-kun. Dude, don't tell me. You dating Yukinoshita-san, man?”

The sauna stirred. Hayama and Totsuka exchanged glances and sighed. On the other hand, Zaimokuza went into a rapid rant like a mosquito going, “Of course not, no way... No way, right? Right? Say it isn't so. Be honest. Don't worry, I won't get upset. Okay?”

“...”

When I upheld my silence, Tobe moved half of his body toward me to press for an answer. Hayama then flicked his head. “Don't ask him...”

“Yeah! We all said we'd just watch over them, because they'll definitely deny it if we asked.” Totsuka lectured Tobe in a hushed voice.

*Wha... you're kidding... Was everyone already aware and were just staying quiet out of consideration...? That's just, I don't know...* I wiped my sweat and looked up at the ceiling. *Ahh, I want to die...*

The thoughts came from the bottom of my heart, and I let out a hot and deep sigh. Then, I blurted out. “Uhh, you said the taboo word earlier, so Tobe... you're out.”

“Out!”

After my stupidly random call, Totsuka and Zaimokuza repeated after me.

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46 A famous quote from a manga called “The Solitary Gourmet.”

“Wait, what, why!? I didn't say it was hot at all!”

Shut up. Those excuses wouldn't work before my power of “taboo.” Conventional wisdom dictated that the use of “hot” in any situation were completely applicable. Since any usage of the word in any context was forbidden, Tobe's “hot damn” activated my power.<sup>47</sup>

I shooed him away with my hands, and Tobe reluctantly got up. Subsequently, Zaimokuza slapped his thighs and got up as well.

“Hmph, I, too, am at my limit with this heat!”

“Same...”

Zaimokuza made his way out while pushing Tobe, and Totsuka followed him with staggering footsteps. With less people, the sauna went quiet. Only Hayama and I remained. He stayed still as if in meditation. We didn't exchange a single word, merely breathing in and breathing out.

As we continued to steam like we were having an endurance contest, Hayama opened his mouth. “So, what's the truth?”

His words were smooth, yet there was a pressure to them that pricked my skin. The muscles on his back were suggesting he had no intention of moving until I responded.

“It's nothing like that... if anything, it's nowhere near that,” I said, sighing.

Hayama's body twitched. Then, he burst into laughter and held his stomach. After a few moments, he let out a deep breath and stood up. He turned half of his body to me and grinned, wearing a smile that was refreshing in appearance but interlaced with irony.

“Sure is hot...”

He stated coolly, and calmly left the sauna.

X X X

After a careful and thorough steaming, my mind and body felt light. I made my way to the shoe rack at the entrance feeling refreshed. On the way, I fiddled with my smartphone to send Komachi a message saying, “Don't need dinner.” I immediately received a response saying, “Roger! Do your best with the preparations! I'll make sure to be at the prom!”

*You don't need to come...* I made a wry smile and walked outside after putting on my shoes. After pulling up the door cloth, I could see the sun had inclined quite a bit, and the ocean in the distance was flaring with a bright red.

As I was walking, I pressed the cold can of MAX Coffee that I just bought against my forehead and my neck. The passing spring wind was pleasant to my warm skin, and I narrowed my eyes from the glare of the western sky.

“Hikki.”

I turned to the voice, and Yuigahama was on a bench beckoning me over with her hand. Yukinoshita was sitting beside her with slightly flushed cheeks. Her hair was loose, compared to her tied up style during work, and she let out a satisfied breath. Peeking from over her shoulder beside her was Isshiki who gave me a criticizing gaze.

“Senpai, you're so slow.”

“Or maybe you three are just too fast?” I retorted and walked over to the bench, fully aware that I was the last one out. “Where's everyone else?”

I couldn't see anyone else, and Yukinoshita answered. “They already went to eat.”

“I see.”

No one said a word from that point on. In spite of that, we didn't show any signs of heading to Surprised Donkey where everyone was dining.

Yukinoshita, Yuigahama, and Isshiki stayed put on the bench. I accompanied them, shaking my MAX Coffee and snapping the tab open. Then, I rested my back against the wall beside the bench and sipped my coffee. Of course, everyone maintained their silence and the moment of quiet and serenity continued on. The four of us simply enjoyed the cool evening breeze after our baths and watched the setting sun.

We were all here together, yet we didn't have a single conversation. In any normal situation, this

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<sup>47</sup> Taboo is one of Yu Kaito's power, a character from “Yu Yu Hakusho” and the sauna situation is a direct reference to episode 69 of the anime.

would've been an awkward period of time with little to do. It wouldn't have been strange for us to fiddle with our phones as a form of distraction. But we were all strangely calm, merely indulging in the silence.

It was a little similar to the atmosphere of the clubroom after school on a day like any other. There weren't any words I would describe it with, for it was a place I could stay in forever without ever growing tired of it.

Isshiki hummed a standard prom dance number and swung her legs in conjunction with the rhythm, her skirt just barely flapping back and forth. Her intermittent humming turned into a lullaby that invited a feeling of nostalgia due to the setting sun.

Thanks to that, Yukinoshita began to nod off. The added comfort of getting out of the bath caused her to let out small yawns, and she would rest her head on Yuigahama's shoulder. Yuigahama inched her shoulder closer as if to avoid losing the warmth from their slight touch.

I drew my shoulders in from the sudden gust of wind that blew across the seasons. I looked down at the bench with a sidelong glance, wondering if it was just the chills after a bath, but there were no routes for the wind to travel through.

It was still a warm sunny spot. A comfortable sunny spot that closely resembled that room filled with sunlight. A sunny spot that closely resembled that place—that room as we brilliantly watched the sun set below the ocean's horizon and brighten the surface of the water.

I'm sure the reason I—we wanted to stay in that sunny spot forever might be because we knew that this evening would eventually end, and that this time would never come again. However, the time for us part from it arrived.

I'd be lying if I said I wasn't reluctant. It's not like I didn't have any regrets. I still had thoughts that pulled at the back of my head.

But I had no choice but to finally accept it; I liked that time and that place, so much that it made me have these thoughts. If I didn't accept it, I felt I wouldn't be able to part from it.

It was just so bright and dazzling that it left a scorching scar. It would leave a wound and turn into a blemish that I could never forget. I would one day lament the things that once happened as I looked upon that scar. Before the afterglow could disappear, I stepped forward to leave that warm spot.

“Ready to go?” I said, turning half of my body.

Yukinoshita who had been falling asleep opened her eyes. “Sure...”

Her answer was brief as she straightened her body from leaning on Yuigahama. After thanking Yuigahama in a low voice, she adjusted her crumpled collar.

Isshiki joined her legs together and jumped to her feet without waiting. She rotated her heels with the sound of her loafers grinding against the sand.

“Yep... let's go.” Isshiki wore a tender smile and turned to Yuigahama.

