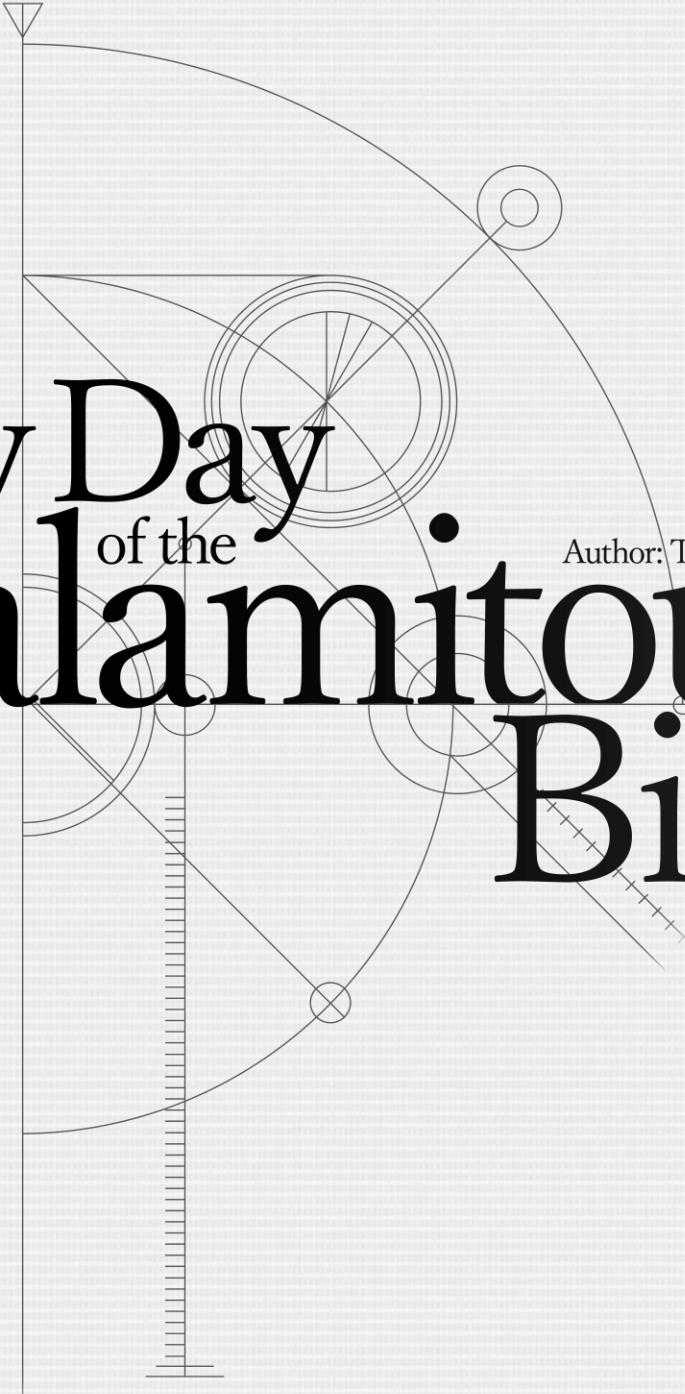


Holy Day of the **Calamitous** **Birth**



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STEINS;GATE

Official Afterstory

Heavy breaths burst forth from my mouth, quickly dyed white by the cold.

I sprint across the crosswalk in front of the UPX building, and when I reach the entrance to the newly constructed Gunbam Café—a location that's already become an integrated part of the city—I double over and gasp for air. Eventually, I manage to take a deep breath.

My lungs are pleading for oxygen. The back of my throat is horribly dry. What's more, I can even sense the faint taste of blood in my mouth.

It's no use... Despite all the desperate searching I've done, nothing's come of it—there's still been no sign of that little girl. If I were in better shape, maybe I'd be able to keep going...

That thought brings another girl to mind—a girl with braided hair, a vintage jersey, slender limbs, and a robust figure that made her look as athletic as a wild doe. The girl in question no longer exists in this world; yet, if she *were* here, I have no doubt she would be able to keep running.

