



とカエルが地球にいたころ……⑤

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特装版

Suetsumihana
When Hikaru was on the earth

末摘花

ヒカルが地球にいたころ……⑤

ファミ通文庫

「今度の女は、どこのどいつだ」
「それが、弱ったことに、
ほくにもわからないんだ」

未摘花

Shokunakano
Shokunakano

ヒカルが地球にいたころ……⑤



「おまじないは、おまじないでいいよ」
「おまじないは、おまじないでいいよ」





夏休み、
プールを満喫

!?

*You seemed to be dancing airily as you strolled through the flowers,
dazzling beautifully in a breathtaking manner.*

Your eyes used to be so pure.

Your lips used to be so pure.

Your hands used to be so pure.

Your breathing used to be so pure.

*Hikaru--your entirety was hopelessly speckless, shining alone even in the
midst of the darkness.*

That is why, Hikaru--

*Because of your beauty, I found myself attracted to you, fell for you, and
then--*

Do Your Women's Strife Elsewhere, Please

"Do you know about Cowslips, Koremitsu?"

An utterly sweet voice could be heard by the ear.

Koremitsu, covered in a blanket, had his eyes covered as the voice gently reached him like a lullaby.

"The Cowslips are yellow flowers that bloom wildly in the grassy plains during spring, as cute as the Japanese Primrose. The girls gather these flowers as a form of fortune telling, 'This one, or that one? Tell me, who shall I marry?' singing such songs innocently."

(This guy's still yapping away early in the morning...it's already summer vacation. Can't I just take a break...)

Koremitsu muttered quietly to himself as his body embraced the refreshing mattress, the comforting feeling of the pillow.

During this time, Hikaru continued his flower lecture.

"In Nordic Mythology, the Cowslip is the flower the Goddess Frejya, the keywielder, holds. In the past, it has been known as the 'flower key'. It became widely known through the evangelism of Christianity as 'Saint Maria's Key' and 'Saint Petero's Key', a flower symbolising the revival of life."

(Ahh, I see...well, whatever. Anyway, are you always in such a lecturing mode when awaking up with a girl too? Even if it's you, an effeminate pretty boy prince, you sure are noisy...)

"In ancient English, Cowslips are known as cow dung."

(Wait wait. Why are we talking about that early in the morning?)

"The bell shaped flowers are the beds for pixies, so they are also known as pixie cups. The situation here is similar to that too. Look Koremitsu. You have a very cute one right beside you."

Hikaru chuckled with his usual sweet voice.

(What kind of fairy tale are we talking about?)

However, he felt an intriguing warmth near his chest. There was a silky feeling beneath the blanket, and though it had some weight, it was still soft...smelling a little, he scented upon a sweet fragrance of grass and milk.

"Hm?"

A scent?

"Good morning, big brother Koremitsu."

The wide-eyed girl with silky cheeks greeted with her pink, tender lips.

"Woah, Shiiko!"

Stunned, Koremitsu froze there, maintaining his sideway sleeping posture.

Shiiko, or Shioriko Wakagi, was dressed in a bear pajamas, clutching at Koremitsu's chest tightly, her soft thin black hair scattered.

Hikaru was beside them, dressed in white robes like a god from Greek Mythology, smiling with amusement as he narrowed his pretty eyes.

(Goodness, this guy's acting like a Takarazuka actor--no, more importantly, Shiiko.)

Koremitsu got up from the bed sharply.

As it was summer, he was dressed in singlet and shorts. His muscular arms and legs were showing, and the sight of him in such a state, sleeping with a 4th grader girl is really a bad thing! The law would definitely not allow it!

"Hey, Shiiko! Didn't I say not to enter my futon whenever you want to!"

"You're petty. It's fine, right? We slept together before."

Shioriko looked unhappy as she puffed her rosy cheeks.

"That was different. You're a 4th grader already, sleep alone! If you want someone to sleep with, go sleep with Lapis!"

"But Lapis finds it annoying to sleep in the futon, and will run away."

"Well...it is the summer after all. It's hot."

In this time where the hot air blows through the ajar windows, Shioriko would find it tough sleeping while cuddling the cat.

"That's why I'm sleeping with you, big brother."

"No."

He refused adamantly.

Shioriko's first temporal stay at the Akagis' was on the day where her grandfather was hospitalized. That day was special because she was in a complete funk.

After her grandfather Tomohiko died, she began living with them as Koremitsu's little sister, and had gotten livelier as a result. As an older brother, Koremitsu had to remind her that she must not enter a man's futon no matter what.

Koremitsu accepted Shioriko as family with such a serious attitude, and Hikaru, who had been yapping from the get-go *'Shiiko is cute, but she is off limits!'* *'As Shiiko's original guardian, I shall only allow you to do so 10 years later!'*, relaxed that Koremitsu would not abduct a loli. At this point, Koremitsu was extremely miffed that Hikaru was clearly enjoying seeing him panic at Shioriko's shocking actions, trying to think of countermeasures.

"Big brother, you really are very petty, petty, I tell you! Lapis~ big brother is being petty towards Shiiko!"

Shioriko even fussed a little at Lapis as the latter remained, squatted at the sliding door, with a cool look. Its eyes remained still as it licked its furs with its pink tongue.

And upon seeing this, Shioriko again pouted her lips, slumping her shoulders.

"...I dreamt of grandpa. I felt lonely...that's why I came here..."

"Ack."

Koremitsu felt his chest tighten.

Was this her usual acting at work?

(No, I'm learning everyday too, even though we've only been together for a month or so. I guess it can't be helped if she wakes up in the middle of the night and wants to be with a relative...)

"Shiiko really is pitiful to be treated so coldly by her big brother."

Hikaru spoke with an empathetic tone,

"Ah...erm."

While Koremitsu watched that little back of hers, hesitating as to how he was supposed to tackle this issue, Shioriko looked over her shoulder, and quickly looked forward, looking on dejectedly.

"Uh, a-actually, if you really can't handle the boredom, you can come to me and...well, that."

"No, I'm already an adult. I'll handle it alone."

She continued to keep her back turned away from Koremitsu, letting out a soft, unenergetic voice, sobbing deep within her throat.

"No, there's no way you're an adult when you're still in 4th grade, right? I don't mean that when you're being so lonely you can't take it."

"But I'm not really a family member...I'll just cause you trouble, Big Brother..."

"Enough with that nonsense! You're not causing me trouble! You're already...something like a real little sister to me. If you're really troubled, just come to me however you want. Watch me settle everything for you nicely."

What am I insisting on so early in the morning? He felt his face scald upon thinking about this.

Shioriko turned her head around.

She continued to stare at Koremitsu with wary eyes, but soon after, showed a childish, innocent smile.

"Right, big brother."

She clung onto Koremitsu tightly, and began to rub her cheek onto his.

“Yikes, this is really itchy! You can only hug me when you're really troubled! Right now, go wash your face at the basin. It's time to go for radio exercises.”

Lapis watched Koremitsu whisk Shioriko off with a 'good grief' look, and Hikaru, dressed in a Greek outfit,

“It is good for siblings to be so amicable in the morning.”

Made such a comment.

Shioriko was feeling really chuffed, her cheeks glowing, and the sobbing had ceased.

(Have I been fooled again?)

Koremitsu had such a doubt in his mind. At this moment.

The cellphone on the table rang, playing the Godzilla theme.

“Shiiko, you changed my cellphone ringtone!?”

“I didn't find any hellhound theme when I looked through, so I used this as a makeshift.”

“Don't search for such a thing! And stop looking through someone else's phone!”

He brought the phone over, and glanced at the caller's name.

“Shikibu?”

He murmured, and Shioriko's ears picked up on it.

He then pressed the receive button.

“It's me.”

And answered bluntly.

“S-sorry! Was I too early? Are you still sleeping?”

Honoka in turn quickly replied in a shrill voice that struck his eardrums.

“No, I already woke up.”

“Really? Th-that's good...sorry. I decided to call you immediately, Akagi. I thought something big might happen again if I didn't do so.”

She rambled about such random matters.

And Koremitsu frowned.

“Seriously, how many times did you think of calling me? Don't tell me something happened?”

He asked seriously, *Ack!* And got such a response.

“...Instead of that...er-erm...we-we haven't set the date.”

“Date?”

“About that.”

“Koremitsu, the pool.”

Hikaru reminded at Koremitsu's ear.

Speaking of which, they did affirm the promise to go to the pool at the end of semester ceremony

(Ah, is that so? She's referring to that? I should be the one proposing the time and location.)

Hikaru had always been the one advising Koremitsu on the locations when the latter invited Aoi and Tsuyako out. This time, Koremitsu was to do so himself, and he was careless.

His chest was slowly sizzling due to his mistake.

“Sorry, it's about the pool, right? When are you free then?”

Honoka heaved a sigh of relief, probably worried if Koremitsu had forgotten about the promise.

“I'm fine with whatever time it is. This week maybe? A little earlier is good, or my heart's going to tighten while waiting—uu, it's nothing.”

Anyway, arrange it this week! This week! I do have lots of things to do in the summer vacation unlike you!"

This time, she hurriedly rattled on.

"This week...well, I have nothing. I'm okay on Wednesday and Thursday."

Koremitsu said as he checked through his calendar.

"I wanna go too, big brother! It's alright, right?"

Shioriko suddenly shouted.

"Huh?"

She was shaking Koremitsu's knee with her little hands while the latter remained dumbfounded

"Okay, please, please, big brother? I—always wanted to go to the pool with you ever since summer vacation ended! Didn't you promise Shiiko to bring her out during summer vacation?"

She complained, her eyes wide.

"Ah, got it. I'll bring you out next time. Maybe next week."

"No, I'm free this week too!"

She shook her head and fawned, the twintails of straight hair swaying left and right.

Koremitsu sensed that Honoka was listening on the other side of the phone with bated breath, and was at a loss of what to do.

Before the summer vacation, he could not take care of Shiiko because of Tsuyako's matters, and as such, harbored the guilt that Shiiko might have felt lonely. Thus, he decided to make sure matters were settled during the summer vacation, and not leave her unattended.

“Guess I got no choice. But I'm definitely going to be worn out if I'm going to a pool twice.”

“We're not going together. I want to tag along with you guys.”

“What!?”

(Wait, with you guys, as in, she's coming along with Shikibu and me?)

Honoka too,

“!”

Was left thunderstruck.

Shioriko lifted her head, and stared at Koremitsu with an impish, innocent look.

“Besides, if I'm going to the pool with you, you'll be mistaken as a kidnapper, big brother. You'll be sent for re-education.”

(WHAT DO YOU MEAN BY THAT!?)

Hikaru let out a giggle, and on the other side of the phone,

“...It's very possible.”

A feeble voice could be heard.

“If you're going to be locked up, I'll be really troubled, big brother Koremitsu. You'll be mistaken for a lolicon, a kidnapper.”

“Akagi is a lolicon and kidnapper...!?”

The voice on the other side of the phone suddenly got shrill.

“In that case, you might be forced to quit school. If you can't get through the job applications and background checks, you might end up being a yakuza like Butaro in Little Maruko!”

“THAT'S VERY POSSIBLE!!”

“Shikibu! Don't just agree with her like that!!”

Koremitsu inadvertently exclaimed.

(Speaking of which, Hikaru, stop snickering away over there!)

Shioriko placed her soft, tender face on Koremitsu's coarse face, and said to the moutpiece.

“Well, please, Miss Shikibu? Please let us go to the pool with you so that big brother Koremitsu's life won't have a bleak future. You're the only one I can ask!”

(Wait, the initial promise to the pool was between Shikibu and me! Now why do I have to ask Shikibu to allow Shiiko along!?)

It was too ridiculous no matter how he thought about it. Where had the premised been changed?

And while Koremitsu remained dumbfounded.

“Understood! I-I'll go to the pool with you and Akagi as your guardian, Shiiko!”

Upon hearing Honoka's determination.

Hikaru, floating beside Koremitsu, let out a wry smile as he commented.

“Miss Shikibu really is the reliable yet easy-to-fool type, huh?”



And so, it was agreed that Koremitsu, Honoka and Shioriko would go to the nearby pool two days later, Thursday.

“You are quite popular, Koremitsu.”

It was after breakfast. Shioriko hurriedly ran out from her room and scampered across the corridor, saying 'I got to prepare early', and Hikaru was joking by the side. Certainly, it was annoying.

“That's not the case. I'm just going to the pool with my little sister and classmate. Besides, Shikibu helped me out a lot of times before this, so I guess this can be some sort of thanks. Right, that's it!”

“Normally, I do not think there is a need to specifically go to a pool with a female classmate alone just to repay her.”

“It's not just the two of us. Shiiko's coming along too.”

“Yes, Miss Shikibu must have been regretting things right now since she was the one who allowed Shiiko to come along. She probably is grabbing her pillow, rolling around on the bed. It really was a chance for her, and you will be bringing your little sister along for this rare date.”

“It's not a date.”

“It is not?”

With Hikaru staring back with wide eyes, Koremitsu felt an abrupt unease.

Eh? I-is it a date after all...?

For Koremitsu, who had girls fearing and evading him till this point, he was unable to draw the line between a date and a simple outing.

(But because Shikibu helped me so many times before, I'll want to go along with her if she asks me to go to the pool with her. I don't want to be the one being helped by others all the time. I think it's more like I want to maintain the friendship rather than wanting to treat her equally like how she treated me. But is a single date between a boy and a girl really a date?)

Hikaru looked dumbfounded, and said to Koremitsu while the latter murmured with his arms folded,

“Koremitsu, what exactly is your definition of a date?”

He came up with the hardest question to answer.

Am I not thinking hard about this thing now!?

Koremitsu frowned, and answered,

“I think a date is when, you kiss when the atmosphere is most intense. No, when you're holding hands.”

“Eh?”

Hikaru was gobsmacked.

“I don't think it's a date if we're walking without holding hands.”

*How in the world am I able to say such embarrassing things to a ghost?
Won't others be thinking that I'm a guy who likes to clench his fists and
mutter to himself on the corridor?*

Hikaru looked back intently, giving a pitiful look either out of disinterest, or because he saw Koremitsu gritting his teeth silently.

“Well...that certainly is just like you.”

He muttered.

“Just shut up already.”

He tried to forget the embarrassing conversation from before, drew the cellphone out from his pocket, and flipped it open. Normally, he would not be checking his messages, but ever since the summer holidays began, he had been doing so often.

Surely he was still worried about Aoi.

--Thank you for coming over to help me.

Hikaru's older brother Kazuaki tried to abduct Aoi into a distant villa before summer vacation ended, causing quite a commotion. Aoi was left unscathed in the end, and during the end-of-semester ceremony, she even came to Koremitsu's classroom with Asai to bow and apologize.

Her life was not in peril back then, but it must have been quite a shock to her. Her face was pale, looking tentative.

--I really am foolish for not knowing anything, to believe what Mr Kazuaki said. I cannot allow myself to be this naive and let such a thing happening again.

Her body was curled up, her eyes were lacking vitality as she spoke in a self-depreciating tone.

On the other hand, the cold looking Asai,

--Yes. It is better for you not to be bothered with a shaggy stray dog like him.

Said that with derision, and there was a faltering in Aoi's eyes.

--I really am sorry for causing you trouble, Mr Akagi.

Aoi whispered with a teeny-weeny voice, and was dragged away by Asai.

Hikaru was worried for Aoi, and Hikaru too had the same feeling, often exchanging messages with her.

--Are you alright?

--Don't worry about me. If something crops up, you must tell me.

--Summer vacation is starting. Are you feeling a little better?

It was the first time he had sent messages to a girl so frequently since Yū. Aoi's responses were brief in comparison,

--I am alright.

What exactly was she thinking? How had she been living? What was she thinking? Was she really not suffering—Koremitsu became really worried given that he could not see what was going on exactly.

While Koremitsu was checking to see if Aoi had sent any messages, Hikaru grimly glanced at the screen from the side

“So there is no news from Miss Aoi?”

He muttered to himself, his eyes betraying the worry for Aoi.

“...Hm, with Asa and Mr Shungo watching over her, I do not think something like that will happen again.”

He probably remembered that extremely caring big brother.

*I hate Aoi here, but Aoi is Hikaru's **most beloved**,* Kazuaki, the child of the Mikado's legitimate wife, treasured Aoi like a doll.

--I can be forgiven by anyone no matter what I do.

Even after his cross-dressing habits were revealed, he was still able to calmly his own views with a cryptic smirk.

Tsuyako once trembled and said that Kazuaki was the embodiment of the spider.

That the Rokujō who personally murdered her cheating husband and the mistress was still alive.

As she had said, Kazuaki was ostensibly surrounded by a demonic, ominous aura of madness at that time.

Upon recalling about it, Koremitsu felt a chill on his back, and at the same time, rage surged to his throat when he thought about what Kazuaki did to Aoi.

“If I see that perverted brother again, I'm definitely going to beat him up good.”

He muttered to himself.

“How reliable.”

Hikaru chuckled.

Hikaru never said anything about Kazuaki.

From the beginning, he never mentioned anything about his family.

(The brother does seem rather obsessed with Hikaru...what does this guy think of his brother.)

I am an illegitimate child, so I hardly have the chance to talk to my older brother. Hikaru once said this...

Koremitsu wanted to know the reason why the luster would fade from Hikaru's eyes, but at the same time, he was afraid of knowing.

Hikaru probably killed himself. Tsuyako's words echoed at Koremitsu's ears.

(I won't ask now, but when exactly will he tell me?)

When exactly will that day arrive?

Probably on the day they separate.

Upon thinking about it, Koremitsu could feel his heart breaking apart.

To change this gloomy atmosphere, he racked his brains, thinking of something else.

He heard a soft grumble from Shioriko's room.

“Ah, seriously, I don't like this one else.”

She sounded really anxious, but there were also voices like 'this can't do', 'it's showing already', 'Lapis~Nice body~', and even the stomping of the tatamis.

“Arghhh, this is the worst!”

The stomping got louder.

“What's the matter, Shiiko?”

“Ah, Koremitsu, do not open the door now.”

Hikaru reached his hand out, wanting to stop Koremitsu. However, the hand passed through Koremitsu's body like usual, and the door was opened.

At that moment,

“Kya!”

A cute cry rang.

“Woah!”

Koremitsu too exclaimed.

There were all sorts of swimsuits, pink, yellow, scattered on the floor like flowers, and Shioriko was standing in the middle, changing clothings.

The one-piece polka dot swimsuit with frills by the side was right at Shioriko's waist, and the sight of her snowy white back entered Koremitsu's eyes, who hurriedly rushed out.

“Ah, why did you suddenly enter, big brother! You're a pervert!”

Shioriko covered her flat chest with both hands, her face blushing as she protested.

“So-sorry!”

Koremitsu really hated the notion of having to apologize to others, and hated it when others apologize to him. At this point however, he had no choice but to apologize.

Shioriko hastily turned away.

“Y-you're really p-pe-perverted!”

She sneaked into Koremitsu's futon and opened the door to the bathroom while Koremitsu was bathing; all those were fine, but she looked regretful when Koremitsu saw her naked body, calling him a pervert over and over again.

“I told you already not to do so.”

(That's too late.)

Koremitsu saw Hikaru sighing away by the sight, and resisted the urge to lash out at the latter.

“Sorry. You were changing?”

And then, he turned around to apologize again.

“Uuu, I'm choosing the swimsuit to wear at the pool. Hikaru bought a lot of them last year. I told him that I don't need any of these, but Hikaru kept saying that they all suit me, and would keep giving me a gift-wrapped swimsuit every day.”

(Hikaru...your actions are basically that of a pervert's...)

How would the shop attendants think of a 9th grader buying swimsuits a 3rd grader.

If it were a pretty boy like Hikaru, even if he was buying an elementary school girl-sized purple bikini in a shop, the attendants would be rather understanding. *My, he is such a caring older brother*, they might compliment.

Hikaru looked blissful,

“Every single piece does suit Shiiko after all. I cannot pretend to ignore such a sight; whenever I pass by the swimsuit shop, I find that they all suit her very well.”

(That's just your own delusion. Also, a man shouldn't be lingering in front of a swimsuit shop, let alone pick the sizes of an elementary school kid.)

Koremitsu glared right at his floating friend.

“Uu”. After that, Shioriko groaned behind him.

“I've received enough presents to last me a lifetime, but these are all too small. I can't possibly wear them.”

“So you have grown, Shiiko.”

Hikaru looked touched as he narrowed his eyes.

(Why are your words so disgusting here.)

“Well, it's not like the swimsuits shrank. You've grown after all. It's your puberty, and it can't be helped, right?”

“Even so...”

Her voice got softer.

“...It's rare to get a chance to go out with you, big brother. I want to wear the most beautiful swimsuit and play all I want. These are all what Hikaru left for me.”

“Shiiko...”

Hikaru was dumbfounded.

How exactly does Hikaru think of that polka-dot one piece frill swimsuit?
Just when Koremitsu was lost thinking about this.

“In that case, I can only upload my photos on a lolicon online shop and sell them all.”

“Ack, aren't these what Hikaru left for you!?”

Koremitsu yelled back.

Hikaru too,

“Did I hear that correctly, Shiiko?”

Looked on grimly.

Shioriko barely managed to put on her swimsuit, but it was too small and tight fitting, causing her to shriek 'kya!'. She picked up the scattered swimsuits, cuddled them to the front of her chest, and covered her body.

Meanwhile, the slim-bodied Lapis continued to like its own feet coolly.

“I think, instead of looking at these swimsuits I can't wear, reminiscing and crying over what Hikaru, I might as well exchange these for money and get new swimsuits, and everyone's happy. The latter's more logical.”

She went straight to the point.

“The 2nd hand shops in town doesn't allow the sales of underaged stuff, but those weird online shops can sell them for a good price when done well. If Hikaru knows that I can use his presents in such a logical way, he'll definitely be happy.”

“Uu, well, if Shiiko can be happy here, I do not mind.”

“No, Hikaru will be devastated if he knows about it! He once wanted to groom you into a fine lady! A fine lady won't sell her own swimsuits at a weird shop! Anyway, pull yourself together and stop thinking of such ideas again!”

“But, the swimsuit...the pool...I have my own swimsuit for class...but, that kind of swimsuit won't get me any appeal, making me look like I'm an elementary school kid. It's not cute at all...won't I have lost here?”

What in the world are you thinking about? Koremitsu personally felt that an elementary school girl should wear such a swimsuit, but Shioriko really looked troubled at such a proposition, fidgeting away.

“Well, Shiiko is a girl after all. She wants to show her big brother her most beautiful side to her big brother after all, especially when it is her first time going out with him.”

Hikaru spoke up for Shioriko by the side. Koremitsu frowned, and said,

“I’ll buy one for you.”

An hour later.

Shioriko was beaming as she skipped about beside Koremitsu on the streets.

“You’ll help me choose one, right? Big brother?”

She frolicked.

“I don’t really know anything about a girl’s swimsuit.”

“It’s alright. I want to wear what you like.”

“Leave it to me, Koremitsu! I guess, well, a bright grassy green separate piece swimsuit should fit Shiiko very well. I do have a dilemma here, whether the sweet pea pink bikini or the snowdrop white one-piece will

showcase Shiiko's cuteness to its fullest. Ahh, I really feel wonderful to be able to choose Shiiko's swimsuit this year."

The sight of Hikaru being bashful was disgusting.

Both of them entered the swimsuit corner of the department store, and upon seeing Koremitsu, the staff members scowled.

A youth with red messy hair was glaring through the stores with an abnormally sharp glare; such a person would definitely be deemed as a dangerous person, and if not for Shioriko beaming so brightly beside him, he would have been whisked away for questioning.

Koremitsu was already used to seeing such stares, but it was somewhat unbearable for him to enter a women swimsuit counter. While he continued to lower his head and arch his back further, he heard a familiar voice.

"Ahh, seriously, which one do I choose? The purple one-piece here or the black bikini over there? Uu, I can't decide."

"You're so pretty, Hono. Any of these will suit you. It's rare to see you being so indecisive however. Normally, you're the one who made up your mind while I'm still thinking of what to pick."

"I'm betting on a woman's spirit here! I have to wear the best—swimsuit this summer!"

"The best swimsuit?"

“So-something that can make the breasts look big...”

“Hee? The breasts!?”

“He did say that he likes big breasts when I asked him whether he likes them large or small...uu, it doesn't matter. Anyway, I can't lose here.”

As expected, Honoka was standing in front of the changing room, peaking to a bespectacled girl, wearing a bright purple one-piece swimsuit.

The swimsuit emphasized the cleavage greatly, and the elegant curves from waist to legs were as radiant as before.

“This one is really good, Miss Shikibu. It shows the charms of a mature woman to the fullest extent! This is really wonderful!”

Hikaru's eyes were dazzling.

Honoka in turn noticed Koremitsu.

“Wah!”

And shrieked in shock.

“What's the matter, Hono? Uh, Mr Akagi!!”

The class representative with braided hair was stupefied as well upon seeing Koremitsu.

“Wh-wh-wh-wh-wh-wh-why are you at the women swimsuit corner, Mr Akagi!? Are you a swimsuit collector? Are you the type to put all sort of designs in a room, and even rub them on your face to stimulate something?”

“Stop thinking of others as a pervert and give me that condescending look! I'm here to accompany this fellow!”

Honoka and Michiru looked over at the girl beside Koremitsu, the skirt reaching the knees.

“Y-you're a lolicon after—”

“I'M NOT!!!”

Upon Koremitsu's glare, Michiru's shoulders shivered as she hid behind Honoka.

Honoka used her right hand to pull the changing room curtain and cover her body, her face flushed red as she looked at Koremitsu, her mind blank. She then looked over at Shioriko, showing a surprised look for an instant, before frowning.

On the other hand, Shioriko gave Honoka a childish, impish smile.

“It's nice to meet you. I'm Shioriko Wakagi, living with big brother Koremitsu and the rest. Are you Miss Shikibu?”

She lifted her head at Shikibu like an innocent bird.

Honoka's eyes faltered, and she greeted back with a smile.

“Yes. Hello there, Shiiko.”

“I-I'm Mr Akagi's class rep—”

Michiru too introduced herself, and upon hearing them, Shioriko showed a cuter smile.

Hikaru continued to marvel Shioriko's cuteness beside Koremitsu as he made a weird happy dance,

“Shiiko is so cute, she is an angel! A pixie!”

(What's going on? What's with this smile full of fighting spirit? It's Shikibu here, not some moneybag middle-aged man she likes here!)

While Koremitsu remained confused, Shioriko raised his hand with her slender arms.

And Honoka's eyebrows twithed.

“Thank you very much for allowing Shiiko here to go to the pool with you and big brother. I come here with big brother to pick a swimsuit. Oh yes, you say you want to choose the best swimsuit for me here, big brother Koremitsu.”

“Eh, I—!”

Right now Koremitsu was about to speak up, Honoka spoke in a tone shriller than usual.

“It must have been tough. Since it's tough for you to take care of a kid yourself, Akagi, I'll help you as well. It really takes a lot of effort to take care of a kid. Right, choose my swimsuit too.”

She loosened the hand that was grabbing the curtain, and undid the Pareo at her waist. With a crisp sound, the deep adult-like purple one-piece swimsuit revealed the slender waist and the long thighs.

She even reached her right foot forward to showcase the curves of her legs, placing a hand on her waist.

“This is fabulous, Miss Shikibu! It is like a Heliotrope basking under the sunlight, brimming with passion!”

Hikaru was effervescent with his praises, but Koremitsu wondered,

(What's going on? Why did the atmosphere become so intense out of a sudden?)

He was completely mystified.

Also, he had to choose Shioriko's swimsuit and Honoka's swimsuit. This was absurd.

“But I don't know anything about a girl's swimsuit!”

Though Koremitsu insisted, Honoka and Shioriko had their game face as they bombarded him with one question after another.

“Akagi! What about this? Does your heart race after seeing this?”

“Big brother? Which one do you prefer? This bikini or that one-piece?”

“You prefer the swimsuits that emphasizes more on the breasts, right? In that case, I'll go try that leopard stripe swimsuit. Wait for me.”

“Big brother, I'm done here. Tell me what you think.”

“Look, it's the leopard stripes, Akagi. Look and tell me what you think.”

Sweat was seeping from Koremitsu's forehead.

“Ahh, that's enough already. Shiiko, pick one with more fabric.”

“As for Shikibu...forget about the leopard stripes. Wait, don't take the zebra stripes!”

He ended up chiming in hastily.

Meanwhile, Hikaru floated above Koremitsu as he requested selfishly,

“Speaking of girls swimsuits, it is best if you choose something that matches their personalities. Oh yes, Koremitsu. The yellow one with flower patterns on it will definitely suit Shiiko well. There is a vinyl silver swimsuit over there! I want to see Miss Shikibu wearing it. Please, Koremitsu.”

(If you like it, go wear it yourself! You thoughtless ghost!)

“Why are you looking upwards, Akagi? Look at me!”

“Big brother! I can't tie the back. Help me here.”

“Ahh, Akagi...! I'm having trouble with the string on the waist!”

“Big brother! I can't take off the swimsuit. It's too tight. Help me!”

“Akagi! The skirt hook's caught on a string. It's uncomfortable rubbing on my leg, and...”

“Hono...I need to go for cram school...”



“Hurry Akagi!”

“Help me, big brother!”

There were calls from both changing rooms.

The store attendants were left aside, unable to approach.

Koremitsu continued to run around to help, grumbling in his mind,

(Argghh, seriously, like I know anything here! You girls might as well stick seashells on the top and bottom!!)



After returning home,

Koremitsu was seated cross-legged in his own room, his shoulders slumped heavily.

“...I'm never going to shop for gold, jewelry or such things again, and I'm never going to go shopping with girls again.”

What exactly was going on? Why would those two keep arguing like that?

While they were on the way home, Shioriko was clutching at the bag with the bikini inside.

“I can't lose.”

She whispered.

“I do find it enjoyable however. Miss Shikibu and Shiiko would actually have such a cute side to themselves. It really is quite a sight to me.”

“...Cute? Their eyes were bloodshot, goodness.”

Were they feeling emotional because it was the summer? If not, how else could he explain that strange tension going on?

“...I think I used up half of my summer vacation energy for this day alone. I still have to go to the pool with those two 2 days later. Ugh, can't this be finished faster?”

“You cannot let your be dejected, Koremitsu. I shall assist you however I can.”

“Heck, you'll just say things like 'that polka dot swimsuit is good, this high leg is good'.”

“Haha...that is a man's instincts.”

Koremitsu let out a deep sigh.

“Well, never mind. Speaking of which, it's about time we deal with your 'wishes'.”

“Ah, you still remember”

“Of course. I want this chatty ghost beside me to hurry up and depart into the afterlife. Let's just finish them over the summer vacations.”

“Uu, you are being so cold today, Koremitsu.”

Hikaru looked dejected.

“Like I care. Then? Who's the girl this time? Where is she?”

“Actually, I do apologize, but I do not know.”

“Eh?”

As Koremitsu widened his eyes, Hikaru beamed cheerfully, giving a sweet, cheerful smile that could cause many girls' hearts to flutter.

“I do not know anything about the girl's real name, her age, where she lives, her face, her voice, nothing at all.”

Coffee Shop Where the Riddles Assemble

(This day has finally arrived).

The 'Saffron' marked a final cross on the calendar with an orange fountain pen. She picked up the black seal coat hanging on the chair, which ostensibly had a spell that could calm her heart, and stroked it with her pale hand. She turned to the loyal servant who began serving her family since her mother's time, and even her grandmother's time.

“I'm eating outside for lunch.”

After informing the servant, she left the house.

(I wonder if the Mr. Polar Star still remembers about the promise between us...)

She first met him through the internet during the previous Autumn.

And the chance encounter occurred because a person called the Mr. Polar Star left a comment on the blog 'Saffron' set up.

'Saffron' uploaded photos of all sorts of herbs she painstakingly raised onto the blog, and Mr. Polar Star commented, “Your good friend Miss Lilian has quite the vast knowledge, and is refreshingly honest to others. It certainly is amazing.” Because of it, the duo started conversing with each other.

'Miss Lilian' is the affectionate nickname 'Saffron' gave to her Sage flowers.

There were other kinds of herbs at the house 'Saffron' tended to, and they had their unique names. There is the Miss Cosette for the Chamomiles, Mr. Rui for the Lemon Balms, Lady Shear for the Fennels, Mr. Philip for the Aloes, Miss Stellar for the Rosemaries.

'Saffron' had the habit of giving names to her plants and personal belongings ever since young, and to a few male blog fans, she was hailed for having an innocent cuteness. There were however a few who felt that she was 'airheaded', that 'she spends too much effort forcing a character upon herself'. Perhaps most of the latter were females who were jealous of her.

But neither the male nor female readers were interested in Miss Lilian and the herbs, but were interested in 'Saffron' herself.

The contents on the comment columns were mostly about 'Saffron's' personal matters.

If there were those who were interested in researching on herbs, they would probably visit the more professional blogs and websites.

'Saffron's' blog was divided into a daily life about the dear princess section by the readers. They naturally would not be concerned about those herbs

However, the Polar Bear would passionately give her advice, like 'Miss Lilian looks energetic like usual today', or 'Miss Cosette does not seem to be spry. You might want to try switching places'.

And so, after constant replies from 'Saffron', both of them exchanged their mail addresses, gradually becoming intimate.

--I do wish to meet you personally. There are some things I wish to tell you. Can we meet this time?

On this Spring, soon before the Golden Week, Mr. Polar Star made such an invitation.

After receiving this message, 'Saffron's heart practically ceased, the tip of her nose itching.

Was the 'there is something I wish to tell you', a love confession?

She had such a premonition right from the beginning.