Our backs steeped in the sunset glow and Yuigahama looked up at us. She closed her eyes and nodded several times. Then, she whispered, “Okay, we should get going...”

She didn't hesitate to get up from the bench and used her momentum to walk forward without turning back. She chased after Isshiki to walk alongside her and left that place behind.

Yukinoshita remained on the bench after adjusting her appearance. I sent her a gaze saying that we should get going. She nodded back and was about to stand.

Before she could, I offered my hand without a word.

She tilted her head slightly, unsure of the meaning of my gesture, but she immediately made a faint smile.

“I can stand up on my own...”

“I know.”

I knew she could stand on her own, and I knew she would say that. But even so, I offered my hand. And I would probably continue to do so from now on.

Moments before disappearing, the evening glow radiated even stronger and deepened the shadows as it stretched farther. Both her shadow and my shadow became one, and no one could distinguish whose shadow was whose.

In the world encased in vermillion, the color that dyed my face, her cheeks, and everything in its hue, she smiled and took my hand.

## Interlude

It was almost time for the joint prom to start. We were mostly done with setting up the venue, so now we were just waiting for the attendees.

I was working the reception, so there wasn't much in terms of preparation. I was just sitting absentmindedly at the entrance, gazing at the place I was at earlier. Inside the lounge, the two of them were in a meeting about something. Had things been like they were before, I would've been there, too. But now, I wasn't. The thoughts filled my head as I was in a place farther away.

“Yui-senpai, what's the matter?”

I turned and noticed Iroha-chan had come over.

“Oh, um, it's nothing...”

My answer was clearly saying otherwise, and I tried to cover it up with a laugh. She just smiled without saying anything more. I had no idea what to say, so I laughed again, but badly. I fiddled with the bun of hair on my head, which had become a habit at this point.

“Yui-san!”

The familiar voice pulled my attention, and I could see Komachi-chan in our school uniform running over. There was just something about her new appearance that made me open my arms.

“Wow, Komachi-chan! Your uniform! It's so cute! I love it!”

“Oof.”

Komachi-chan let out a strange voice as she was smothered by my chest. Iroha-chan let out an apathetic “uh-huh”. When I turned around, she had a face wondering who she was. Speaking of which, I don't think these have ever met.

“Um, this is Hikki's younger sister Komachi-chan.”

After letting her go, I introduced her and Iroha-chan narrowed her eyes in response. She nodded. “Senpai's little sister... Oh, the rice person.”

“Mmm... well, something like that.” Komachi-chan made an odd face in response to her strange choice of words.

Iroha-chan bowed. “I'm Isshiki Iroha, senpai's underclassman. Nice to meet you.”

“Oh, nice to meet you, too. Iroha-san, is it? Thank you for always taking care of my brother. I'm his sister Komachi. I'm here to clean up my brother's mess—help out!” She simplified her difficult words and bowed back adorably. Afterwards, she looked around. “On that subject, where is my brother at...?”

I glanced at the area I was staring at earlier. “He's over there... You should wait a bit, though. They're in a meeting. I don't think we should get in their way.”

“I see...” Komachi-chan made a lonely smile.

Seeing her made me think she knew about our situation. It's possible he talked to her about it. I sighed, not feeling particularly good about her being so considerate. I thought I was being extremely quiet, but then I could hear a loud yawn. I looked to my side to see it had come from Iroha-chan.

“Does it really matter? I don't see the big deal.”

She was so frank and natural about it that I responded with a “Huh?” When I tilted my head, she made a cheeky smile.

“I mean, even if you didn't, there's no way those two will stay that like for a long time, don't you think?”

“You think so...?”

“I do. They're both such a huge pain, you know? Doesn't it feel like things would end right on the spot as soon as something happened?”

“Uhh, no, as his sister, I can't say I like how you put that...”

“R-Right...”

Komachi-chan and I had dubious looks, and Iroha-chan grinned. “Look, see, in three years, we'll be able to drink, right? Then, we can pretend to be drunk and go bam! Bam! Once you force something to happen, then the ball's in your court. That thing's a monster of responsibility, you know.”

“I-I don't know about that... Besides, we have no idea what will happen in three years, anyway...”

All sorts of things came to mind, and even I could feel I was getting red from them. I tried to think of a way to change the subject, and Komachi-chan had a confused look and tilted her head.

“Isn't it two years for Yui-san? Are you talking about yourself when you say three years, Iroha-senpai?”

“Shut your mouth, Rice-chan.”

“Rice!? I'm Komachi! Komachi's my name!”

“Cute name, right? It's better to make your position clear when meeting other girls for the first time. Otherwise, we'll have problems later.”

“Wow, amazing personality you have there.”

“Haha, speak for yourself.”

Shoot, they don't seem very compatible. I'd feel a lot better and happier if they could get along, though...

I tried to calm them down by keeping them apart while going “now, now, you two...” with a smile. Komachi-chan put her hands on her hips and sighed. “This is the problem with younger people who don't understand the position of the little sister. Please listen. My brother's got the mentality of an ascetic monk, and he'll find a way to deal with that kind of situation. For example, he'll pretend to sleep the entire time before actually getting drunk. That's the Hachiman mentality.”

She explained while wagging her finger, and Iroha-chan and I nodded our heads. That's so true. I can totally see that. I thought, and Iroha-chan seemed to be on the same wavelength.

“Oh, the tofu mentality<sup>48</sup>.”

“No, it's more like the Hoshino Coffee souffle mentality.”

“Oh, I like that since it's so good.”

This time, Komachi nodded back... Were they on good terms or what? Komachi nodded back to Iroha-chan this time... *Are they on good terms or what? I don't get these two.* I thought, and then Komachi-chan scoffed at Iroha-chan. *Or maybe not...*

“If that's all you're capable of, I won't be calling you onee-chan any time soon, Iroha-senpai.”

“Huh? Uh, no thanks, seriously... Jeez, what's wrong with this girl?” Iroha-chan made a loathing look with her mouth and turned to me.

“Umm, Komachi-chan's a really bad brocon.”

“Of course. Just who do you think has loved him for the past 15 years? Back then, he was just the most adorable little thing...” Komachi-chan pounded her chest and took out her smartphone. It looked like she was going to show us some photos.

“Oh, I wanna see.”

“Bleh... Can't say I'm interested, but I guess I'll take a look, too.”

I leaned in to look at her phone, and Iroha-chan did the same while complaining. Komachi-chan looked for the photos and asked, “Which ones do you want to see? I have photos of him before he got a dead look in his eyes, and after. I've also got some after his eyes became rotten.”

“Uhh, just show us the cute ones. Was he actually cute at some point?” Iroha-chan said, doubtful.

“I think he said something like that before...”