The face of yet another girl comes to mind—a petite girl in possession of strong will, violet eyes, and an ever-present aura of provocation and intelligence that

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emanated from her entire body. If she were here, she would have the needed intelligence—the needed *ingenuity*—to solve this problem in an instant.

But... she isn't here right now. She isn't by my side.

I hurriedly rebuke myself. *Don't lose heart, dammit!*

With those thoughts flooding my head, I turn my gaze upward. Akihabara's winter sky has been dyed a desolate gray, a change I'm only now becoming aware of. Though the weather forecast claimed there would be no risk of precipitation today, it seems all but likely that prediction will land terribly off the mark. It remains ever true, I suppose, that not every aspect of this world is predictable.

The sudden melody of my ringtone interrupts my thoughts. Mayuri's calling me. I pull my phone out of my pocket and hastily press the answer button.

"Okarin, I... I don't know what to do... I can't find any places that have the symbol at all..." she says from the other end.

She sounds like she's on the verge of crying. I, too, stand on the precipice; nonetheless, I steel my emotions, so as to avoid getting sucked into a whirlpool of helplessness. As much as I want to cry right now, I don't want to make Mayuri feel any worse, either. Instead, I frantically give her words of encouragement, as well as instructions on where to look next.

There's no word from Lukako. Daru's probably still hard at work searching for information online, but so far, nothing's come up from his end. Faris is working a shift at MayQueen+Nyan², meaning she had no choice but to turn down our request for help. In her stead, she sent her butler, Kuroki-san, out to help us; unfortunately, even he hasn't reported anything as of yet. Needless to say, the search isn't going well in the slightest.

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A few hours have passed since we first lost sight of the girl in question—and within this enormous city, no less.

Mister Braun, Moeka... why aren't you answering your phones? Was the work you mentioned related to SERN after all...?

“God damn it!” I shout in frustration. Passersby in my vicinity shoot confused glances in my direction before quickly hurrying away.

This is all my fault... How the hell did things turn out this way? It was only a few hours ago that the five of us were enjoying a day blessed with normalcy...

I suppose it all started... back when we were at the lab, as usual.

Earlier that day...

A freezing gust of wind attacks my body, forcing me to pull my collar up in defense. The wind carries with it a flyer for some risqué dating sim, which flits into the space between a few buildings and disappears. A plastic bag of moderate heft hangs off of one of my fingers, twisting and turning as I mindlessly spin it while trekking forward.

At last, my destination stands before me: I begin to climb the stairs positioned next to the Braun Tube Workshop, which lead to the lab. The sound of my footsteps, echoing through the narrow entryway’s cold air, has a bit more presence than I was expecting. As I soak in the stairway’s melancholic atmosphere, I steal a brief glance at our mailbox—it’s filled with pink “special service” flyers, moving company leaflets, and other miscellanea.

Now at the apex of the stairs, I open the relatively creaky steel door to the lab. Once inside, I stick my finger into the gap between wool and skin; off goes the scarf that was shielding my neck from the cold.

There is but a single heater in the lab; the lab members acquired the fine asset during the non-burnable garbage day, and it has proved particularly practical during these frigid times. I waste no time in sticking my hands out in front of the heater to warm up... Or at least, I would, if not for the large lump of meat already huddled in front of it.

“Daru, if you don’t move any further away from that heater, you’re going to find yourself transmogrified into a heap of broiled meat. Much like the turkeys they sell out there... No, perhaps ‘a doner kebab’ would be a more accurate descriptor.”

“Mmph... Don’t say stuff like that, Okarin...” Daru complains. His shivering hands are hovering just over the glittering, honey-colored flames of the heater, taking in their heat. Perhaps my words have affected him in some way, because he suddenly smirks, his lips twisting into the shape of a “3.” Frankly speaking, Daru taps into his second-dimensional knowledge at the weirdest times.

“Why, with all that blubber you have, the cold should scarcely be a problem for you,” I retort.

“Why you gotta be so mean, Okarin?! The cold’s cold—it doesn’t matter how big you are!” he responds, indignant.