The wordings the Polar Bear used in the messages sent to 'Saffron' were all so elegant, so romantic, like a gentle invitation.

But to meet the Mr. Polar Star offline?

Such a notion was a little terrifying to her.

From the mail messages, it seemed the Mr. Polar Star was a kind, somewhat cheeky person who would say some self-deprecating things at times, a man who loved to research on plants, and did not seem like a bad person.

However, if they were to meet offline, she wondered if he would be as frivolous sounding as he was in the messages.

And if Mr. Polar Star were to meet 'Saffron' in real life, what sort of thoughts would he have...?

She scratched her nose, feeling tense.

It was too scary!

She intended to reject this invitation as politely as possible, saying,

—If you are able to continue thinking about me before summer vacation, and if you can find me before summer vacation ends, I do not mind meeting you. I will also listen attentively to 'what you wish to say to me'.

And Mr. Polar Star in turn replied,

—Hm, I understand. It is a promise then. It will begin from the first Wednesday of summer vacation till the end of it. As for the location, let us set it at the shop which sells the red tea you like. I will be wearing a refreshing blue and white cap that reflects the summer sky, and until summer arrives, I will continue to yearn and think about it. In that case, no matter whether you are deep within the lush forests or the spacious grasslands, I will definitely find the amazing flower that is you.

He continued with his boastful words, but it was a sweet reply to 'Saffron'.

She was feeling exhilarated, and if she said something bad, to hide her true thoughts before summer vacation arrived, Mr. Polar Star probably would not wish to look for 'Saffron'.

On the other hand, even if Mr. Polar Star continued to think of 'Saffron' till the start of summer vacation, there was no way he could find her even if she showed up at the appointed place.

Definitely!

But there was no need to worry as such. Ever since Golden Week ended, Mr. Polar Star had ceased to exchange messages with her, and he never left any comments on the blog.

It was unknown what happened to him, but if he were someone who could read the mood, he would certainly understand the intention, that 'Saffron' did not wish to meet him, and would lose interest in her.

But either way, it was too early for him to back off.

Would it not be better to continue clinging onto her?

She could not deny that she had such thoughts, but she really was delighted that he gave up on her halfway through.

Even if she were to appear at the shop during summer vacation as promised, there was no way Mr. Polar Bear would appear at the shop again.

That was fine.

“But why did I end up coming to this shop anyway?”

The red tea shop 'Bonne Chance' was plain and cute, ostensibly a reconstruction of a fairy tale brought to life. 'Saffron' stood at the door dejectedly.

The rife summer sun shone upon her from above with ferocity.

“Mr. Polar Star definitely forgot about the promise. Better go back early.”

But, what if—

If Mr. Polar Star did abide by the promise.

If he were to wear a refreshing blue and white cap, and appear in front of 'Saffron'.

The tip of her nose started to itch.

“I-I think...I'll have a look just for today.”

Right. Neither Mr Polar Bear or anyone else would know that she was 'Saffron'.

(I'll wait...just for today.)

Only for today.

It was rare that she came by.

(Mr-Mr. Polar Bear does give the impression of a prince who always says such amazing stuff in his messages. He probably is a NEET, a herbivore of a shut-in who is unpopular, with a big belly, dimples on his face, a man who girls back away from, calling him 'disgusting'. He'll definitely disappoint me...but.)

She stepped into the shop, waiting for him as she heard her heart race. The shop had just opened for the day, and there were no other customers.

1, 2 hours passed, and there were people entering, sitting on the country-styled wooden chairs. The waitress girls were wearing white aprons, dressed in the famous cute, antique uniforms the hems of the aprons and skirts swaying about.

But the man with blue and white cap had yet to arrive.

(He won't come.)

(He won't be coming anyway.)

(Yeah. I don't want to meet him—but I do want to see him once.)

There were conflicted emotions surging within her, and her heart was practically about to break, the tip of her nose itching for some reason.

At that moment,

“Welcome!”

The bell at the door chimed, and there entered a male customer, a rarity at that.

He had a refreshing blue and white cap akin to that of the summer.

“!”

(I-is that—)

'Saffron' gasped.

Even the waitress who greeted him cheerfully shuddered her shoulders in shock.

And the other customers froze.

(Mr. Polar Star...is a shut-in...unpopular, herbivore...)

Standing at the door was a lanky person, whose back was arched, an abnormally sharp glare staring throughout the shop, had messy red hair, a stiff face, raised eyebrows—a youth who resembled a wild savage dog.



(Eh, why are the customers all females here?)

Koremitsu carefully examined the store, and his frown deepened.

His disgust was burning, for he saw that it was a foreign farm-styled shop that was very popular with girls. Both the interior and exterior gave a plain,

cute image; the wooden tables and chairs gave a sense of comfort, and the walls were decorated with refreshing scenery paintings. There were also some flowers and greens in sleek looking pots, placed at the windows.

There was a calm looking middle-aged man at the counter, probably the shopkeeper. His eyes were widened at Koremitsu while holding the pot of imported red tea.

The waitresses dressed in fluttering white apron gave Koremitsu icy looks.

It was the same for the customers. There was a group of girls occupying a table, discussing so rabidly about the latest fashion trends, only to remain silent, the voices stuck in their throats. There was a customer who placed her bag on a seat beside her, ready to open the newspapers, only to use the newspapers to cover her face. Another big sister was seated at a single seat table, drinking her tea as she fiddled with her phone; the fingers holding the cup shuddered slightly. A young girl of similar age was seated in the far-most corner of the shop, browsing through a pocket novel, stopped as well, giving Koremitsu an icy, spiteful look.

(Argh, looks like these are the only young girls.)

Koremitsu recalled the words Hikaru said the previous day.

—I do not know anything about the girl's real name, her age, where she lives, her face, her voice, nothing at all.—

The ghost, which had caused him all sorts of trouble, said so with a nonchalant look.

—*What's going on now?*

Koremitsu's temples were trembling intensely as he got up to roar. And then, he was notified by a chuffed Hikaru that the duo became acquaintances through the internet.

—*I knew of a blog called the 'Sunset blue', also called the 'sunset meeting', being quite popular amongst male readers, saying that it was very cute, littered with bits and pieces of the author's daily life. It is a popular blog many people pay attention to.*

In fact, Koremitsu went on to access the 'Sunset Blue' through his cellphone.

And soon, he arrived at a blog with an intricate light blue background at the brink of sunset.

The blog owner was called 'Saffron'.

It seemed to be an online ID.

—*When both of us were conversing with each other, I would call her 'Miss Saffloer'*

—*Miss Saffloer?*

—*Yes. She said that the name is only used by those who are more intimate with her. She interprets this as the 'summer meeting', and so, I became her captive.*

—'Sunset meeting'? What's that?

—This probably is a new term she came up after thinking about it, perhaps? Miss Saffloer is designated as a princess of a country with a sunset blue sky.

—Ahahah? Princess? The type that wants a flower ring on her, that? That's an airhead if I see one.

In response to Koremitsu's acrimony, Hikaru grimaced.

—Girls always have dreams of being the princess. Even Miss Shikibu, so feisty against men, started writing a cellphone blog called the 'Purple Princess', no?

Now that he mentioned it, that seemed to be the case.

Since the conversation involved Honoka, who often helped Koremitsu out, the latter had no choice but to fall back.

—Well...everyone does have their own moments of fantasies. As long as it doesn't cause trouble for others, I guess it's fine whether they're the princesses or goddesses or whatever. I just can't understand them either way.

—Miss Saffloer probably is the type of person who attends a rich girls school with its own elevators, and wears a coat because of the cold. She always thinks of McDonalds and Kentucky as human names, has nothing she can never take part in, attends all her harp practices without fail, her

clothes are order-to-make, she often visits all sorts of famous tourist spots, like Parco, 109, Laforet. She even gives all sorts of nicknames to the herbs she grows in the garden. All these brought her cute innocent self to life, and she became famous.

Koremitsu surfed through the blog's diary, and found a black seal coat draped over an old bench, an old looking harp, the Miss Cosette for the Chamomiles, and the Mr. Rui for the Lemon Balms.

At this point, Koremitsu's face soured.

—You see? There is some part of Miss Saffloer's hair taken here. It really is a nice flowing black hair, right? The curves of the chin are perfect.

Hikaru chimed in enthusiastically as he pointed at the photo.

Though there was some taken, it was just a bit. Nobody could be certain to her body type and appearance.

—This little bit of exposure does gripe a man's heart, no? I understand the reason why Miss Saffloer's blog is so popular amongst the male readers. She definitely is the type that is shy and innocent, certainly a wonderful lady, one I cannot help but imagine. Ahh, but I really wish to meet Miss Saffloer in real life; it is causing my heart to race.

Hikaru narrowed his eyes slowly, his cheeks flushed.

(Goodness gracious, don't just date anyone without knowing how she looks like!)

And in his amazement, he arrived at the appointed shop.

The waitresses in the shop stood still, and nobody led him to a seat. Thus, he had no choice but to pick a random table to sit at.

The surrounding customers peeked at Koremitsu, pretending to be nonchalant.

Koremitsu clicked his tongue as he whispered.

“How about it, Hikaru? Anyone who looks like Saffloer here?”

Hikaru continued to float above Koremitsu's head, looking around.

“Hm...this is tough as there are a lot of girls. All of them are so cute...”

What off-topic stuff are you thinking about? As Koremitsu wondered, “Ah!”, Hikaru exclaimed.

“You found Saffloer?”

“No, but I found someone more amazing.”

(Someone amazing?)

“At the table with the houseplant there...”

Koremitsu turned over to stare, and was stupefied.

As it was a blind spot when he entered, he never noticed, but there was a male-female pair seated at the couple's seat.

The man was frowning hard, forming wrinkles on his noble-looking face, and the lady was an aloof-looking beauty--

(Ack, aren't they Tōjō and Saiga!?)

Why are those two here!?

Both of them were being so close, looking as if they deliberately chose to sit together like that. However, neither of them looked happy as they remained silent.

Asai was staring at the notepad computer, looking rather feeble. On the other hand, Tōjō's stare had never left the cellphone screen.

“Are Asa and Mr. Shungo actually dating...but those two do not seem like the type to develop relationships to such an extent. Asa always calls Mr. Shungo 'Mr. Shungo', something peers refer each other to. Mr. Shungo in turn does take care of both Asa and Miss Aoi since young, and the fact that Miss Aoi always complains to Asa first should be a dispute between them—”

Hikaru started analyzing things.

(Hey, stop using the term 'dating'. I can't imagine that!)

Just when cold sweat was trickling.

“Welcome. Please look at the menu.”

A shy, stiff voice tickled Koremitsu's ears, and the most amazing person was standing in front of him.



“Aoi...!”

“*Miss Aoi!*”

The waitress was dressed in a neat uniform with a white frilly apron, her cheeks blushing. Standing in front of them was the princess who was formerly betrothed to Hikaru, Aoi Saotome.



The summer sunset shone upon the narrow, steep street, dyeing it a golden color—Aoi was dressed in her personal clothing as she walked out.

Once she spotted Koremitsu waiting for her outside, her face became red again as she slowly spoke,

“Sorry to keep you waiting.”

Her black, silky hair was untied, swaying along with the wind.

“Oh...”

Koremitsu simply answered her as she lowered her head slightly, and they strolled down the street under the sunset.

(Great that Tōjō and Saiga went back first.)

Because of those two, he was able to walk alone with Aoi like this after her work.

It seemed they were very busy as they scuttled off soon after. Before he left, Tōjō even stared at Koremitsu for a little while.

“I have already arranged for a car to pick up Aoi. You do not have to send her home personally after her work is done. Also, no personal chatter when she is working.”

He added those words with emphasis.

However, Koremitsu ignored Tōjō's words as he said to Aoi, who was serving him red tea.

“...Can we talk after you're done with work?”

He asked softly. Aoi's shoulders shivered in shock as she looked over at Koremitsu in surprise. She rushed back to the counter, and returned to Koremitsu with her face flushed, leaving a note on his table.

There was a neat line of words written on it,

“I am done with my work at 5. Can you please wait for me at the back door after that?”

After leaving the shop, Koremitsu whispered to Aoi, who was leaning her head towards him,

“Tōjō said that there's a car waiting for you. It's alright there, right”

Aoi stammered as she walked on.

“Well...he is following us all this while.”

“!”

Koremitsu turned around, and found a posh black car maintaining a distance of 10m away from them, slowly moving forward.

During this time, there appeared a ghost above his head, the sunset shining through his fringe. Koremitsu inadvertently placed his hand on his head.

“So-sorry about that. I did ask the driver to go back first, but he told me that he cannot do so. Well, after some negotiating, he did promise to not say anything about me going home with you to Big brother and Asa. I do not think Asa will begrudge you anymore. So, erm, about that behind us, please do not mind what is behind us.”

There was no way Aoi could see Hikaru at all, but after hearing her say those words, “*uu*” Hikaru was pressing at his chest.

“Ah, you will still be distracted after all. Sorry, sorry about that.”

“It's nothing...”

Koremitsu lowered his hand, and said with a bitter look.

“I'm already used to having others notice me, so it's fine. I think the driver's worried about your safety too, trying his best to be your bodyguard. It's quite a rarity, isn't it.”

Ever since the incident with Kazuaki, it might not be a bad thing to be overly wary. Though it was difficult to mention such things to Aoi herself, she knew the significance behind those words. She however seemed confused about certain things, and lowered her head, saying,

“Yes...but I...I am too useless, always being protected by others...”

Her slender shoulders sagged weakly.

Hikaru too watched her worriedly. Upon seeing this, Koremitsu felt a slight aching in his chest.

The incident with Kazuaki probably left her with quite the shock.

“I suppose you started working part-time because of that.”

Aoi closed her lips tightly.

After some silence, she answered with a soft yet determined voice.

“I do not think it is good to be as I am up till now. I have to be stronger...I must at least be someone who can settle my own matters. I want to be a person who is decisive and honest...”

She then lifted her face, and forced a smile.

“But I kept failing even till now. It is great that I made up my mind to go out to work. I now know that there are many things I do not know of, many

things I cannot do. After that, I will learn to do things I have yet to learn, and try things I cannot do. I shall continue to work hard.”

Koremitsu thought that Aoi was a princess who was innocent to the ways of the world, who would die if nobody reached their hands out to her and protect her. But at this point...

He looked back at Aoi with intense feelings.

So Aoi, who kept replying 'I am alright' at the end of every message to Koremitsu, was seriously thinking about this matter, and starting to take action.

Upon thinking about it, he felt solace in his heart, a sweetness filling it.

“Amazing.”

“I-it is not that great.”

“No, you're already quite strong now, Aoi. I'll continue to support you.”

“Thank you very much.”

She clasped her hands in front of her chest, thanking him delightedly, before puffing her cheeks.

(Wh-what's the matter?)

Just when Koremitsu was feeling confused regarding her expression as she looked up at him,

“I wanted to see you again after I managed to improve myself, Mr. Akagi. I did not expect to meet you today.”

She said remorsefully.

“I even told big brother Shungo not to say anything about it.”

She grumbled, and shyly lifted her head, giving a demure look.

“But you came to the shop today, Mr. Akagi. We can chat like this on the way back, and I have you encouraging me.”

As he watched the eyes that were staring right at him, Koremitsu recalled the girl that was his first love.

—I won't run away. You told me that, Akagi.

—This time, I will not run away. I am going to go for it.

The girl embarked on a journey to make herself stronger, like a feeble, fleeting light that seemed to flicker in the darkness in that instance.

—Thank you, I'm fine.

The memories of the farewell locked within his heart were being awakened, even the sight of his teary face, forcing a smile. His heart was filled with conflicted emotions.

“No, I guess I entered that shop out of coincidence...”

He endured the throbbing in his heart, and stammered.

Aoi got on the sedan at the fork under the sunset, and the driver gripped onto the steering wheel, leading her home.

It probably was going to rain. The wind was slightly heavy due to the humidity, and Hikaru combed his hair with his hand, saying calmly,

“Miss Aoi is slowly changing here...it is something really incredible, and I want to cheer her on, but...”

He remained silent, and revealed a faint smile,

“I do feel a little lonely after all.”

There was sadness in the eyes that watched Aoi disappear into the distance.

Koremitsu could empathize with the loneliness Hikaru felt, for he watched Yū depart from him. To break the gloomy atmosphere, he spoke out loudly,

“Stop looking so bothered here. Don't we still have your wishes? Our schedule's messed up due to the shock of seeing Aoi there. We haven't found out who Saffron is; we're definitely going to find who that sunset blue princess is tomorrow!”



“A-argh, I can't believe it...! That cheating man!”

Once she reached home, 'Saffron' dashed straight to her room, threw her bag onto the bed, and yelled with her face flushed, the tip of nose buzzing.

She thought that the Polar Star was an unpopular herbivore, but she was utterly shocked to learn that he was a wild boy with red hair and a lupine glare, her heart nearly ceasing.

What was more infuriating to her however was that he was supposed to meet her, the "Saffron", but was more concerned with the waitress in the shop.

That waitress had her dangling black hair tied to the back, and 'Saffron', watching by the sidelines, could tell that she had white delicate skin and a clear pair of eyes. She was a girl with such cuteness and beauty, she was practically a doll.

(B-but...even when he was ordering stuff, the eyes after that...never left her after that. Is that what it means to be love at first sight? Is my promise with him insignificant now? Have I been forgotten?)

That was not all.

That red-haired boy secretly whispered some words to the cute waitress when the latter served him some tea, causing her to blush, scamper off, and return to put a note on his table.

'Saffron' even saw him read the note on the table seriously.

(A-a-a-a-a-a-a-a-a-a-and after that, they even gave each other a few looks, did some hand signs...!)

Was he trying to woo her?

Speaking of which, the girl was actually preoccupied by such a gruff, wild boy. Did she have a beast fetish or something? She met up with the red-haired boy at the back door after their work was done, and went off with quite the amicable mood.

One had to wonder whether they knew each other as they kept a slight distance walking under the sunset, looking shy. 'Saffron' hid behind the signboard as she watched their back, her nose buzzing as she watched them leave.

In such a situation, her body would probably sizzle due to anger. Other than her ostensibly scorched nose, the typically docile 'Saffron' was frosted all over, probably due to the powerful air conditioning in the room.

Either way, she was not in a good mood.

“It-it's really unbelievable...is-is Mr. Polar Star that kind of person...!? Isn't Mr. Polar Star really a shut-in herbivore of a guy who backs away from girls and not dare approach them? Him, well, it's too much to call him a beast. The blue and white cap is too refreshing, doesn't fit him at all! I got bluffed!”

She groaned as she walked into a large room that was wide open.

(He sent me that message with so many meanings behind it, telling me that there's something he wishes to tell me, saying such cool things like 'no matter whether you are deep within the lush forests or the spacious grasslands, I will definitely find the amazing flower that is you.'")

“I really, really shouldn't have trusted him!”

After lashing out furiously, she calmed down, both mentally and physically.

She took the black seal coat on the bench, draped it over herself, and shivered.. It was summer, yet this chill was different from the usual. Leaving aside the fact that she was scared of the cold, she probably was feeling wintry due to the events that transpired on this day.

Her heart sank, and her body never warmed up in the slightest.

—XX had always been cute, huh?

Mr. Shūhei's voice rang at her ears.

Calm down. That steady voice said.

And then, the voice again repeated what Mr Polar Star said back then.

—The name Mignon is given to a cute girl.

Her eyes were staring at the black seal coat, reaching out her clenched hands, spacing out as the lowered bangs nearly covered her face.

(I suppose Mr Shūhei is the only one on this world who would call me cute after all...yes, with a nose like mine...)

She lowered her head dejectedly—

“N-never mind.”

She then patted and lifted her face.

“H-h-h-h-h-h-he probably has no intention for seeing me. I won't be going tomorrow. Mr Polar Star managed to woo someone; he pr-probably won't be coming back, I guess...”



The next day, Koremitsu arrived at the shop at 9am, right after the doors were opened. He picked a seat where he could spread his legs wide, sat down, and started observing the customers.

He did not have much time to spare, for he promised to bring Honoka and Shioriko to the pool in the afternoon.

There was a customer in the shop, seat by the toilet, reading the newspaper and rubbing her face from time to time. There was a girl reading a pocket novel at the wall, and a group of girls gossiping away regarding the latest fashion trends.

The customer reading the newspapers suddenly stood up, pulled the curtain, and returned to her seat, wiping her face. She was inadvertently

tensed, probably due to a savage hound with a sharp glare in the shop.
“This place specializes in tea and cake!” “Eh? It's enjoyable, isn't it?” Two girls were chatting away, about to enter, but were terrified upon seeing Koremitsu's eyes. “It-it's too crowded here. Let's change to another place, okay?” “Y-yes, let's do so.” they scampered off.

(Tch, I didn't come to this shop filled with sweets because I like it. A cup of red tea can't last me two hours.)

Whether it was 'Saffron' or 'Saffloer, he just wanted to find the person whom Hikaru made a promise with, and end this matter.

“Hey, anything about Saffron?”

He continued to observe his surroundings as he whispered to Hikaru softly.

Hikaru was seated on the chair beside Koremitsu, watching the latter who wore a blue, white cap and a refreshing getup of white-based clothing. He even lifted the cup from the tea set (?) to pronounce the mood, “*Hm, let me think.*”, he said, showing those sweet looking eyes.

“Miss Saffloer leaves all her laundry to a personal maid, and likes to collect all sorts of accessories, and really treasures them greatly, as far as I can tell from her blog. She even gave names to her earrings and necklaces. Such a cute girl, is she not? There was once where she bought a brooch she really liked from a bunch of sunstone accessories, and even after thinking hard about it, could never come up with a name for it, so she once asked me, 'Can you please help me out here, Mr Polar Star'?”

It seemed Hikaru had given himself the online nickname Mr Polar Star, abstaining from terms like harem prince, shining beauty and such.

“I called it Mignon. In French, it means cute. Miss Saffloer said that Mignon looks like it is smiling when placed on her chest, and cannot send me a photo due to embarrassment. She also said that since Mr Polar Star came up with this name, she would treasure it well and wear it only on special occasions. I could not tell whether she was being deliberate, or she was innocently honest when she said that, but I felt a throbbing sensation.”

(I can't use that as reference!)

It seemed this Saffron was certainly an airhead living in her own world, to give names to plants, and even her accessories. In contrast, Hikaru too was certainly another lost cause for being able to chat with her so amicably.

(Both of you are so alike. If you're able to continue talking with her like that, can you receive her electric signals or something? Also, stop asking for a photo of a girl's chest, you lecherous, frivolous prince!)

And all his enthusiasm had waned.

On one hand, he wanted to hurry and settle the matter here. On the other hand, he was overtly concerned by Aoi, moving about clumsily with the tea set tray in hand.

Aoi again had her hair tied up, and was dressed in a frilly white apron, her cheeks looking tense as she worked hard. As to be expected of a pampered

princess, it was obvious that she was incompetent in such things, either toppling the tray or dropping the cups, sometimes even tripping over a few customers' feet. She was often lowering her head, apologizing.

(Eh, she's exerting too much strength in her shoulder, no? Her movements are still. Ah, she's too nervous trying to prevent the tea from pouring out of the cup; well, I can't say that I don't understand. You won't be able to watch your surroundings if you only look at the cups. Ah, damn it, her leg hit the chair. Argh, it hurts, right? That's why I say to look around—)

Aoi would space out at one moment, topple the cups at another, and scare the customers the next moment. During this time, Koremitsu's temples were throbbing.

At the same time, Tōjō, seated at the table with the houseplant, had his face covered with the cellphone, always reacting to Aoi's actions, standing and sitting down from time to time.

There was once where a male customer called Aoi over to make an order, and until she finished listening to the order, Aoi looked as if she would be killed if she did not do as he had asked.

On the other hand, Asai was seated at the table adjacent to Tōjō's, using the notebook computer. Unlike Tōjō however, she would turn her head around from time to time, not staring at Aoi intently, but watching on with a cold look of disdain. She seemed to ponder, and suddenly reached for the keyboard, typing at it furiously. It seemed from the frosty aura she was emitting that she was not in a good mood.

(Saiga came to this shop just because she's worried about Aoi, huh?)

Saiga and Tōjō would whisper some words from time to time. Even so, they continued to look forward.



“It seems the Shimizus are joining the Roses. The lady amongst them has the bloodline of the 'right', and has close ties with the Roses.”

Tōjō continued to pretend to twiddle with his cellphone as he whispered in a voice audible only for Asai to hear.

Typically, they would not be conversing in a place with so many people present. There was no reason for them to come to this shop just to dily-dally. However, they both had the common view that Aoi was not to leave their sights, and having appointed themselves as Aoi's guardians, both of them came here to check on her work condition, and did not intend for her to be heard.

There rang an icy voice behind him.

“Even if the current master is a member of the Roses, and the eldest male is to marry the Higashihara that is part of the Roses...this will bring us lots of benefits.”

“That may be the case, but the Wisterias are not to be cut off.”

“ ... ”

“If we reveal that at the perfect timing, it be the decisive moment for this victory. The problem however is the attitude of the commander...what will happen if that happens.”

“...I do not think...it will be a good thing...Kazuaki has yet to take action now, but it seems he is planning something.”

“How can we give up here?”

“...We have a 50% chance of winning. But there will be a problem.”



(Tōjō and Saiga are looking serious here. What are they talking about? Speaking of which, if they want to talk, why aren't they sitting together?)

Koremitsu watched the duo whisper amongst themselves, and beside him, Hikaru was looking ecstatic as he continued to reminiscence his memories with Saffron, It got to a point where he was practically in a trance, dazzling as he spoke, like a prince from the Middle Ages.

“I think that Miss Saffloer is someone hidden amongst the thorns. That is the part that makes her most alluring.”

“Thorns? Why talk about that?”

Koremitsu asked with a wry look, and Hikaru's eyes became gentler, clearer—his face showing a matured smile.

“Her words have some hidden thorns in them, I suppose. That sort of prickly feeling does make me excited.”

“You're a pervert after all.”

Koremitsu could only shrug his shoulders weakly.

(No, this guy's undoubtedly a pervert. I don't want to be discouraged by such a thing myself.)

“Speaking of which, what kinds of women do you think are weird?”

“Hm, this is a difficult one.”

Just when Koremitsu thought that Hikaru was showing a serious look.

“All the girls in this shop are really cute. You see the rightmost girl amongst that group of high school girls? The vigorous girl dressed in the sunflower yellow T-shirt—that girl is called Kae, and I heard she is trying to diet using chocolate. It is a method to eat 200g of dark chocolate when having a meal. The pink Primula like girl with the cute round face is called Miyanon by everyone, and she only tries a new hairstyle, dye her hair during the summer vacation. The girl opposite her with the fluttering tunic, that Eustoma-like girl has a devoted crush on Mr Mitamura from her class, and wants to invite him out to the fireworks festival next week. She is asking everyone else for help—”

(...This guy is really...)

Koremitsu tried to restrain himself from throwing the cup on the table as best as he could.

“Every single flower has its own charisma. I suppose I should listen in on everyone's mail addresses here, and investigate them thoroughly.”

“Hey, I'm not here to woo a girl. Start looking for her seriously.”

Koremitsu was clenching his fists as he said, and Hikaru grinned, excusing himself with a sweet, gentle voice.

“But I am looking. If I can listen in on the girls' conversation, that is a form of information collecting, no?”

“That just your own personal interests, you Casanova of a ghost.”

“How rude. I am observing them while pondering about who Miss Saffloer is right now. For example, that intellectual looking girl seated at the wall with the clear eyes just peeked at you, Koremitsu. Ah, you see?”

(The wall...?)

He turned over to that direction, and as Hikaru had said, the girl reading the pocket novel at the wall was staring at Koremitsu with clear ears.

She had long flowing black hair that reached her shoulders, was dressed in a white blouse, and gave a similar impression to the gaze in her eyes, one full of calmness. Once her eyes met Koremitsu's she averted them naturally, reading her pocket novel again.

“That Tolstoy's collection of Poems is an original copy. It is simply amazing that she is able to read Russian without the need of a dictionary. She had been drinking Mint Tea both today and yesterday. It really gives her a Miss Mint type of impression that matches her image really well.”

Hikaru noted jubilantly.

Never mind. Ever since he entered the shop, Hikaru had been lively and cheery while looking for 'Saffron'.

(This guy really likes women.)

But in contrast, Koremitsu was somewhat intrigued by the fact that the girl peeked at him. He looked over, and got ready to get up.

“!”

The maid who came up to refill his water was terrified, and covered her face by raising the pot filled with water.

(Eh?)

What? Did I do something to her?

“D-do you need some ice water?”

The waitress asked with a shrill voice, one so unnatural one had to wonder how it happened.

The pot was still covering her face, guarding it at all costs.

“A-ahh, yeah, thanks.”

Koremitsu felt that there was a hitch, but answered as such.

“Pl-please enjoy yourself. Ohoho.”

And once the water was pot, she scampered off with the pot covering her face.

“What exactly is going on here?”

It was common for him to be feared and shunned by the girls. But this was too straightforward, no?

“I am a customer here after all.”

Koremitsu muttered.

“I am sure she must have been touched by your wild charms.”

Hikaru advised. However, such an innocent smile and wink had the opposite effect of draining him.

(Whose fault is it that I ended up like this?)

“Ah, goodness, I feel like I have been hated here.”

In such a relaxed atmosphere, surely there was no way a wild beast could linger here?

“Hey, Hikaru, tell me Saffron's mail address. I'll just contact her directly. Given that it is you, you would have memorized a girl's mail address, right?”

“Eh, y-yes.”

Hikaru was observing the girls with his hands on his hips, or rather, affirming who the real girl was, perhaps? Once he heard Koremitsu's unsentimental words and saw the latter fish out his cellphone with a serious look, he slowly recited Saffron's mail address.

Koremitsu started to input the words.

“Hey, you're here, right? Stop wasting my time and hurry over here.”

He typed out such a message, and pressed the send button.

“Wa-wait a moment, Koremitsu? A girl will not come over here if such a violent message is sent to her. You have to be more romantic, more elegant in your wordings, like for example, 'the evening mist had yet to fade, and you are a little unkind. My heart shall gain peace when the rain falls. Can you let this pitiful me see your gentle self?', something like that—did I not give you such a lecture regarding Yū?”

“Shut up. It's not raining right now. A little intimidation is required to make such a troublesome woman appear!”

“Ahh, my image...”



'Saffron' was confused

You got to be kidding! He came back!

Soon after opening the door, a wild hound-like boy with red hair, wearing a blue-white cap, was seated in the shop, observing the incoming customers.

(Wh-wh-wh-wh-wh-wh-why? Hasn't he lost interest in 'Saffron'?)

Is he targeting that cute doll-like waitress this time?

Certainly this seemed to be the case, he must have been here for her. However, why did he wear the blue-white cap that was meant to see 'Saffron', and even glaring at the entering customers with such a look?

He seemed like a police superintendent observing every hook and nook left behind at the scene of the crime. No, he seemed more like a bandit ready to commit a robbery.

(It feels like he's very frustrated. He's also muttering alone to himself. It-it-it-it-it-it's scary!)

Once she saw that he was noticing him, 'Saffron's heart practically ceased at that instant.

The red-haired savage raised his eyebrows, his temples twitching, and muttered to himself again as he fished out his cellphone.

Soon after.

'Saffron's cellphone vibrated.

“!”

She received an anonymous message.

The sender was Mr Polar Star.!

Her nose was itchy, and she opened this message with her trembling fingers.

“Hey, you're here, right? Stop wasting my time and hurry over here.”

(He-he-he-he's actually fuming. He-he's definitely angry now!)

What should she do? If she were to appear using her identity as 'Saffron', she would definitely be robbed of all the valuables she had, be threatened with something like 'this isn't enough', and might even be dumped onto a fishing boat.

(Ca-ca-calm down. How can 'Saffron' reply now under such a situation? Right, calm down. It's fine. 'Saffron' is a love expert. If I continue to shudder, that wild beast will notice that I am 'Saffron'.)

She quickly replied.

“I certainly am here, and I can clearly see that unhappy look of yours as you stare at the screen. The blue-white cap over that red hair of yours certainly is eye-catching, but is a mismatch for that refreshing feeling, no?”



There was a reply from 'Saffron' !

Koremitsu widened his eyes in shock, and stared at the cellphone screen.

Hikaru too peeked in from the side.

“Ugh, what does she mean that I don't match that refreshing look? What mismatch? Such a busybody.”

Koremitsu curled his lips to a frown.

But there was no doubt 'Saffron' was in the shop.

(Which once is ishe?)

He had already looked through everyone present once.

There was a person fiddling her cellphone amongst the chatty group of high school girls.

(Is that her?)

“Look, this is the newest video of my Mr Lucky! He's really amazing, right?”

“Wow, he's biting the frisbee and twisting his waist. Lucky is really amazing.”

“His tail is wagging, right?”

“Let's upload it onto a video site, Kae. Call it the 'waist twisting Tanuki!'”

So that Lucky was a Tanuki after all!? Not a dog!? Can Tanukis be raised in the residential area!?

Koremitsu retorted in his heart.

He gritted his teeth, letting out a grinding sound, his shoulders trembling as he suppressed his fury. The customer reading the newspaper was probably terrified by such a scene as she opened the papers wide, shut the blinders, and wiped her face with a hand towel.

Not too far away from her was the suspicious waitress who served him cold water. She seemed to be up to something.

“Miss Sueko.”

Another waitress called her, startling her in the process.

“I-I-I-I-I'll get going!”

She answered shrilly, and strut sideways to the counter like a crab.

She even looked around tensely.

The girl reading the original edition of Tolstoy's book at the wall was holding the cellphone in her slender fingers, staring at the screen calmly.