I recalled something to that effect when we went out together a while ago. But remembering it was a little painful, so my smile became a little forced.

Iroha-chan sighed. “Oh, right. You get some guys like that. They brag about being cute when they were younger or brag about being popular in Shinjuku's area 2. But in reality, they're just petty losers who try to cover up their reputation by propping themselves up instead.”

“Wow, you're not holding back at all, huh!? U-Um, that's not true... I mean, look how cute Komachi-chan is!”

I squeezed Komachi-chan's shoulder and pushed her forward. She looked up at Iroha-chan and fidgeted while poking her fingers together. Looking reluctant, she said, “Um...”

“Yes?” Iroha-chan glared.

Then, Komachi-chan made puppy eyes. “Do you mind if I call you onee-chan? At the very least, for

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48 Tofu mentality is essentially someone very mentally weak.

just a short (temporary) period?”

“Why!? Heck no!”

“Ehehe, I noticed you seem to understand my brother well.”

“Huh?”

“I was always under the impression my brother needed someone who could string him along from above, or push him up from below, but... I guess there was always the option of petty scum banding together, too.”

“Huh? What in the heck are you even saying? Um, sorry, but I am nowhere that hopeless... His looks are one thing, his head's another, and his personality's just trash.”

“And to top it all off, he's a scumbag! He's the kind of loser that tramples over his own feelings, let alone others!”

“Why does that even make you happy...?”

Komachi-chan's pleasant boast made Iroha-chan have a nasty reaction. She looked at me for help, not knowing what to make of her.

“Mmm, Komachi-chan's a really bad brocon...” I said, managing only an awkward smile.

Then, she giggled with a bit of shyness and bowed. “That just goes to show how hopeless my brother is, so please stick with him until he finally straightens out as a person.”

“Well, I already had to go through a whole year with him, so whatever...” Iroha-chan didn't seem too eager and even a little unhappy. She turned to me. “What about you, Yui-senpai?”

“I'll...”

I had no idea what to say when she asked.

“I really do like that part about you, Yui-senpai.” She walked closer with a sigh and moved her mouth to my ear. “Is there a law that says you can't like someone with a girlfriend?”

“Huh? I don't think so...”

“Right?” Iroha-chan hopped back with a giggle, wearing an invincible smile like an older woman. Her smile was so adorable, and I think it looked just like the smile I used to have, like a girl who was in love.

“Iroha-chan, do you feel that way, too?”

“Huh? No way. I still think I've got a shot with Hayama-senpai. At the very least, if he gives in, then I don't mind that either, but I have no intention from withdrawing from the game with Hayama-senpai at all.” She made a very nasty face and shook her hand.

“Huh? Then what about what you said earlier...?”

“Isn't that obvious?” She sighed and brushed her hair aside. Then, she moved her hand to the side of her fair. “It's a girl's privilege not to give up!”

She made a small peace sign with a smile more bold and cuter than anyone else. She was obviously trying to look feminine, but she had the coolest smile I had ever seen.

Fascinated by her expression, a word escaped my mouth.

“Oh...”

It wasn't a sigh. And it wasn't anything meaningful, either. It was the voice from my heart. The two smiled at the same time and made me feel warmer. They were on such bad terms earlier, too. I bit my lips and nodded my head several times. The two looked at each other and laughed. Then, they huddled together and began whispering to each other.

“Are you really okay with this, Rice-chan?”

“Hm, let's just say I've got my own thoughts on the matter.”

“Uh-huh.”

“Grr, why do you sound so uninterested?”

“Because I am...”

“Now, now, trust me, there's something in it for you too, Iroha-senpai. Can you lend me your ear?”

After whispering into Iroha-chan's ear, her face looked incredibly unpleasant.

“Wha... Whose side are you on exactly?”



“My brother's, of course. Oh, that was so high in Komachi points.”

“Ugh, you're so gross.”

“Excuse me!? Rude! Don't come crying to me for help, because I'll never side with you!”

“I never asked for your help in the first place.”

The two didn't seem to get along all that well, but they seemed compatible in a way. Watching them caused me to laugh. Maybe this was their way of cheering me up. I hugged them out of happiness. While Komachi-chan hugged me back, Iroha-chan unwillingly looked away.

I had yet to sort out my feelings, and I felt that wasn't a good thing. I knew this wasn't right, either. But it might be okay for me to indulge myself a little bit more in that sunny and warm spot.

“Okay! I feel better! Let's go!”

I held their shoulders and pushed them forward with a force proportional to the support they gave me. And then, I rushed to the one place I wanted to be in.

## Chapter 9: That blue remains blue in spite of losing its luster to time.

Once we went through the formalities of the staff farewell ceremony, we were poised to complete the preparations for our very own farewell, one that didn't consist of a speech at the podium, a gift of bouquet flowers, and tears, but one where everyone could let loose and enjoy themselves while we were working our butts off behind the scenes without any leeway to process the emotional repercussions of separation.

Despite the tribulations we had faced, the joint prom was scheduled for normal operation. With the cooperation of numerous parties, coordination of the venue proceeded without issue. Every floor was thoroughly garnished with balloon art and flowers and the ambience was accented with a soft BGM track. All affiliates that were given admission in advance were bustling with excitement in part due to their exaltation in gaudy dress wear.

With the guests' anticipating flaring in the background, Yukinoshita and I began our final meeting in a corner of the lounge.

"Hikigaya-kun, please oversee the floor designated for Sobu High and the overall management of the hall staff."

"Got it."

"Also, coordinate with the tennis and soccer clubs through Totsuka-kun and Hayama-kun as they direct the guests inside."

"Roger."

"Keep an eye on catering as well. The lounge is being set aside as a resting area, so cooperate with Zai... Zai... him and the others."

"And she gave up on his name..."

"As for the work involving re-entry stamps, Kaihin-Sogo will take care of it. Since you're overseeing the staff, ensure the floor mats are replaced occasionally. We want to avoid getting sand inside when people return from the beach."

"I hear you... Wait, don't I have way too much stuff to do? This feels more like grunt work than management."

She gave me a blank look. "Unfortunately, we're the only ones who understand the flow of this event, and I have to ensure it runs smoothly... Or is my partner unable to do something this simple?"

She flicked the hair at her shoulder with the back of her hand and made a provocative smile. Before her unyielding gaze, I didn't have very many responses to choose from.

"Oh, I'll show you..."

When she pulled the "partner" card, it didn't matter if I was reluctant or if I had to mumble, I could answer as such. I wasn't sure if she had heard me, but she smiled back.

When our meeting came to a standstill, the venue momentarily went quiet, and the distant noise, like the incessant insects on a long autumn night, suddenly stopped.