“Tutturu!” Mayuri, who is seated in one of the lab’s chairs, sewing away, chimes in. “Okarin, all of us feel cold, so you shouldn’t blame Daru-kun for trying to warm up the best he can.” She raises her head and smiles in my direction. Admittedly, what she’s said is quite honorable.

“Oh, might that be a new costume? Are you crafting another one for Lukako to wear?” I ask her, shoving the array of 500-milliliter Dr P bottles I bought at a discount shop into the refrigerator.

“Yup!” Mayuri replies. “Me and Luka-kun are reeeeally looking forward to Winter ComiMa this year, and I’m doing my best to have all this done for the big show at the end of the year!” She then raises her hand up in the air, as though she’s swearing an oath. Another big smile colors her face.

Right now, things are just so... peaceful.

I reach for my phone and put it to my ear. “...It’s me. For now, it appears all is proceeding harmoniously; however, it is precisely *that* which makes our situation all the more suspicious. A plot, put into effect by a national conspiracy, may in fact be underway. Should the forces threatening us use this tranquility as a stepping stone for their aims, they may manage to coerce us into roaming freely, such that they might capture us with greater ease. I bid you, therefore, to remain ever vigilant. El. Psy. Kongroo.” With that concluding remark, I silently slip my phone back into my pocket.

“That act again? Chuunibyou, FTW!” cries Daru, shrugging his shoulders in an exaggerated motion. I return a placid smile in response.

I’m all too aware that my little faux-conversation came off as incredibly pretentious—even so, answering these so-called phone calls has long since become a ritual of mine. It’s the mechanism I use to ascertain the tranquility of our everyday life—the method by which I ensure our lives remain devoid of all the kinds of horrible experiences I was previously made to go through. To me, it’s a way to make sure I still have the needed mental capacity to steel myself and maintain my peace of mind.

To put it in other words... it may be my way of shutting out the harrowing memories I have of everything that occurred a few months prior.

To be honest, I still have nightmares about the events of this past summer. Those nightmares play out so dreadfully that, more often than not, I find myself waking up violently in the middle of the night, a cold sweat soaking my neck and back.

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Those dreams of mine always take me back to that world—a world that should no longer exist. Being forced to remember what happened back then leaves me so terrified, it becomes hard to even breathe. Those sticky pools of blood... Her lifeless, empty eyes... Her feeble, pale arms, hanging limply at her sides... Her body in my arms, feeling as though it were crumbling away... And the pale green, jelly-like—

No. That's enough. I'm sick and tired of reliving that infinite corridor of death—that mirrored, *labyrinthine* hell on earth—over and over again.

Fortunately, those nightmares have recently stopped tormenting me so frequently. In time, my world will surely return to its prior state of normalcy; every so-named “story” shall converge with our normal, everyday lives.

And, as a matter of fact, our world *has* been quite tranquil these last few months.

Shiina Mayuri, aka “Mayushii☆.” Hashida Itaru, aka Daru. And myself, Okabe Rintaro, aka Hououin Kyouma. The season has changed from summer to winter, but in no way does that mean we three have changed in any way; on the contrary, we’ve continued to spend our days just as we always have.

Considering that allows me to recall one important point: life is actually *meant* to be a series of uneventful days. And indeed, the months that have passed since I was discharged from the hospital have been exactly that: peaceful and ordinary.

Speaking of changes, however, there is *one* detail that bears mentioning...

“Hm...?”

Before me sits the monitor to the lab’s computer, which I’ve just awakened from sleep mode. An unread email sits in my inbox; I hurriedly move the mouse over to click on it.

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To: Okabe Rintaro

From: Maki

Subject: I'm lonely...

You know... my husband hasn't been paying attention to me lately...

If you can keep a secret, please message me back.

<<**IMPORTANT**>> Dear valued customer! From today onward, everything is [**Permanently Free**]!

Perfect Promos ~**Deal ends at MIDNIGHT tonight!**~

I deflate. Much like a balloon that's lost its knot, the air completely vacates my body. It's as though every ounce of energy I had has disappeared in one fell swoop.

Did a spambot acquire my email address after I bought something online?

Goddamn spammers... I hope every single one of them... dies and burns in hell!