That girl lifted her stare from the screen, and looked over at Koremitsu.

It was a direct, refreshing expression.

“It seems Miss Mint just looked at her phone.”

Hikaru muttered.

Koremitsu too leaned forward.

The girl immediately looked away from Koremitsu, closed her cellphone, and continued reading her phone, leaving the frosty sidelong face to be seen.

(Is that Saffron?)

Koremitsu watched the black hair that draped to her shoulders, the white face and the refreshing sidelong look, and was about to get up.

“Big brother Koremitsu!”

A cute voice resounded, and a pretty girl with twintails and a floral hairclip came scampering over to him, her twintails swaying in the air. She had a large vinyl bag hanging from her shoulders and a green pochette swaying about.

“Oh, Shiiko.”

After the radio exercise was over in the morning, Shioriko finished the dodgeball practice for the annual district tournament .

“Ahh, seriously. Why do they have to get the elementary school kids to take part in some dodgeball tournament when it's the hottest time in the summer? The 4th and 5th graders are even forced to take part; even if it's because of declining birth rates or a severe lack of participants, it's tyranny!”

She had been grumbling ever since she left the house.

“But well, if it's today, we're going to the pool later.”

However, her mood improved immediately.

“See you later then, big brother!”

And then, she ran off with fervor, waving her hand.

Koremitsu was supposed to meet Honoka and Shioriko outdoors after the dodgeball practice was over, but Shioriko was cuddling Koremitsu by his neck, sitting on his lap, giving a blissful chuckle as she said,

“Heh heh, I couldn't wait, so I came by here.”

“Ack, don't hug me here, and stop sitting on my lap! That's rude!”

All the stares in the shop were focused on Koremitsu.

None of them had the 'this sibling relationship really is really a great thing' thought, for all they saw was a lecherous psychopath who seduced a young little girl.

Tōjō and Saiga, whispering amongst themselves, were also left speechless as they stared at Koremitsu coldly. Aoi, serving tea earnestly, widened her eyes, and then fidgeted, recalling that she should not be distracted.

The waitresses and customers were all giving him conflicted looks.

“This is terrible, everyone is look over here, Koremitsu! Shiiko is just too cute after all!”

Hikaru chimed in zealously, like a foolish big brother going off point.



(What? What? A loli? That's a loli, right?)

The twintail black-haired girl that seemed to pop out from a pretty girl anime was sitting on the beast's lap, fawning at it as it cradled the neck.

She clearly was an elementary school student. It was a kissy-missy with the doll-like waitress the previous day, and now an elementary school girl on this today

Speaking of which, when they were talking about herbs, Mr Polar Star did mention that the Chamomile was cute like the pure girls, and talked about

wanting to twist the cheeks of Miss Saffloer's Miss Milfie like a little girl's silky skin. Clearly this fitted the description...

(Is-is that his true nature? Is Mr Polar Star a lolicon!?)

You Don't Do Goin' to the Pool with Women!

The meeting place was near the pool entrance

Shioriko latched her milky white arm around Koremitsu's, probably due to the excitement at the prospect of going to the pool.

This aspect however clearly highlighted her innocence and cuteness as a child.

“Listen up, don't sit on my lap in the middle of the public.”

“Got it.”

She answered obediently.

Honoka was the first to arrive, and was waiting for Koremitsu's group. This was the second time he saw her dressed in casual wear, but on this day, she was dressed in a sleeveless summer knit and a slim pair of pants. The ridiculously large earrings and pendant matched the brilliant summer, and her great figure, coupled with the long, refined legs, made her a resembling fashion model.

After seeing Shioriko latch onto Koremitsu's arm by the side, Honoka narrowed her eyes, her lips sharp.

“Hello, Shiiko.”

A forced smile appeared on Honoka's lips.

“Hello, Miss Shikibu.”

Shioriko in turn replied with a radiant smile.

It was practically a recreation of the events two days ago, though both of them looked courteous on the surface, there was a frosty atmosphere beneath, and Koremitsu inadvertently let out cold sweat as he watched on.

“S-s-s-s-sorry for being late!”

And the bespectacled class representative with braids ran over to them, huffing and puffing like a goldfish.

“I had something going on, so, erm, I left my house late.”

She stopped abruptly in front of Koremitsu and the rest, adjusted the glasses on her nose bridge, and readjusted her breathing.

(Why is this girl here too!?)

Honoka responded to Koremitsu's skepticism.

“Michiru was invited by me. Thanks for you help, Michiru, even though you're really busy there.”

“No, I just didn't have that many important things to do today.”

While Michiru continued to catch her breath, Honoka whispered to her,

“I'll leave you with what I requested yesterday.”

“Y-yes.”

Michiru nodded seriously.

“Hey, what are you talking about?”

“Big brother Koremitsu, they seem to be whispering something. Let's go in together.”

Shioriko tugged at Koremitsu's arm, ready to pull him.

At this moment, Honoka stood in front of them immediately.

“How thoughtful of you, Shiiko. I'm done with what I have to say though.”

And then, she pulled Shioriko's milky white arm over.

“Now then, big brother Koremitsu here can't enter the girls changing room. Big sister Honoka will lead you in now.”

“Eh, wait, I can walk this far myself. Ahh, big brother Koremitsu~~~~~!!”

Koremitsu was dumbfounded as he watched Shioriko get dragged away by Honoka, one step at a time.

And so, Honoka dragged Shioriko through the gate.

“See you later then, Akagi.”

“Y-yeah, I'll leave Shiiko to you.”

“Wait, don't treat me like a kid!”

Michiru followed Honoka quietly from behind. On a closer look, she was dressed in school uniform even though it was the summer.

“Alright, time for us to go to the changing room and change, I guess. Wait, Hikaru, you don't have to change clothes.”

Koremitsu whispered, and in turn, Hikaru's face was dazzling.

“Of course not. I have to get changed too! Get changed! Get changed, you know!”

And he was yelling excitedly like a child.

“Tch, you really want to go to wear trunks, huh?”

“This is the first time I am going to the pool with everyone! I often go to the hotel pools alone with another girl to play, but this is my first time going to a common pool. My heart is throbbing at this first experience.”

(Sorry for only being able to go to a commoners' pool.)

Koremitsu's temples were throbbing.

And so, Hikaru changed clothes about 7 times in the men's changing room.

“Look? I can see the underpants logo under these surf pants ! Is it not cool? Or is this pair of mesh better? Looky look, Koremitsu, have a look at these. Which is the best?”

Koremitsu turned his back on his friend as he silently changed his clothes.

(You are at the same level as Shiiko and Shikibu.)

He thought.

Even at the poolside, Hikaru's was grinning from ear to ear..

“Wow, this place is really crowded! So this is how a commoner's pool look during the summer vacation!”

Hikaru stared at the pool that was filled with customers, and looked over at the customers waiting to ride the slide, looking impressed.

After much contemplation, he picked a refreshing pair of pool pants that glittered as brightly as his marble white skin.

During their first encounter, Koremitsu assumed that Hikaru was a female, and after the androgynous Hikaru removed his clothes,

(This guy's a male after all.)

Koremitsu could not help but think about this.

No matter how silky white his skin was, how slender and refined his limbs, his skeletal structure betrayed the fact that he was male, and not female.

Hikaru himself was not typically particular about his body frame, but after seeing Koremitsu's chest, he pouted, moved towards Koremitsu, and compared their arms.

“Eh, my arms are not muscular after all. My arms are as thick as yours, Koremitsu, but your arms look really sturdy and firm.”

He muttered.

“I may look like this now, but I do push-ups every night when I am alive.”

“Maybe it's due to the body types. Either way, it's scary if you have such a pretty face and muscles all over your body.”

“But it would have been great if there is something that can make me more manly, something that can make my body frame sturdier. If that happened, I will not have conversations like 'your arms are thinner than mine, how depressing'. There was once where that girl told me 'let us meet when my waist is 2cm thinner and yours is 2cm thicker.', and she put on the clothes she took off before leaving. She already bathed too. I thought that voluptuous body of hers was her charm. Girls really are hard to understand, no?”

“Seriously, stop worrying about such things.”

While he interrupted this completely foolish worry, Honoka and the others, having changed their clothes, finally appeared.

“Big brother Koremitsu~”

“Kept you waiting, Akagi.”

“E-erm, sorry to keep you waiting, Mr Akagi. Ooo, are you angry?”

“*Wow.*”

Hikaru in turn exclaimed in amazement.

Shioriko was dressed in a white separate swimsuit with ribbon and flower decorations, coupled with flower-like frills surrounding the waist.

Honoka was dressed in a purple bikini with matching black trims that emphasized a mature vibe.

“This is really amazing, really amazing! Shiiko is like a snowy white Moth Orchid! The frills seem to be fluttering! White does suit Shiiko best after all. The tender milky skin is a perfect match for the white swimsuit, really too dazzling. Miss Shikibu's bikini is really bold and sexy! The waist and spaghetti straps really emphasize her figure greatly, really a striking sight. Miss Shikibu today is the Purple First Lady. Those slender legs of hers can beat those of Miss Universe!”

Hikaru narrowed his eyes to a seem, heaping effervescent praises often the pair's swimsuits.

“Hurry and say something too, Koremitsu.”

(Wait, you want this me to say something like Moth Orchid, Miss Universe?)

Koremitsu felt that something was stuck in his throat.

Honoka pouted her lips shyly, and Shioriko was bashfully staring at Koremitsu.

“Ho-how's my swimsuit?”

“Big brother, this swimsuit you bought for me, does it suit me?”

“I bought my swimsuit using money earned from my part-time job. How does it look on me, Akagi?”

“Shiiko here picked this to be a little sister worthy of you, big brother. This one's fine, right?”

“I-I suppose you'll be embarrassed about having to pick such a childish swimsuit, right, Akagi? This time, I decided to be different and pick a swimsuit that's more daring and mature looking than before.”

“But you won't dare wear such a flirtatious swimsuit like now when you're older. It's better to wear something suitable now.”

There brewed a tense atmosphere between Honoka and Shioriko.

And Koremitsu interrupted them.

“Th-they're both good, right? Shikibu's great, and so is Shiiko's. That...braid hair class representative's good too.”

He uttered out such words awkwardly.

Both Honoka and Shioriko turned their heads aside.

“Eh? Are you talking about me?”

Michiru pointed at herself, shocked.

“ ... ”

“ ... ”

Honoka and Shioriko stared right at swimsuit Michiru was wearing.

A deep-colored school swimsuit.

The most ordinary type of swimsuit worn during school swimming classes, to boot.

For Koremitsu, he could not simply praise Honoka and Shioriko wholeheartedly while ignoring the class representative with braided hair. Though both of them realized this fact, they could not help but bemoan.

“Are you a school swimsuit fanatic, Akagi?”

“Uu, I thought nobody would be wearing such school swimsuits. Is this a tactical failure?”

Why would both of them look so downhearted, giving Koremitsu conflicted looks of condescension and disappointment?

(What's with these eyes...didn't I praise them, saying that they're fine.)

“This is unexpected, Koremitsu. I thought school swimsuits are simply a representation of nostalgia.”

Hikaru nodded as if he was a neutral party amidst all of these.

“Damn it, you girls better warm up before you enter the pool.”

After saying such words, he started stretching his limbs, warming himself up.

However, he should not have raised his eyebrows at this moment, for the surrounding people gradually scattered, mistaking him for a delinquent.

“A-as-as-as-as expected of you, Mr Akagi! Everyone's afraid of you! The once crowded pool is now completely spacious.”

Michiru tried her best to console Koremitsu, but the latter felt a pricking feeling in his heart.

“Big brother, this pool slide looks really tall and steep, shocking and very thrilling. Let's go for it!”

Having recovered from her shock over the school swimsuit, Shioriko reached her little hand for Koremitsu's, and was about to walk off.

At this moment,

“Sh-Shiiko!!!! I'll bring you there as a class rep!”

Michiru grabbed Shioriko by the elbow.

“E-erm, I want to try the slide there too. A-and, I want to know you better.”

“B-but I wanna play with big brother!”

“Yes, yes, speaking of which, Michiru's dream is to be a kindergarten teacher! Just leave Shiiko to Michiru, Akagi. Let's go to the adult pool over there. The children's pool is too shallow that I can't spread my limbs wide. I'll leave Shiiko to you, Michiru.”

Honoka shot Michiru a look, and the latter nodded firmly with all her might,

“Yes, I understand, Hono.”

“Alright now, Akagi, this way.”

Honoka suddenly looked a lot cheerier as she pat her hands upon Koremitsu's back, pushing him to the adult pool.

“Ah, wait!”

“Hold it!”

Shioriko shook Michiru's arm off.

“If you're going to the adult pool, big brother, I'm coming too.”

“Sorry, but elementary school students have to use the children pool, Shiiko. If you want to use the adult pool, you have to grow another 30cm taller.”

Honoka puffed her chest that was covered by the bikini, bragging haughtily.

Shioriko paused,

“My swimming skills are such that nobody can claim to be better. I can swim leisurely for 5km; I can hold my breath underwater for 3 minutes.”

“Wow, amazing, amazing. But this has nothing to do with how long you can hold your breath underwater. It is dangerous for a kid to enter the adult pool when the feet can't touch the floor. You might even get called out of the pool by the lifeguard.”

“Th-that's right, Shiiko. So you'll be playing with me at the kid's pool. If Mr Akagi is to enter the kids pool, the other kids will be terrified to tears. It's better for him to use the adult pool with Hono.”

“Yes, leave Akagi to me. I'll watch~ him good so that he won't do anything to girls in school swimsuits.”

“Hey! Am I a pervert!?”

“Big brother, I want to be with you.”

Shioriko hugged Koremitsu's waist, and lifted her head.

It was normal for Shioriko to do this. However, it was a different feeling having direct skin contact.

(Woah, it's itchy here. Hey!)

He felt ticklish on the belly, and nearly jumped due to the itchiness.

Honoka's eyes broke into a glare.

“Akagi, if you're going to stick with Shiiko so closely, you'll be mistaken for a lolicon again!”

“Shiiko, there's lesser people at the slide!”

“Big brother, even if the lifeguard comes threaten me, I want to use the adult pool with you.”

“Alright, all of you, just shut up for once!”

Koremitsu bellowed.

Honoka and the rest were shocked.

“Shiiko, you still can't use the adult pool now. No matter how good your swimming in, you have to obey the rules here.”

“Ehhh!?”

“You just said something cool just now, Akagi! That's right. Rules are important, Shiiko!”

“Shiiko, I-I'll go play with you.”

“And I'll got to the kids pool.”

“Eh, wai—Akagi.”

“Now there's no problem, right, Shiiko?”

Shioriko, who was looking glum before this, broke into a radiant smile immediately.

“Right, big brother.”

And so, both Honoka and Michiru lowered their heads.

“Sorry to disturb you. Shiiko here will go play with big brother at the kids pool. Please go to the adult pool and try something exciting. Ah, you might want to find guys to date.”

“—!! I-I don't have any interest in dating! I guess it's a good thing to go to the kids pool and experience some childhood memories.”

“Th-th-that's right, Hono. I-I just remembered that I can't swim either! I-I guess it's better to go to a pool where my legs can touch the floor.”

“I want to go wading too!”

Hikaru's eyes were dazzling abnormally as he said this. *You're so pumped up in the changing room just now. Are you really glad to be at a commoner's pool?*

In the end, the 4 people and 1 ghost head off to the flowing pool for children

Hikaru looked completely delighted as he looked around, and could not help but blurt out things like *“that mother is wearing a swimsuit a child can play in. This is such a heartwarming sight!”*

And upon seeing that unfettered smile

(Speaking of which, this is the first time I'm going to the pool with others.)

His heart raced as he suddenly felt tense.

Right, he was always feared by others at school, with nobody he could call a friend. He never entered the water other than the school pool. Regarding this pool, his excitement at going to the pool with others was the same as Hikaru's.

I see, this is the first place I'm entering the pool outside class. I'm not lonely either.

With an aberrant anticipation, they arrived at the flowing pool.

(Wow, the water in the pool is flowing. Amazing.)

Koremitsu sat beside the pool, placed his legs in the water, and was shocked when he felt the moving currents flowing to the side.

He entered the water, and it reached his waist. There was a levitating feeling at his waist, and he floated up comfortably.

(Wow, I'm moving. I'm really moving.)

(My legs are floating. It feels flurry.)

(So this is a flowing pool.)

“Koremitsu, there are many girls in swimsuits here. It feels like I have entered a fireworks parade, every single one of them looks cute. Ah, that girl's shoulder strap dropped. And she tied it up now. That bashful smile of hers is really cute, really alluring.”

(Wow, even if I don't moving my arms, I can continue to move forward.)

“Ahaha, this is really interesting, huh Koremitsu?”

“Yeah.”

Koremitsu quickly responded to Hikaru's question, and the two men continued to enjoy the flowing pool.

“Uu, I finally picked a mature looking swimsuit, and Akagi has no interest in it at all. Would it be different if I wore a school swimsuit instead? Speaking of which, what's with him? Leaving the girls aside to enjoy himself alone? Is he going to ignore any girl who doesn't wear a school swimsuit?”

“Sorry for being unable to help in any way, Hono. I really shouldn't have worn the school swimsuit here. I don't have a slim figure like your, Hono. A bikini would have looked bad on me.”

Michiru closed her eyes as she lowered her head and apologized, her glasses covered with water droplets.

“That's not true. You'll definitely look cute if you spend the effort dolling yourself up. Doesn't that orange checkered swimsuit fit you well?”

“But the excess fat on my tummy is too obvious. Anything you wear will look good on you, Hono...”

“Seriously, you're too low on self-esteem, Michiru. You should try such things during the summer vacation. Right, it's decided. To thank you for today, let's go to the salon next week. Next, try changing your image.”

“Ehh, isn't that...ahh, Hono! Shiiko's headed towards Mr Akagi!”

“Ehh!?”

“Big brother, carry me!”

“Woah!”

With the weight suddenly added upon his back, Koremitsu's head dipped into the water.

“Hehe, it's like a tortoise parent and child.”

Shioriko climbed upon Koremitsu's back, giggling away.

Her wet swimsuit was sticking tightly onto his back.

“Ah, you are really cute, Shiiko. Just like an angel. No, you are an angel.”

Hikaru poked his head from the water surface, looking blissful.

“Hey, Shiiko, it's dangerous!”

“That's it, keep swimming!”

“I'm not a dolphin!”

“Ne, ne, this is Shiiko's request. Shiiko here will forgive you for leaving her alone in the future if you do this.”

“A-alright.”

And so, Koremitsu continued to carry Shioriko as he trudged forward.

“Wah~ I'm so happy~”

Shioriko in turn was buzzing away.

“I always dreamt on riding on a Great Pyreness or a Siberian Husky.”

“Am I a dog here!?”

Koremitsu grumbled.

“How great this is, Shiiko. I want to ride too~”

And Hikaru, swimming (?) beside them, looked envious.

(Scram, you idiot.)

“Okay, getting on!”

Hikaru floated from the water and leaned on Koremitsu's back, looking like he was embracing Shioriko from behind.

But even so, he ended up passing through Koremitsu, only barely managing to maintain contact with the latter. Perhaps he liked this kind of fake riding(?).

“Waah, the Limited Express Koremitsu!”

(Hurry up and get off me, you ghost!)

Koremitsu grumbled quietly as he flailed about.

(Waaahhh. What are you two doing-----!!!??)

Honoka continued to whip up splashes with her hands as she saw Koremitsu carry a pretty elementary school girl, swimming through.

(Even though Shiiko is a pretty girl, and Akagi treasures her really well like a true little sister, he is really doting on her too much.)

The promise to go to the pool was only between the two of them.

Is this a date after all? Why am I feeling frustrated, spinning on the swivel chair alone in my room when summer vacation just started.

—I don't want to go dating with Akagi.

—Akagi probably feels bored because he has no friends to ask out during the summer holidays. I'm just going out with him out of kindness.

Why was it, that when she talked about him, her face was sizzle?

—I might be able to use this opportunity to build my relationship with Akagi better.

Amongst other things, this was one thing she had been secretly wishing for.

Koremitsu however would not contact her no matter what. *Well, it's to be expected, Akagi has never asked a girl out before, and he won't spend much thought on it anyway. This is bad of you, Akagi. What would have happened to you without this love expert in me leading you?* Her face blushing, she dialed Koremitsu's phone.

And so, what was supposed to be a promise to go to the pool ended up with an elementary school kid popping in.

—Understood! I-I'll go to the pool with you and Akagi as your guardian, Shiiko!

She yelled for some reason.

Upon recalling about it, she realized she had fallen completely into Shioriko's trap

Back then, Shiiko was still distraught, going through the pain and loneliness of losing her kin, and it was to be expected that she wanted to play with her big brother. Besides, Honoka did think of wanting to build a good relationship with her as she was the little sister.

But at the swimsuit counter at the department store, the naive thinking she had before this went up in smokes once she faced off against the real Shioriko.

She had already heard that the girl was a real beauty, and even from the little photo with the black censor bar over the eyes, she could tell that Shioriko's cuteness was outstanding.

The wonderful, silky hair was devoid of any split ends, that innocent expression of hers, the milky white skin, the rosy cheeks, the alluring pink lips that were glossy even without lipstick. Though the girl was underaged, her limbs were slender, to the point of seductiveness. She was dressed in a long skirt covering her knees, and she lifted her head up.

I have never seen such a cute kid before.

Is that an angel?

A pixie?

The angel-like, pixie-like pretty girl latched her slender arm onto Koremitsu's, ostensibly declaring to others that Koremitsu's was her belonging, giggling away at Honoka. At that instance, Honoka understood her intent.

This kid is dangerous!

She was warding off Honoka, standing in front of her, letting Honoka know that the latter was the obstacle between her and her big brother Koremitsu.

Stop kidding with me! Even if she's a pretty girl who can be heads and tails above the rest in a contest, I can't possibly lose to a kid with flat chest and hasn't reached puberty yet!—Upon thinking about this, she undid the pareo, and got into battle mode.

She was really yearning for the pool date on this day, with the unyielding mentality.

She requested Michiru to assist her and get Shioriko away from Koremitsu.

—If-if you really wish for it, Hono, I-I'll be willing to do anything. Why do you want to take Shiiko away though? A-a-a-a-and when did you ask Mr Akagi out to the pool? Even choosing a swimsuit with such deliberation. Are you intending to show it to Mr Akagi? Hono, so you do have...!

Michiru widened her eyes under the glasses.

—Th-that's not it! I want to get Shiiko away from Akagi to control his lolicon tendencies! You see, didn't Akagi create a commotion back then because he was a lolicon? If such rumors continue to persist, the Japanese Dance Club he finally managed to join might be forced to shut down. If there's such a criminal in your class, you'll be troubled as the class rep, right? Michiru?"

—Y-yes! I understand! I'll help you to stop Mr Akagi from going on the criminal path of being a lolicon, Hono!

She got an affirmative response.

And after that, once Honoka's target Koremitsu saw the swimsuit, he muttered to himself for a while, and finally said,

"Shikibu's great."

But there was the sudden doubt that he was a fanatic for school swimsuits.

And in the end, because she got careless, Shioriko clung onto Koremitsu.

Honoka was positioned such that she could not see Koremitsu's expression from the front, but after seeing Shioriko gleefully playing on his back, Honoka could only think that Koremitsu was the same.

(Is-is it that Akagi's feeling shy because Shiiko's on him? Ahh no, I don't want to see Akagi looking all lecherous!)

What to do?

If she did not hurry, she as the Purple Princess would fail to live up to the title of the love expert that gave lots of advice to girls skeptical over their loves.

"How about you do the same thing as Shiiko, Miss Shikibu?"

"Eh, how can I possibly do such a thing? --ACK!"

Honoka was startled due to a voice that should not be present. A short-haired boyish girl was leering away.

"Oumi! Why are you here!?"

“Wah, Miss Oumi...!?”

Michiru held her glasses with both hands.

Why would Hiina Oumi of the news club be here?

(Does she know that I'm here to swim with Akagi? Or is this a coincidence?)

She pondered as she stared at Hiina's breasts.

Leaving aside her appearance, the massive humps wrapped under the refreshing green bikini were round like melons.

No, it would be more accurately to say that the bikini was about to burst out, or ripped apart at least. It felt like thin green clothes covering the most exposed areas.

Whenever Hiina moved her body slightly, the two lustrous round melons would dangle left and right.

And Honoka's eyes followed them.

(A-amazing. They aren't that obvious when she wears the school uniform, but I never expected them to be this big. Akagi said that he likes big breasts himself; if my breasts can develop to such an extent...)

“Miss Shikibu?”

After having her name called, she finally recovered.

She lifted her head, and stared at Hiina.

“What are you doing here, Oumi? Are you here to interview Akagi? I won't forgive you if you make a report about the lolicon delinquent king playing with an elementary school kid.”

Hiina in return gave a boyish smile.

“You're so cool protecting Mr Akagi like this, Miss Shikibu~ Aren't you quite the gallant one~ I can feel those feelings of yours~ if you wish for your feelings to reach Mr Akagi, I shall do my best.”

“Mind your own business.”

“The way you blush and say this is really alluring~. If you go to Mr Akagi, say 'Akagi, you've been taking care of Shiiko like this. Come play with me too' and hug him, you'll definitely succeed.”

She said that spiel of words in one go.

“I-I won't do such a thing! I-I'm not an elementary school kid!”

If it was Shioriko, she could hug Koremitsu while maintaining an innocent look. If Honoka, as a high school student, was to do the same thing, Koremitsu definitely would be shocked, to say the least.

(B-but...if I don't do this much at least, that dimwitted Akagi won't treat me as someone of the opposite gender...)

But it was impossible. Definitely impossible for her.

No, no, no!

Honoka shook at head.

“If an elementary school kid can do it, why can't a big sister high school student who has finished puberty. Here, let me demonstrate.”

“Eh, wait, Oumi?”

Hiina stood up, and sneaked up on Koremitsu.

“Ho-Hono!”

Honoka hurriedly pursued Hiina, and Michiru in turn followed them.

“Mr Akagi~~~!!!”

Hiina grabbed Koremitsu's legs from behind.

“Warugh!”

As his legs were suddenly grabbed, Koremitsu fell into the water.

Shioriko too lost her balance and tumbled to the left. This too messed up Koremitsu's balance, and with weights on his back and waist, Koremitsu sank further.

“Big brother!”

“Mr Akagi!”

The flustered voice gradually distanced.

“*Wah, Koremitsu!*”

Hikaru too exclaimed.

Koremitsu floated to the surface, and coughed hard as he choked on some water.

“Fuwah, ack ack. O-Oumi!?”

“Ahh, you look like you're still suffering. This can't do! Let me give you some CPR!”

Hiina closed her eyes, raised her lips, and closed in on Koremitsu's lips lecherously.

“You idiot, leave me!”

And after saying that, he pushed Hiina away!”

“Why are you here!?”

“Ahh, why is it that when everyone looks at my face and give me such annoyed looks, telling me 'why are you here!?' . It is depressing.”

Now that she had mentioned this, Koremitsu, who was usually shunned by others, felt a sense of guilt.

However.

“Well, it is a given that I am concerned by such things. Once I notice the stares around me, I won't be able to get things for the latest scoop. That's why I came here out of my own curiosity!”

“Wah!”

Hiina spread her arms wide and hugged Koremitsu.

Her large breasts were pressing onto his chest.

“!”

Shioriko gasped upon seeing the abnormally large volume of the springy breasts.

Hikaru too was effervescent in his praises,

“Miss Oumi today is like the pitcher plant or the Albany pitcher plant.”

Aren't those carnivorous plants!?



“Hey, let go of me!”

The bouncy feeling pressing on his abdomen was really a bad thing to him.

“It is a rare time that we're at the pool. Let us fully fee each other's presence~”

“A pool isn't a place for such public lewd acts!”

Koremitsu yelled. If he were to push her off hard, her swimsuit might end up being ripped off. Thus, he did not dare to use all his might.

Shioriko in turn tugged at Hiina from behind,

“What are you doing to Shiiko's big brother!”

And later, Honoka caught up to them.

“Oumi, what are you trying to do! Let go of Akagi!”

While Koremitsu and Hiina were playing push and pull, Michiru yelled,

“Awahwawwah! Mr Akagi's having an orgy!”

“You four-eyed braids! Know the term orgy better before using it!”

Hiina, Shioriko and Honoka were tumbled in a mess, and the surrounding onlookers watched this intense battle over Koremitsu,

“It's an orgy!”

“All the girls are cute.”

“There's actually such a young girl amongst them.”

“Lifeguard, that glaring delinquent over there is having an orgy!”

Such voices rang from the sidelines.

“I'm not having an orgy!!”

“Let go already, Oumi!”

“Only Shiiko is allowed to hug big brother Koremitsu like this.”

“You're starting to feel excited now right? Mr Akagi?”

“Shiiko, can you please stop grabbing Akagi's leg like that?”

“Miss Shikibu, your leg is twinkled with big brother's yourself.”

“I-I just want to help Akagi.”

“I'm okay with a 4P!”

“Hey, all over you, stop pushing and let go of me already!”

“E-e-ev-ev-ev-everyone! It's not a good thing to have an orgy in public. You'll be taken away by the police for questioning!”

Fulfilling her responsibility as the class representative, Michiru got in to help break them up.

But as they continued to nudge about in a frenzy, someone's elbow caused Michiru to be pushed aside, and she slid away, sinking into the water.

The pool was not very deep as it was designed for kids, but as she lost control of her legs, she started to flail about.

“Hey! That braid class rep fell into the water!”

“Michiru!”

Honoka let go of Koremitsu.

Koremitsu moved towards Michiru and leapt into the water.

But during this time, both Shioriko and Hiina had their hands on his waist, coupled with the fact that Honoka and Koremitsu's legs were tangled. This caused him to lose his balance,

“Big brother.”

“Mr Akagi!”

And both Shioriko and Hiina undid the drawstring on his pants, causing the pants to slip off.

(Ack!)

As Koremitsu brought Michiru out of the water, a pair of swimming pants floated slowly to the surface.

Michiru, coughing out water as she gasped for breath downwards, “Wah!” exclaimed in shock.”

The surrounding onlookers gave Koremitsu disapproving looks.

“It's an orgy after all.”

“So that girl with braids is part of them too.”

“A 4P!”

“Young kids nowadays.”

(I'm not having an orgy!)

Koremitsu grumbled furiously in his heart.



Having vowed never to go shopping with girls again 2 days ago, Koremitsu made a vow 'not to go swimming with girls again' on this day.

After reaching home, Hikaru looked on grimly as he lectured Koremitsu, leaning at the wall,

“You need to reflect on some aspects”

“ ... ”

“I do feel that you need to adapt to getting along with girls.”

“ ... ”

“You are no longer that lone wolf from before, and it is not just a matter of one, two girls looking for you. There will be many more girls you have to interact with in the future.”

“ ... ”

“Anyway, what I want to say is that if this keeps up, it will be a repeat of the commotion today.”

“ ... ”

“And with more people from the other gender, the competitiveness amongst them will increase further.”

“ ... ”

“Koremitsu, if your opponent is a girl, you cannot hit her or send her flying. That will only increase the number of casualties.”

“ ... ”

“You were called away by the lifeguard for removing your pants in the pool. That is not something that can be easily settled by being forbidden to enter it again.”

“Ugh.”

Koremitsu gritted his teeth, letting out a gnashing sound.

“I think I should go to a country without girls after all.”

Before this, girls always shunned Koremitsu. Thus, he had never experienced the hardships of having to deal with them.

The mantra 'don't get involved with women' was something his grandfather had after his grandmother suddenly left home. Even so, it was not because Koremitsu paid the preaching to heed, but because the girls did not want to get involved with him

Ever since he got to know Hikaru, who really liked girls, and completed the latter's promises that were made before his death, Koremitsu had been appearing in front of girls like normal.

Such an improvement was certainly worthy of praise.

But Koremitsu still did not know how to get along with girls.

(I don't know what those girls are thinking at all. I tell them to 'shut up', and they start yapping more. Even when I told them 'leave me alone, you're noisy', they just won't stop.)

As Hikaru said, I think I better heed gramp's teaching before the victims start to increase, and break off with girls completely.

Hikaru started at Koremitsu with a pondering look, like a philosopher, and said,

“To be honest, Koremitsu, there is no place in the world without girls. It is completely impossible to live in an environment without girls.”

“Then what do I do?”

Koremitsu laid weakly on the floor

“Looks like you need to do some training.”

“Training, as in?”

Hikaru nodded firmly.

And then, he said

“Let us woo some girls tomorrow.”

“Woo girls, you say!? Are you kidding me!? You just want to do that yourself. What do you mean by getting a girl that likes to smile by wooing her? I'm asking you a serious question here!”

Hikaru however continued to grin cheekily, and said to Koremitsu with a matured look while the latter was incensed,

“But I am being serious here. From now on, I shall teach you how to get along with girls, one step at a time—when I depart, I will not be able to help you even if you want some of the most basic suggestions...”

The clear expression gradually dulled.

And Koremitsu's voice was stuck in his throat.

“I do not know how long I can continue to remain in this human realm.”

The rich, gentle voice throbbed Koremitsu's heart.

“Maybe I might even vanish suddenly in front of you tomorrow.”

Unknowingly, he had gotten used to having Hikaru by his side.

Though he would space out or think most of the time, the presence of the refreshing voice beside him allowed him to relax.

But such a relationship could not continue forever.

Perhaps they would have to separate the next time.

Or even at this moment.

If it was not as Hikaru as said, that he would not be able to depart until his promises with the girls were complete, what exactly would cause him to remain in this world? Koremitsu could not comprehend.