I turned around to see the cause and could see Yukinoshita's mother and Yukinoshita Haruno taking strides while exuding a pressure to their vicinity. Although that wasn't their intention, it was inevitable given the combination of the two young beauties, one clad in high-class Japanese clothes and the other in a flashy dress that exposed her shoulders, back, and bosom while drawing a mermaid line from her hips and below. On top of that, Hiratsuka-sensei who was following behind them was another impressive and cool beauty, taking on a masculine attire with a pant suit. It's only expected they would garner attention.

They cut through the waves of people as they walked to us. Yukinoshita glanced over and goaded them with a smile.

"Oh, I wasn't expecting you to be here."

Yukinoshita's mother returned a cheerful smile along with her sister's slovenly attitude.

"Yes... I thought it'd be best that I saw this event to the end."

Though cheerful, her words were teeming with an intensity like that of hostility. *Jeez, this person's as scary as ever...*

As I retreated behind Yukinoshita's shadow, Haruno-san interjected lightheartedly in spite of the

tension. “Oh, don't mind me, I'm just here for free drinks.”

“Except we're not offering any alcohol here,” Yukinoshita said, astonished.

Haruno-san pulled Hiratsuka-sensei by the hand, arm in arm. “It's okay, no worries. If I feel like drinking, I'll just head over to the restaurant over there with Shizuka-chan.”

“I'm driving, you know...” Hiratsuka-sensei wasn't particularly enthused, but she didn't shake off her hand, either. While appearing to be on an adult date, she looked at Yukinoshita and me in turn and smiled. “I'll be enjoying myself today if you don't mind.”

“Do your best, Yukino-chan. Hikigaya-kun, you, too. Do your best...” Haruno-san cut her sentence short, took one step closer, and whispered into my ear. “And be ready for what's to come, okay?”

“Ehh...”

The tone of her voice and her words caused a frightening chill to run up my spine. I could only respond with a pathetic groan. She laughed and moved her body even closer.

“Well, if you ever need help, just let your onee-san know. I'll lend you a hand.”

“Quite frankly, you're the last person I want to deal with...”

I took the opportunity to respond to her generous offer with sarcasm. Initially puzzled, her eyes narrowed as if she was a beast sizing up her prey.

“God, you're so adorable, Hikigaya-kun... I'll make sure to dote on you as much as I do with Yukino-chan from now on.”

It's almost as if she had been holding back the entire time. *You're kidding, you can go up another level...?*

Still, this was Yukinoshita Haruno. There's no way she'd be satisfied with just that. It's likely she would continue to test me as always going forward. As if making that evident, she made an alluring chuckle near my ear. I found myself writhing, and when my body came in light contact with her exposed skin, her sweet breaths that tickled my earlobe, and her floral aroma that stimulated my nose caused my back to shiver. *Oh no, this person really is scary...*

As I shuddered in place, Yukinoshita promptly came in between us and slapped Haruno-san's hand. Then, she pointed outside with her index finger. “Nee-san, the restaurant's over there.”

“Oh dear, someone's upset. I'll see you two later.” Haruno-san feigned innocence and waved her hands.

With Hiratsuka-sensei as her escort, the two quietly left. After seeing them off with a sigh, Yukinoshita turned to her mother. Unlike the bout between sisters earlier, the confrontation between mother and daughter felt tenser. Her mother put her folding fan to her chin and spoke with a piercing voice.

“Yukino... There will always be some opposition whenever you attempt to begin something new. Whatever reasons you may have, not everyone will agree, and that's only truer for an incredulous event like this... At this point, you should expect claims to both schools and our family.”

“I imagine.”

“Now that I've warned you, I have no intention of taking your side, regardless of what little schemes you come up with.”

She glared at me with an icy glint in her eyes, as if discouraging the things I had done in the past. But that glare was obstructed by an extended hand. Yukinoshita took a half-step forward, wearing an icy smile resembling the woman before her.

“That's fine. It's part of my duty as the one in charge to take responsibility, and they've been taken into account from the onset.”

“I see. Well then, let's see what you have in mind.” Yukinoshita's mother made an amiable and dauntless smile.

In watching them from the sideline, their exchanges that consisted of verbal exchanges and playful banter resembled the way beasts would rear their children. Only when the children were ready to leave the nest that the two-way interaction would grow fiercer.

Some time ago, Haruno-san once said this: The existence of an enemy would cause people to grow. I had a slight suspicion before, but it's now turned into something definite.

For the mother and daughter, or even the siblings, confronting each other was their form of communication, and opposing each other was their idea of education. *What's with this rakshasa family? Could it be their entire family is full of troublesome people?*

I took a step back in hopes of not getting involved with them. But noticing my retreat, Yukinoshita's mother smiled at me. "Hikigaya-kun, I imagine we'll be troubling you quite a bit, but thank you."

"Huh? Oh, well, right. It's my job, so..."

With such a happy smile, I couldn't quite say, "Nope, not happening." I could only send back an ambiguous response with a wry smile.

Finding that satisfactory, she returned a smile behind her fan and gracefully walked away in good spirits. After watching her leave, Yukinoshita sighed. "She finally left... Let's resume our meeting."

"There's still more...?" I asked, dejected.

She pressed against her temple. "There is. It doesn't please me one bit, but they pointed out something we didn't consider."

"Huh?"

When, where, why, what, who, and how? I wanted to ask the 5W1H questions, but she spoke before me.

"It's regarding the alcohol. It's not being provided here, but there's no rule barring the guests from bringing in their own. Keep that in mind when you're on your patrols."

"More work... But, yeah, got it. Anything else?" I asked.

She placed her hand to her chin and thought. "Let's see..." After considering for a moment, she moved her eyes around, looking to see if there was anything else to say. Then, she whispered. "For now... I think that should cover everything."

"Roger. Let's get started, then."

"Yes, let's." Yukinoshita lifted her face.

After we briefly exchanged nods, we made for the backstage. And so, the curtains of the final stage were raised.

X X X

Though the joint prom was in full swing, I wasn't sure if I had taken a proper break yet. I had such a heavy workload that time was just ticking by.

The gorgeous view that spread out before me, decorated with the actively moving colorful dresses was akin to the cherry blossoms carried by the storm of spring. There was no event more fitting for a farewell than this.

Every floor was accompanied by classical music, and familiar faces were frantically running back and forth. Each and every one of them made sure to pile on the insults, complaints, and jeers whenever they passed by me. And this was all because of my position as the general floor manager. As prominent as the title sounds, it was nothing more than claims management. Because of that, I'd find myself getting in touch with all the different groups and immediately heading to resolve any incidents.

Even now, I was desperately running around to resolve another incident, and that was when my name was called from behind.

"Hikki."

There was ever only one person who would use that nickname. I stopped and turned to see Yuigahama.

"Oh, hey. How are things on your end?"

"No problem there. It's not too busy anymore. Iroha-chan's kinda dead in the backroom, though. How about you?"