A bout of silent curses later, I toss the email into the "Trash" folder. An enormous, disappointed sigh escapes my lips.

"Checking your email again, Okarin? Man, you were doing that on your phone for so long, and now you're staring at the monitor like you wanna lick it! But hey, don't worry: I get how you feel. One hundred percent." A disgusting look colors Daru's face as he speaks.

Mayuri follows up, her lips carrying a mischievous smile. "Don't worry, Okarin, there's nothing bad about what you're doing. It means you aren't a normie yet!"

"Wha—?!"

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“Summer vacation has ended, and you suddenly discover that your best friend’s swapped to the normie class...’ Damn onion-cutting ninjas! I’m seriously tearing up over here!”

“What the hell are you on about?! There’s nothing going on between Christina and myself! Can it with those baseless, ridiculous assumptions, will you?!”

“But I didn’t assume anything—everything I said was perfectly on point. Besides, I never even mentioned Makise-shi,” Daru replies. “Oh, and just so you know, Okarin, tsundere guys aren’t moe in the slightest. Dammit, the two of you should seriously go off and die. I didn’t even *mention* Makise-shi, but you’re probably already off in your own little world. Lemme guess what you’re thinking: ‘The day our eyes met, I knew it was fate...’”

Daru then faces me, a distressed look on his face, and continues. “The two of you were struck by arrows of love... Nay, by arrows of destiny! Oh, it brings me to tears! Aaah, they just won’t stop!”

Mayuri continues the onslaught. “Chris-chan is really cute and really smart, so I think we can trust her to take care of Okarin,” she says to Daru. “But you know, Mayushii doesn’t really think Chris-chan would send something private in an email if she thought it might get opened at the lab.”

“Gotta agree there. She might act otherwise, but Makise-shi’s a real sucker for romance. So, stuff like sending lovey-dovey emails to each other, all night long... Yeah, Okarin, you should actually go off and die. Dammit, I hope your phone explodes from sending so many emails to the other side of the globe.”

Daru and Mayuri’s banter advances relentlessly. A slight heat begins to rise to my face in response.

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“I told you, it’s not like that!” I protest. “W-We’re merely exchanging *opinions* and *conjecture* related to an ongoing research project!”

Daru snorts. “Yeah, yeah. You two are just *so* busy studying the *revolutionary* twelfth theory of love, which’ll reveal all of the secrets of affection to the world over. Yeah, I get it.”

“E-Enough with your drivel! I am an insane mad scientist! My ambitions will never be cast aside in favor of something as *frivolous* as the pursuit of love! Moreover, my assistant is currently stationed in America, and...”

“Hey, Okarin, don’t you think it’d be better if you tried contacting Chris-chan first instead? She would probably like that,” Mayuri offers. Her suggestion sends me into an abrupt silence.

As I’ve been saying, there truly is nothing going on between us. It’s just that we exchange emails sometimes... Okay, well, fairly often. But that’s all there is to it.

Daru interrupts my thoughts. “Christina is currently occupied with research of the utmost importance. I do not wish to burden her further with my correspondence!” Wow-*wie*! That’s pretty manly of you, Okarin! That’s why we love you, that’s why we admire you!”

Daru’s one-man imitation show grows ever more grating by the second—I find myself cursing his maddening ability to aggravate me.

“Daru! Cut it ou—”

Before I can finish my sentence, a knock at the door stops me in my tracks.

“Mind if I step in a sec?” asks the muffled, gruff voice behind it. Without so much as waiting for an answer, the speaker—a large, muscular man—opens the door and steps inside without a care in the world. It’s Tennouji Yuugo, manager of the Braun Tube Workshop below us.

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“O-Oh... Well, if it isn’t Mister Braun. How may I help you?”

To be completely frank, Mister Braun’s isn’t a face I’m particularly happy to see, given how behind I am on the rent... That being said, his entrance was of exceptionally good timing—timing worthy of praise, even.

“Before you ask, I am still unable to pay this month’s rent, unfortunately. You see, we’ve just started development on two new Future Gadgets—namely, the ‘Cellulaser Gun’ and the ‘Item Getter Robo Mk. III.’ As you might imagine, this has left me with little in the way of leftover funds...”