With a slightly crestfallen look on his face, Hikaru said to Koremitsu while the latter pondered,

“Koremitsu, I wish to repay you as much as I can while I am still on this world. Just as you fulfilled for me one promise after another, I want to

repay you with what I can do, within my capabilities. As a ghost however, I can only do so little.”

“ ... ”

(This guy is despicable.)

How was he supposed to reject Hikaru when the latter put it this way.

Koremitsu inadvertently gritted his teeth, gulped his saliva, and clearly spoke,

“Got it. Teach me the ways you pick up girls.”

How to Properly Handle a Girl

(Mr. Polar Star has yet to arrive...)

'Saffron' continued to look back and forth at the shop door and her watch, her nose buzzing.

It was the third day to fulfill the promise.

And so, 'Saffron' entered the shop when it was near noon.

The Mr. Polar Star she wanted to see was not the wild beast that would not discriminate between a waitress or an elementary school girl.

But if Mr. Polar Star had yet to give up on looking for 'Saffron', and came to the shop.

If he put on the blue and white cap that was a complete mismatch, picked a spot and set up base within, spread his legs out wide in an uncouth manner, arch his back, show a frown, and give a sharp glare that would obstruct the shop's business.

If her identity as the 'Saffron' was revealed, that barbaric man would probably be furious. He might even write some bad things about her, and vandalize her blog.

When that happens, the impression of the popular blog host 'Saffron' would take a severe hit.

Though she did come to the shop for certain reasons—

It was almost noon. 'Saffron' managed to cool her limbs due to the shop's air-conditioning, but Mr. Polar Star had yet to show up.

(I guess this...'Saffron' thing does not matter to him any more...I think he prefers a girl who he can hold hands with in reality rather than a girl whose appearance and name he did not know of.)

And right beside Mr. Polar Star was a doll-like waitress who was extremely ladylike, and a cute elementary school student who was as sweet and cute as a pixie, sitting on his lap.

It was to be expected that he would lose interest in 'Saffron'.

(Besides...e-even if Mr. Polar Star sees me, he will only return in disappointment...)

--You are really cute, aren't you? There's no other person as cute as you in the world. Your nose is especially cute.

The only person who would let 'Saffron' sit on the lap and cuddle the nose while saying this was her father.

He was a *Sheng* musician of the Japanese Gagaku classical music genre, and had a 25 year age difference from her mother. When 'Saffron' was born,

he was already an old man, and must have really doted on her as he was able to get such a princess in his late years. Whenever he saw her, 'you're cute', he would repeat these words over and over again, and guided her in the way of the *koto*

And so, 'Saffron' too believed that she was cute, that she had the most beautiful nose in the world.

It was only when she entered a kindergarten, where the princesses gathered, that she realized her thinking was wrong.

There were all kinds of cute girls there.

And then, she, who stood out amongst them, was like a tea stain on a white pamphlet, realizing the looks of pity and sympathy from the rest.

“Look at her nose.”

“It's weird~”

“Teacher, why is XX's nose different from us?”

And when she heard this question, the tip of her nose sizzled.

Her father was a huge liar.

From that moment on, 'Saffron' would hide behind the princesses when she gathered with them to avoid attention, and lived her school life like this.

'Saffron' was born in a famous family, but she was not some rich noble. When she was in 5th grade, her father suddenly passed away due to illness, and her lifestyle was prudent.

Her clothes were all made by her mother and maid, and it was unavoidable that the clothing was not trendy or such, and her stationery were all cheap. She thought it was foolish to doll oneself up, and was not unhappy at the conditions; she had no demands for her clothing other than it being good enough to last her through winter.

She had a frail body, and would never leave the seal coat her father left behind at the ends of the year.

Her mother was a lot younger than her father, but compared to others, she was definitely not some young, beautiful mother, and was a quiet princess who could not live on her own. The maid that was older than her mother was even older, and lived quite the carefree life herself.

If those two are to die, what am I supposed to do...?

'Saffron' did not have a friend, and never stepped into a fast food restaurant. She would hear her classmates chatter amongst themselves, saying things like 'let's go to the supermarket', let's go to 'KFC'.

(I always hear them talking about Mr Supermarket and Mr KFC. They're definitely popular boys. Are they from other schools?)

She had such doubts echoing in her mind.

And this misunderstanding lasted even into middle school.

Because of the family's economic issues, she did consider entering a public school, but the school of princesses were kinder, and she felt more at ease there.

There was once where she played alone at the park, and a group of boys bullied her, saying, 'You have a weird nose'. Because of the trauma caused by such memory, she fully understood that she lacked the courage to live in an environment of commoners.

Of course, her mother naturally thought that 'Saffron' would choose her alma mater, that after graduating from university, she would get married with a suitable man.

But this era is different from yours, mother. I can't possibly do such a thing!

On this world, the only one who would call 'Saffron' cute and praise her nose was her now-deceased father. Everyone else would think that she was an ugly duckling with a strange nose.

To such a person, her fated partner would never appear.

That she might as well live her life alone quietly, never hoping for anything.

At school, she tied the only thing that could be considered pretty, her long hair, and the uniform skirt were to her knees, as per school rules. Back home, there was the seal coat her father left behind, *right? Isn't that right?*

Miss Mary, Miss Pascal, Miss Dorsey, and she would spend the time talking to the plants she nicknamed.

Nobody would talk to 'Saffron', and nobody noticed her.

This is fine, nobody will want to see such a nose. I don't want to be teased and get bad memories like that again.

And so, when she first entered middle school, she met 'her'.

The bright saffron color, the purple—

Her cellphone vibrated, dragging her back to reality.

(The sender's Mr. Polar Star?)

She read the content, feeling extremely tense as her fingers felt as if they were about to drop the floor.

“I can't make it today. I'll be there tomorrow.”

After seeing such blunt words, she felt relieved, and yet disappointed.

Her nose slowly began to sizzle.

(It-it's nothing. Y-y-yo-yo-you don't have to send me a message just like that now. I won't have to come to the shop starting tomorrow, and it's more comforting to me. Thanks to you, I won't have to be in such an awkward situation tomorrow.)

She closed the cellphone, and pushed the door aside.

To be honest, I don't want to see the face of that wild beast again.

She rode on the bicycle parked in front of the shop, passed through the paths full of up and down bumps, and head off to the road.

(Speaking of which...she's not here today.)

Just when she was thinking about the face of the doll-like waitress whom the Mr. Polar Star seemed strangely concerned with.

(Eh...?)

There was a red-haired, savage looking youth standing at the main street as the passers-by moved through.

He arched his back like a cat, his lips curled to a frown, muttering some things as he glanced at the passers-by.

(Mr. Polar Star?)

She instinctively braked the bicycle, and there was heat simmering from the tip of her nose.

(What's he doing, giving such a grumpy look—ah, it's normal for him, I guess.)

At this moment, Mr. Polar Star approached a passer-by.

She was a beauty, a female college student.

Mr. Polar Star said something with a scowl, causing the girl's shoulders to shudder, running off in fear.

Mr. Polar Star then clicked his tongue, and this time, approached a female high school student dressed in a summer one-piece, and before he could speak up, she ran off in fear.

(Is he working part-time to get customers? Or...?)

Or was he trying to hook up girls...?

Hook up girls...!?

Her body became frosty, but the tip of her nose suddenly boiled over.

Did he send a message saying he could not show up just because he was trying to hook up with girls?

Was wooing all sorts of girls more important than the promise with 'Saffron'?

“It's...!”

The tip of her nose was throbbing.

No, not only her nose. Even her limbs were shaking.

“Yo-yo—yo-you're the worst~~!!!”

She then grabbed a can someone left behind, and threw it at the red hair.

“Ow! Who's that!?”

And then, she escaped, pedaling the bicycle hard.



And on the next day, after the wooing training called 'how to get along with girls'.

Koremitsu strutted off to the tea shop, Bonne Chance with a sour look.

(I have no talent in wooing girls after all...)

Having been fooled by Hikaru's words, he went to the streets, trying to woo girls he did not know of, and the results were completely wretched.

They were either terrified, crying, running away, or throwing cans at him. On top of that, he even met Asai...

(Why is it that Saiga has to appear there!?)

And it was that kind of moment, in that particular moment,

(—and I ended up trying to woo Saiga.)

She was staggering around, probably due to the summer heat or sleep deprivation, but her sharp tongue was as vicious as ever, saying things like

a high school debut, that a dog's thoughts were so crude after all, that it was the worst situation for her.

And then, it seemed she was feeling really uncomfortable, and after resting for a while in the park, a lot of things happened, and he was chased by the police—

(Ahh—I really don't want to remember what happened yesterday. Is she really my nemesis in my previous life or something?)

And after that, he met Honoka and Aoi.

(I don't know what happened there either. Either way, it's good that everyone's happy. What happened back then however? Why were Shikibu and Aoi together? They said they just so happened to meet coincidentally and have some tea, but are they really on such good terms?)

Koremitsu recalled the sight of Honoka and Aoi walking down the street under the sunset dejectedly.

“Hey!” And when Koremitsu called out to them, they looked really flustered, their shoulders trembling, and they turned around.

—A-Akagi!

—M-M-Mr. Akagi!!!

—Erm, I so happened to meet Her Highness Aoi, and we ended up chatting over tea or something...

—Eh, yes, It so happened to be my rest day today, and I so happened to meet Miss Shikibu. We were having tea until just a while ago.

—Don't you want to chat with Her Highness Aoi, Akagi? She is refined, cute, and a rich girl. These make her an ideal target.

—I-I too want to be a determined, amazing girl like Miss Shikibu here.

Honoka sounded slightly shrill as compared to the usual, probably because it was the day after the incident at the pool, and did not look at Koremitsu right in the eyes. Aoi in turn looked somewhat restless, fidgeting from time to time.

“Well, it certainly was an eventful day yesterday.”

Hikaru, floating beside Koremitsu, answered with a cool smile, and unlike the scowling Koremitsu, he looked like he was enjoying himself.

“Thanks to what happened yesterday, you managed to improve your relationship with Asa.”

“Like how!? Because of her, I got called a pervert, and got pursued by the police everywhere!!!”

Koremitsu inadvertently lambasted, attracting the attention of the passers-by. Flustered, he hurriedly lowered his head and hushed his voice.

“...Anyway, I won't ever go wooing girls again.”

“Eh? How about you try it again?”

“Shut up. It's more important to look for that Saffron. You better look for her seriously!”

“I understand!”

Are you being serious here? Koremitsu snarked back as he opened the door.

“Heh!?”

Instead of the usual 'welcome', there was a shocked cry.

Once Koremitsu entered through the door, a waitress hurriedly raised the tray to cover her face, and sneaked past Koremitsu.

It seemed to be the waitress who suddenly approached to refill his water. Koremitsu probably was way too intimidating, and soon after, she hid in the furthestmost part of the counter.

“That person's cheeks are as red as the Geranium. Is it because she is intrigued by you?”

Hikaru grinned as he chimed in.

(She hates me, no?)

Koremitsu pouted his lips, and picked an empty table to sit down at.

The regular customer seated at the window, reading the newspaper, was starting to wipe her face with the hand towel, and looked somewhat uneasy as she lowered the blinders.

The female high school students too tried their best not to meet Koremitsu in the eyes.

(Goodness, they're all like that.)

The girl Hikaru called Miss Mint was seated at the window, silently reading the pocket novel at the wall.

(Saiga and Tōjō...aren't here today again.)

The table with the houseplant was empty.

Leaving aside Tōjō, the fact that Asai was not present was a slight solace to Koremitsu.

He would consider his attempt to woo Asai as the biggest failure of his life.

She was the one person he did not want to meet. Perhaps the reason why he could not see her was because she too was trying to avoid meeting him.

Koremitsu took the innermost seat, and looked around. At this moment, Aoi brought the menu to him.

Once she saw Koremitsu, she gave a bashful smile.

Koremitsu recalled what happened the previous day, and his face too became somewhat red.

“...Thank you for what happened yesterday.”

Koremitsu whispered his thanks, and Aoi in response look increasingly pleased.

“Not at all.”

She whispered back.

Hikaru rested his tender, loving eyes upon Aoi.

And after making his order,

“I understand.”

Aoi politely responded, and returned to the counter. Soon after, she brought a red tea set on the tray cautiously.

While Aoi laid out one piece after another, Koremitsu looked over at the table, and said,

“Looks like you're used to working here.”

“This still is not enough.”

And after hearing this, Aoi shyly replied, and continued,

“I am working hard...because you do come by every day, Mr. Akagi.”

“Is-is that so?”

Though he was really concerned with Aoi, Koremitsu's main purpose for coming to this shop was to look for 'Saffron', and stammered.

Aoi already was peeved at Hikaru's Casanova antics, and Koremitsu could not tell her that 'Saffron' was a friend Hikaru met on the internet, that both of them had a promise.

Hikaru too showed a gloomy look.

(Isn't this all because you dated a girl when you don't even know her appearance?)

And so, Koremitsu changed the topic clumsily.

“Erm, you're getting along well with your colleagues, right? You weren't bullied, right? Like the one walking at the wall like a crab.”

He glanced over at the rude waitress from before, and Aoi turned over to the latter, “That is not the case.” seemingly saying,

“No. Miss Sueko is a senior who started working here a little earlier than me, but she is very friendly. She is a rich girl from a famous girls school, but she knows everything, and can do anything. She is someone I really admire. Sometimes, she would use the remains of the red tea as a pesticide, sometimes making vegetable soup, and even use glue to repair stocking

runs . Do you know about these, Mr. Akagi? You can use glue to stop the bleeding when you cut your finger on a chopper!”

Aoi was exclaiming somewhat excitedly.

Koremitsu's face was somewhat stiff.

(That was a rich girl? Isn't she too ill-tempered? Speaking of which, if Tōjō knows that Aoi stopped her bleeding using glue, he'll definitely faint on the spot...eh? Wait?)

What did she just say?

Miss Sueko is a senior who started working here a little earlier than me—

(Wait...! What if Saffron isn't a customer here, but an employee...!)

Koremitsu narrowed his eyes, and stared at the waitress that was Aoi's senior, terrified of meeting him in the eyes as she walked sideways.

(I remember Saffron is a rich girl from a girls school...)

Just when Koremitsu was unable to contain his curiosity about the waitress, Aoi suddenly whispered at Koremitsu's ears.

“Asa is not here today. I am really glad to be chatting with you like this, Mr. Akagi.”

The voice, coupled with the sweet memory, caused his heart to race, and as he looked back at Aoi, he found the latter looking back with a similarly sweet and blissful look.

Feeling a little perplexed, Koremitsu panicked, and said,

“Sp-speaking of which, Saiga has been busy or something, ending up like she doesn't even have time to sleep. Be careful yourself, Aoi. Don't tire yourself out.”

And Aoi's face showed surprise.

“How do you know about Asa's schedule, Mr. Akagi.”

(Eh, I said something unnecessary.)

“I-it's because, before this...I think Saiga did say this before.”

“When did you have a chat with Asa?”

Aoi's face became downcast.

(Ack!)

“I-I suppose I better get back to work here. There seems to be more customers now.”

Aoi's showed a bashful look, and she lowered her head before returning..

“So-sorry.”

However, a few steps later, she stopped in her tracks.

“Asa is too sneaky.”

“Huh!?”

“She has been trying her best to stop me from talking to you, Mr. Akagi, and she herself talked to you secretly.”

She gave a pouting look on her face, her back turned away from Koremitsu, before she hurried back to the counter.

(What's...with Aoi's expression?)

Not good.

His heart was throbbing.

He was showing such a reaction to a girl his friend truly treasured. Clearly, this was a bad thing.

Anxious, he felt the throbbing hasten.

“I am harboring mixed feelings now, Koremitsu.”

Having witnessed their conversation, Hikaru spoke with a vague expression. The gentle expression that was staring at Aoi before this seemed a little hazy.

“Wh-what are you saying? Suddenly being all so serious like that. You're a little weird here. As for 'Saffron', that woman called Sueko, she's definitely weird.”

Koremitsu changed the topic.

And the girl reading the pocket book at the wall was watching Koremitsu's every action with a poised look.

“ ... ”



At the same time.

“Akagi, what is going on here?”

“Big brother Koremitsu...wh-when did you?”

Honoka and Shioriko were seated at the table with the houseplant, blue with shock.

The one who revealed the intel that Koremitsu was at this shop was Hiina Oumi of the news club.

Akagi's at a red tea shop?

It seemed surprising, but why Aoi of all people was working at this shop!?

(Ahh, Her Highness Aoi did say yesterday that she started working to learn more about society.)

On the previous day, Honoka was feeling crestfallen, for the enjoyable pool trip she so yearned ended up in such a state. She wanted to explain matters to Koremitsu, and went off to the shop she heard from Hiina, only to meet Aoi on the way there.

Aoi knew that Honoka was Koremitsu's classmate, and that they joined the Japanese Dance Club before summer vacation ended.

—You are the one...often with Mr. Akagi. And erm, you joined the Japanese Dance club, with him. Am I correct?

Aoi asked tentatively as she looked up.

Honoka too spoke without holding back,

*—Your Highness Aoi, you did have a period when you got together amicably with Akagi, and that you went out today...Akagi did come to me for help personally because he liked you **back then**.*

She did not say 'now', but emphasized on the 'back then'. Upon hearing that, Aoi looked utterly devastated.

Why would the two of them spend the time together drinking tea? Such a question was already unimportant.

Honoka was extremely skittish in front of Aoi, whom Koremitsu once liked, her mind in a state of pandemonium. She assumed that Aoi too was probably feeling uptight.

Whether it was unnecessary matters or foolish ones, she felt that she said a lot of them.

In the end, both of them left the red tea shop weakly, only for Koremitsu to appear to them. One had to say this certainly was a coincidence.

Even the cellphone novels Honoka wrote would not have such a *deus ex machina*.

It was because of Koremitsu's appearance however that Honoka managed to recover somewhat. And she came to this place because she wanted to continue talking with Koremitsu normally

(I haven't apologized about the pool yet. I'll go to that shop again.)

This time, she ended up meeting Koremitsu's little sister, Shioriko, in front of the shop.

“A table for two?”

And once the waitress asked them this, they ended up sitting at the same table.

Also, Honoka was completely frozen when she saw Aoi, dressed in a maid outfit, looking blissful as the latter talked to Koremitsu.

Shioriko glanced over at Aoi, and muttered, seemingly realizing she had no choice,

“I was careless. There's another opponent...ah! And she's such a pure refined princess, the kind those manly guys with a code of honor really like—”

Honoka suddenly felt a mischievous impulse, and said,

“Akagi used to like Her Highness Aoi. Shiiko, you don't have any hope now.”

Shioriko's little ears twitched,

“Her Highness Aoi. That's Hikaru's fiancée, right?”

She widened her eyes in shock. “I see, so it's her...” She muttered to herself while staring at Aoi, and then gave an utterly defeated look.

“As to be expected of Hikaru's fiancée. She really is an ideal woman without flaws. Hm, so big brother Koremitsu likes Hikaru's fiancée. But if that's the case, isn't this just an act of pity to take care of his dead friend's fiancée? Big brother Koremitsu has no immunity against such women that needs protection.”

She came up with a most critical analysis far beyond the thought process of an elementary school girl.

And even pointed the topic back at Honoka,

“In this case, I think you're the one with no hope here, Miss Shikibu. You're cool and pretty, and very popular amongst the girls, but you're too hot-headed and not cute at all, and treats people of the opposite gender no differently. I don't think you're the type big brother likes. In the worst case scenario, you're at most a classmate and clubmate to him.”

(Ho-hot-headed...!? Not cute at all!? No no no no, she's an elementary school kid. I can't let myself get angry so easily like that time at the pool. I can't show the magnanimosity of an adult like this.)

She forced herself to eke a smile.

“Aren't you always living with Akagi under the same roof, Shiiko? You're at most siblings, right? You're the one with no hope.”

“We just lived together for a month.”

“Right now, the term 'live together' can be used even when there are different families. Well, there are some things elementary school kids don't know of.”

“Big brother Koremitsu always say this about the mapo tofu and southern barbarian pickle I make, 'it's good, Shiiko', and asks me for extras.”

“It's just cutting tofu after all. Cutting into quarters, at least.”

“But I did cut them seriously. Have you made a lunchbox for big brother to eat before?”

“Ugh!”

“What? You didn't?”

“A-a lunchbox is so heavy, so a guy will feel annoyed by it. Unpopular girls won't know about this.”

“Yeah, a lunchbox, even if it's a riceball, as long as it's from someone he likes, he'll be really happy. If the lunchbox comes from a classmate, it's just a pile of garbage no matter how rich it is.”

Honoka's lips were a little numb.

If she were to continue being dragged along like this, her reputation as the love expert would be wrecked.

“It might be too agitating to you, Shiiko, so I didn't say this beforehand. I got pushed down on the school corridor by Akagi before.”

This was not a bluff.

“Akagi suddenly buried himself in my breasts. It really shocked me.”

This was not a bluff either.

“Back then, if I didn't resist with all my might, our relationship might not be as simple as how it is now.”

What...exactly was that?

Koremitsu suddenly charged out from the art classroom, and crashed into Honoka onto the corridor. Both of them fell together, and Koremitsu's head was buried in Honoka's cleavage. 'Go and die, you pervert!' she kicked Koremitsu with all her might, and their relationship after that could be said to be at its lowest point.

Back then, 'no no, it's alright. I spaced out while walking, sorry' if Honoka did say such a reply, and if Koremitsu remembered that incident and fell in love at first sight, it would have been very weird. Rather, that would be impossible.

“B-big brother even did such a perverted thing...!”

“Akagi is a carnivore after all. He stayed at an apartment with another girl for days (not me but another girl), kissed in front of others (not me but another girl), brought a girl into the toilet, causing a commotion when others gathered around (not me but another...)!”

“I knew that Hikaru would often do such things, but if even big brother Koremitsu...”

Though she behaved like an adult, she was still a child at heart.

After seeing Shioriko looked so rattled, Honoka finally felt somewhat relieved.

(Seriously, Akagi goes about having all sorts of rumors with other girls, and I only have that initial rumor. I never had something like that happen to me. Even when we were alone together, we never had that mood—)

She too started to feel angsty.

(Akagi was really formal when he spoke to me, and I thought he was not used to getting along with girls. Is that just an act in front of me? Does he show his savage beast's personality in front of others?)

Cold sweat started to trickle in large beads.

And Shioriko stood up, shouting,

“BUT I DID SEE BIG BROTHER KOREMITSU'S PoNoS, AND I STILL HAVE A PHOTO OF HIS PoNoSSS, AND HE PROMISED TO TAKE MY VIRGINITY!!!”

“!!!”

Shioriko's voice echoed through the shop.

All the people present shot their glances at Honoka's table.

On the other hand, a blushing Koremitsu, who was muttering something to himself, shut up once he noticed them. Aoi held onto the cups and tray, her eyes widened as she looked over at them.

And then, Shioriko clenched her fists hard, the twintails behind her head swaying hard as she yelled with all her might,

“BIG BROTHER KOREMITSU'S MY-MY-MY
DDOOOOOOOOOGGGGGGG!!!”

There was silence.

Honoka's thought process, which had snapped, started to kick into gear again.

Standing in front of her at this point was an elementary school girl, huffing and puffing.

Charging towards them was her red-haired classmate, looking really panicky.

And there were the customers at their seats, the waitresses far away, their mouths agape.

(A promise to take her virginity? And dog, as in...)

Koremitsu was headed towards them, his eyes widened, his expression gloomy, his mouth opened, seemingly yelling something.

(Virginity, with an elementary school kid?)

Honoka aimed at Koremitsu's solar plexus, and deliver a right kick she practiced in gym during kick boxing class with all her might.

“YOU'RE THE WORRRSSSTTTT-----!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!”



Honoka's powerful kick landed right at Koremitsu's abdomen, causing the latter to tumble backwards. During this commotion, he ended up involving

the shopkeeper standing behind him. The shopkeeper was thinner and frailer than Koremitsu, his head hit the floor, and a large swollen bump appeared.

And so—

“Sorry about that!”

Koremitsu bowed deeply towards the shopkeeper.

And he maintained that position as he glanced to the side, muttering,

“You two, apologize too.”

“S-sorry.”

“I'm really sorry.”

Left at their wits end, both Honoka and Shioriko lowered their heads at the same time.

(Seriously, these girls.)

Koremitsu's temples were twitching.

They started a commotion at the pool, and came here as well, creating such a ruckus.

He was stunned when Shioriko shouted, *he promised to take my virginity!*

Big brother is my dog! Those words caused quite the shock amongst the surroundings. To top off his misfortune, while he was about to stop Shioriko, he was kicked and sent sprawling by Honoka, who actually believed this.

It was too painful when he got hit. He nearly thought his intestines were crushed.

Because he got kicked, he tumbled back, having lost his balance, hearing a cry behind him.

He found the shopkeeper sprawled onto the floor, and it was a strenuous situation, some calling for an ambulance, and some hoping to get him on a taxi to the hospital. The shopkeeper managed to recover quickly, but there was a large mirror-shaped mochi-sized bump on his head.

“I-I’m fine here. Do-don’t worry about it.”

It was unknown if the shopkeeper was a nice person, or that Koremitsu was too scary. The shopkeeper continued to bow, but this matter was not over.

As Aoi watched on worriedly with her moist eyes,

“Sorry to cause everyone trouble.”

Koremitsu bowed again to the shopkeeper, the customers, and the waitresses, and led the dejected Honoka and Shioriko out of the shop.

“Actually, Koremitsu, Shiiko and Miss Shikibu have reflected greatly about this incident. Do not be so peeved now.”

Hikaru floated by the side as he said, but Koremitsu pushed the door aside grimly, dragged the duo a stone's throw away, and stopped.

Honoka and Shioriko's face were completely blue with shock.

“Koremitsu.”

Hikaru in turn pleaded leniency for them, murmuring.

(I don't know how to get along with girls, but it's because I pampered them too much that they're so unruly now. Most importantly, they're always causing trouble for others. I'm never going to take care of girls and obey them anymore.)

Right, I can't strike a conversation with girls after all.

If they call for me, I'll just reject them with a louder voice. If that doesn't work, I'll yell at them and make them silent.

Koremitsu took a deep breath, and roared,

“DON'T YOU EVER STEP INTO THIS SHOP AGAIN, YOU TWO! IF YOU'RE GOING TO CAUSE A RUCKUS IN FRONT OF ME AGAIN, I'M GOING TO STUFF YOU IN THE GYM MAT LIKE A BAMBOO MAT WRAP! REMEMBER THAT WELL!!!”



'Saffron' waited for the red-haired boy to lead the two girls out of the shop, tailed them, and pushed the door aside slightly.

“I'M GOING TO STUFF YOU IN THE GYM MAT LIKE A BAMBOO MAT WRAP! REMEMBER THAT WELL!!!“

At that moment, she heard a roar, and saw a demon-like man standing in front of the girls, their backs facing 'Saffron', their shoulders shivering.

(Eekkk—!!)

She was not the one being scolded, but 'Saffron' cringed.

(He-he's scary, he's really scary—)

He immediately turned away, and stormed off in large strides. The two girls too followed him with their heads lowered.

And so, 'Saffron' remained where she was as she watched them leave.

(What was that just now?)

That little girl suddenly yelled, saying that her big brother will take her virginity or something, and the beauty with pretty legs sent a kick right at him...

(A harem war?)

A love triangle amongst those three?

(No, that waitress looks like she's in love when she looks at him too. Is that a love square?)

It seemed the number of girls around him would increase whenever he arrived at the shop.

How exactly did he establish his relationships with the girls?

“And speaking of which, is he really looking for me—~~~!?”

It would be troubling if she was to be discovered by that wild beast of a man, but when he flirted around with other girls in front of her, creating a harem war than sparked quite a commotion, she inadvertently felt a little disappointed.

“ ... ”

The tip of her nose started to itch, and she pushed out her bicycle dejectedly, stepping on the pedal.

(The girls that came to the shop today have nice figures, have good fashion sense, and look dazzling with some accessories on them, really charming...)

The girls that can make boys fall for them must definitely be the showy type.

I thought Mr. Polar Star was supposed to be different from other boys....

She started a blog soon after entering middle school, and for some reason, it got really popular, with comments from boys left on the messageboard. She knew that most of them assumed 'Saffron' was simply a rich pretty princess, and were simply lapping up to her.

However, Mr. Polar Star fixated his stare on the little plant photos Saffron uploaded.

And he called 'Saffron's friends by their names.

As there was something he wished to convey, he even left a message to 'Saffron', In that case, no matter whether you are deep within the lush forests or the spacious grasslands, I will definitely find the amazing flower that is you.

(He called my brooch, Mignon.)

—Mignon is a name given to cute girls.

At that time, her heart really fluttered.

It felt as if she could actually hear Mr. Polar Star's voice.

—I-I do not really pay particular mind to my appearance. When I was still a child, everyone looked surprised when they look at me, and I wondered why exactly was that. Because of my appearance, I never had any friends...

—But it is because of my appearance, that I spent a lot of effort to accept and love myself. I would sometimes face the mirror alone, talk to myself.

—But recently, when facing the mirror, I feel that my chest is about to break apart.

—Why was I born into this world with such a face, such a state...why did the me in the mirror never change at all?

After he revealed such troubles, a painful feeling struck 'Saffron' so severely.

—It has nothing to do with appearance. I think that no matter how you look like, you're an amazing person, Mr. Polar Star. Your every word is unpretentious, exciting. I think you definitely are this kind of an outstanding person.

She tried her best to console him.

Mr. Polar Star then replied immediately.

—Thank you. You definitely must be a kind person who understands others well.

When she received this reply, her heart raced.

(That's why...even though I know I won't have my fated partner...right now, I'm a little...really a little hopeful. Didn't Mr. Polar Star smile back at me when I'm not a pretty girl? He did think that I have inner beauty, no?)

'Saffron' recalled the gentle expression he gave when he chatted with the doll-like waitress, the flustered look he gave when the pretty little girl sat on his lap, and the usual tone to lash out at the girls. Her heart tightened.

“I guess...it's not about the looks after all.”



The next morning, on the day after the commotion, Shioriko looked completely unenthusiastic, probably because she was reflecting her actions.

It was the same when she ate the sunny-side eggs and the cabbage miso soup, as she remained silent, not looking at Koremitsu.

When Lapis passed by her feet quietly, Shioriko tilted her head, looking as if she was about to cry.

She hung the staff card for the radio exercise on her neck, and was about to leave the house. Koremitsu was standing at the corridor, his arms folded as he looked at her, shocking her upon seeing him, giving a feeble look thereafter.

“Shiiko.”

Koremitsu called out, and paused,

“You're going for radio exercise?”

“Eh, yes.”

“I'll go with you once in a while.”

Koremitsu knelt at the corridor, and started tying his shoelaces. Shioriko asked tentatively,

“...Big brother.”

“Yes?”

“...You don't hate me, right?”

Koremitsu knelt down there as he turned his head around. Shioriko was looking back at him with a feeble child's eyes.

He then spoke sternly,

“I won't. I'm your dog after all.”

Shioriko's eyes became a little wet.

She blinked her eyes, spacing out for a little while, and wanted to say something, but was unable to let out a voice. The words were stuck in her mouth, and then, she timidly whispered,

“...Your hand please.”

“Woof.”

Koremitsu replied stiffly, and placed his bony hand on Shioriko's little palm grasping it tightly. He could feel warmth from the slender fingers he nearly broke apart.

Hikaru, standing beside the duo, was smiling, ostensibly watching a cute couple.

“Hurry up and put on your shoes. You're going to be late for morning exercise.”

“Alright, big brother.”

Shioriko's tender face gradually broke into a sweet, blissful smile.

“I'm leaving!”

She called out to Masakaze and Koharu, who were inside the house.

The duo probably would be relieved after hearing such an energetic voice.

Koremitsu too heaved a sigh of relief.

To be honest, he felt really embarrassed about the 'woof' response from before...

Though the surrounding children were shivering, he proceeded on to do the radio exercise with Shioriko, and after seeing a little of her dodgeball practice, he strolled off to the shop Bonne Chance leisurely.

(...I think it's better to send a message to Shikibu.)

At this point, Honoka undoubtedly was as dispirited as Shioriko before this.

Upon thinking about how Honoka must have been looking gloomy with her shoulder slumped, he felt anguish in his chest.

(Did I....go overboard the previous day...)

Honoka was always raging.

The biggest cause of it was always Koremitsu.

(But what do I write in the message?)

Koremitsu took the cellphone out of his pocket, and slipped it back. Hikaru muttered,

“If it is Miss Shikibu, you just need to do the same as for Shiiko. Reach your hand out, and go ‘woof’.”

“How can I possibly do that!”

“Miss Shikibu probably will suffocate due to happiness.”

“Shut up!”

“And if I were not a ghost, I would really hope to film this episode by the side.”

“Go die again!”

“Wow, so scary~”

Hikaru pretended to give such a look, and then showed a gentle, mature expression.

“If you can convey your own thoughts into direct words, it will definitely reach Miss Shikibu.”

“Uu.”

He paused, still holding the cellphone in his hand.

And before he knew it, he was standing in front of the shop.

Either way, he would deal with the message later.

He did forbid Honoka and Shioriko from ever stepping into the shop again the previous day, but he wondered if the people inside the shop were hopeful, thinking that it would apply to Koremitsu himself. Feeling extremely tense, he pushed the door aside.

There were the usual customers of the one at the window side, reading the newspapers with the blinders down, the chatty group of girls, and the Miss Mint reading a pocket novel at the wall.

“We-welcome!”

Greeting him with a higher pitch this time was Aoi.