"I'm dying here. Seriously, this is impossible. Anyway, I'll go check on Isshiki later. Also, catering's starting to run low on food, are there any sweets or anything in the backroom?"

"There's some light stuff in there, should I bring them out?"

"Yeah, please. Zaimokuza and the others are out buying more right now, but I've been doing what I can to cover as much of the portions as possible until they get back."

Yuigahama laughed. "Oh, hehe."

"Was that funny?" I asked.

Then, she retracted her smile for a moment. “Yeah... This just feels like us, you know?”

However, in the end, she couldn't completely erase her heartwarming smile. I felt a slight tormenting tug at my heart, but I brushed up my hair and made an obviously poor smile.

“Sorry you had to help us in the end.”

“It's okay.” She took it in stride and shook her head. Then, she looked around the vicinity with a gentle gaze. What she saw was the dancing dress silhouettes, the guests embroiled in laughter, Yukinoshita hurriedly running from place to place, and the exhausted corpses of the staff members. She smiled. “Because this is the view I've been wanting to see.”

“I see...” I smiled along with her.

This view certainly did resemble all the ones we had seen to this point. We never could see things to the end. We'd be at odds with each other, the situation would escalate and cause us to butt heads. Even after the fuss, we'd find ourselves between a rock and a hard place and ultimately settling for shoddy work to make ends meet.

But it's because of that thrill we experienced in those days that made it enjoyable, just like now. I wanted to kill the person who came up with this unreasonable project because it was so extremely busy, but when all things were said and done, I was fond of this kind of lifestyle.

“Hey...”

“Hm?”

In response to her whisper, I removed the earphone of my headset from my ear, only for her to muddle her words and shake her head.

“Never mind. I'll save it for another time.”

“R-Right...”

“Come on, back to work! Hurry, hurry!”

“R-Right...”

I broke into a run as she urged me on, and she whispered to do my best from behind. I really had no choice after hearing that.

I may complain, and I may not get things done perfectly, but it's my creed to get at least sixty percent of the job done, enough that I had room to make excuses. Roughly all of the problems we've had were far from being resolved. They were all merely swept under the rug through the tentative abuse of bluffs, lies, and other sloppy methods. There would come a day where I would get my just desserts and be forced to shoulder all responsibility. I would have to pay all of my debt until until there wasn't a single strand of hair left on my buttocks.

But perhaps, that's what I wanted to do. Just running back and forth until I was dead tired, complaining, but still doing my job. That way, I could completely exhaust myself, lament over my regrets until I couldn't anymore, and ponder over my youth full of mistakes. And then, I wanted to tell this story over and over in my older years on a veranda to Komachi's grandchildren.

As I rambled on with the exact thoughts an elder person would have, I hectically ran around taking care of my various jobs. Before long, the inclining sun began to dye the Tokyo Bay with a glimmering red beyond the window.

There were those who went to the sandy beach, those who relaxed in the lounge, and those who chatted around the bonfires.

Everyone passed the time in their own way, and eventually gathered on a single floor. The final dance time was about to begin.

Compared to the recent prom, the sound and lighting were far more elaborate and caused the excitement in the air to surge to another level. Simultaneously doing my work and avoiding the crowds of people was quite the herculean task.

A standard dance party number began to play out of the large speakers. The spotlights jumped from place to place and filled the disco balls with light. The bouncing light resembled a revolving lantern and every time the music transitioned, it would inform everyone of the approaching end much to their disappointment.

I made my way out of the whirlpool of fervor and watched. After resting against a wall, I let out an exhausted but satisfied sigh.

The popular EDM that played, the passionate dancing, and the blinding strobes of light weren't exactly things I liked, but I didn't hate the time I spent indulging in the sounds in the dark corner of the

floor. But it was only for a brief of moment of time that I was able to space out.

I was called over the headset and was given a stream of instructions as well as disparagement. Without even the luxury to take a breather, I responded in acknowledgment and ran.

X X X

At the onset, the joint prom was plagued with large issues before its inception. However, while the day of the event saw some incidents and accidents, there wasn't anything problematic that could lead to the canceling of the event. Relatively speaking, the event ended on a successful note.

That being said, things really did get heated up. With the intermingling of graduates and current students from both schools and a few of the event affiliates, all of their singing and dancing made for quite the uproar. Such high levels of energy made it feel all the more desolate when the event was over.

The venue was completely devoid of people except for me, the general floor manager, after the party. I looked over the floor area while cleaning up, which included picking up trash and checking for lost belongings. It was only moments earlier the floor was drowning in spotlights, music, and voices, but now it was painfully quiet.

I took my time surveying the floor from corner to corner until I heard footsteps on the linoleum floor. I turned to the noise to see it had come from Hiratsuka-sensei.

"You're still here?"

"Yeah... I just happened to forget something," she said, walking to the center of the floor. Despite her claim, her gait took on a decisive pace and didn't suggest that at all. Still, I had already checked the entire floor.

"I looked around, but I didn't see anything..." I moved my head around, wondering if I had missed something.

"This is what I forgot."

Hiratsuka-sensei stopped in front of me and offered her hand. She wasn't holding anything, and there wasn't anything on top of her palm, either. Her palm was just facing upwards. It didn't look like she was asking for a handshake based on the direction of her hand, either. Ultimately, I couldn't figure out what she wanted and gave back an inane response. Then, she extended her hand farther.

"I completely forgot to dance with you." She made a handsome smile while courteously taking up my hand like a prince. But since it was out of the blue, I wasn't able to muster a decent reaction.

"Huh?"

I stared at her with my mouth agape. Even she got a little embarrassed when she returned a shy smile. The gap from her handsome behavior to that of a maiden had me struck with a bit of dizziness.





When I stood there in surprise, she tugged at my hand for a response. I regained my senses and voiced the first thing that came to mind.

“Um, well, I’ve never really danced properly before, you know?”

“The same goes for me.”

She smiled, unconcerned, and smiled back. Then, she performed a large arc with our hands. She continued on to make haphazard steps without signaling the start of the dance.

There were no music, bouncing pin spot lights, laser lights, or smoke to garnish the moment; only Hiratsuka-sensei’s humming. But with the combination of the loud and rhythmic sound of her heels and her upbeat tune, it felt more than enough.

It’s not like we were any good at dancing. That’s why, we’d suddenly jump into some choreography we saw at some point in the past, mimic dance steps that we couldn’t possibly do, jokingly play with our jackets and even whistle.

This was really stupid... but it was a fun moment of stupidity.

In the instant our bodies came together, she let go of my hand as if to push me back and landed a graceful turn. The sudden push crumbled my balance and caused me to stumble. But before I could fall over, she grabbed my hand again and forcefully spun my body. And just as we were about to celebrate the moment, her heel dug right into my foot.