The latter gadget I mentioned, by the way, is a modified radio-controlled robot with trash-picker hands, entirely maneuvered with a Vii Remote. It’s been able to pick just about anything up, from a used game case in a bargain bin to a hundred-yen coin hidden behind a wardrobe.

“I don’t want nothin’ with *you* right now. Man, yer as stupid arrogant as ever...”
Mister Braun grumbles.

On closer inspection in Mister Braun’s general direction, I manage to spot Moeka standing... right next to him. Truly, her presence is as scant as ever.

When our eyes meet, Moeka offers me a slight bow. That’s progress, I suppose. At least she didn’t immediately whip her phone out to message me, as she did when we first met.

“Reason I’m here today is for Miss Mayuri,” Mister Braun continues. “It’s about my lil’ Nae.” He turns his head; behind him stands a little girl, clinging to one of his muscular legs. Her name is Tennouji Nae—she’s a sixth-grader whom I often refer to as a chipmunk. Her appearance is so innocent, it’s difficult to believe she’s the daughter of this rough-and-tough brick house of a man.

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“Y’see, Miss Mayuri, I need you to take care of Nae for a bit—if ya don’t mind, ‘course.”

“Huh? Me?” says Mayuri, shocked.

“*What?!*” I shout.

“Wow, we get to look after Nae-tan?! Lolis, FTW!” Daru follows up, his eyes practically glittering in excitement.

Mister Braun swiftly casts a murderous glare in Daru’s direction; in a mere instant, Daru is petrified, and he crumbles into a million pieces!

...Or so it feels, anyway.

Mister Braun looks back at Mayuri. “Sorry, but it’s urgent stuff. And the part-timer over here’s gotta tag along with me. Matter a’ fact, we might already be just a bit late...”

Today’s Christmas Eve. Why on earth does the typically languid Braun Tube Workshop staff have something to attend to *now*, of all times? I mean, it’s not as though they’ve up and started doing business as a confectionery, right?

“Well now, Mister Braun, you must understand that this lab is a fortress—one where all the wisdom of mankind has been amassed, for the purpose of building a prosperous future. This is no playground, or anything of the sort—”

“I don’t give a damn about yer ambitions or whatever, and I’m talkin’ to *Miss Mayuri*,” the built man interrupts. Then, looking back at Mayuri, he asks, “So, will ya do me a favor? Nae and you’re close, yeah?”

“Umm, well... Mayushii doesn’t mind at all, but... it’d probably be a good idea if Okarin and Daru-kun were here with us...” She glances in my direction. Good work, Mayuri. Your loyalty is commendable.

“She’s quite right. Why, how very high-handed of you to make such requests, Mister Braun. Do you not know that Shiina Mayuri—Lab Mem Number 002, and thus, my subordinate—requires my approval to commit to such missions?”

“Tch. Fine, fine. You’re up to bat then, Okabe,” Mister Braun gives in. “Give me good results and I might even forget about yer rent for just a bit longer. But you better not go scarin’ Nae or makin’ her cry, hear me? If you do, I’ll fold ya like a scrap of paper and hang ya from the goddamn Honoden Building—right in front of the whole damn station!”

As he speaks, Mister Braun starts to adjust his shoulders and neck—and as a result, a number of deep cracks can be heard resounding from his muscular joints. It’s almost as though he’s rearranging his muscles themselves, such that he might be able to use them more effectively.

“Hm....”

Though I’m presently under immense pressure, I nonetheless raise my palm to my chin and begin brooding over what Mister Braun has said.

So, both Mister Braun and Moeka are leaving to go on an errand together... The words “SERN” and “mission” flash through my mind, but I immediately reject that line of thought. What’s most important in this moment is the *now*—not the past. The time I’m spending, at this very moment, with everyone else in this room... *that’s* what’s most important.

This place is one I want to protect; this *time* is one I want to protect. After all, I already possess something I never want to lose, and I know, deep down, how valuable that something is to me.