It seemed she had something to say, but was quite fidgety as she approached Koremitsu, probably because of the shocking thing Shioriko said the previous day..

“A table for one? Over here please.”

She said, and stiffly led him to a seat.

At this moment, Koremitsu felt somewhat touched.

After making his order, Koremitsu scanned the shop. Asai and Tōjō were not present on this day either. It seemed Asai was unable to spare some time because of her hectic schedule, and Tōjō probably had something similar going on.

And at that moment, there was a customer covering her face with a sugar pot, entering his sights.

She sat down 2 tables away from Koremitsu.

At that instant, he assumed it was the waitress called Sueko. On a closer look however, he found that she was not dressed in a white apron that fluttered with the window, but a simple shirt and a black pleated skirt, similar to the female Heian Academy summer uniform.

(Speaking of which, isn't that our school uniform?)

Hikaru too was surprised.

And also, the 3 braids and round glasses frame appeared from behind the sugar pot—

Koremitsu got up from his seat and approached her.

“Hey.”

He came up to her, and the 3 braids shivered.

“Wa-was I seen...?”

The class representative with braids slowly poked her head out.

“You think you weren't? What are you doing here?”

“Well, Hono said that you suddenly raged at her, and that she probably will never be able to talk to you again. It seems she was really concerned about it.

Koremitsu nearly fell forward as a result.

“D-did Shikibu ask you to come here?”

Michiru took half a step back, and tried to defend herself shrilly, probably because his face was too close.

“Th-th-th-th-that's not it. Hono is really really despondent.”

“ ... ”

An image of a dejected Honoka appeared in Koremitsu's mind, and he felt astringent.

Michiru then waved her hands, saying,

“A-and, I already liked this shop for quite some time. I often came by during summer vacation.”

“What!? I never saw you before, right?”

“But after I saw you enter the shop from my house. I didn't dare enter this place, Mr. Akagi...”

“What did you say!?”

“I-I-I-I-I'm fine with it however. I'm still rushing with my assignments. You're still angry after all, Mr. Akagi. Hono is still not in a good mood, Hono.”

Michiru muttered to herself, and adjusted the chair such that it got lowered.

“!! Don't say anything to Shikibu.”

After reminding her this, Koremitsu returned to his seat.

“Well, Koremitsu, I suppose you should give Miss Shikibu a call. It should be better to do that than to spend time sending messages.”

“Guh!”

After hearing Hikaru's words, Koremitsu took out a cellphone from his phone, and stared at it.

“Sorry, we are currently full at the moment.”

“My friend is in here. Over there.”

A rhythmic set of footsteps stopped at Koremitsu's table.

Koremitsu lifted his head, and found a black-haired, tall and slender girl, Asai Saiga, staring down at him with a poised expression.

“Hey.”

With a cool expression, Asai slotted herself in the chair opposite Koremitsu before he could speak up.

(We're not so close that we can sit together and talk, right?)

Or was it that Asai started to feel a little intimate with Koremitsu because of what happened **two days ago**?

But just that?

(Speaking of which, I did try to woo Asai before. It's because she wasn't feeling well that I took care of her at the park. And she calls me a pervert in front of others, and I got chased by the police as a result.)

Hikaru too was extremely surprised by Asai's sudden change in attitude, muttering,

“I thought Asa really hated Koremitsu like an Echinococcus!”

(An Echinococcus!? Isn't that a parasite? Am I a bug now!? A parasite!? That's worse than a mad dog!)

He was completely seething, but Saiga remained seated opposite Koremitsu, not talking to him.

She kept her lips shut, watching him coldly.

And then, she said to the waitress, who came to take her order.

“One Earl Grey, straight up.”

And remained silent again.

(Why aren't you saying anything? Hurry up and say something, you cold-faced woman!)

He was feeling completely restless within, and he gulped down what he wanted to say upon recalling how he tried to woo Asai.

But that day was certainly something both Asai and Koremitsu wanted to forget.

—Asa believed that there was Santa Claus until about 3rd grade.

He nonchalantly mentioned what he heard, and though Asai remained calm in her tone, her face was gradually flushed. Koremitsu in turn continued saying things that made her embarrassed.

As payback, he got chased by the police for most of the day. Asai probably did not want to see Koremitsu after that.

(What's she thinking?)

He could not read her intent, and whispered,

“...Are you feeling a little better?”

“...Does that have anything to do with you?”

A brusque reply came at him in turn.

(!!! She's making me mad again.)

“Hey, Asa.”

“How many times must I repeat myself that I do not allow you to call me that?”

“Are you sitting right opposite me just to use that iceberg-like stare to look at my face?”

“An ugly face like yours is not worthy of being looked at.”

“Ah, I see. Now then, why are you still staring at my face when you don't want to look at it?”

Asai again shut her lips.

“...”

She frowned hard, looking displeased, ostensibly seeking an answer to Koremitsu's question as she watched him intently, before speaking up,

“I suppose it is better that you do not worry about Aoi.”

“Aoi?”

Aoi, who was serving red tea at this point, looked over at Koremitsu's side worriedly, her tray shaking. Asai was supposed to utterly despise Koremitsu, and this time, chose to deliberately sit in front of him. She could not relax after all.

Asai's stare was sharp, and she coldly said,

“You came to this shop for Aoi, right? I suppose you can at least remove your claws from her. You who have declared to deliver Hikaru's presents to Aoi have done your job. Your duty is already over. You are completely unnecessary to Aoi's life from this point on.”

Koremitsu glared back at Asai,

“It would be one thing if Aoi said this, but if you're saying it yourself, aren't you being too protective of her? It's not just about me here; You and Tōjō, we're all too protective of her. Aoi can't possibly be a pampered princess forever. She has to be strong-willed and learn how to survive on her own.

Hikaru heard Koremitsu's words in anguish from the side. At this point, he probably was aching in his heart.

To Hikaru, Aoi was someone he would be willing to open his umbrella for, a pure, speckless white flower that he treasured and protected.

At this point, he could only watch this changing girl with his unchanging eyes. Koremitsu too could feel the loneliness.

(But if Aoi wants to be stronger, I really want to help her out a bit. You'll definitely do that if you're alive too, right, Hikaru?)

Asai narrowed her eyes.

She showed a sharp glint in her eyes, her expression filled with frustration, rage and anxiety.

It was the same as when Koremitsu declared himself to be Hikaru's representative, an icy expression that showed all its rage—

Her thin lips curled into a sneer, letting out a chilly voice.

“Aoi is gradually becoming independent. Is that what you think?”



(He-he's talking to another girl with a serious look—!!!)

Seated opposite the red-haired was the tall, lanky intellectual beauty that had come to this shop before.

Before this, 'Saffron' always noticed her working at the notepad computer with a serious look, whispering things to the handsome man behind her from time to time.

(She's not a couple with that leader-like handsome man? Two timing? Such a flirtatious woman? As long as she's pretty?)

The tip of her nose started to itch, and her chest was throbbing.

(Mr. Polar Star is an idiot.)



Asai's words felt like an ice pick at Koremitsu's chest.

“I suppose you definitely do not know how important an existence she is to her family's kin?”

She stared at Koremitsu's eyes as the latter watched on with bated breath, and continued to ask,

“The Mikados is an old reputed family with massive financial and political clout, and the Saotomes served them for generations; you definitely do not know how many responsibility she has as the eldest daughter of the Saotomes, do you?”

The tinge of anger shown in her eyes was gradually surging.

(Why is it that she really hates me this much!?)

It had been the same since the first time they met; she always denied Koremitsu's existence, and was full of scorn and fury.

Hikaru was beside Koremitsu, staring at Asai from a distance with a gloomy. All he saw was darkness in front of him, an expression that was completely devoid of hope, which caused Koremitsu's back to feel a chill.

“As an outsider of the Mikados, you really do not know anything about Hikaru, about Aoi.”

Koremitsu expression and body were rendered frozen, unable to move.



There seemed to be something more important than the rage Asai was venting upon him—Koremitsu did not know what was the thing forced upon him.

And Asai's face gradually became gloomy.

“You probably...do not know anything about me either.”

There was a little bit of despair in that reverberating voice, causing Koremitsu to feel a gripping sense of loneliness. He whispered,

“...I do know that you believed in Santa Claus until your 3rd grade.”

Asai's lips curled into a frown.

However, this was not the awkward expression she showed at the park, her face blushing, but that she did not seem to hear his words at all. She maintained such a posture, and calmly continued with an intellectual tone.

“Aoi does not have the freedom to be allowed to act alone, and she will not.”

She seemed worried for Aoi, and spoke with the stern tone of a big sister,

“...When she does this, she will be the one hurt in the end.”

At least Asai's wishes to protect Aoi was something sincere. This was something both Hikaru and Koremitsu agreed on, but they felt some obvious spite in Asai's words.

He felt repulsed by her words, but was unable to fire shots back.

“What now? How am I supposed to understand when you don't finish what you want to say?”

Right now Koremitsu responded.

The cellphone on the table vibrated.

And so, Koremitsu opened the cellphone with a scowl, read the message, and was shocked.

“Come look for me. I am here with Mignon.”

It was Saffron.

Saffron was at this shop, at this time, observing Koremitsu.

(Damn it, at the worst timing possible too!)

It was the perfect opportunity to look for Saffron, but at this point, he was having an intense battle against the woman he most hated.

Caught in an awkward dilemma, Koremitsu held onto the cellphone in his hand tightly.

And after that, there was the sound of ceramic breaking behind him.

“Kya!”

Followed by a soft squeal.

He looked back, and found the broken pieces of red tea cups at Aoi's feet. Her face was pale, not knowing what to do.

“So-sorry”

She knelt down to pick up the pieces, looking somewhat teary. The waitress called Sueko brought a broom and dustpan over as she rushed over.

“Don't touch it.”

She wanted to stop Aoi.

“Ow!”

It seemed Aoi cut herself on the finger because of the pieces.

“Are you alright, Miss Aoi? I'll handle things here. Go to the kitchen to wash,.”

“But.”

“It's okay, hurry back now. Ahh, you're bleeding a lot. Shopkeeper, please take the first aid box out for Miss Aoi.”

Aoi shrank back as she watched Sueko handle things so smoothly, looking like she had someone to rely on. “Miss Saotome, please leave this to Miss Marinokoji.” the shopkeeper said, and Aoi finally got up slowly.

Hikaru floated in the air, watching Aoi leave. Like him, Koremitsu had the urge to rush over and take care of her, but it was against common sense for

the customer to take care of the employee, and there would be stares, probably causing a bigger commotion. Besides, he was not able to excuse himself at this point.

In contrast, he wondered if the overprotective Asai would rush over to Aoi and lecture her without any care.

Unexpectedly however, Asai remained seated, and the events unfolded in front of her did not faze her.

She remained seated upright in her chair, watching Aoi's actions with a terrifyingly collected, rational expression.

And then, she said, seemingly proving the validity of her statement.

“Look at this.”

The calm tone, coupled with the unforgiving stare, were fixated right upon Koremitsu.

Aoi looked over at Koremitsu's side tentatively.

And once she noticed Asai's stare, her expression seemed a little abnormal.

Asai's expression was ostensibly declaring that everything Aoi did to this point was futile, that she could not be independent.

Aoi felt like running away. Her face reddened, looking disappointed and sheepish as she bowed her head deeply.

Koremitsu too was stunned by Asai's cruel words and stare, but was unable to argue back. Beside him, Hikaru too looked troubled.

There was a call sent to Asai's cellphone.

She brought the phone to her ear, and seemed to say something—

“Is that so? I understand.”

It seemed she heard some good news as her frowning eyebrows eased up, and she got up from her chair.

“I shall make my leave. When I am not around, do not involve yourself with Aoi. This is for her sake.”

After she stoically instructed him, she swayed her alluring long glossy black hair, and turned to leave.

The class representative was seated at a corner of the shop, watching everything that happened. At the instance Asai passed by, she hurried covered her face.

Koremitsu continued to grit his teeth as he glared at Asai, until the moment she left.

“...What's with that woman.”

He finally spat out these words.

There were already droplets of sweat on his forehead before he knew it, and he could no longer contain the rage in his body.

Asai simply denied all of Aoi's hard work just because she failed once. And Koremitsu did not say anything because he was stumped by her.

“How can there be such a cold-blooded person? Though she may not agree with the fact that Aoi's working part-time, isn't she being too harsh here?”

He ended up grumbling like a loser.

“Aoi really looks very pitiful here. Did that woman really believe in Santa Claus? She really was a cute kid back then. What caused her to be so conceited and ruthless?”

“...I think it is because of me.”

“Huh!?”

Koremitsu looked aside, and saw Hikaru show a gloomy look. His clear eyes were gradually becoming shrouded, his voice weakening.

“I suppose it is my fault that Asa became like this.”

“What...do you mean by that.”

“ ... ”

Hikaru continued to endure the silent anguish, his long eyebrows lowered. After much endurance from Koremitsu's side, he finally heard a reply.

“...I had a promise with Asa when we were young.”

(Promise...?)

With Asai

Normally, Koremitsu would have told Hikaru off, calling him a date maniac even starting from young.

“That we will look for the tsuchinoko together.”

“Heh!?”

Koremitsu was a little lost.

He had been hearing all sorts of strange things on this day.

(Speaking of which, this guy is speaking Japanese, right?)

He was really skeptical regarding such vague words.

The tsuchinoko's a creature like a serpent, right? During the previous century, it was deemed as a mystical being that looked very suspicious. Ahh...speaking of which, I think I heard that word when we were at the park two days ago. Did I mishear it?

Hikaru continued to look on grimly as he lowered his head. After that, he said,

“That if we capture the Tsuchinoko, we would take a photo as a memory.”

“Hey!”

“And she said that if we can catch one male and one female, we would breed them.”

“Hikaru.”

“That if we continued on, we could build a museum for Tsuchinokos”

“Wait.”

“We were certainly gullible back then. That was impossible.”

Koremitsu immediately slammed his head into the table.

“..What is the matter, Koremitsu? Are you tired? Do you feel like crying? Is it because I said such depressing things?”

“Who in the world will cry here! I'm just feeling tired! I just want to calm down!”

Before Koremitsu knew it, the surrounding stares were fixated upon him, and he hushed his voice,

“Ah, damn it. Listen to me properly for once. It doesn't matter that Saiga has a bad personality or what. Rather, I should be really glad here. There's no way a tsuchinoko museum can ever happen. It's great that she's able to understand this before entering high school.”

“...Yes”

Hikaru beamed back.

Was that smile what Hikaru would show when he was sad? Koremitsu was a little intrigued.

(That's definitely it. She thought that the tsuchinoko museum can be built, and was really shocked when she learned that she was lied to, that they were all fools. That's why she became such a stern woman. It's probably similar to the Santa Claus thing.)

He concluded.

“Leaving aside that, Aoi's fine, right? It looks like a deep cut.”

“I suppose it should not be something major if she can continue to work in the shop...it really is tough for her to show her failure to Asa...”

Hikaru too was clutching at his chest with both hands, seemingly in anguish too.

“And if Mr Shungo learns that Aoi got hurt, he will definitely force her to quit.”

“...Hm, that makes sense.”

They definitely had to keep this a secret from Tōjō. Speaking of which, it seemed Asai never told him about this...

“Ah, Miss Aoi is back.”

Hikaru leaned his body to the counter.

Aoi exited the kitchen door with her head hung in shame. She had a plaster on her ring finger, and it looked extremely painful.

“It looks like she is not hurt too much.”

“Yeah...”

But she seemed lethargic.

She raised the tray of red tea set, and her movements were tense and stiffer than before to prevent the tray from shaking, her shoulders and face looking rigid.

Hikaru looked really tantalized as he moved his lips.

And Koremitsu pretended to go to the toilet as he stood up, passing Aoi nonchalantly.

After she served the red tea to the table, Aoi let out a heavy sigh as she returned back, and there was a voice,

“Pull yourself together.”

Hikaru too embraced Aoi from behind, and encouraged with his gentle voice to her ears,

“Do your best, Miss Aoi.”

At that moment, it seemed Aoi's shoulders holted.

Michiru, seated next to the toilet, widened her eyes as she saw Koremitsu talk to Aoi.

And after Koremitsu used the toilet, he met Aoi in the eyes.

Aoi gave a stiff smile, her pink lips seeming saying 'yes'. She then continued with her work.

At this point, there seemed to be nothing going on, at least. She seemed to have recovered somewhat, and was relaxed.

(Saiga told me to mind my own business. Maybe she's going to look at me with scorn again.)

At this moment, the bell hanging on the door chimed, and a customer walked in.

“Welc—”

Aoi, who was at the door, went up to greet the customer, only to stop halfway. She widened her eyes, her cheeks stiffened.

Koremitsu too widened his mouth when he saw the customer.

The other customers and waitresses in the shop showed one shocked look after another.

Michiru too looked stupefied.

The woman who entered was dressed in a one-piece dress with a deep bold neckline and a short skirt, dressed in a glamorous get-up. She had a little of her red hair, slightly curled at its tip, bundled, and the rest was lowered naturally. This woman was wearing sunglasses—

“An artiste?”

“Definitely. Isn't she a model?”

“Sure feels different from a normal person.”

She did not mind the chatters, the amazement, and the appreciative looks as she entered.

(What's with that person...! She's gorgeous— EHHHH!? She's going to Mr Polar Star!?)

The woman was as beautiful as the red weeping cherry blossoms, dyeing the shop with color, mesmerizing her surroundings as she approached Koremitsu, her heels rattling. She then stopped, reached out her long fingers, and removed her sunglasses.

And then, she smiled heartily.

“I have arrived, Mr Akagi.”

I'm Not a Convenient Woman, Duh!

There were some girls, that even when they simply existed there, they would be the focal point of attention.

She in particular was one of those special girls.

She was a girl who transferred to the affiliated noble girls school 'Saffron' studied at.

On the day of the opening ceremony, 'Saffron' was in a new class, ignoring the buzzing voices of the other girls as she read her book quietly.

“Ah!”

A shocked voice could be heard.

“That book! I'm reading it now too!”

She said as she took out a book with a similar cover from her bag.

That was her.

The girl with a cheerful smile.

The girl who remained fearless even when dealing with the rich princesses.

She had a strong sense of justice, would often take care of others well, and was able to express all she wanted to say fluently.

She was extremely gentle.

—I like this flower very much.

—In Arabic, this flower means 'yellow'. It can be made into a yellow dye, but this flower is a beautiful purple color itself. Isn't it interesting?

—That's why my lucky colors are purple and yellow.

The glamorous purple and the radiant yellow.

She was like the flower with both these colors—

And before 'Saffron' knew it, she had many people surrounding her.

It was such that the princesses who were in the school since the affiliated kindergarten wanted to improve relationships with her, that they invited her to their houses.

But for some reason, she treated such a person like 'Saffron' as a friend. Whenever they were together, 'Saffron' would feel that she was being compared to, and she felt suffocated.

The only one willing to talk to 'Saffron' at school was her.

'Saffron' was not used to conversing with others directly, so she would lower her head and cringe, her voice sounding really tense, and she was

unable to express herself very well. Whenever she wanted to talk, the tip of her nose would become red, and a miserable feeling was pricking her from within.

She kept reading books during rest time, and that was because she could not burn the 10 minutes of time if she did not do so. Whenever her classmates continued to buzz and chatter at the back, her body would stiffen, and her inner heart would seem very empty. She wanted to return home quickly, she wanted to escape to a place where she would not feel awkward even when she was alone.

There was only one girl who approached 'Saffron' like this, giving a warm smile, approaching her with light steps.

This made her annoyed.

This made her distraught.

But XX, you just need to doll yourself up a little better. Let me go shopping with you. I'll pick the clothes most suited for you. If you add a little touch to your hair, you can change your image, you know? Do you want me to cut it for you? You'll be happy if you become pretty. You'll feel a lot better when you wear your favorite accessory—but even after saying that, those words merely caused 'Saffron's heart to break in despair.

Even if it was a little accessory, it was something too shameful to 'Saffron', too pitiful, something she could not wear.



“Delicious.”

She added the gooseberry jam into into the green tea cup with the gold hemming that was filled in tea, placed the liquid in her mouth for a little while, and closed her eyes, ostensibly analyzing the lingering taste in her mouth. After that, she said with satisfaction.

“The sweetness and sourness of the jam, when added into red tea, becomes a richer fragrance that spreads in the mouth.

Her pretty, long and curly eyelashes were raised upwards, and she broke into a thin smile, giving off the regal vibe of a few thousand flowers blooming at the same time.

“The interior decorations of the shop is similar to the foreign houses I see in the illustration books when I was young, simple and cute. The space between the seats is just right, and really is relaxing. This is a fine shop. The shop name Bonne Chance is brilliant too; in French, it means 'to wish someone good luck'. Ah, there is an afternoon tea set in the menu, two types of scones, clotted cream and my choice of jam, different types of sandwiches like seasonal fruits, petit four, and cookies...this is worth looking forward to. However, I am on a diet now...what do I do now, Mr. Akagi? Can you help me?”

“Senpai.”

“What is it~?”

“I can't really help as I don't really like sweet stuff.”

Koremitsu glanced at the three layers of photos of cake and tarts laid out on the silver plates.

“Eh? That is too bad.”

Once Tsuyako said this, she giggled as she played with the menu using the slender fingers she trimmed every single day.

“Ahh, the afternoon tea set starts at 2. It is now too early though, so how about some cream tea? I want both types of scones here, the clotted cream and my choice of jam. What do I do with the jam? Which one will be better? Marmalade or blueberry? Ah, pineapple looks delicious too.”

“If it is jam, pineapple and kiwi flavors are said to have the refreshing flavors that cannot be eaten elsewhere so I really recommend them. This is what a girl who often came here said. Personally, I want to try the honey jam myself.”

Hikaru poked his head in from beside Tsuyako, and spoke with a soft, sweet voice.

Koremitsu stared at the happenings going on in front of him, and said,

“Senpai, are you here just to open a tea party?”

“Can I not come here to see my cute underclassman here? It will be a month and a half of summer vacation when we will not be seeing each other. You probably would have forgotten about me.”

“I won't. Speaking of which, don't say cute to a guy here.”

“So you do pay particular mind to this, Mr. Akagi. That is unexpected.”

Tsuyako looked away from the menu, stared at Koremitsu, and laughed cheerfully. She was still the same as before, a woman who really liked to laugh.

“So you really came here to open a tea party.”

“Can I not?”

“Not that you can't—but well...”

At least choose the right place! He however did not say the reason.

Micihiru was seated near the toilet, holding a sugar pot in her hands as she peered over quietly. She did not come over to talk to them, probably because she was worried about disturbing them.

And in contrast, Aoi had been scowling ever since Tsuyako sat at Koremitsu's seat, giving them a terrifying glare that caused his back to freeze over.

To Aoi, Tsuyako was a woman who was not to be underestimated, who did not care that she got involved in a scandal with her fiancée Hikaru. Also, Tsuyako was heavily involved in the incident with Kazuaki back then.

Tsuyako too had her own troubles, and from the outcome, it seemed Tsuyako told Koremitsu where Aoi was. It was because of this that he was able to save Aoi.

But even so, it was probably impossible for both Aoi and Tsuyako to get along well. Leaving aside Tsuyako, Aoi, who had a pure mindset, would probably think about Tsuyako's scandal with Hikaru and the incident with Kazuaki whenever she saw her face.

(Hikaru, don't just stand there, giggle and talk to senpai like that. Don't you feel sorry to Aoi?)

Koremitsu knew very well that Hikaru really treasured Aoi.

And he knew Hikaru broke up with Tsuyako to improve his relationship with Aoi properly.

In spite of that, though Aoi could not see Hikaru, the latter looked completely unabashed as he whispered to Tsuyako sweetly in front of Aoi, and till this point, Koremitsu could not comprehend.

(This guy is a harem bastard to the soul after all.)

Koremitsu was sometimes left speechless by Hikaru, sometimes sympathetic to Aoi. Tsuyako stared at Koremitsu, seemingly harboring some thoughts, and said,

“It seems Miss Aoi will feel unhappy whenever I am around.”

Koremitsu was left speechless.

“If you understand that, please take note at least. You're an adult right, senpai?”

“Ah, but Miss Aoi and I are of the same age. In terms of birthdays, Miss Aoi is even a few months older than me.”

“But.”

“And I do not like it if I am told to watch myself. This makes me feel that that person is looking down on me.”

“I don't have that intent.”

“But you do think that as compared to Miss Aoi, I am more resilient.”

“Uu.”

“That is why you wish for me to be more adult-like, so that Miss Aoi will not be feeling uneasy, no?”

“Ugh!”

“Am I wrong?”

Koremitsu was again left speechless.

Why could this upperclassman give such a carefree look, a mischievous expression, and give one tough question after another, confusing him completely?

As Koremitsu scowled and muttered, Hikaru too seemed rather sympathetic as he gave a skeptical look.

Tsuyako used both hands to support her head and stared at Koremitsu with her alluring eyes. Suddenly, she showed a cute smile from her lips and eyes. This upperclassman that seemed older than him normally showed an innocent, cute expression that matched her age.

“Sorry to stump you there~”

She apologized, chuckling away, looking as if she was happy to be able to trouble Koremitsu.

Amongst the girls around Koremitsu, Tsuyako was more or less the most unreasonable yet the most feminine, stubborn, busty and alluring.

And it was because of these feminine features that Koremitsu was occasionally teased, occasionally troubled by.

“It is a fact that I came to see you, Mr Akagi, but I am not here for myself; I am here to talk about Miss Shikibu.”

“Shikibu?”

This time, Tsuyako revealed the reliable expression of an upperclassman as she beamed,

“I do use the Japanese Dance club room for dance practice during summer vacation, no? And so, I came to the clubroom this morning.”

“...!”

“She looked really~~~ gloomy, that there was a cloud of rain over her.”

“...”

“What is the matter? I asked, but even so, she would not reply at first. However, if that feisty Miss Shikibu is being so dejected here, I guess something must have happened with you. After probing a little more, her expression got even more downcast. She continued to sit on the tatamis, her knees cupped together, and she shrank back like a tortoise.”

“..!!”

“I can never meet Akagi again, well that was what she said—”

Akagi felt his heart ached.

What in the world are you doing, Shikibu!?

“I have a rough gist of what is going on after asking Miss Shikibu about it, and while she is somewhat to blame for this, I cannot ignore her as an upperclassman when she is looking so dejected in front of me. Mr Akagi,

would you mind paying a visit to her? She definitely must be withdrawn like a tortoise now, but I do not like the saying 'paying a visit'."

Tsuyako continued to stare at Koremitsu intently, her eyes clearly giving the vibe of a reliable upperclassman, exceptionally gentle.

That expression was very similar to Hikaru's, the latter watching Koremitsu from the side.

"...Senpai, if you came directly from school, why are you dress in your own clothing?"

"I so happened to pass by a shop on my way here, and I bought these to let your heart flutter."

Even in this aspect, she was similar.

Koremitsu answered with a serious look,

"...I understand about Shikibu. I'll get going now."

Both Tsuyako and Hikaru smiled at the same time.

And as Koremitsu stood up, holding the bill, Tsuyako whispered to him gently,

"Well, Mr Akagi. Miss Shikibu must have been rather nervous when she is in front of you. She wants to show you her good side, to make you like her no matter how little it may be. However, she is often flustered as a reason,

unable to control her mood swings. In the end, she always shows her most violent, indecent self in front of you.”

“Senpai...thanks for telling me all that.”

He lowered his head.

“My pleasure.”

She answered cheerfully.

And so, he turned to look at Aoi, who continued to scowl.

“!”

She closed her lips, and turned away, showing a distressed look from her sidelong face.

“...If Hikaru was still alive, I suppose Miss Aoi probably would not want to be independent...Miss Asai...probably has her own troubles.”

She muttered.

—Miss Asai and I are so similar, yet so different.

When Aoi's painting was stolen, Asai stormed to the clubroom, and had a squabble with Tsuyako.

The self-deprecating words Tsuyako said back at that moment rang in Koremitsu's mind.

Hikaru too looked on glumly.

Though she seemed a little concerned, Tsuyako reverted into a bright smile immediately,

“I suppose honey jam is the best after all. It is what Hikaru likes. Have a good day, Mr Akagi.”

She sent him off.

“Oh, yeah.”

And Koremitsu began to walk.

He finished paying, and was about to exit the door, only to find Aoi standing beside it, giving a feeble look.

At that instance, it seemed she wanted to say something to Koremitsu, but she still smiled in the end.

“Thank you for coming. Erm...please come back again.”

She whispered.

He felt a little uneasy about leaving Tsuyako and Aoi together alone, and the forced determined look Aoi showed, coupled with Hikaru's pained expression, caused his heart to ache.

(Senpai, I trust you here. Please don't busy Aoi.)

He muttered in his heart.

“Oh.”

He answered, trying his best to sound gentle.

The girl seated at the window opened the pocket novel, watching everything that happened between Koremitsu and Aoi.

There was also Michiru, seated at the table next to the toilet—

After exiting, he checked the messages in the cellphone.

(So Saffron didn't send me any messages after that, huh?)

I'm with Mignon right now.

He finally had the chance to meet up with Saffron.

(Damn it. I got no choice here.)

He slipped the cellphone carelessly into his pocket, and raised his eyebrows as he ran down the slope.



(So Mr Polar Star went away...after all.)

Though she sent him a message, he never looked over at her.

'Saffron' grasped Mignon tightly with her icy hand.

He probably would never look for 'Saffron' again.

(Because there are so many beautiful girls around Mr Polar Star...)

There was the waitress who quietly waited the red-haired youth leave the shop looked so adorable with her moist eyes and her lips that wanted to say something.

The red-haired beauty that watched the duo with her elbows on the table, her hands supporting her head, giving off such an overwhelming regal

There was the pretty little girl with rosy cheeks who called him 'big brother'.

There was the pretty looking girl who summoned her courage to call him 'Akagi' in spite of being clumsy, and had neat eyebrows and nice long legs.

There was also the intellectual beauty who had a serious conversation

Compared to them, she definitely could not be categorized as a woman herself.

She was a peculiar animal.

—Yaa, that is a weird nose.

—You definitely escaped from the zoo or something, right

She recalled the events of her being teased by the boys in the park when she was still a child, and the tip of her nose became red, her body became frigid, ostensibly frozen.

(So boys do like cute girls after all.)

As a girl who was not born as a beauty, she probably could only live on with her face covered, never to be shown to others.

There was an irritating comment left on 'Saffron' blog **'In reality, you're probably just an ugly, unpopular girl right (LOLZ) You cover everything on your face other than your hair and chin because the rest of it is so ugly that you can't correct it anymore?'**

Her heart felt as if mud had been flung onto it as she trembled and deleted the comment.

(Mr Polar Bear probably thinks that too, right? That he doesn't want to see my face because I'm ugly.)

Was he feeling regretful that he gave the brooch 'Saffron' owned 'Mignon'?

She felt really peeved.

The tip of her nose was searing.

(I-I-I-I-I might be an ugly girl, but 'Saffron' isn't.)

—Miss Saffron, the way you space out is cuteness.

—Miss Saffron, you are definitely a pretty girl in real life, no?

She hid her real face, and for the first time, she was praised as cute, amazing, pretty.

—That really is a beautiful black hair, so much that it surprised me. You definitely are a princess, are you not, Miss Saffron?

—Your chin is thin and small; it causes my heart to throb.

As a 17 year old girl, such words were never said to her before.

Right, she definitely could not let this end.

She did not want Mr Polar Star to assume that 'Saffron' was an ugly girl, and hid herself to avoid meeting him.

The nose tip that had accompanied 'Saffron' for 17 years buzzed, seemingly determined too. At that moment, her heart was oozing in pain.

Her fated person never existed.

And she was a fool to believe that such a dream-like encounter might truly exist.

There was no one in this world who liked her like this.

And nobody would ever praise her, calling her cute.

Her fated partner never existed right from the beginning! If she never hoped for it, she would not be disappointed, and that would be fine!

But if it was 'Saffron'—

As long as it was Saffron'—

The hands that were holding Mignon tightly were seeping sweat.

“Right... 'Saffron' is a popular, pretty girl...”



(Akagi's definitely still mad now.)

Honoka cupped her knees, seated at a corner of the Japanese Dance Club.

She had been like that since morning, maintaining that posture for who knew how long. Noon should have passed quite a while ago, but she was not hungry in the slightest.

She repeated her thoughts over and over again, her regrets looping over and over again, repeating itself.

(I promised never to kick Akagi again, and I did it again without thinking, and even sent a staff member flying when he had nothing to do with it...)

There was a large lump on the shopkeeper's head.

(Why is it that I don't learn when it's about Akagi! I always wanted to be a cool girl in front of him.)

—DON'T YOU EVER STEP INTO THIS SHOP AGAIN!

Honoka was lectured loudly outside the shop by Koremitsu, who was fuming so much his hair was standing. He really was livid, and she was utterly stunned.

(Akagi definitely thinks that I'm just a stupid, violent girl who's not his girlfriend, a troublesome stalker girl who continues to harass him during the summer vacation~~!!)

Though Shioriko too was at fault for the commotion in the shop, she was still an elementary school student. There probably was no helping it either.

Furthermore, to Koremitsu, Shioriko was someone to be protected like a real little sister. Perhaps they might have made amends, and she was fawning over him, asking Koremitsu to carry her on the back.

(If I get Akagi to carry me, won't I look like a female pervert here? That'll annoy Akagi more.)

No, at this point, she was already hated to quite a state.

(If I just go to him and apologize...will he forgive me?)

But how many times had it been that she went to apologize to Koremitsu after going berserk like that?

She was so bashful every single time, looking ready to die as she apologized with a shrill voice. She always assumed that Koremitsu would take pity on her in this state, and never pursued the matter.