“Ouch...”

The sharp pain made me lose my balance, and this caused us to fall backwards on top of each other. My back struck the floor with Hiratsuka-sensei on top of me.

Her body was far lighter than I had ever imagined with a hefty weight to her soft parts. I wriggled in place when her uttered “ouch” tickled my ears. Her long hair brushed against my neck and face and made it hard for me to take a breath.

She slowly got up from our close entanglement to sit on the floor. Then, she combed her frazzled hair and grinned with the maturity of an adult.

“Lucky guy.”

“Um, I just had my foot stepped on, you know...?”

I sat up and caressed my tingling foot. I wish she wouldn’t say stuff like that. Where’s her tact? Surely she was aware of how vulnerable a boy in puberty could be? Both my foot and my heart’s in pain, you know? But that’s OK, because I didn’t actually lose anything.

“Phew, I’m so tired. But I had so much fun.” She crossed her legs and rested her back against mine. She seemed to be fairly tired and was breathing heavily, likely from our messy dance. I didn’t budge as her backrest while listening.

“In spite of what happened, this turned out to be a splendid event. Admittedly, I was a little concerned after you told them such a big lie...”

Her point of concern was in reference to that exchange in the reception room from the other day. I stuck to my guns and feigned ignorance about the direction of the joint prom. I didn’t really lie, though. I merely played dumb. In similar fashion, I shrugged my shoulders. “I wasn’t lying at all, just pretending.”

“You’re a bad man.” She sighed and bumped her head against mine in a scolding manner. Though it didn’t hurt, her long hair was a bit ticklish. It also smelled nice, so I found myself fidgeting. Then, she chuckled. “But I suppose that’s just how you’re choosing to spend your youth.”

“Come again?” I tilted my head at her curious wording.

She turned around and looked at me past her shoulder with a teasing smile on her face. “Ever heard of this? Youth is a lie, and an evil...”

She erected a finger and began reciting. I inclined my head at her words. When the realization hit me, I did a double take.

“Oh god, having to hear that now is super embarrassing... Please stop, seriously.”

I immediately threw my face into my hands. There’s nothing more embarrassing than having something you had written in the past read right in front of you. It just made you want to die!

Hiratsuka-sensei broke into a laugh, but eventually stopped. Then, she asked me with a gentle voice. “How do you feel about this entire year? Did anything change?”

Her question made me recall of the things I wrote on that day.

The spine of the book was once so fresh and new to the point of excessive immaturity, but as time passed, the color was stained by the sun and lost its luster. However, it was still vivid enough to be called blue.

“Nothing changed...” I slowly paced my answer as if reflecting on the incredibly short, but unbelievably long year.

Hiratsuka-sensei bumped the back of her head again, seemingly finding that answer unacceptable. “That was a bad question... Did you find the genuine thing you were looking for?”

This time, I didn't need any time to answer. After all, it was something Hiratsuka-sensei had taught me. I thought, struggled, and worried... My answer was obvious. I returned her head bump with a grin.

“Hard to say. It's not exactly supposed to be easy to find, right?”

“Someone's going to get angry hearing that. Maybe even cry in a corner somewhere.”

“What a pain... That sounds way too real, so please stop... Who are you even talking about, anyway? That's not it.”

“I see. You're right, that might not be it.” Her shoulders shook as she laughed. Then, she moved her lower body to sit beside me. “If your feelings for a single girl include things like empathy, superficiality, curiosity, pity, respect, and jealousy, I'm sure the word 'like' isn't enough.”

With her cheek in one hand, she folded each finger as she countered the emotions while looking at me.

“That's why, you can't seem to break up or go your separate ways. No matter how far you become or how much time passes, you're still drawn to each other. Perhaps, that's what it means to be genuine.”

“You think so? I don't really know.” I shrugged with a sarcastic smile. We would never truly know whether the choice we made was the correct one. Even now, our minds had doubts. However, I could never acknowledge a correct answer that someone insisted was the only one. “But that's why, we'll always continue to ask, because I'm sure the both of us won't believe in it that easily.”

“Rather off the mark, but you get a full score for your answer. You really aren't cute... but that's what makes you my best student.”

She ruffled my head with her hand and made a mess of my hair. While my head was being spun around, a static noise came from my earphone. After a few seconds, I could hear Yukinoshita.

“—Hikigaya-kun, can you come to the wooden terrace?”

I didn't answer immediately and turned to Hiratsuka-sensei.

“Sorry, there's still some work left, so I need to get going.”

“I see. I'll be on my way, then.”

She quickly got to her feet and offered her hand to pull me up. I shook my head with a smile and got up on my own. She slowly lowered her hand while wearing a lonely smile, but before she could bring it down all the way, I took her hand and squeezed it. Then, I bowed.

“Thank you for taking care of me.”

Hiratsuka-sensei lost her voice for a moment, but when she realized it was a handshake, she laughed.

“Yeah, you really were a handful.” She slapped my hand and let go. Then, she thrust her hand into her pocket and had a bitter smile. “I suppose this is goodbye.”

“Goodbye, sensei.”

My mouth twisted and I gave her a somewhat mature smile. Seeing that, she nodded back in satisfaction and began walking to the entrance. As I burned the image of her taking one step, two step, and more steps away, I, too, turned my back. I gripped the microphone of my intercom and quickly responded.

“Sorry, I was occupied. I'll be right there.”

After a couple of moments, I was given a response of gratitude. I hurried my pace and headed in the opposite direction. As I began walking, I could hear the sounds of the clacking of her heels from behind. They suddenly stopped.

“Hikigaya.” I turned around when she called out to me, and she was looking at me over her shoulder. Then, she placed her hands to her mouth and yelled. “Explode, riajuu!”

“That's old, you know. Are you from ten years ago?” I retorted and began walking again. But after a couple of steps, I turned.

Hiratsuka-sensei wore her coat and had her back faced to me. She took defining steps, the sound of her heels audible, and continued on with beautiful, decisive steps. Even though she wasn't even looking at me as I watched her, she raised her hand without a word.

I bowed in response and turned back. And this time, I ran to where she was.

X X X

After leaving the dance floor, I made my way to the wooden terrace. The dark of night had already enveloped the world outside, and even the ocean view was just flickering with lights from boats in the distant horizon. But in spite of the ocean's poor visibility, the night view of the Tokyo seaside area along the coastline on the right and the night view of the industrial area between Tokyo and Chiba on the left were a sight to behold.

I looked around for Yukinoshita and found her organizing documents near the fireplace in the center of the wooden terrace. It was the only place that appeared warm in light of the growing, chilly wind. A bonfire in the shape of an umbrella was lit in the fireplace. Every spark of the fire illuminated Yukinoshita's white and slender countenance and strengthened the magical presence she would have more than usual.