All of this is precisely why I’ve not pried into Mister Braun’s and Moeka’s affairs since the summer. I don’t want to know what the other side of their lives is like... No,

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that's not quite right—I don't even want to know *if* they have another side to their lives on this worldline. It's because we don't know each other particularly well that we can remain friendly neighbors, and friendly neighbors alone.

Truly, there's much more to being an adult than initially meets the eye.

"Can't she just... stay home alone?" I nervously suggest.

"A kid staying home alone... Do you *want* her house to get broken into, Okarin?"

Shut up, Daru. Don't provoke this foul, fanged beast for no reason.

Mister Braun considers the idea. "Well, Nae's smart, and she's a good girl, so that might not be the worst idea you've ever dreamed up."

Remove that strange smile from your face, Mister Braun. Do you *want* me to shove some of your oh-so-loathed sardines into that slack-jawed mouth of yours? Lest you catch a mouthful of flies in their place.

"But, well, there're these rumors goin' 'round about a kidnapping ring these days, and this neighborhood ain't all that safe. So, just do me a favor an' keep her safe, all right? Nae'll have a phone on her just in case."

Nae is, in fact, carrying a strange, black pochette shaped like a creature. On closer inspection, I spot the edges of the cutting-edge cell phone in question poking out of it. Did Mister Braun really go out of his way to buy something that extravagant for her?

Well, let's ignore his obnoxiously loud helicopter-papa rotor blades. I think I ought to give some thought to the organization he just mentioned; it's not SERN, of course, though I've heard it's related to the Russian mafia, or perhaps another dangerous group...

As my mind clouds over with these thoughts, the sudden sound of Mayuri's voice brings me back to reality. "Okarin, we should help out! It would be so sad if Nae-chan had to spend Christmas Eve all alone..."

"W-Well... While that is a decent point, I don't think..."

"C'mon, pleeeease?"

Mayuri joins her hands in front of her chest and begins to supplicate me. Ugh... For some reason, I feel as though I'm being asked to keep an abandoned puppy she found on the streets.

"W-Well... If you're going to put it like that, then I suppose there's nothing else I can say except..."

It's been a few months since summer departed and fall began. In that time, another change came to pass: I became a lot more vulnerable to Mayuri's pleas, essentially. Thus, in spite of how uneasy I feel about the idea, I nonetheless nod my head in surrender.

"Hehe, all right! C'mere, Nae-chan!" Mayuri exclaims in victory. She sets the costume she was working on onto the sofa and beckons for Nae. The chipmunk—who I should mention has become quite fond of Mayuri these last few months—flits away from her father and draws closer to her. The second Mayuri kneels down to the floor and begins patting her head, Nae becomes all smiles.

The mood in the lab shifts. Laughter resounds throughout the room as Mayuri gently tickles Nae; Mister Braun's face relaxes, his eyes closing ever so slightly; even Daru's watching the scene playing out before him with a gentle smile on his face, devoid of any wicked desires—like he's a villain whose soul has finally been purified of evil. It's as if spring's blooming in this corner of our messy little lab...

This ability of Mayuri's... it allows her to gently lower everyone's guard and envelop them in a calmness like no other. It's most certainly a natural talent of hers. In the past, I would likely have christened it "Healing of the Lord," or something like that.

"Hmph. Well, I suppose we won't have anything to worry about, so long as we leave it all to Mayuri..." I say.

"Yuuup! Just leave it to Mayushii! Good luck with your work, Mr. Manager!"

"Good luck with your work,' you say? Hot damn, he's got a daughter *and* a missus awaiting his return... Man, that's moe as hell..."

This guy's hopeless... but there's nothing quick to be done about him. I opt to ignore Daru entirely, as his brain clearly suffers from some terminal malady.

"Thanks a ton. I owe ya one, Miss Mayuri." Mister Braun offers her a disconcerting, syrupy wink, and Moeka nods her head in her direction.

The pair prepares to leave the lab. "...I'll be sure to grab ya a present from over there, all right?" Mister Braun continues, a wistful look on his face. Moeka, on the other hand, maintains her blank expression. Once they've left, the steel door shuts behind them, locking the wintry air out.