If this were to repeat itself continuously however, Koremitsu too would have had enough and reach his limit.

Honoka too did not know what expression to show when she face Koremitsu in the future.

“Uuu, I guess I might have to transfer schools...”

Just when Honoka was mourning away, nearly breaking into tears.

She sensed the door being opened.

Certainly, it must have been Tsuyako who came back

Honoka continued to keep her head buried into her knees while this happened, spacing out as she remained silent.

“Up-upperclassman Tsuyako, please tell me how do I keep calm in front of the person I like?”

Her heart was already filled with agony when she simply said those words, and she felt full of anguish, nearly overflowing.

It was that painful, such great pain, and she wanted to shout,

“What can I do to be myself in front of Akagi.”

Tsuyako remained silent. No matter who it was, such a question would be difficult to answer.

Honoka lifted her head stiffly,

“S-sorry...it's nothing. Please forget what I just said.”

But standing in front of her was not Tsuyako.

It was her classmate, the one with messy red hair, a sharp glare, a skinny body with his back arched, looking down at her with his face blushing, looking restless.

“!”

Why is Akagi here!!!!????

“Wai-wai-wai-wai-wai-wai-wait, why!?”

(Did he hear that?)

Koremitsu was blushing as he averted his eyes.

(He heard it after all!!!)

Honoka shook intensely, and just when she was about to stand, she pressed her hands on the hem of her skirt in her haste, lost her balance, and fell backwards.

“Wah!”

Her legs flew towards the air as she tumbled.

Her back crashed the tatamis, and on top of that, her head hit the wall with a loud thud.

(Uuu, this is really embarrassing.)

She wanted to hurry and stand up, before realizing that her skirt was flipped. Surely her underwear could be seen as well, and her heart jolted.

And of all days, she was wearing panda prints!

She hurriedly supported herself, flattened her skirt with both hands, bent her knees, and sat down again.

“~~!!”

She whimpered as she cautiously lifted her sight, and found Koremitsu standing still, blushing harder than before.

“Y-you saw...?”

“Eh, yeah...”

He turned away, stammering.

“You're not denying it? You saw?”

“It can't be helped!”

Koremitsu grumbled.

Honoka really hoped to break a hole in the tatamis and bury her head into it.

“I-it's not like what you imagined...I normally wear something more mature than that. I do have things like black lace, lavender silk and the like! B-but when I'm depressed, and when I wear this...I feel that well, I revert back to being a kid, that I become even livelier...I-I just wear it on occasion, just occasionally. Prints, patterns...like panda, I really only have one of it! As-as-as the love expert, don't mistake me for liking to wear panda prints panties!”

(Seriously, why am I discussing about underwear so passionately?)

Koremitsu was rendered overwhelmed.

(I'm an idiot. Won't this make him more stunned?)

Why was it that she would always show Koremitsu such an unbecoming sight?

She felt bitterness in her chest, hapless. This time, she really was about to cry.

(Well, it's fine anyway.)

She closed her lips, and lowered her head.

And because Honoka suddenly became silent, Koremitsu called out to her softly,

“...Shikibu.”

“Well...it's alright.”

She felt a stinging pain in her throat as she eked out a hoarse voice.

She raised her eyebrows, and turned her face towards Koremitsu. She wanted to show him a feisty look, but perhaps she looked ready to burst into tears at this point. Koremitsu gasped as he frowned.

“It's fine already.”

(Akagi's definitely incompatible with me here. No matter how I try to express myself, I'll definitely fail all the time, and the relationship between us will definitely worsen.)

If that was to be the case, it would be best if she did not approach him.

(I definitely will not be liked by Akagi either way.)

—*I haven't forgotten*

Koremitsu said this to Honoka with a serious look at this place, on the day of the semester closing ceremony.

I haven't forgotten, Shikibu, about you saying that you like me.

As it was too sudden, too embarrassing, she yelled 'forget about it' immediately, but once she reached home after that, she kept repeating those words over and over again in her mind, spinning around on the chair.

“Akagi has always...been working hard for girls...even when he had bad things said about him, even when he was scorned at, he would always act in the other person's interest...”

Koremitsu revealed a troubled look as he looked down at Honoka.

Honoka tried her best to hold the tears from falling out many times.

“I think you are really cool because of this, Akagi, but..”

If she were to say such a thing, he definitely would be stunned.

And she would be hated.

No, it would be better for her to be hated by him than to be a classmate on good terms with him.

“I'm different from Her Highness Aoi, Miss Kanai and Shiiko! You never did anything for me, Akagi!”

Koremitsu widened his eyes, ostensibly from the shock due to Honoka's words.

And as she saw him in such a state, she was filled with agony within.

She could not longer listen to Koremitsu say to her 'you're a good person, Shikibu'.

If she were to continue seeing his face, she would only be left with more anguish, so she stood up.

This time, she did not fall back, and stood up properly on the tatamis, storming out to the exit.

“Shikibu, wait.”

Koremitsu spoke gruffly as he grabbed Honoka's arm.

(Why're you stopping me, you idiot! You don't have any intention, don't agitate a woman's feelings ! You're going to make things worse worrying for me as a classmate!)

She firmly shook aside Koremitsu's hand that was grabbing her arm.

“I just wanted the two of us to go to the pool together, Akagi. You might not think it's anything much, but I was really looking forward to me! That's enough now!”

She said everything she wanted, and did not take another look at Koremitsu as she stormed out.



“Argh, what exactly was that all about anyway?”

Koremitsu grumbled as he stared at the direction left towards.

She disappeared before he realized it, and left in his hand was the touch of Honoka's hand, and his dripping sweat.

Left behind as well were the uneasy eyes staring at him, and the flurry of intense words.

“That idiot!”

Koremitsu cupped his head and squatted on the corridor, ostensibly breaking his knees.

And then, he remained like that, grumbling,

(That Shikibu actually expressed her feelings like this. Did I make her endure like that all this while!?)

Honoka had been by his side, grumbling 'I'm not doing this for your sake' as she offered him help.

She ostensibly said everything she wanted, any doubts she had, but it also did not seem to be the case.

—E-Erm...about the pool...

—Are you really going to the pool with me once you're done?

Honoka was ever so bashful back then, and once she got Koremitsu's affirmative reply, she looked really delighted.

—I'm different from Her Highness Aoi, Miss Kanai and Shiiko! You never did anything for me, Akagi!

That actually was the matter after all.

Koremitsu had been thanked by Honoka all this time, but was never able to repay her back in any way.

Her words continued to echo in his mind, his heart aching.

“Hikaru...I really don't understand women at all. I don't understand anything about what she's thinking.”

—I haven't forgotten.

He said such words while pretending to look cool, and decided to face Honoka seriously at that. However, he never noticed how much pressure he brought to her.

(I'm really a bastard.)

He cupped his head, feeling really dejected. As Koremitsu remained like this, Hikaru spoke with a mature adult-like voice.

“Your realization of this can be considered an improvement by itself. If you find that you failed, you can try again.”

Koremitsu slowly lifted his head, and found his friend squatted beside him in the same posture

“If it is you, you can definitely do it.”

Koremitsu's inner heart calmed down, silence blowing by like a refreshing breeze.

As a ghost, Hikaru could not start again even if he regretted.

That was why those words of his could echo in Koremitsu's heart.

“...You're right.”

“Well, it is like you to pull yourself together no matter how much you regret, and continue running forward, Koremitsu. You are my hero after all.”

“You think too highly of me, idiot.”

He muttered, and stood up.

He certainly was not something amazing like a hero.

He certainly had regrets. From this day forth, he would also have many things he would regret.

However,

He started worrying about what he could do for Honoka.

And besides, he did have a friend he could consult beside him.

He arched his back and leaned forward, his cheeks seering as he muttered,

“A-anyway...wooing other girls isn't something for me. I won't do that again. And...well...regarding a woman's feelings...can...can you teach me about them?”

Hikaru widened his eyes slightly, and said,

“My pleasure.”

Hikaru seemed very delighted as he beamed, causing Koremitsu to feel very embarrassed. The latter placed his hands in his pockets, looked away, and walked down the corridor.

“Hey you—”

And at the corner, he stopped.

The bespectacled girl with braids looked devastated as she stood there.

“Sorry, I was worried about Hono...so I trailed you. And then...I heard your conversation...”

Koremitsu raised his eyebrows as he drew his hands out of his pocket, scaring the girl as the latter took a few steps back, shouting,

“P-p-p-please don't be angry.”

“I'm not.”

He lowered his raised shoulders, and spoke quietly,

“It's good that you're able to think for your friend's sake.”

The class representative with braids stopped retreating, looking ready to burst into tears as she gave a hesitant look deep within her eyes, staring at Koremitsu,

“...This is the first time Hono is concerned about a guy.”

Unlike the shrill voice she would use due to tension, she whispered,

“I had been friends with Hono ever since she transferred in during middle school. I came here through the affiliated school, but I look so plain, so easy to bully...like I got chosen to be the class rep by everyone...everyone just calls me the class rep...Hono however called me by my proper name Michiru, helped me complete my work, and she helped me say out whatever I wanted to say. Everyone was willing to listen to Hono...Hono really is cool.”

She said with an admiring smile, and reverted back to a lonely look,

“I-I always hoped that I can be like Hono, so I bought the same accessory as her. You see, doesn't Hono have a glittery bracelet chain on her arm? Whenever she starts exercising, that chain would start shaking, rattling. She's pretty, and amazing...but it doesn't match me at all. In the end, I could only look at it and use it as a cellphone strap...ah, huh, what was I saying just now? I was supposed to be talking about Hono...please don't be concerned about me. Sorry!”

She used both hands to support her glasses, saying it like it was a joke.

Upon seeing Michiru like that, Koremitsu spoke to her, as if it was the first time they met.

“Do you hate the role of being the class rep?”

Michiru shook her head.

“I did at first, but it's different now. I'm me now, the best class rep in Japan.”

Koremitsu was very impressed by that reply.

And beside him, Hikaru watched on with a gentle expression.

“Miss Hanasato, you are like the Tachibana flower, a pure white flower that hides deep within the green leaves. Perhaps you might not be noticed by the others, but you are determined and devoted, giving off a memorable fragrance. You are a charismatic girl yourself.”

Michiru Hanasato.

For the first time, Koremitsu understood that this was the name of the bespectacled class representative in front of him.

And, feeling somewhat respectful to his classmate as well, Koremitsu called out,

“Hanasato!”

Michiru widened her eyes.

“You're like the Tachibana flowers. You're plain, but you have a gentle memorable fragrance. I think that's very good.”

She probably was shocked because Koremitsu knew her name.

And she looked up at Koremitsu's face, not moving at all.

As she had been staring at him all this while, Koremitsu was worried if she had passed out on the spot.



Suddenly, a tear flowed out of her large, widened eyes.

A little tear alone glided down her face like a glittering, transparent dew., and Koremitsu gasped as he watched this.



“Can we sit together, Tōjō-senpai?”

Shungo Tōjō read the message on the cellphone with a frown, and lifted his head to stare at the girl who came to talk to him. The wrinkles on his forehead intensified.

“There are still other seats here, right?”

Shungo coldly answered.

“But this is the best one.”

Hiina Oumi of the news club showed an impish smile on her boyish face, and sat beside him.

She folded her legs, ostensibly boasting about the thighs that were sticking out of her shorts, and leaned her body to Shungo, ostensibly boasting about the breasts that she barely managed to hold in with a tanktop.

She was merely a 15 year old girl, but her slightly opened lips and moist eyes revealing a fragrant coquetry and an intellect that defied her appearance.

The aura she gave off was something Shungo did not like.

Or rather, he despised.

No, to be precise, he had no choice but to despise.

He could not let this girl's feelings rest upon him. That was what he swore when he brought her out of that place.

The relationship they would have was simply to be that of a user and a person being used, and they could not hope for more.

—It's fine.

She smiled back without any begrudging.

—Even if this is the case, I feel blessed to be with my family.

Is it really a happy thing to be with a family member who cannot admit you? Shungo was uncertain.

But the girl sitting beside him, looking up and spacing out was being so satisfied, looking ever so blissful.

“This is good once in a while.”

Hiina turned her head around like a kitty, and narrowed her eyes.

“What will happen to if Aoi gets suspicious?”

Aoi was a waitress at this shop, the one Shungo really doted on, and concerned by her actions. Hiina spoke with a harsh look,

“Her Highness Aoi will think it is just a shameless underclassman forcing herself besides her senior.”

“So why are you not sitting opposite me, but beside me?”

“It's easier for me to whisper to you, that's why.”

Shungo kept quiet, and Hiina probably deemed this as acceptance as she leaned her face to his ear, whispering everything she learned in a happy whisper.

The head of the Mikados was still taken ill. During this time, Hikaru died; was it not a coincident.

It was probable that the head did not want to nominate Kazuaki, the legitimate wife's eldest son, as the heir, but to Hikaru.

As for why, it was because Hikaru had the face most similar to the head's favorite woman.

“Do you think Lord Hikaru killed himself, senpai?”

Hiina asked, changing her tone.

Shungo personally witnessed the scars on Hikaru's arms.

When it was during Golden Week.

Shungo saw Tsuyako kiss Hikaru at the turf club located at the Mikados' villa, and inadvertently lashed out at him.

After that, Shungo wanted to apologize, and went to Hikaru's villa, seeing the injuries under his sleeves.

Those were scars from a blade.

But—

“Hikaru has no reason to seek death.”

For he, beloved by the Heavens, the women, the boy who lived his life freely, why did he choose suicide?

Even so, Shungo noticed Hikaru's hollow expression at the last time they conversed with each other.

Hiina stared at him with with her clever looking eyes.

“The Matriarch Asa might know something.”

Asai was Hikaru's cousin, and Shungo again pondered.

After Kazuaki committed the cardinal sin of locking Aoi up, Shungo was the one to propose an alliance.

Asai agreed with this proposal.

For the sake of the Mikados' future, the Tōjōs have switched over from the Roses to the Wisterias.

Asai's objective should be the same thing.

And so, both Shungo and Asai would have the same benefits and cons.

However, unlike the cute innocent Aoi, Asai was as sharp and cold as a knife, and even for him, she was someone he did not really want to get involved with. It was one thing that he had to handle the obnoxious ladies like his older sisters, but it was another to deal with the overly insightful Asai. The way she called Shungo 'Mr Tōjō' when the latter was her senior made her an unpleasant person too.

But as an ally, she certainly was reliable.

And even if they had something going on, it was merely that of pros and cons, and not trusts.

“Asai—probably will not say anything.”

The bond between Asai and Hikaru.

The thoughts Asai had of Hikaru.

What was built up since young was probably something stronger than what Shungo could imagine.

Asai's actions were still based on that dead boy.

And then, the one who most understood the boy called Hikaru on this world, the one who understood his thoughts, was Asai.

Hiina too had this idea.

“Yes, that's why I started investigating whether Lord Hikaru killed himself or was killed. If 'that person' was the culprit, it'll be killing two birds with one stone. I'll just investigate more on that side.”

Shungo frowned.

“Won't that be too dangerous?”

After hearing her older brother's words, Hiina Oumi relaxed her face, and smiled.

At a distance where both of sense each other's breath, she stared bissfully at this important person to her who had the same bloodline, worried about her safety as he frowned away. She whispered,

“It's fine.”

This is something the princess Her Highness Aoi cannot do.

But if it's for my brother's sake, I'll finish it even if I've to give up my life.

Suetsumuhana

The next morning,

Koremitsu's eyes were bloodshot, his skin dry as he went up the slope leading to the red tea shop Bonne Chance.

He pondered over Honoka and the significance of Michiru's tear over and over again the previous night, unable to sleep.

His head and body were ostensibly seared by fire, and even as he tried to lie on his side on the futon and close his eyes, the images of those two would appear in his eyes; Honoka yelling 'it's alright', and Michiru, removing her glasses, rubbing her cheeks as she apologized 'it's alright, I was just shocked'. His heart ached.

He rolled about on the futon, and looked at the clock with his half-opened eye to check the time—then, he realized something.

Hikaru could not sleep at night.

The blue moonlight shone in from the window in the midst of the humid summer night, shining on Hikaru's gloomy sidelong face

It was a gloomy sight.

The cool and distant face.

The tightly shut, lonely lips.

(So Hikaru has been like that when I'm sleeping so soundly.)

There was no human voice, no sound, and shown in those eyes were merely just darkness.

He could not take a walk to ease his burden, and he could not read books to spend the time. Perhaps he could only stare at the sky like this.

Koremtitsu walked forth and he whispered, asking,

“Ghosts...can't sleep?”

Hikaru's gloomy eyes seemed to waver.

Perhaps he noticed the reason why Koremitsu was not in a good mood, and answered with a refreshing face,

“I was already used to having insomnia when I was alive.”

Hikaru answered with clarity.

“I do wonder how many nights I end up unable to sleep even after switching off the lights...because the girls in my bed would not let me do so.”

Koremitsu realized that Hikaru was trying to pass this off as a joke, and felt more anguished within.

“Eh, do not be like that. Why are you giving such a scary look, Koremitsu? It is not a big thing that I cannot sleep. I think it is interesting to count the tatami blocks and play a word chain by myself.”

“Ugh, Hikaru!”

“Y-yes?”

“Even if it's a day earlier, I want you to be able to sleep properly.”

After hearing Koremitsu's affirmed declaration, Hikaru showed a stiff smile, and said,

“I do feel those words seem to imply a different meaning.”

However, Koremitsu in turn was completely pumped up.

(Right, if I continue to hesitate, it'll take a longer time for this guy to depart, and he'll continue living through such painful nights. I'm already suffering so much being unable to sleep for an entire now; if I'm going to be like this every night, it's no different from Hell. Better settle this guy's emotional issues and send him to the afterlife.)

First, he would have to look for Saffron.

“You better look for Saffron properly today!”

Hikaru too looked on calmly,

“You are right. She probably was getting impatient waiting for you.”

“Uu, it's my fault for ignoring her message and leaving first. Shall I send a message back first?”

Koremitsu took the cellphone from his pocket, thinking hard, wondering about how he should respond.

“Well, when I told Miss Saffloer about how I could not sleep, Miss Saffloer sent me lots of herb medicinal recipes that promotes sleep, how to mix aroma oils, how to make Potpurri, and so on.”

Hikaru spoke from the side cheerily,

“She even showed me photos of the processes one by one, and even added explanations that are easy to understand. She really sent me a lot, like a hill.”

The face was dazzling like the sunlight under the bright morning sun, and the golden hair fluttered in the air as Hikaru beamed radiantly.

“What do you think? She is a good girl, right? She is a nice girl, right?”

Hikaru's sincere words and expressions really touched Koremitsu's heart.

One had to wonder why no matter which 'flower' it was, Hikaru was able to be so vivacious.

He spoke with a sweet expression, as if bragging to Koremitsu his most beloved lover.

“As her name implies, she is cute, and somewhat scatterbrained, cheering for me when I am downhearted. She is a girl like an orange flower.”

(Hm? Saffron's color is orange?)

Koremitsu did not know much about flowers, but when he searched the images of Saffrons on the internet, it seemed the flowers with those names were all purple...

Well, for him, any color would do for the flowers. Certainly, there could be orange Saffrons.

“Anyway, help me think of what to write to Saffron, Hikaru.”

“Hm, you are right here. First, we have to apologize about yesterday, and then—”

Koremitsu ascended the slope as he did as what Hikaru advised him, typing in the keys.

During this time, Koremitsu asked,

“Hey, to be honest, who do you think is more suspicious? If it's me, the most likely person is the rude waitress.”

“Miss Sueko, you mean?”

“Yeah, that Sueko. Aoi said that she's studying at a noble girls school, and there are some hints that she just started work recently. She's been acting

suspiciously when she looks at my face. Anyway, it feels like she's the one rather than being just the most likely person.”

“Eh, ah...yes. But you see, Saffron has long flowing black hair, and Miss Sueko is a little brighter, a little curly, at that.”

For some reason, Hikaru stammered weakly.

“That sort of things can be changed at times, right? Don't women always change hairstyles?”

“Eh, yes...that certainly is the case, but.”

“No, it's definitely her. If that's the case, I'm going to grab her by the collar and interrogate her.”

“Wait, Koremitsu! We are not policemen questioning a ruthless criminal here!”

Just when Hikaru was hurriedly trying to stop Koremitsu,

An uncouth voice rang into their ears.

“You got to be kidding me! That's a completely extra service charge! I won't continue working if you don't add some extra pay!”

There was a woman yelling loudly at the cellphone, standing in front of the duo.

That person was dressed in a long cut-and-sew skirt, had a large slingbag, and though her outfit was neat and tidy, her tone was coarse.

“...Is that Sueko?”

“*Erm...*”

Hikaru muttered vaguely, looking awkward.

(She does look like Sueko from her silhouette.)

But this tone makes her seem like a bar hostess rather than a rich princess, one who was violent, ready to cause a ruckus at all times. For some reason, Koremitsu felt that he heard that voice before.

“Anyway, I just want to talk about my basic pay increase! That's all! Argh!”

Sueko realized that there was the stare of a heinous hunchback high school student behind her, and turned her head around

She saw Koremitsu standing right in front of her, and averted her eyes in fear, hurriedly raising her bag, trying to hide her face. However, Koremitsu had already seen her face completely.

“You're that gawdy big sister living beside Yū's room!”

“Ugh!”

Sueko was taken aback.

Right, at the time Koremitsu often visited Yū's apartment, there was often loud yells noise coming from the next door, talking about bad times, pay rises and such.

When he knocked on Yū's door, Sueko would poke her head out from the next door, looking vexed as she said such vicious things,

“Don't get lecherous and do bad things, you damn brat.”

After that, Koremitsu learned that she was a bodyguard hired to protect Yū.

And this woman appeared in front Koremitsu as Sueko Marinokōji, a 3rd year of a certain famous girls high school.

“You entered that shop to protect Aoi this time, did you? Did Tōjō ask you to do this again?”

“Guh!”

“Ahaha...this certainly is something Mr. Shungo would do.”

Hikaru laughed wryly as he whispered.

“Miss Aoi was lavish in her praise, saying that Miss Sueko was very earnest, taught her all sorts of things, and helped her a lot. Miss Sueko was also the one to first help Miss Aoi when the latter dropped the tea cup.”

“You're the one who taught Aoi how to heal wounds with glue, use the tea leaves remains as a pesticide and all sorts of other things, right?”

“Sorry for not having money here! This is all part of my life experience!”

Sueko did not care any longer now that her cover was blown, and yelled as she lowered her bag, revealing her face. She did not have as heavy a make-up as she did when living as Yū's neighbor, but it was thicker than any ordinary person, and was extremely gaudy.

“Speaking of which, you call yourself a high school girl with that age of yours? Isn't that being too shameless?”

“Aren't you quite the rude brat to ask a girl's age immediately? I just graduated N years ago.”

“Don't you feel embarrassed for coming up with such a ridiculous alias like Sueko Marinokōji?”

“Sueko's my real name anyway.”

“Your real name!? It doesn't match you at all!”

“Yeah, I know that myself. I'm the youngest of my 4 sisters, so if you've any issue, go complain to the parents who named me Sueko for convenience sake!”

“So Miss Sueko is the youngest of the 4 sisters. It does seem to match the story of Amy in Little Women; she is the most beautiful of them all, and finally married into a rich family.”

Hikaru chimed in with some unnecessary tidbit.

A little while after the yelling, Koremitsu spoke softly in a lethargic manner,

“...In other words, you blocked your face with the tray, and pretended to sound posh. All that is because it'll be bad if I found out about your identity, right?”

And so, Koremitsu's idea that Sueko was the most likely suspect to be Saffron vanished.

Sueko suddenly lowered her waist, and begged,

“Anyway, can you please keep this a secret from Aoi? Of course, please also keep this a secret from young master Tōjō. Or else, my pay will...”

And then, she spoke with an erotic expression, sounding sexy,

“Hey? Will you? If you can keep my secret, this big sister will do some interesting things to you.”

“No thanks.”

“What's with that immediate answer!? And why're you giving that annoyed 'geh!' look on your face!?”

“She is right, Koremitsu. It is rare for such an invitation from a woman. That is being too rude. Even if she is not your type, you can promise once to learn.”

“Shut up, you sex maniac!”

“Sex maniac!? I'm a woman here! Ah, I'm going to be late for work. My pay—listen up? If you dare reveal this, I'll pour hot soup into your mouth!”

Sueko started running frantically.

“Ah, Miss Sueko. Your skirt is folded over. It is rare for you to dress up like a princess.”

Hikaru whispered, sounding devastated.

“Hey, Hikaru. You knew about her identity before this?”

“Eh!”

Hikaru's shoulders jolted in surprise.

“No wonder you weren't exactly agreeing with me when I said she was suspicious.”

“Is-is that so...? If that is the case, it is because I am in a bad state due to a lack of sleep. Ah, I feel dizzy.”

“What do you mean dizzy!? Stop with that 3rd rate acting! Why didn't you tell me she's the big sister living next to Yū!?”

Hikaru forced a smile while he was being glared at, and said,

“But did Miss Sueko not walk like a crab and cover her face with a tray, trying her best not to let you notice her? Her face was as red as a Geranium. It would be too pitiful for her if her hard work went to waste because of my own mouth. You see, I am an ally of girls.”

“Stop messing around with me, you flirtatious bastard. Always saying such things like the big sister next door being like a red Geranium!”

“Ah, Koremitsu! Your cellphone is ringing!”

“Don't try to misdirect me! Ah, it is.”

The cellphone in his hand was vibrated.

Once he saw who the sender was, his heart jolted.

“Hey, it's from Saffron.”

“Eh?”

After opening the message, both Koremitsu and Hikaru streaked at the screen—

“I had enough of you treating me as a fool.

You never had any intention of meeting me, do you, Mr. Polar Star?

Chatting up other girls in front of me.

My impression of you has been destroyed completely.”

“Ack, she's really angry here. Speaking of which, what does she mean 'chatting up other girls'? When did I do that in the shop?”

“...So you have no awareness of it at all. Well, I shall talk about that in the future. There is still some content after the message.”

On Hikaru's reminder, Koremitsu dragged the screen down.

“I am not going to date you anymore, Mr. Polar Star.

I do not wish that you send me any messages, and I shall ban you from my blog.”

“Ack, what do I do now. She's refusing me on her side.”

“It cannot be helped that all sorts of charming girls appeared one after another. Rather than that, look down.”

“She's still not done with her complains?”

“But before that, I wish to meet you one last time, because I want to give you a huge slap.

Today, you shall be slapped by Saffron, and you shall be dumped.

And with that, everything will be over.”

“Haaaaa!? What's she saying here!? Why do I have to be slapped!?”

“This is amazing, Koremitsu!”

“Like how!?”

While Koremitsu continued to grasp the phone tightly, Hikaru's face and eyes were glittering,

“This does mean that Miss Saffloer will be making an appearance, right?”

Koremitsu understood.

“Yeah! If she wants to slap me, doesn't that mean I can see Saffron?”

The once crestfallen mood immediately improved for the better.

“Alright! If you're going to show up now, I'm going to catch you.”

“...Like I said, this is not like a policeman catching a criminal.”

Hikaru seemed a little worried.

It was the same red tea shop, the same door, and he opened the door with more apprehension.

“Welcome.”

The first thing he heard was Sueko, who had her identity revealed, her eyes seemingly saying,

“If you dare reveal my identity, I won't forgive you.”

She showed such a cheap smile as she welcomed Koremitsu, and led him to his seat.

Aoi was standing in a corner, her head slightly lowered as she showed a clear smile.

(Great, she looks lively now.)

Koremitsu too nodded as thanks. With that, Aoi was happy, showing a smile on her lips.

Hikaru too was chuckling by the side.

(Speaking of which, it seems Aoi really respects Sueko. If she knows that Sueko was hired by Tōjō as a bodyguard, she'll be really shocked, I guess.)

For Aoi's sake, it would be better for him to hide the truth...

After making his order, he looked around the shop.

There was the customer seated at the window side with blinder, wiping her face with a towel as she read the newspapers; there was the group of high school girls seated in the middle of the shop, yapping away. At the corner was a girl flipping through the pocket novel, looking on with gloomy eyes—

That girl whom Hikaru dubbed Miss Mint lifted her head, staring in Koremitsu's direction.

(Is that...)

To Koremitsu, she was supposed to be the second most likely suspect after Sueko.

From her age, it seemed she was a high school girl.

She had been reading alone there all this while, sometimes giving Koremitsu an observing look or something.

(Is she?)

Saffron?

The eyes were cold, devoid of any warmth, ostensibly answering Koremitsu, 'that is me'. Koremitsu gulped, stood up, and was about to walk over to her.

“Mr. Polar Star?”

There was a voice from behind him.

“Eh? Yeah, that's me.”

The moment he turned his head around, there was a loud sound on Koremitsu's right cheek.

The tremendous impact blew from his face to his mind, and it seemed his neck was snapped.

That person gave him a merciless slap.

Koremitsu tumbled from the chair, and landed on his butt in an unbecoming manner.

“Wh—wha?”

His cheeks were still searing, throbbing with pain.

There seemed to be something broken in his mouth, and the taste of blood could be felt.

All the stares in the shop were fixated on Koremitsu, and Aoi herself seemed to be stopping herself from screaming as she placed both hands on her mouth. Sueko was behind Aoi, grabbing the latter by the shoulders, supporting her.

“Koremitsu, are you alright?”

Hikaru was flabbergasted as he stared at Koremitsu sidelong, exclaiming with shock.

It seemed the face was really swollen.

Koremitsu blanked out for a little while as he was knocked to the floor, and finally recovered, remaining on the floor as he looked up at the person.

“So you're Saffron?”

He answered forcefully.

“That's correct, Mr. Polar Star.”

Staring down at Koremitsu was a girl dressed in a bright purple tunic and a short denim pants, the refreshing and imposing sight akin to that of a Saffron.

(So she's Saffron?)

Koremitsu gritted his teeth as he continued to glare back. He heard a voice 'another harem war?', but it seemed everyone was already used to such a commotion as they pretended not to notice anything.

“Though we have finally met, it is too bad. This is the end of the line for you. I shall reject any messages from my address.”

She spoke with clarity and emphasis, beaming like a purple flower basked in lots of sunlight.

The large hanging earrings and the pendant on the chest were dangling glamorously, and the silver chain hanging on her little arm were rattling.

Koremitsu had wondered who she resembled, and it was Honoka.

The amazing body, feisty expression, and a slender waist caused him to think this way.

(What's with this strange feeling? It seems off?)

Was the Saffron Hikaru talked of really her?

“Goodbye now. You weren't a bad person online, but I have nothing to say about you in reality other than mediocre.”

The glossy long hair swayed in the air, and Saffron turned to leave.

The group of high school girl let out a sigh, seemingly watching the wondrous closing of a love drama scene.

“Hey—“

If she was to go away like this, Koremitsu's mission as Hikaru's representative would not be done.

And the day Hikaru gets to the afterlife would only grow distant.

Also, Koremitsu wondered what was the strange feeling in his heart, and had not given up on investigating it.

Something seemed off!

There seemed to be a minor mistake somewhere.

If he could understand the logic behind it—

The sweat seeping from Koremitsu's forehead entered his eyes, and his vision got blurry. And then, for some reason, the face of the class representative with 3 braids, the lonely tears that stroked her cheeks appeared in his eyes for some reason.

At this moment.

Hikaru's voice filled the place in the midst of this tense atmosphere.

“It does seem strange hearing those words from your mouth. I never met Miss Saffloer before.”

Hikaru stared at Saffron's back seriously, the light shining through his soft hair, causing it to ostensibly glitter, and his face to become as clear as an angel of light.

In his delirium, Koremitsu yelled,

“I haven't met Saffron yet!”

'Saffron' stopped her elegant steps.

She kept her back turned away from Koremitsu, not saying anything.

Hikaru then continued with a calm tone,

“You may be Saffron, but the Miss Saffloer I exchanged messages with is not you.”

“You're Saffron, but not Saffron herself. At the very least, the Saffloer Mr. Polar Star exchanged messages with isn't you!”

Hikaru's words continued to spread in Koremitsu's heart.

The latter's confused thoughts continued to piece themselves together, forming something tangible.



Once he had a strong awareness of it, he felt a painful shriek in his heart, and focused his ears on Hikaru's voice with all his might.

“In the online world, Saffron was a cheerful, somewhat airheaded rich princess. She is popular amongst the boys. In reality however, is Saffron really like that?”

“Saffron declared herself to be cheerful, somewhat clumsy and a little airheaded on her blog, and is really popular. Is the real Saffron like that?

The flowing waterfall-like long hair rested upon her back, and she shivered a little, probably because she was rattled. Perhaps she was wondering whether to turn around.

The silver chain on her wrist let out a soft sound.

The people in the shop probably assumed that Koremitsu was simply trying to get her to stay, and pretended not to notice.

But the girl with the icy expression in the corner of the shop, reading the pocket novel, was the only one to stop what she was doing, and stared in Koremitsu's direction.

And Aoi—

Too stared at Koremitsu with worry and confusion.

During all this, Hikaru did not stop,

“She did not know who Mr. McDonalds and Mr. KFC are actually names for McDonalds and Kentucky Fried Chicken, not because she is a princess who does not know anything about the world, but because she does not have friends that she can go out with after school or during the holidays, no? The reason why she does not put on the accessory, but keeps it carefully, is because it does not match her, no? That she feels embarrassed wearing it, right?”

Koremitsu's mind again recalled Michiru's lonely expression.

—I always hoped that I can be like Hono, so I bought the same accessory as her.