I would've loved to watch her like that forever, but the popping sound of the firewood caused her to lift her face. Once she noticed me, her illuminated cheeks loosened to form a smile at her lips.

"Oh, Hikigaya-kun, hello."

"Hey. Sorry for the wait," I said, walking to her. There, she lifted her hand to stop me.

"Wait, first of all, have a look at your feet."

"Huh? My feet..."

The only thing I could see was a floor mat covered in sand and nothing else... *Umm, is this some kind of puzzle?*

When I made a confused look, she sighed. She tapped the documents against to table to organize them and carried them over to me. Then, she pinned down her skirt and crouched to slide her finger across the floor. She got up and presented her fingers.

"Look. See how much sand there is?"

"Uh-huh..."

Okay... I could only give her an affirmative. What? Was shis some kind of mother-in-law rehearsal or something? She used a wet tissue to wipe her finger and then placed it on her temple.

"Remember what I said? To avoid getting any sand into the hall? And to switch out the floor mats?"

"Ohh..."

You sure did, yep. Of course, I was way too busy, though. Instead of responding, I made a disgruntled face.

Did she call me here just for a lecture? That magical presence she had earlier was gone like the wind and leaving only reality in front of me. Yukinoshita who was fragile in nature had less of a maternal attitude and more of a strict mother-in-law. She rested her hand on her waist and chided me in a very calm manner.

"Now that you know, please clean that up before we leave."

"Okay..."

I hung my head and nodded. I turned around and right before I could search for a broom, she interjected, sounding as if she had more to say. I looked back, reluctantly wondering if there was more, and she had her hand touching her chin.

"Can you check the waiting room while you're at it? Only our belongings should be in there, but I just want to make sure. I need to finish wrapping up the payments for the extra orders we made and return the keys. Thank you."

"R-Right... And I got more work... Okay, right, roger that."

Once these jobs were done with, I would finally be free, and that means we could finally pack up and leave. The joint prom that was felt simultaneously long and short would at least be over. The night view coupled with the night breeze that caressed my cheeks left me with a profound feeling.

In that moment, Yukinoshita caressed her lips and once again, added further. "Also... do you mind



meeting in front of the entrance after we finish up here? If you could check the parking lot, that would help. If there's still people around, let them know.”

“Got it...” I said, an unpleasant premonition creeping up on me. Was this one of those crappy conversational ways to dump more work on me? I shivered at the thought, but unexpectedly, she spoke up again in a smaller voice as if something had come to mind.

“And...”

“You still have more? Can we stop now? This is good enough, right?” I said, annoyed.

Then, she took one step closer, looking docile. “No, I want to make I tell you this last one.”

After prefacing her intentions, she broke eye contact and coughed. She was talking so much earlier, but now she was sucking in her lips. Just when I thought she was going to say something, she would take deep breaths while squeezing the documents in her hands and hugging it to her chest.

After pulling her gaze upwards, she looked straight at me with her beautiful eyes and utter her words with a quiet, but pronounced voice.

“Hikigaya-kun, I love you.”

I froze in place from her sudden declaration, and she made a bashful smile. Her cheeks were dyed with pink and used her documents to obscure them. She made furtive glances at me to see my reaction, but eventually finding the silence unbearable, she retreated backwards. Before I could even answer, she fled in a hurry.

*Hey, you can't be serious? She's such a pain. What am I supposed to do if she just runs off like that? What's her deal? Or what, am I supposed to formally tell her how I feel some other time? That's way too hard, seriously. Man, she's so much trouble.*

—But it's that insanely troublesome part about her that made her so insanely cute.

## Chapter 10: That's why, Hikigaya Hachiman said.

The last spring of high school had begun. The cherry blossoms that were visible from the windows of my class above had yet to reach peak bloom, but the petals themselves were progressing magnificently regardless.

There's nothing more important than the initial head start of spring, whether it was in the stone world or the normal world. In that respect, I had the worst start. To get straight to the point, I had the worst class assignment.

I had no issues with being separated from acquaintances and friends. Wasting time in class and being the last one to find a group during class excursions were things I was used to. It's when I was assigned to the same class with people I wasn't particularly close to that was painful.

Hayama Hayato and Ebina Hina, two individuals among my limited acquaintances, were the two worst rolls I could get in my gacha result, and now I could safely explode and die. Tobe would be a better alternative at this point...

Whenever we crossed each other, the both of them would engage in brief and harmless conversations with me. Given that these two were attention magnets, the curious stares I'd get from the people around us were awful. I was never one for small talk, so the stress shortened my life span at the rate of mach speed. Because of that, I tried to keep my time in class to as close as zero and would bolt from class the moment the bell for the end of the school day sounded.

The flower beds in the courtyard that could be viewed from above in the suspended hallway that led to the special building announced the onset of spring. But regardless of a change in seasons or a change in school years, debts from the past wouldn't disappear; case in point, the unreasonable joint prom still had some remaining tabs left to cover.

Both Yukinoshita and I were still using the clubroom that had long served its purpose. In other words, we were wrapping up the remaining business of the joint prom.

As a parting gift, Hiratsuka-sensei made prior arrangements with the student council to let us have temporary access to the Service Club's room. It was a little spacious for just the two of us, but the overflowing work made up for the extra space as if filling in a blank canvas.

We signed off invoices, processed mountains of receipts, and were buried in a valley of reports. But we went through them one by one with careful precision. Yukinoshita would normally take care of this level of workload immediately, but her speed was sluggish. But perhaps, she just wanted to soak in the moment for a little longer, just like me.

"Why don't we take a break?"

"Yeah."

After stopping, she tapped on my shoulder and began brewing black tea. My teacup, which had been left untouched for some time, and her stylish one were filled with the vivid colored tea. Although the remaining mug was cleaned and free from any dust, steam could not be seen rising from it.

"Enjoy."

"Thanks."

I took the teacup she offered and sipped. She similarly took a mouthful and let out a satisfied exhale.

"At the rate we're proceeding, we should be all done by tomorrow."

"Yeah, seems like it."

"After that, we'll need to clean the room up." Yukinoshita looked over her belongings. She didn't have that many to speak of, but her tea set did look somewhat heavy.

"I'll help you carry your things, since I don't have much."

"Really? I'll take you up on your offer, then." She smiled, and continued. "While you're at it, would you like to come over for dinner tomorrow? My mother insisted... I must say, she seems rather fond of you."

"Any chance you could refuse for me...?"

"What makes you think I can do that?"

"Tomorrow is... uh, you know." I answered, having a light-bulb moment.



She tilted her head. "If you're referring to Komachi-san, she'll be busy choosing a club to join, so she'll be staying late. Totsuka-kun has his hands full with the tennis club, and Zai... Zaitzu-kun? I'm sure Zaitzu-kun can wait for another time, right?"