—You see, doesn't Hono have a glittery bracelet chain on her arm? Whenever she starts exercising, that chain would start shaking, rattling. She's pretty, and amazing...

But later, she gloomily spoke of how the accessory did not fit her

—In the end, I could only look at it, and use it as a cellphone strap

Michiru's words were about how she admired Honoka, how she wanted to be like the latter. This image slowly overlapped with the profile of Saffloer when Hikaru spoke of her with clear eyes.

—Her clothes are order-to-make, and likes to collect all sorts of accessories, and really treasures them greatly, as far as I can tell from her blog. She even gave names to her earrings and necklaces.

—There was once where she bought a brooch she really liked from a bunch of sunstone accessories, and even after thinking hard about it, could never come up with a name for it, so she once asked me, 'Can you please help me out here, Mr. Polar Star'?

—I called it Mignon. In French, it means cute. Miss Saffloer said that Mignon looks like it is smiling when placed on her chest, and cannot send me a photo due to embarrassment.

It was merely an accessory used for looking at.

Saffron did not have the courage to put it on her.

For a plain getup fit her identity better, and made her feel at ease.

Just like how Michiru wore the school uniform even when she was outside school—

“Is Miss Saffloer in real life not a plain person, a girl who the adults would not look at? At least that is the girl I at least remember from my imagination derived from the diary.”

“Isn't the Saffron in real life a plain, unpopular person in real life? If I have to say it, she's definitely that sort of person who'll hide in a corner of the classroom and not attract attention, no?”

Saffron turned around to look at Koremitsu.

She raised her eyebrows in fury, glaring at him with a terrifying expression. However, she closed her lips, shivering a few times, her feeble breaths looking like a sinking fish.

And her eyes glanced aside slightly.

“Soon after we became more acquainted with each other, she told me to call her Saffloer. Speaking of Saffloer, in Dutch, it means Safflower, and also known as 'false Saffron' in English. Right, the fact is that Miss Saffloer has already revealed herself as a false Saffron right from the beginning through her blog title 'Sunset blue'.”

There was some beauty in Hikaru's words.

And Koremitsu tried his best to convey the truth Hikaru led him to.

“Saffron wanted Polar Star to call her 'Saffloer' because it is a special name. That's why she wanted Polar Star to call her that. Listen up, Safflower isn't Saffron, but a fake Saffron!”

Saffron bit her lips, groaning.

There clearly was a faltering in her eyes.

The earrings dangled, and she again glanced aside.

“In that case, who is Saffron? I always thought that was the girl Miss Saffloer always admired, a glamorous girl who was used to socializing

with others, and was such that accessories suited her. Of course, that is just like you, the one standing in front of me now.”

“Saffloer wanted to be just like you, trendy with her clothing and put on cool accessories, but she can't do it, right? She wants to be like you, but she can't be like you. So she wanted to be like you in the online world, at least!”

—I always hoped that I can be like Hono

Michiru said those words.

Even if she could not do so in reality, perhaps she could become the one she admired in the online world, where the faces and names could not be known.

Perhaps she could be 'Saffron'.

Perhaps this was what Saffloer thought.

“Certainly, you are Saffloer.”

“To Saffloer, you're 'Saffron'.”

“At the same time however, you are not 'Saffloer'.”

“But the Saffron Polar Star met isn't you, but Saffloer! Besides, you never showed up in this shop during this past week! If you call yourself Saffron now, that'll be too shameless of you!”

Of course, there was no way Koremitsu could not notice an attractive girl like her in this shop.

'Saffron' continued to keep her lips shut, remaining shut. The forced expression she showed at first remained, but it eased up greatly.

And her eyes were wavering about because of her lack of poise, glancing aside a few times.

As the sunlight shone through his hair, Hikaru walked to that direction.

“Now then, where is Saffron exactly? She definitely must be listening to our conversation, I believe.”

Hikaru walked gracefully without letting out any footsteps on the floor, and Koremitsu too followed slowly. He then called out to Saffloer, hiding in a corner of the shop.

“Hey, Saffloer! You can hear me, right? Better show up now, or do I have to pull you out?”

Saffron moved her pale arm with the silver chain bracelet, trying to stop Koremitsu, but missed. 'Ah!' she then opened her mouth slightly, letting out a feeble cry.

“Miss Saffloer would give names for her houseplants, and treats them as importantly as her family. She also knows that when the summer sunlight is shining down, the leaves will change colors. This is why she let down the blinders, so that the plants do not take in too much sunlight.”

“I know you give names to the leaves you like, and give them special care. You let down the blinders so that the plants won't get exposed to the sunlight too much.”

Koremitsu's footsteps echoed.

Hikaru too slowly approached the seat at the window side.

Seated over there was the customer reading the newspapers as per usual.

“Yes, you are Miss Safflor.”

Hikaru's slender finger was pointed at the customer reading the newspapers.

And those newspapers were lifted by Koremitsu forcefully.

“You're the 'Saffron' Polar Star had a promise with, Safflor!”

With a rippling sound, the newspapers got thrown behind by Koremitsu, fluttering behind him.

Eek! The girl shrieked behind him, shivering as she curled up at the table.

Her long black hair was bundled behind, and her half-sleeved turtle-neck knitted shirt was matched with a plain colored shawl, the arms revealed from there looking long and thin.

On the chair beside her was a very old school bag, and there was a black cellphone on the table. There was also an orange sunstone brooch attached to a luxurious looking silver chain strap, glittering.

That definitely was the Mignon accessory Hikaru named.

Koremitsu grabbed it in his hand, and said,

“This is the proof that you're Saffloer!”

At the next instant, the girl lowered her head, grabbed the bag beside her, embraced it, got up, ducked below Koremitsu's arm, and escaped.

She kept running away, ignoring her image.

She bent her waist down, her butt raised, and fluttering in the air was her black bundled hair and the fringe that reached her chest, running out from the shop, ostensibly stumbling out. The shawl dropped as she ran out, but she did not stop to pick it up, probably not realizing it.

“Beni!”

The girl called Saffron shouted.

“Dear customer, please pay—”

The shopkeeper was about to call out as well, but Saffloer had already ran out of the door.

“Damn it.”

Koremitsu stuffed Saffloer's cellphone into his pocket, took a note from his wallet and slapped it on the table as payment for both of them, and ran after her.

“Mr. Akagi!”

Aoi called Koremitsu's name, but the latter did not have time to look back.

(Hey, why did she start running away! I'm not done with what I have to say! I haven't conveyed what Hikaru wants to say!)

He slammed the door aside and ran out, looking around for the girl.

At this moment, he found the girl with her hair tied in a bundle, pedaling hard on her bicycle.

“You won't get away!”

And so, he ran off after her.

“Koremitsu, she is riding a bicycle. You cannot catch up to her by running!”

Hikaru exclaimed.

“I know!”

Koremitsu started running up the stone leading to high school.

He ran up 3, 4 steps at a time, striding forth, ostensibly about to break his legs as he ran up. The scorching summer sun shone brightly upon him, and the sweat soaked his T-shirt, his heart pounding furiously.

Having gotten up to high ground, he looked down from the handrail surrounding the place. He found Saffloer riding forth furiously with her body leaned forth, the flowing hair behind her like a tadpole tail.

“Ahh, this is impossible. She is getting away!”

While Hikaru said with a frown,

“Leave—”

Koremitsu got his limbs over the railing as he yelled, leaping over,

“LEAVE THIS TO MEEE!!!!”

The red hair was standing, and the eyebrows, face, temples, were all seemingly ripped by the wind.

“Koremitsu!” Hikaru's exclamation grazed by Koremitsu's ears like the wind.

Koremitsu landed right in front of Saffloer, who was riding the bicycle.

He felt a numbing pain in his knees, but did his best to stand upright.

The accelerating bicycle crashed into Koremitsu head on, and Saffloer shrieked from within the hair that was covering the face.

Koremitsu gritted his teeth, holding onto the bicycle handles hard.

He flexed his muscles, rubbing his sneakers against the asphalt greatly. He glared his eyes, gritting his teeth, like he was doing a serious contest with the bicycle itself, and after using all his might, he managed to stop it.

“W-wh-wha-wh-wha-what's going on...~~!? What's with you~~~!?”

Koremitsu's reckless actions, when coupled with his savage, man-eating fiend-like appearance, caused Saffloer's voice to quiver in fear, nearly breaking into sobs. The bundle of long hair at the back was undone, and the scattered hair was such that Koremitsu was unsure as to which side was the front. Her slender arms were shivering.

Koremitsu grabbed onto the bicycle handles, and spoke with a serious stare,

“I'm Polar Star's representative! I'm here to tell you his words!”

Saffloer stammered from the other side of the blinding bangs.

“Re-representative...!? You're not Mr. Polar Star himself?”

“Yeah, that's right.”

“So you aren't...Mr. Polar Star.”

It seemed that Saffloer was whispering something to herself, seemingly relieved that this wild beast in front of her was not Mr. Polar Star.

But she immediately broke down into tears.

“But why isn't Mr. Polar Star showing up himself—!?”

And then, she wailed,

“He's dead.”

“!”

Koremitsu could not determine the expression she showed due to the massive amount of hair. It seemed however that she was greatly shocked.

“You're lying...”

She muttered hoarsely,

“It's really true. He fell into a river during Golden Week and went to that—well, I guess it's better not to say where he went. Either way, he died. That's why he can't come here.”

“...Koremitsu, is that explanation not too intense for her...?”

Hikaru muttered unhappily beside him,

“You see, Miss Saffloer is scared till a loss of words, no?”

(What do you expect me to say now? That he became a ghost and is floating beside me right now? Now that'll scare her.)

He grumbled in his heart.

And during this time, Saffloer got off from her bicycle, and knelt on the ground.

“Geh!”

Her shoulders were weakly slumped, and she lowered her head so much it felt as if it was touching the asphalt, sobbing as she snivelled.

“I-i-is that so? So Mr. Polar Star died soon after he made a promise with me? So ev-even if I want to meet with Mr. Polar Star...I won't be able to do so?”

(Woah, stop crying!)

Koremitsu was most unable to handle the tears of women, and started feeling fluttered.

And furthermore, they were on the road.

If any passer-by was to be around, Koremitsu would certainly be deemed as a bad person.

(What do I do? What do I do now, Hikaru!?)

He looked around, but Hikaru was nowhere to be seen.

While he assumed this, Hikaru had already floated to Saffloer, kneeling on one leg, giving her a tender, loving look.

“Hey, please do not be so depressed for my sake. We finally managed to meet; come, please lift your head, and show me your cute face.”

Hikaru coaxed.

(You~~rascal!!!!)

Koremitsu nearly fainted.

“Hey, your hair is so black and pretty, but it is too long. It feels like a bamboo screen of darkness separating you and me. I will not be able to see your face in this case.”

Hikaru's eyebrows were lowered in earnest.

(So you aren't just hoping to look at her face after all?)

Of course, after having worked so hard, Koremitsu was curious as to the face beneath the black hair. However, rather than that, he wanted to settle the skirt touching the ground and the falling tears.

“Uuu. -but...it would be better if we didn't meet.”

Safflower sniveled as she tried to utter a complete sentence.

“B-because...if we do meet, Mr. Polar Star would definitely be disappointed.”

Her voice broke together with her emotion as she continued to sob and snivel. Hikaru's expression too became one of sadness.

Koremitsu too was unable to remain silent, and he said hastily,

“Why don't you want Polar Star to see you?”

“Because I'm an ugly girl!”

She said determinedly, and then broke into tears again.

“I-I have a gloomy personality, I always wipe my face with a towel, and I'm like an old man, but when I get nervous, when I panic, my no-nose will get hot—and I wonder whether it'll get red, so I had to use a towel to cool it...a-and, as-as-as-as you said before, I'm always alone in a corner of the classroom in reality, because I have a weird face, so I was teased by the others...I can't even say anything. I never been invited out once, whether it was McDonalds, KFC. It's the same for the accessory; I used up half a year's worth of savings, but I never wore it because it's too embarrassing...that's why I hate myself for being so tragic, that I can't show my face to others...that's why I disguised myself as the very popular 'Saffron', and became the fake Saffron—!!”

“...Don't talk about whether you can show your face to others yourself.”

Koremitsu said gloomily.

He had been terrifying the people around him since his infancy, all because of his appearance, and could not make a single friend. He could not however use this as an excuse, something his aunt Koharu told him.

Koremitsu too kept Koharu's teaching to heart, and went through 16 years of arduous journey.

“B-because I re-re-really can't show myself to others, and I'm really ugly. My-my nose looks weird too.”

Lots of tears pattered upon the plain brown skirt, and the stains of tears spread about. Saffloer's shoulders became limp as the scattered hair multiplied.

Hikaru watched on with a tragic look.

Koremitsu parked the bicycle, and knelt beside him.

He then reached his hands out for Saffloer, raising her hair aside like a curtain.

“That's not true.”

Koremitsu said,

“!”

And was speechless.

(Th-this is...!?)

An ugly woman!? Certainly not the case. But well, *it's just normal!* He could not say that either. He was at a loss of words.

First, her face was long.

She had a wide forehead.

Her eyes were a little sunk in.

Her lips gave a little vibe of the Heian Era—till this point, everything was alright.

The one big issue however was the nose in the middle dangling down. The tall yet flat nose bridge resembled that of an elephant, and the nose tip was dyed red, probably because of how emotional she was.

Normally, a girl's red face would cause anyone's heart to flutter for some reason. That sweet and sour heartbeat however was different; it felt like a pounding heart when seeing something rare.

How would he describe it, unique? No. Interesting? Definitely no. Rare animal—

(Not good!!! Nearly said that out!!)

His hands had spread the hair aside, and their eyes were staring at each other. The longer the silence continued, the worse the situation would deteriorate to a point of hopelessness. Even he, hopeless as he was at understanding a girl's heart, understood this well.

Safflower's eyes were widened due to Koremitsu's violent action, and as time ticked by, she lowered her eyes, giving a look of despair.

(Got to hurry and say something!? Surreal? Avant garde? Alien? Idiot! Those aren't praises!)

Just when the situation was about to get really awkward.

“What about it? Is it not cute?”

Hikaru, standing beside Koremitsu, spoke heartily.

Koremitsu glanced diagonally upwards, and found Hikaru staring at Safflower with glittering eyes.

(C-Cute? This guy's way too straightforward!)

Hikaru's beautiful face was showing a delighted look, glowing. He narrowed the eyes on his charismatic face, moved his lips slightly, and took a step forth.

“Your skin is white, your face is narrow, and you have a large forehead. Your lips are as rich as an apricot's petal, and I really wish to poke at it. That cute nose especially is something I have never seen before! How can there be such a cute nose? I cannot bring myself to look away because of it! It is mesmerizing! Such a beautiful nose.”

Hikaru was able to rattle off what Koremitsu could not say like flowing water, and the latter was intimidated.

Koremitsu knew that Hikaru definitely was not lying. These were his true words.

This person really felt that Saffloer was cute.

Koremitsu was startled by this fact again, and touched.

(So you aren't just a flirty harem prince after all!)

No matter which flower it was, they all had their unique charm. Surely Hikaru had no pretense when he always said these words with a smile.

His vow to love all the flowers was never shaken in the slightest.

(Hikaru, you're the best handsome man right now! The man amongst men!
I really respect you now!)

He had to convey Hikaru's words to Saffloer.

Right, he would do it.

(If not, it's pointless for me to be Hikaru's representative.)

“M-m-my-my-my face is-is-is-is weird after all, right?”

Saffloer was trembling all over, her reddened nose quivering violently.
Koremitsu leaned forward to her, and yelled,

“That's not the case! You're cute! And so is that nose!”

“EHH!?”

Saffloer was taken aback.

“You're really cute! There's no other woman like you in this world! You're the best! If Polar Star's still alive, he'll definitely, definitely—say such a thing! He'll definitely say that you're cute!”

The nose, face, forehead, neck and even deep inside the eyes, all of it became red due to Koremitsu's words.

“When the Safflowers start to bloom, they are a bright orange, and as time passes, they gradually become red, just like you now, Miss Saffloer. And then, when you extract their little seeds, those seeds can be used to get high quality oil that can even be made into ink! You do know that the petals can be made into dyes, right? It can dye a pure white fabric into a gentle orange or a radiant red, and sometimes, it can even be lipsticks for women. It was said that thousands of years ago, the Egyptians used dyes made from Safflowers to color the clothes used for embalming the mummies. The love and demand for Safflowers has lasted this long, and even now, it has been a widely popularized flower in the world.”

Hikaru spoke tenderly.

The words, and the passion, were all conveyed to Koremitsu.

“The Safflower is an amazing flower! Polar Star said before that the clothes the Egyptian mummies wear are dyed using Safflower dyes, and the dyes are widespread in the world. It can dye fabric, can be extracted for oil, and can make ink. It's a highly demanded, highly loved flower!”

“The Safflower has all sorts of names, and this is proof of its widespread use. In Japanese it is known as Kureai in Japanese, Safflower in English, Carthame in French, and Saffloer in French. It is called the fake Saffron, but that is because they have similar colors, and can be used to make dyes. There are no disadvantages, and they all have their own charms. In the Man'yōshū, it is hailed as the Suetsumuhana. That truly is a wondrous name too. The origin of Suetsumuhana has two means. The first is that when extracting it, the flower is plucked from the end of the stem; the second is that when extracting, the tip of the flower is taken, and then downwards. I do find the name Suetsumuhana to be really excellent. It is like how, when in the midst of the sea of flowers, basked under the morning dew, the maiden happily picking the many flowers appears in the scene.”

“The reason why the Safflower has so many names is because its name is widespread, that everyone loves it. Amongst those names are Kureai, but Polar Star loves the name 'Suetsumuhana' best, because he says this reminds him of the people picking a large number of orange flowers happily.”

“Suetsumuhana...”

“Right, the name is given because it has to be plucked from the tip of the stalk. That's what he said before.”

Saffloer's little face was tearing up as she beamed.

“Amazing...I never thought Mr. Polar Star would know about such things. Saffloer, Suetsumuhana, Kureai. He already knew all these about the Safflower.”

Hikaru pat his hand on Saffloer's nose like he was handling a fragile item.

“Yes, I do know how good a girl you are, how beautiful a Suetsumuhana you are.”

Hikaru conveyed his thoughts with a sweet voice that nearly melted the air.

His crystal clear eyes were looking up at her, filled with his love for her.

“Yes, I do know how good a girl you are, how beautiful a Suetsumuhana you are.”

Hikaru conveyed his thoughts with a sweet voice that nearly melted the air.

His crystal clear eyes were looking up at her, filled with his love for her.

And so, to Koremitsu's eyes, Saffloer's long face, little eyes, apricot-like lips, and even her nose, all became cute as a result.

With all his might, he declared,

“Right, Polar Star knows about it! That you're a Safflower of the highest order!”

This surely was the thing Hikaru wanted to convey.

He wanted to convey his overflowing love into earnest, gentle words.

To this flower that was about to wilt and shrivel, to moisten the flower—to pour water upon it, to bask it under the light.

“I really do love the unique flower that is ever so serious. I really love the bamboo shoots for treating the mushrooms as its friend. I really do love how the Saffloer thinks of McDonalds and KFC as human names. I really do like the you who taught me how to make herb tea and Potpurri when I was unable to sleep. I really do love the cute Saffloer who said that the face does not matter, and that she likes my inner heart. I truly love you. I wished to meet you directly and thank you before I say goodbye. I want to thank you for replying to my messages, for being so kind and gentle towards me, and I wish to say that I really love you for the way you are.”

“Polar Star really wanted to meet you directly and say farewell now. Even now, he's grateful that you've been his companion, treating him so gently. He really loves you for how you are.”

Saffloer's red nose was trembling, sniveling, and her beady eyes were teary as she said,

“So Mr Polar Star knew that he would not live for long, and wanted to meet me for the last time in the end?”

(No, I just said that Hikaru fell into the river and drowned, right? Why does it sound like he died from an incurable disease?)

Hikaru broke up with the other girls not because he knew of his death date, but because he wanted to patch things up with Aoi.

“So Mr Polar Star truly loved me like that.”

She sniveled and sobbed, unable to say anything.

Beside her, Hikaru looked ready to break down into tears,

“Miss Saffloer, you are unable to see me as I am right now, but you are the wonderful girl as I imagined.”

And she said,

“I-If I too were to meet Mr Polar Star, I will definitely fall in love with him too. Even if he is a shut-in, an unpopular guy, someone who cannot be accepted at all, I-I-I-I’ll definitely love him.”

There seemed to be a little misunderstanding here, but Koremitsu kept quiet.

Saffloer felt the sweet love from Polar Star, and the love of Hikaru while the latter embraced her by the shoulders. There seemed to be something a little off, but those were the true feelings.

“Speaking of which, you forgot your cellphone.”

Koremitsu pulled the cellphone out from the pocket, but the chain on the strap was broken.

“Ack!”

“Ah.”

Koremitsu and Saffloer both called out at the same time, and Hikaru chuckled, muttering,

“I do suppose 'Mignon' wishes to break this lock on its own power, and be decorated on Miss Saffloer's chest.”

Koremitsu's face was sizzling as he grabbed the orange sunstone brooch that fell off, and left it on Saffloer's chest.

Saffloer in turn withstood her embarrassment as she let Koremitsu fumble around with the brooch, her face completely red, tensing up.

“I guess 'Mignon' thinks that this is better.”

After hearing Koremitsu's brusque words, she looked down at the brooch on her chest proudly,

“...Thank you.”

And smiled, saying this.

To Koremitsu's eyes, the smile was refreshing and pretty, and looked really cute too.

(What? This girl's rather cute herself.)

“Anyway, do you want to see a photo of Polar Star?”

He asked as precaution.

If Saffloer wanted to see, he would ask Tsuyako to send a photo of Hikaru over to him.

In fact, if she were to see Hikaru's appearance, she would probably be shocked and overwhelmed by how different it might be from her expectations.

However, the sunstone brooch was beaming like a sun god on Saffloer, who shook her head, saying,

“I like Mr Polar Star not for how he looks, but for how he appears within. Even if I do not see his appearance, it is fine.”

Hikaru beamed delightedly, and Koremitsu too whispered with utmost relief,

“I see.”

The breeze blew by them, and the transparent sunlight was reflected upon the brooch.

Saffloer lifted her chest, and spoke clearly,

“To me, Mr Polar Star is the prettiest boy in the world.”



Hey, Koremitsu.

My 'flower' this time is a little different, but she is rather cute herself, a pretty flower people cannot look away from, no?

I really feel lucky to be able to meet that flower in the midst of such a vast internet forest.

At that moment, I spent another sleepless night.

It was good when I could feel another girl's warmth.

But occasionally, when I spend the time alone in my room, I do wonder whether the long night would last for eternity.

*Was I going to be locked in this prison of darkness, falling to the abyss?
My heart was suffering.*

The secret hidden within me was stained with guilt, and even if there was any reason for it, it would not be allowed.

I tried my best not to let others realize, did my best to hide it, but perhaps that guilt was seeping out from my body like black water seeping out from a cracked vessel. Did everyone else realize it, I wonder?

During such a long, arduous night, the only solace was her blog, which I discovered while surfing the internet.

The blog had uploaded pictures of green herbs, little flowers, cups, accessories, and all sorts of things. They all had their own names, and I feel relieved knowing that their owner really loved them.

I tried reading the blog diary, and found it to be cute. Soon after, I naturally found myself leaving messages on it.

And then, she responded to me, and we started exchanging mail addresses.

To me, it was a refreshing thing interacting with an enigmatic girl, whom I had no idea of her appearance, age, and even her name. It was delightful too.

What sort of girl would she be? I wondered as I anticipated.

Certainly, it must be a serene, shy, girl who was a little careless, and somewhat airheaded. When I was depressed, she did her best to cheer me up; certainly, she must have been quite the gentle soul.

But Koremitsu.

What I am most attracted about her was not her cuteness, nor her gentleness, but the sharp thorns I felt from her.

The thorns hidden under the leaves of the Safflowers.

The thorns themselves are soft, but when stroking them for a short while, there certainly would be a prickly feeling. This is something the Saffron does not have.

The innocent airheaded girl is able to reveal a little of her true self slightly, and I felt a little of the heartbeat hidden within me as I continued to converse with her through the screen.

The moment I felt my affections for her at its highest was when she told me 'please call me Saffloer'.

When she explained how in the Sunset blue language, Saffron actually meant Safflower, I understood that it was not real.

The flower called Saffloer was actually a Safflower, a fake Saffron.

And that Safflower, the Suetsumuhana was an imitation of the Saffron.

Once I realized this, I felt an increase in my intrigue for her from the other side of the screen, my back felt chilly, and my heart was tense, ostensibly gripped. I had already fallen head over heels for her.

What? Are you saying that I lose to a girl too easily?

Did I already realize that the girl reading the newspapers was Saffron right from the beginning?

That I was just beaming nicely at you, floating leisurely in the air while you searched for her frantically?

Th-this is a misunderstanding!

Even I could not be certain immediately of her identity.

At most, all I could do was wonder whether it was her, and that was all. I really did not simply smile and watch you fumble around!

I do admit however that I just want to experience the ordinary, thrilling moments that was somewhat gentle.

To me, she is that kind of a gentle enigma.

But the thorns under the gentle petals, slightly deep within would definitely not bring a lung-ripping pain, but that of a gentle thrill.

When I conversed with her through the screen, I was able to avoid the curse of the lonely nights that plagued me.

I wondered about the sight of the flower I had yet to see in my heart, and with such a blissful feeling, I awaited the dawn.

We contacted each other using our words, our hearts, and our enigmas.

When I look at the mirror, I find myself to be repulsive. When I could not sleep, I took flu medicine in place of sleeping pills. In the middle of the night, I let myself into the pool. I prayed to God, hoping my existence would vanish. That Suetsumuhana however told me this.

That she liked my inner heart.

For that beautiful, enigmatic, Suetsumuhana, to be with my best friend in you, frustrated over this and that, searching about, that certainly was my best summer.

It felt like both of us were off looking for treasure.

I was with this now reliable partner, feeling really delighted, relieved, excited.

Is it not better than I imagined, to find a flower like this?

Certainly, that flower will become more charming in the future after that.

And having viewed through many flowers myself, I can conclude that this certainly is the case.

The men who have fallen to her charms definitely will not simply appear on the internet, but in real life too.

Hey, Koremitsu. Even if she cannot see me, there is a bond that can be maintained.

On a certain day, in the middle of a bright, radiant place, a plant will sprout, and gradually grow.

We were healed by that bond, redeemed by it.

If I am to leave this world, this bond will surely remain.

You definitely can hear me when I call from the other side of space.

Our little adventures will definitely be etched in your heart, I suppose.

When I look down on Earth, my heart too can definitely recreate the story that happened this story, I suppose.

Though it might be lonely, it definitely is a wonderful thing.

If, at a distant place billions of light years away, I am able to connect my heart with someone.

If, I can be your friend once I leave this Earth.

As long as there are still friends there.

Epilogue

The Secret the Two of Us Made That Summer

“So-so-so-so-sorry about that, Miss Tayū. I made you my stand-in, and I ran away at the end.”

Having heard the message from Mr. Polar Star's friend, Beni sent a message to her friend, Ayaka Tayū, for them to meet at the park next to the shop, and was scratching her head.

“Goodness. After you ran out of the shop with that savage looking boy, I was the one who attracted the most attention after that. That's really embarrassing when I think about it.”

Tayū puffed her cheeks as she said this, her eyes looking up as she seemed fidgety,

“But well, leaving aside that, I was dragged out without knowing what's going on, and even exposed myself as the cover. Sp-speaking of which, Beni, I didn't know anything about what that boy said, like making a blog, using a blog name like Saffron. It was only until I was asked to be your cover that I knew about all that...erm, do you find someone like me to be annoying, Beni?”

The usual feisty sun Tayū was actually showing such a feeble look, and now that she had expressed her fear of being deemed annoying, Beni was shocked and anxious.

“Tha-th-th-th-that's not the case at all. An ugly and ordinary girl like me can't be compared to you, Miss Tayū. I posted on the blog, pretending to be a rich princess using the name Saffron, and even asked you to be my stand-in. I-I think that I'm the one being looked down.”

“Beni, you say that you're pretending to be a princess, but aren't you a princess yourself? You were already of a higher social status than me since the affiliated kindergarten, your dad's a Gagaku musician, a former noble himself, right? You live in that kind of a spacious mansion too. As for me, I'm a commoner who transferred in during middle school, There's no way I can be compared with you! It's like the Meiji Era in that people do always talk about social statuses, right?”

Beni in turn was getting confused,

“Bu-but my father died a long time ago, and my status as a noble has already become nothing. I treasured the bag father left behind because I needed to scrimp, and though my house's large, there's a lot of broken places after many years of not maintaining them. Ah, it'll leak sometimes too—you don't have to worry about family backgrounds, Miss Tayū...aren't you able to get along with those princesses?”

After hearing that, Tayū bashfully replied,

“But that's because of you, Tayū. I'm just the daughter of an employee at a SMC, and I had to go study at a school full of princesses. I wondered whether I would be the only one different from the rest, whether I would be able to make a single friend. I was really uneasy on my first day to school. After that, I found that you were reading the same book as me, Beni, so I let it slip.”

—That book! I'm reading it too!

Tayū widened her eyes on the first day she entered the middle school, and excitedly approached Beni, who was in a corner of the classroom, reading the book.

Then, she took out a book with the same cover, looking delighted as she grinned,

—Thank goodness I have someone with the same interests! I'm Ayaku Tayū! Just call me Tayū! What's yours?

—Beni...Hitachi.

At first, Tayū looked as if she was completely fearless, not apprehensive of anything. Was she truly not feeling nervous however?

She stared right at Beni in the eyes while the latter was shocked, ostensibly unable to breathe, and said sternly,

“To me, that was like a fated meeting!”

Her nose was buzzing, and started to sizzle.

She never thought that she would ever have a fated moment.

Only her deceased father had ever viewed her as a unique child.

However, Mr. Polar Star's friend did say this.

That she was rather cute.

And that if Mr. Polar Star was on Earth, he definitely would say the same thing, for he truly loved Beni.

There was someone other than her father who would truly love her, and there was someone who would find Beni, who tried to hide her presence amidst the lively, pretty girls.

And so, she believed Tayū's words.

“That was like a fated meeting!”

Surely, there would be fated meetings in friendship too.

Tayū held Beni's hands tightly, staring at her. Beni could feel a tense atmosphere.

Her father and Mr. Polar Star had both said that the tip of her nose would redden when she was cute but even so, Beni said,

“So-sorry to make you be my stand in! Le-let's go eat at Mr. McDonalds.”



A few hours after he bid farewell to Saffloer.

Saffloer sent an image to Koremitsu's cellphone.

There was a photo of both Saffloer and Saffron holding burgers in their heads, smiling heartily as they took a selfie.

“It really is a great thing to be able to have friends.”

“Yeah.”

Koremitsu and Hikaru closed in on the cellphone screen. Both their voices were full of life.

However, there was still an unresolved doubt in Koremitsu's heart.

Upon thinking about that, he scowled.

(What do I do...about Shikibu...? Invite her to the pool again...? But she told me 'never mind already', and won't be willing to go with me again...it's so noisy down there too...I don't think it'll be suitable for some serious topics.)

Hikaru watched Koremitsu frown and wince in anguish, and chimed in,

“Koremitsu, you are thinking about Miss Shikibu, right?”

“Ack, you know how to read hearts?”

“I do not have to. You have clearly expressed your thoughts on your face.”

“!!”

So my expression can be read so easily. Koremitsu muttered.

“Would it not be a good idea to discuss this with me instead of bottling it up and frowning? I do know and understand about girls than you after all.”

Hikaru stared at Koremitsu with an earnest, gentle expression.

“I wish to repay you as much as I can while I am still on this world.”

Koremitsu recalled the words Hikaru said.

“Just as you fulfilled for me one promise after another, I want to repay you with what I can do, within my capabilities.”

“I-I’ll leave it to you...”

Koremitsu said in a teeny-weeny voice, his cheeks searing, his sweat dripping, as he ostensibly struggled.

Hikaru raised his lips and cheeks, heartily responding,

“Sure. Leave it to me.”



(Why's Akagi asking me out now...?)

It was 9pm, and they were to meet at the back gate of the school—

At first, Honoka assumed it to be a prank when she received the message.

That someone posed himself as Koremitsu and invited him out.

However, she really could not think of another who would do such a thing.

After she replied back, she was certain that it was Koremitsu.

(I got jealous and started that commotion. I thought I wouldn't receive any of Akagi's messages again.)

Honoka's feelings for Koremitsu were one-sided, but back then, she grumbled that she never had an advantage compared to the other girls, 'ahh, it's alright!' and ran off. What sort of expression should she show in the new semester? Perhaps she should transfer schools after all. She brooded over this issue for quite some time.

As the Purple Princess, she would respond to the issues of girls who had failed in their love affairs with answers like,

“I can understand what you are thinking, but you have to calm down and think. You are just throwing out your thoughts, and not refreshing yourself in the slightest. You will simply be drowned in your own thoughts.”

Or,

“Before you go crazy, calm your inner heart. Think about whether it's good or bad for your love. If not, you might start some crazy mess.”

Or,

“You definitely~ mustn't say those words! You won't dare see his face again! That'll definitely be a failed love!”

And so, she became pessimistic..

Let's continue to compose a sweet story within the world of fiction. When writing the sequel to her cellphone novel, Takuma, who was supposed to be the lovey-dovey partner of the heroine Natsuno, suddenly confessed to the prettiest girl in school, and had lost interest in Natsuno.

“You don't care about me anymore!?”

Natsuno snapped,

“It's impossible for us to be together.”

And broke up with Takuma.