She fired off her words nonchalantly, but it was frightening how she had a complete grasp of the schedules of everyone around me. Every excuse I could think of was shut down, and I could only eke out a stutter. She placed her elbows on the desk and looked at my face.

"Who else is there? Hayama-kun?"

"Nope, not a chance in hell, seriously."

Why did I have to spend time after school with that guy? I made sure to voice my objection for that point alone, all other things notwithstanding. She followed with a triumphant smile. "In other words, you don't have any plans. I'm glad to hear that."

I had no words of rebuttal in the face of such a happy smile. I certainly had the physical means to escape tomorrow. But there was no point, because she would just confront me on another day. By no means was I against going out to eat with Yukinoshita Yukino herself. As a matter of fact, I could totally go on an enthusiastic tangent and invite her out to eat at a naritake ramen shop somewhere. But it's a different story when it's about her family. I did what I could to resolve any external conflicts with them, but internally, there's still some things left untouched.

*What do I do? What do I do?* Frantic thoughts filled my head, and my eyes fled to the door. And then, a knock came.

"Come in." I immediately answered the stroke of good luck and the door flung open.

"Hello! I'm here to apply to the club!"

My little sister Hikigaya Komachi barged into the room in boisterous fashion in her newly fitted uniform.

"Komachi-san, welcome. I knew the uniform would look wonderful on you."

"Yukino-san! Thank you so much!"

Komachi pounced on Yukinoshita, and though initially perplexed, accepted her hug. I waited for the moment to interrupt them.

"Komachi, there isn't any club activities here. We're not looking for new members, and there's nothing for us to do."

"True... We're really only here as an excuse to occupy the room."

"Whoa, that's pretty bad. But no problem. Because..."

Komachi turned back to the entrance, and standing near the door was Isshiki. She was breathing heavily while supporting herself against the door with her hand.

"Why the heck are you so fast, Rice-chan...? Makes no sense..."

"Wait, Rice-chan...? Is that some kind of nickname? I mean, she certainly is the very epitome of the Japanese spirit, but..."

In other words, Komachi who had the title of being the sister of the world attained another title, the Japanese spirit, and was now effectively a two-title holder? Or so I thought, but seeing these two together had me suspicious. Did these two ever meet before? I wondered, and Yukinoshita raised a similar doubt.

"Isshiki-san, too...? Do you two need something?"

Yukinoshita, still held by Komachi, had a puzzled look. Isshiki took a deep breath and slowly closed the door. She walked up to us and presented a single slip of paper. The paper was filled with details on the establishment of a club along with the words "Service Club" on it. Furthermore, the club president column had "Hikigaya Komachi" written in. Below were Yukinoshita's name and mine. The required details were all filled along with the stamp of approval from the student council.

"As you can see, starting today, this room will now serve as the base of operations for the Service Club."

"Huh?"

Both Yukinoshita and I blurted out a confused response. Komachi grinned. "With this, the problem's solved! Let's begin our club activities!"

"Except it isn't..."

This was just forgery, wasn't it? A crime, right? You're guilty, right?

“What activities do you mean...? There's nothing for us to do...” Yukinoshita said, baffled.

Komachi and Isshiki exchanged looks. Then, Isshiki shrugged and sighed. “We'll have one soon.”

“Have what?”

The two answered my immediate question with an unpleasant smile.

*You two sure are friendly...* The little sister and underclassman combo made them look like they were the strongest.

As their onii-chan-senpai, I was happy to see them getting along so well. Well, I should be, but... these two were too crafty for their own good. On one hand, Komachi was shallow, but she was a real schemer. On the other, Isshiki was shrewd and scummy. Putting these two together was just asking for trouble... Not good, this was only making me more anxious. What were these two planning to do...?

But that concern was answered with the light knocks from a visitor at the door.

“Come in...”

Yukinoshita's dubious voice was answered from beyond the door.

“E-Excuse me.”

The voice sounded somewhat high-pitched, likely due to nervousness. The door slowly slid open, and the girl slipped through the small opening of the door, as if she didn't want anyone to see her.

She wore her uniform loosely, and her hair was peach-colored. In taking a step into the room, the hair bun on her head shook.

“Y-Yahallo...”

Yuigahama Yui greeted us like she always did with an awkward smile while lifting her hand. Upon seeing her, Yukinoshita noisily rose from her seat. Her eyes misted over and looked like she was going to cry from her swelling emotions. With a weeping, but loving tone, she called to her.

“Yuigahama-san... You came...”

“Ehehe... I did...” Yuigahama placed her hand on her head while rubbing her hair bun. By just having her there, it felt like the room was filled with a missing piece. Feeling glad from the bottom of my heart, I drank my tea wondering what I should say to her.

But in that instant, I saw it; the sight of Komachi giggling and Isshiki grinning, followed by Yuigahama's incoming glances...

In seeing their behavior, an uneasy feeling welled up inside. No, if I were to be more precise, I could feel something disturbing. It's time like these that my hunches were always on the mark.

“Umm... I'm not here for a request, but a consultation, you see?”

Yuigahama began and Yukinoshita nodded with a smile with enthusiastic eyes, looking to help with whatever she needed. In contrast to her lively eyes, mine continued to look deader and deader.

Eventually, Yuigahama breathed in and placed her hand to her chest.

“So, there's this person I like, and he has someone who's like a girlfriend, and she also happens to be my most important friend... But I want to keep getting along with the both of them from now on. What should I do?”

Yuigahama made a meaningful glance and I averted my gaze. But this time, my gaze met with Yukinoshita's. Her eyes had a chilling coldness to them. I looked around to escape eye contact and focused on the teacup in my hands. But that didn't serve as refuge for the surface of the tea bubbled.

“Let's hear what you have to say...” Yukinoshita smiled and pulled a nearby seat, the seat that had always been empty between the two of us.

“Please have a seat. It sounds like this will take some time.”

“Yeah, I think it will. It won't end today or tomorrow or the day after... I think it'll continue forever.”

Yuigahama looked directly at Yukinoshita with an honest smile. Yukinoshita had a momentary look of surprise, but immediately returned her smile.

“You're right... I'm sure it'll continue forever.”

And so, the empty mug was filled with amber colored tea. The room was enveloped from the warmth and aroma of the tea and the inclining sun bathed the interior through the window. And there, the sunny spot of spring was born. That warmth sent a chill up my spine and turned my face blue.

I see. So, this was what they called a blue spring<sup>49</sup>. Again, I could acutely feel the onset of the new season.

Yes, indeed.

I really had no choice but to say it.

—My youth romantic comedy is wrong as I expected.

FIN

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49 “Blue spring” is in reference to the kanji compound “seishun” (青春), which is comprised of the kanji for “blue” (青) and the kanji for “spring” (春).