“My heart aches after reading this. I still like seeing Takuma and Natsuno being in love with each other.”

“Takuma actually likes a girl other than Natsuno!? I don't want this!”

“Even if it's for the sake of the plot, please don't change the character's personality like that! Takuma definitely won't say something like that!”

This depressing ending caused the readers to send scathing remarks.

And the source of her regrets and outrage, Koremitsu, sent her a message. It was to be expected that she thought it was a prank.

She stared at the message for about half an hour.

(What do I do? I think I better go. But these words alone are too short! I don't know what Akagi's thinking at all—!!!)

Did Koremitsu not think of Honoka's outburst as a big deal, or was he itching to shoot back some verbal barbs at her?

(Ahh—uuuu, if I'm to see Akagi today, I'll probably be nagging at him! Won't he hate me even more then?)

But even so, Honoka was not looking forward to apologizing on her own will, and then repeating the same embarrassing happenings over and over again.

(Yeah. I should have taken a step back now since the time Akagi dragged me out and told me off. I have to become the cool Miss Shikibu that's the ally of all girls. I can't continue to be flustered in front of a guy and be an annoying woman who shouts whatever she has on her mind...)

That was the case.

And so, she ended up worried all day long, rumbling about on the chair, spinning about, even though she definitely was not to become like that...

(And...and I came after all.)

And so, at 9pm sharp, Honoka was at a corner of the school wall, observing the back gate of the school, where they were supposed to meet.

She was dressed in school uniform.

It was summer, and the weather was still very hot. The sweat felt a little unbearable sticking on her skin.

(What now? Akagi's not around? Is this some kind of prank after all...?)

Suddenly, someone tapped her on the shoulder from behind.

“Yo.”

“!”

She instinctively raised her leg, and spun her body around.

And then,

She struck her leg out, but was grabbed by the shoe.

“That was close.”

Sighing in front of her with a tense look was Koremitsu.

And Honoka's cheeks were quickly burning.

“Y-yo-you-your-your han.”

Her voice was rising.

“Let go of your hand!”

“Ahh!”

Koremitsu's face too went red as he let go of the hand grabbing her leg.

Honoka raised her eyebrows, and looked aside,

“Well, Shikibu, thanks for coming.”

Koremitsu spoke stiffly.

Honoka in turn continued to look aside,

“...I didn't come because I want to. It's just that I'm a little curious, so I just came by to have a look...what do you want to do at such a late time?”

“About the pool, let's go there again, Shikibu. Ju-just the two of us! I want to go with you..”

Koremitsu tried his best to say these words.

Stunned, Honoka stared at Koremitsu.

The feisty red-haired classmate of hers was trying his best to look serious as he conveyed his voice, staring at her sternly. Suddenly, her heart was racing.

And at the same time, she felt incredulous.

“We're going to the pool now? Isn't it already closed? I didn't bring a swimsuit when I came up...”

But because Koremitsu grabbed Honoka by the hand immediately, she was at a loss of words.

(My hand! Akagi's grabbing my hand—)

She had never held hands with a boy ever since she entered high school, save the folk dance lessons they had to take.

And also, the hand grabbing her, not letting go, was uneven and rigid. It was Koremitsu's.

Koremitsu probably felt embarrassed by this too as he turned his face aside.

“You don't need a swimsuit now.”

“No need? W-wait—Akagi!”

Koremitsu held Honoka by her hand as he walked to the back gate.

The back gate was locked, but Koremitsu immediately took the key out from his gym pants, and opened it.

“Eh? But how?”

Honoka widened her eyes.

With Honoka's hand still in his, Koremitsu marched into the school.

“Why do you have the key with you?”

“...I borrowed it.”

“Eh? From who?”

“From someone who always claimed that he could be forgiven for anything no matter what he does.”

In fact, the one who handed the spare back gate key to Koremitsu was Tsuyako.

That was something Hikaru used when he was alive, and Tsuyako handed it to Koremitsu.

“I suppose you heard about the key from Hikaru?”

“Yes.”

“And you wish to borrow the key from me for Miss Shikibu's sake?”

“Yeah.”

After hearing such a steadfast response, Tsuyako let out a sweet sigh.

“Miss Shikibu really does have it good there, does she not?”

She muttered, and handed the key to Koremitsu. But before that,

“Let me cast a spell.”

She kissed the key with her soft red lips—

Hikaru never made any mention of how many events had passed before it landed in his possession.

However he forced a refreshing smile,

“I can be forgiven by anyone no matter what I do.”

He merely answered.

“What do you mean by that? I don't get what you're saying at all! Speaking of which, i-isn't this an illegal entry of the school? If we're caught, there's going to be another commotion. We'll probably be suspended or something.”

“We'll talk about that later.”

“That's too reckless! Also, is the pool you're talking about not the one we went that time, but the school pool?”

“Yeah.”

“Why the school poooooooooolllllll—!?”

Honoka was in an utter state of confusion as she let Koremitsu hold her hand and guide her into the school.

(I don't know what's going on at all!)

The hand that was being held was scorching, her face was scorching, and even her head was. It felt as if she had a sunstroke.

In the garden filled with lush greenery the branches and leaves swaying with the breeze, the clear moonlight was the only thing lighting their path, and she was ostensibly stuck in the middle of a forest, letting a red-haired sharp-eyed man drag her hand forward.

And so, they finally arrived at the poolside, surrounded by the fence.

“Okay, let's leap over.”

“Wait, Akagi.”

Koremitsu let go of Honoka's hand as he stepped on the fence, and easily climbed it like a monkey. He stood at the topmost part, looked down at Honoka, and reached his hand out to her.

“You coming?”

Koremitsu's face and body seemed more fearsome, more masculine under the clear moonlight. Glittering were his messy red hair and the sweat on his temples.

“Uuu, this is ridiculous.”

Having given up on this, Honoka started climbing the fence one step at a time.

She never saw Koremitsu smile once, but upon seeing the corner of his lips, even if it was just for a short instant, she felt moved, and her cheeks slightly reddened.

Both of them landed beside the pool. The pool surface in the night looked like the looming darkness, ripples forming one layer after another under the gentle summer breeze.

Unlike the day, it gave a radiant, mysterious vibe.

Koremitsu caught his breath as he marveled at the moonlight reflection, and shyly said,

“..With this now, it's just the two of us.”

—I really wanted to go to the pool alone with you, Akagi.

(Did I really say that?)

Was that why he brought her to this place?

Doubts rose into Honoka's heart.

Koremitsu, who was always a step slow understanding a girl, knowing how to make her happy, and never considered about such things, clearly put in much effort coming up with this plan.

Let's go to the pool then! This promise will be fulfilled.

He was that clumsy, yet so hardworking.

Her heart raced, and she was sweating.

(What do I do? It feels like I still like Akagi after all!)

She had already thought of giving up on him before this, and yet after all these events, she found herself liking him more.

(I guess I'll get more jealous in the future. Akagi's really a hopeless cause for being unaware of such things.)

If she wanted to run away, this was the only chance.

I never thought you're this kind of barbarian who never thinks this through, she did not say. What was I doing up till yesterday? If I'm to force myself to say something, I'll probably get laughed at.

“It's just the two of us after all.”

However, Honoka said with a refreshed feeling.

“Thanks, Akagi! I'm really delighted to be able to go to the pool with you alone during the summer vacation!”

She was really delighted, for it was a plan Koremitsu came up with for Honoka's sake.

She was really happy that he was able to remember her words.

At this point, she probably was unable to express her joy into words, but it was fine. It was impossible for her not to fall in love with Koremitsu.

Koremitsu looked dumbfounded as he widened his eyes at her, and then, his eyes wavered about.

“Well, yeah, that's because I had a promise with you.”

He whispered.

That dimwitted aspect of his too throbbed Honoka's heart.

“Ahh, if only I brought my swimsuit.”

“Wait? You still want to swim?”

“Eh, but if we're coming to the pool, we're definitely here to swim, right? If you had said so before this, I would have brought my swimsuit along too.”

“Is it that one with little fabric?”

As Koremitsu frowned,

“Eh...you do remember about it after all?”

She said, somewhat pleased as her eyes swarmed.

“R-rather than that...I'll say it's etched in my mind...how can I forget about such a thing?”

“Ehhh!?”

Honoka's face was flushed red with a poof.

(Wh-what? Akagi was looking unconcerned before that, but he did look at my swimsuit seriously? And he even remembered it? I'm really happy, but it's very embarrassing! But, I'm still happy; no no no, it's very embarrassing! But, but!)

Her body was heating up rapidly, and she was completely confused.

“I guess I want a swim after all.”

She jumped into the pool.

“Ack, Shikibu!”

Koremitsu called out in surprise.

Honoka's entire body was covered in pool water, and the cold water covered her head. She wanted to cool her body and mind, but ended up feeling hotter.

Ahh, whatever, anything goes.

She splashed water about audaciously, and floated to the surface.

“Come down too, Akagi! It's a rare chance to swim in the pool at night!
You'll regret it if you don't do it!”

“I say, you!”

“Okay now, hurry up!”

While Koremitsu was knelt at the poolside, she grabbed his arm and pulled him in.

“Woah!”

And so, Koremitsu fell into the pool.

“It's cold!”

“You're kidding! It's hot here!”

Her hands were splashing water at Koremitsu, and Koremitsu repaid her in kind.

With a beaming face, she sank into the water, trying to escape. Koremitsu gave pursuit.

And so, they spent time swimming, pursuing, frolicking, and staring off. After that , they shyly averted their eyes, and poked their heads out from the water at the same time.

“Fuwahh!”

“Haa! Fresh air's still the best!”

Both of them lifted their heads as they inhaled the fresh hair. With the moonlight shining upon them, the tiny spots of stars above them were glitter.

“Poof, Akagi! Your hair's fallen on your forehead now. It looks like a kappa now!”

“What about yourself? You look like some devil's apron yourself.”

“I never heard of such a monster before!”

She giggled,

“But the pool at night feels a little eerie. It feels like there's a ghost around.”

“Yeah, maybe he's probably beside us right now, peeping on us.”

“Wait, what are you saying? It feels scary!”

“Are you scared of ghosts?”

“That's not it! Bu-but it's the summer now. If we talk about ghost stories, there might really be something popping out, uu.”

Honoka shivered slightly, looking around from time to time.

“When that happens, I'll protect you.”

Koremitsu said without hesitation.

Honoka's ears immediately sizzled, and she lowered her head, muttering,

“!! it's because you...it's because you always...”

(Why is it that he's always able to say such words so easily?)

Upon thinking about it, she first started to be concerned about Koremitsu because of those words.

“Really...someone like you...”

Should not be saying this sort of thing to anyone. She could have said this and kicked him aside, but was surprisingly not fuming in the slightest.

After muttering, she placed her wet head on Koremitsu's chest with a ploop.

Ahh, I still find myself falling for Akagi so easily.

“You better protect me, okay?”





At lunch time, on the last day of July, the Akagis were having flowing sōmen,

There was a bamboo table placed in the garden, and the long and thin noodles were slowly flowing through. Shioriko watched on, cheering,

“Wow, this is the first time I'm seeing this!”

She picked up the noodle with her pink child chopsticks, cheering excitedly as she slurped the noodle.

Watching on silently were Koremitsu's grandfather Masakaze and his aunt Koharu. They however were not furious.

“It's good to eat such things once in a while.”

“Hm, yeah.”

The duo who would bicker all day long actually had a common view, a rarity at that.

The cat called Lapis in turn nibbled luxuriously at the milk and cat food mixed into it under the greenery.

The cellphone in Koremitsu's jeans pocket vibrated, and he opened it to find it that message was from Beni. It seemed she was to take a challenge at KFC.

Ever since that that, he had been exchanging messages with Saffloer, Beni Hitachi. No matter how minor the matter might be, they were unexpectedly able to get along well, for they had setbacks due to their appearances.

“So this is a penpal?”

“*Ah, yes.*”

And so, Hikaru, floating in the air, beamed heartily.

“*Your social circle of women is growing by the day.*”

“Ack, don't say it as if I'm a harem prince or something!”

“Eh, big brother Koremitsu, you're a harem prince? Who sent this message? Your girlfriend?”

Upon hearing Koremitsu's words, Shioriko frowned and approached to ask him, tiptoeing as she tried to read the contents.

“I said I'm not!”

“Koremitsu, I know that you are starting to show sexual interest in the other gender, but you better not do anything that will make the girl feel bad. If you do plan to date, you have to treasure her greatly.”

Masakaze glanced aside at Koharu, and spoke solemnly,

“Women are great misfortune, Koremitsu. Never ever get involved with them.”

After repeating his usual mantra, he noticed Shioriko, and pretended to cough, quipping,

“...Never get involved with any woman...at least 10 years old.”

However, Shioriko looked troubled,

“But grandfather Masakaze, Shiiko here will be 10 in 3 months time. You won't be playing 5-in-a-row with Shiiko then?”

“Uu.” She asked dejectedly, and Masakaze corrected himself, “Then, any woman at least 11 years old...”

Surely he would change that to '12 years old' when Shioriko reaches 11 years old.

In the afternoon, he went to the large bookshop in town to look at the reference books,

“Ah.”

“Oh.”

It was the girl at Bonne Chance who was often reading a pocket novel.

She was usually dressed in a refreshing white blouse and a skirt that reached below her knees, but this time, she was dressed in a shirt with a ribbon tied at the collar and a mini-skirt that reached above her knees. It seemed that was the school uniform of a nearby girls school.

Though they did meet at the same shop several times, they never talked to each other once, and she suddenly came to talk to him.

“Good afternoon.”

“Oh, yeah.”

“You haven't been to the shop, recently, have you?”

“Ah...after all the commotions I caused in the shop, I couldn't bring myself to go there, I guess?”

In truth, it was that he did not need to visit, for he had already found Saffron.

Aoi was still working inside, and he wanted to visit her sometime later. At that time, it seemed Aoi was working enthusiastically on the other side of the phone.

When Koremitsu sprinted out after Beni, Aoi, who was not used to watching from the sidelines, was wondering about their relationship, “*I am really happy to receive your call, Mr Akagi.*” and said delightedly,

“Next time, please let me be the one to call back.”

He heard Aoi's words and stared at Hikaru's expression, finding the latter to be chuckling. His heart however was a little tense.

“Well, sure. If you got something you're troubled by at work, you can call me anytime you want.”

He answered.

He recalled what had transpired before, and the girl in front of him spoke with intent,

“That's too bad. There seems to be something lacking in the shop when you're not around.”

She whispered.

And then,

“See you later then, **Mr Akagi.**”

She narrowed her refreshingly pretty, narrow eyes, beamed and left.

“How does she know my name?”

Perhaps she overheard it when he was talking with Aoi and Michiru.

Hikaru peeked on Koremitsu's expression as he giggled,

“You actually got wooed back.”

“Huh? That's impossible, right?”

“Well, who knows? You have been quite the hot commodity nowadays. Did Miss Shikibu not enter your embrace at the pool and fawned, saying something like 'you better protect me, okay'?”

“I-I didn't hug her!”

Koremitsu refuted loudly, attracting the surrounding stares.

His face was starting to heat up, and he left the bookshop without buying anything.

He continued to move forward quickly, and whispered, correcting himself,

“We-well...just a little...”

“Eh, is that so? At that time, I felt that it would be uninteresting if I were to peep in on you two back then. I merely used the moonlight to glance at you two a few times. Besides, when you grasped Miss Shikibu's hand at that time, I thought you were about to go on a date.”

“Ack.”

“But well, as my disciple, it is to be expected that two people are to embrace each other tightly.”

“Who's your disciple!?”

“Well, you do have a charm that makes the surrounding girls notice you. Regarding Miss Mint for example, you did not have the chance to talk with her at that time, did you not?”

Koremitsu noticed a hidden meaning to that smile,

“I say, are you hiding something again? Who's that Mint girl? Tell me all about it.”

Koremitsu poked his chin out as he glared sharply, and Hikaru moved gently away from him, snickering with his sweet voice as he floated,

“Well, is that not a good thing after all? Is it not part of an allure for a girl to have her own mystery?”

“Don't play the fool with me, you bastard!”

He continued to yap away with Hikaru as he continued forth on the road as the sweltering rays of sunlight shone upon him.

This was the first summer he had with his friend.

And perhaps, this might be the last summer with him.

Also, Hikaru had a lot of secrets in his heart, sometimes lowering his head gloomily, blankly.

What was it about when he said that he felt a heartache whenever he looked at himself in the mirror? What happened before...? He did mention cheerfully how dejected he was when he could not see himself in the mirror.

This person was really a vortex of enigma, a hypocrite.

And even so, no matter how wide the world became, no matter how things developed, he was always beaming.

If only this summer can continue like this. Koremitsu remembered the words from back then.

This friend will vanish one day.

But still, Hikaru remained on this Earth, standing beside Koremitsu.



“Big brother...!”

Shungo Tōjō heard a shout from behind as he walked out of the shop, and turned his face back.

He had insisted that she would not call him that, and till this point, she abide to this promise.

One could tell from the displeased vow how important of a rule she had broken just moments before, and he stood there, staring at her. What he

saw however was a pitiful person staggering in the back alleys, peeking at him, looking in anguish.

Her lips were slightly swollen, and there were still trails of blood on the edges of her lips.

Her short hair was messy, and the tank top and shorts were stained in mud. Even though she had multiple injuries to her knees, she continued to walk.

Hiina ran to Tōjō's, pulled out the memory card from her cellphone, placed it in his hand, and groaned in anguish.

“The Mikados' power balance has been toppled...! Mr Kazuaki just did something unbelievable—!”



Aoi was walking down the school corridor with a paper bag of sweet dried cherries, tomatoes and baked muffins made from rich milk, which Asai liked.

It was her rest day, and she came to school as there was something on at the art club.

Asai should be at school as well, for she had student council matters. Thus, Aoi was going to bring the freshly baked muffins to her.

(Asa is probably working so hard that she has yet to eat lunch.)

Koremitsu did say before that Asai had been really busy recently, so she wanted to help Asai in some way.

She stood in front of the student council office, and was about to knock on the door, only to hear voices from within,

“...I met a suspicious person at Miss Aoi's workplace. She had a poker face, pretending not to know me at all.”

Her hand stopped just when she was about to knock on the door.

(This voice. Is this Miss Tsuyako...?)

With regards to Tsuyako, who had a scandal with Hikaru before, Aoi still held her with contempt. Tsuyako's shameless, unabashed actions was something Aoi really hated.

Also, she had her sights on Koremitsu too, making the latter call her 'senpai' with such affection...

“She probably is observing that Miss Aoi who continues to rely on you. Miss Aoi, and even said that if something happens to Miss Aoi, she will inform you.”

(...What is Miss Tsuyako saying?)

Her chest was feeling a little frantic.

Asai ordered someone to watch over Aoi...?

Did Asai not go over to Aoi's workplace to watch her every action coolly?

She did not charge out to check on Aoi like usual when Aoi failed.

She did feel ashamed that Asai witnessed her embarrassing side, but she thought, *Asa did not help because she thinks that I can handle things by myself.*

(But when Asa is not in the shop, she sent someone to watch over me..?)

This certainly was something Asai would do, but Aoi really hated the overprotectiveness, and adamantly decided to work while ignoring the protests of her family.

At this moment, Asai's voice rang from within the room.

“It will be too late if something happens to Aoi. I just do not wish for her to get hurt.”

Asai's voice was solemn.

Recently, she had been saying this line often with some vexation, sometimes even declaring sharply in an unreasonable manner—

“You do not wish for her to be hurt? That is just sugarcoating things.”

“Miss Tsuyako, it seems that you know something.”

Recently—right, after Hikaru died.

“I know about it. You and I are the same type of person.”

Aoi's heart let out a loud shriek.

She did not wish to continue eavesdropping,

But she could not move, for she was really too concerned by Tsuyako's words,

“Miss Asai, you are always pretending to protect Miss Aoi. In fact--”

The voice pierced through Aoi's ears and heart.

“You are looking down on Miss Aoi, am I correct?”

The paper bag in Aoi's hand fell.

The delicately packed muffins rolled by her feet.

(Asa has been looking down on me...?)



“Hono...Mr Akagi is a gentle person.”

“Wh-what? Why are you saying such things out of a sudden?”

Michiru suddenly said solemnly as they were picking accessories in a corner of the bustling streets.

Was the fact that she went to the school pool with Koremitsu revealed?

“Hono, you do like Mr Akagi after all, right?”

Michiru again said seriously.

“Th-th-th-th-that's not the case. Akagi and I are just normal classmates! What do you mean by that anyway?”

She had been uttering all sorts of things, denying her association with him, saying that he was a delinquent, and had changed attitudes at this point, but it was tough for her to say that she liked him.

Michiru stared at Honoka intently, and the latter was flushed red.

“Really?”

“Of course. I do have strict conditions. I-I do think that guy's a kind guy, not too bad himself.”

Michiru slowly looked away from Honoka, her face slowly becoming red.

Just when Honoka was worried, Michiru made up her mind, and said,

“Th-then, it's alright if I fall in love with Mr Akagi, right?”

You were shrouded in mysteries, and when light shone upon them, there was only chaos left within.

They hid your gentle expression, your beautiful lips, your tender neck and fingers, the golden, silky hair.

That, was a grotesque, obscene guilt that was never to be forgiven.

But, ahh!

Why is it that I really love you this much?

Hikaru,

I loved you so much I wanted to wreck you.

Asai Saiga's Blunder ~

Just Who Is It That Believes in Santa Claus, Huh?

During her elementary school days, her dream was to be an archaeologist or an explorer.

To seek for unknown living creatures or relics, to continue to explore the world, how fascinating that feeling would be. That was what her immature mind thought and admired.

She wrote down everything she could think of in a a schedule for her summer vacation.

- Catch a Tsuchinoko
- Look for a kappa.
- Search for an Eel dog in the woods.
- Exchange mails with the UFOs on the hills.
- Excavate some relics in the forest.
- Pat the snowman sleeping in the summer.

Life was short, yet she had so many things she wanted to do. She could only look for a Tsuchinoko on the hills during this summer, fish for a kappa

using a cucumber along the riverside, set up an antenna on the hill to call for a UFO, and check the skin texture of a snowman.

However, Asai was whisked off to the posh holiday inns in Switzerland, Canada, Karuizawa, and and she was not pleased about this at all.

One of these days, let us go look for a Tsuchinoko together, Asa.

Let us help the kappas breed, and we can create a kappa-themed park.

Those were the promises she made to her younger cousin Hikaru.

(Such a foolish child.)

Now in the second year of High School, Asai reflected on her past coldly.

Currently, she was burdened with the duty of being the High School Student Council President in Heian Academy, and the eldest daughter supporting the Mikado's side family, embroiled in the complicated politics and power struggles in the family, an icy girl living in the harsh reality.

She had long forgotten about the time she had a cucumber on the fishing rod she leashed at the riverside and did not get anything after 7 hours.

However, the man she most hated at this point had his eyebrows raised, looking shocked as he said,

"I heard you believed there's a Santa Claus on this world until your third grade."



(When was it that the Japanese summers started to become so hot?)

The intense sunlight was reflected upon the asphalt, and Asai's vision was filled with the swaying, sweltering heat as she walked down the shopping street.

No matter which street it was, there were young people of all types. Some were standing in the middle of the streets, blocking the way, some were standing around eating ice products and crepes, and some were making all sorts of weird noises; the scenery was in complete chaos.

(Why are there so many of these flippant people? It is certainly a mistake to stand out here in the summer heat and get drenched in sweat.)

Normally, Asai would pass by the crowds blocking the way with her head held high and an aloof look, forcing them to step aside and form a path quickly. However, on this day, Asai did not have the presence to intimidate them, for they did not notice her as they continued to chat away.

(...I am already like this after not sleeping much for 2 days. This is embarrassing.)

She remembered that for the past 2 days respectively, she had only slept for 2 hours or so.

Her daily chores had increased exponentially once summer vacation began.

The current candidate to be the head of the Mikado family, Kazuaki, was revealed to have forced Aoi to be his wife, and was forsaken by his clan. The Mikado family Asai and Tōjō were involved in faced a severe crisis.

Though her preparations and plots went off perfectly, the unexpected duties and issues came one after another, and she was unable to proceed to the next step. Also, she heard that Aoi went to do some part-time work during summer vacation, so she often had to go to the shop to check on Aoi, feeling really tense, and not daring to relax in the slightest.

(I might as well cause all the useless and despicable people in this world to disappear.)

While she had such terrifying thoughts as she staggered forth.

An unlucky flash of red suddenly came out of nowhere and entered her sights.

"Watch out!"

The clumsy fool in front of her called out as he knocked into her. Before she was about to be sent flying away, he reached out to grab her, and pulled her in.

A voice echoed in her ears,

"Your hair is really beautiful. I really am weak to a girl with such beautiful hair. I suppose the heavens are really cruel to let a cute city flower like you get injured by me."

If you are trying to try and get girls, do not look for me. Asai was about to wave this hand aside, but she was a little skeptical by what she heard.

This voice--

She lifted her head and stared at the person. Was it her imagination? An illusion? No, it was a mind-boggling truth.

She then coldly retorted,

"...Yes. I suppose the heavens are cruel and also incompetent to let me meet a wild dog like you."

It was the vulgar, vile, foolish, wild dog Asai so hated--"Ack!" Koremitsu Akagi called out.



"Hey, I say, you're not looking very good now. Your feet are really unsteady."

"This has nothing to do with a perverted high school seduction master."

"Go to the park over there and rest for a while."

"No need for that."

"Don't force yourself, Asa."

"I do not remember permitting you to call me that--"

Asai then waved Koremitsu's arm away as she sat on the bench in the park.

"I'll go wet the handkerchief. Just wait here obediently.

Koremitsu ran off to the drinking point.

"...uu, why is it that I have to listen to this wild dog?"

Normally, she would not concern herself with such a wild dog trying to accost on the streets. Due to sleep deprivation and the summer heat however, she would feel dizzy whenever she stood up.

"Looks like I do not have a choice...I shall rest here for the time being..."

Her frowning face closed its eyes, and she fell into a deep slumber.

It was an hour later before she woke up again.

She opened her eyes, wondering why this pillow was so hard and uncomfortable. The sidelong view of Koremitsu's frowning, slightly tanned face was closer to Asai's sights than ever, causing her heart to nearly cease to beat.

Did I actually fall asleep on this dog's shoulder!? Why! This dog is too stupid. Could he not have stood up and pushed me away?

"Why did you not wake me up? Such a useless man."

"That's not what you should be saying, right? You're a woman with no cute points."

Koremitsu gave a grumpy look as he spat back with saliva flying everywhere. At this moment,

"I heard you believed there's a Santa Claus on this world until your third grade."

He muttered,

"And you sent letters to Santa Claus before Christmas, and you went out of the way to drop it in the mailbox? How did you write the recipient and address?"

"...That was when I was very young. I do not remember at all."

She coldly retorted, but at the same time, she was completely rattled within.

(Why is it that this person knows about such a thing? Did Aoi tell him? Or did he hear that from Hikaru?)

She recalled that before she was in her third grade, she would request all sorts of presents from Santa Claus. She wanted the Swiss Army Knife or sleeping bags, necessities for an adventurer, she would get antique dollhouses, accessories, or a basket full of tea sets for girls to use.

The worst of it all was during her third grade, early in the morning of Christmas; she found a gold card in her sock.

Santa Claus actually gave me a gold card?

She was thoroughly shocked to know of this truth.

This Santa Claus is actually my parents?

And to add insult to Asai's pride, Aoi and Hikaru, who she assumed to be more innocent, had already known about this.

"You see. The one who gave me these Christmas presents is not a bearded old man, but a pretty madam or big sister."

"During Christmas, Santa Claus would come to our house holding a Christmas bag. They always tell me, "Look Aoi, this is Santa Claus", but no matter how I look at it, it is papa dressed in a red suit and a fake beard."

Am I the only one hidden in the dark about this!?

This shame of a memory was etched deep within Asai's mind, and ever since then, she loathed both Santa Claus and Christmas.

That past of her was mentioned by this abomination of a person that she was nauseated at--the person who proclaimed himself to be Hikaru's friend and representative, Koremitsu Akagi. To top it all, she was teased by him.

What a blunder!

And so, Koremitsu pointed it out as 'Asai's laughable past'.

"You wrote about going to catch a Kappa in your summer vacation schedule?"

"You talked about going for some cold endurance training so that you can climb a mountain and find a snowman, but you always stay in the house in winter because you always get colds?"

"You put a pie in the garden to lure out an Eel dog? So that you can eat together?"

Asai answered those questions with a cold face, "these are all things when I was young", repeating this over and over again. Koremitsu however stared at her calmly,

"Aren't you quite cute in some way?"

This callous remark broke the limit of Asai's patience.

I do not wish to be called cute or anything by anyone in this world!

Let alone that Koremitsu Akagi!

Her face searing, she gave Koremitsu a slap the next instant.

"What are you doing!?"

Koremitsu frowned as he glared back.

At that moment, a policeman just so happened to appear.

"What happened?"

"This **dog** is a pervert."

She calmly stated as she pointed at him.

Koremitsu was whisked off by the policeman as he continued to lash at Asai.

"You're my enemy after all-----!!!"

It is best if I do not meet that sort of person who left me in a pig pen.

However, that man with the obstinacy of a cockroach will definitely appear in front of Aoi again after he is punished.

Once she thought about this, Asai's face was burning again, and she placed a hand on her reddened face, showing a demure expression as she whispered,

"--uu, I never believed in Santa Claus right from the beginning."



Author's Notes

Hello, this is Mizuki Nomura. The fifth volume of 'When Hikaru was on the Earth.....' delves into the topic of 'Suetsumuhana'. In the Tale of Genji, 'Suetsumuhana' was a complete ****, but at least her inner heart should be very good, or not. She was a pitiful princess who did not know the ways of the world, nor knew how to read the atmosphere. She however became one of Hikaru's lovers, was summoned to his room, and never had any financial difficulties, living her own life happily, no?

This time, the ordinary version cover and the drama CD cover are different. For the ordinary cover, I requested not to show Beni's face. Miss Takeoka's illustration of 'imagining something that cannot be seen' was a masterpiece since the time we worked on 'Book Girl', and this time, I cannot help but be amazed when I see it.

The cover of the special edition is Koremitu's harem version. The original concept was that the flowers scattered around Koremitsu were meant to sense Hikaru's presence, but the idea of not letting everyone see him, but imagine him was certainly a brilliant idea.

The drama CD involves the story of Koremitsu and Hikaru going out to woo girls. I was in charge of forming the plot, supervising the scenario, and writing the extra bonus track. The plot is relevant to the story, but there were some lines that were different from the original script during the recording due to certain reasons, so regarding this, please be

understanding. Regarding the issue of what happened between Koremitsu and Asai, Honoka and Aoi, these tracks and the following volumes will explain it clearly, so please be at ease.

I shall also be more in-depth with my explanation here! To all the readers, please hear out the drama CD filled with the beautiful voices of all the voice actors. Amazingly, the voice actors of the passers-by have taken part as main heroines of other works, and the policeman's voice does suit him well too. After the recording, it became a topic between the voice actors, the scriptwriter Miss Sawako Hirabayashi and me. Of course, the voice actors taking part as lead roles are brilliant too.

In the bonus track of this drama CD and the main story itself, there appeared the topic of panda. I wrote 'Suetsumuhana' during this January, and the additional script in May. It just so happened that during the recording period, I heard news of a panda being born, so it really was such great time. Though I was really delighted...I felt really depressed a few days ...my face turned blue with shock when I think back about it; the recording had already ended, but I thought it was impossible to write a panda as a kirin or a camel. Well, I guess I have to be sorry about that, and leave it as a panda. I wonder when is it that I can go to Ueno Zoo again and pray for a cute panda to be born again.

I shall be promoting some work here, and though it is not the right timing, and it had been a long time waiting, the first volume of 'Aoi' manga version is now being sold on the GANGAN Comics June version! The work and composition are really the best, and there have been lots of praises and comments about it. To the readers who have yet to read it, please do check

it out. The Hikaru mini-character on the webpage is also extremely~ cute. Please do check it out too.

The second volume of 'Book Girl' 'Ghost' comic will be sold on August 22nd. The cover is about Hotaru and Kayano!

Also, I do apologize for keeping everyone waiting, but the second volume of 'Dress' will be sold next month, 29th September. Sherl and Princess Seria travelling incognito, Sherl (male version) visiting Annis' house, Prince Ryūjū's diary, the king's sweet fond talk, the blooming love with the princess. There are about 7 stories of them altogether, so please do remember to buy it. The WEB serialization ended without a hitch, and from this point, there are plans to publish them in pocket novels. Sherl's love affairs shall get more intense latter on.

The sixth volume of 'Hikaru' is 'Asagao', and as the title suggests, it will be Asa's turn. That crossdresser who had yet to appear in the 5th volume will appear again, so please look forward to it too.

I shall see you next time then. 'Hikaru' at the end of the year, and 'Dress' in the coming month.

July 12th 2012,

Mizuki Nomura.

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「どうか、ぼくと朝ちゃん最初の約束を、」

ぼくの代わりに叶えてほしい」

犬猿の仲の朝衣と関わるのは気が進まないながらも

ヒカルに頼まれ、その心残り。を晴らそうとする是光だったが――

帝門家の権力争いを制そうとする朝衣の目的とは、一体？

朝顔

ヒカルが地球にいたところ……⑥

著／野村美月 イラスト／竹岡美穂

Coming Soon!



ドレスな僕が

やんごとなき方々の

家庭孝女師様

な件



Translated by tptrishula

<http://heretic1nt.blogspot.sg/2014/11/hikaru-v5.html>