Silence briefly takes the lab, only to then be broken by Mayuri.

"Look, Nae-chan—it's Uncle Okarin!" Mayuri says cheerfully.

"As I've previously explained, she must refer to me as 'Mister Okabe,' or not at all," I retort.

Mayuri's holding Nae up, such that she's facing me. Our gazes meet.

The eyes are the windows to the soul... Or were they mirrors? How does that phrase go, again?

As I ponder that little puzzle, Nae silently stares into my eyes. I can feel my facial muscles twitching in response.

Urk. How best to explain this...

Simply put, I have trouble talking to Nae. My rational side tries to assure me, of course, that the grief-stricken avenger she once was shouldn't exist on this worldline. But, still...

Back then, she killed Moeka without so much as a care in the world. She *tortured* me. She gouged my flesh... and she put me through so much pain... When I recall the feeling of my own lukewarm blood running across my skin, I...

I know the girl facing me now is harmless. I *know* that. It's just that...

Ten awkward seconds pass, during which neither I nor Nae speak a single word to the other. We don't even share a nod.

Eventually, I decide to break the lengthy lull. "How's... school? Is it fun?"

I wouldn't normally bother to ask such a trivial question, but the difficult silence forced it out of me.

"...It's all right, I guess." Perhaps she senses my nervousness, because Nae delivers her answer with an expression as stiff as a board.

It's as if we're playing conversation catch, but both of us are pitching the worst forkballs of our lives—the air is just so terribly... *awkward*. The two of us aren't exactly what I'd call "social" when it comes to the other. And that aside, the enigmatic skill that is "conversing with a little girl like an actual human being" isn't exactly in my arsenal. I wouldn't find it even if I turned my lab coat upside down and shook it.

"C'mon, Okarin, you can do better than that! All right, Nae-chan, this here's Daru-kun. He's really big, but don't worry—he isn't scary!"

Perhaps to try and dispel the thick atmosphere between myself and Nae, Mayuri redirects Nae's attention toward Daru... Hey, wait a second! Mayuri, you can't just let a

child approach that perverted gentleman so carelessly! Damn it, you make the impossible look so easy!

“Hey, Nae-tan, it’s nice to see ya again! I’m Hashida Itaru, and I’m a super hacker! I’m known far and wide as an ally of all women, from those unborn to women in their prime! That being said, grandmas are a no-no.” Daru cocks his head slightly, and the contours in his face sink as he attempts to form a dashing, movie-star-esque smile—he immediately follows this up with a stylish thumbs-up.

However, Nae remains ever silent. She hides behind an absolute barrier of muteness as strong as an A.T. Field. For a moment, Daru falters; then, he reattempts communication by offering a spin on his previous greeting, coupled with a “Nice to meet ya again!” He is, once again, thoroughly ignored. The heart of glass embedded inside his big body shatters with a resonant, crystal-clear sound. Faced with Nae’s rejection, he goes entirely pale in an instant and collapses to the floor.

Son of a... Looks like I’ll have to take up the baton yet again.

“*Muahahahaha!* Tennouji Nae, heed my words: allow me to welcome you to the cornerstone of my millennial kingdom, the stronghold of my ambitions, and my personal secret garden—the Future Gadget Laboratory!”

With a flick of my imaginary cloak, I armor myself with my “Hououin Kyouma” persona—the first time I’ve done so in a fair while. The awkward aura I sensed earlier dissipates thanks to my loud declaration; the tension between Nae and myself quickly melts away, like a thin sheet of ice on a sunny day.

...Well, that’s how it seems from my perspective, anyway. Nonetheless, it’s good to see that switching to this modus operandi remains tremendously effective.

“Now that you are with us, kind traveler, allow yours truly to introduce you to the pinnacles of this lab’s wisdom: the Future Gadgets! Come now, don’t be shy!”

With that said and done, I take a few trips between the steel shelves in the back and the lab's table, so as to procure and present our many inventions to Nae.

- Future Gadget No. 1: The Bit Particle Gun.
- Future Gadget No. 2: The Bamboo Helicam.
- Future Gadget No. 3: Could This Be Ora Ora?! (name subject to abbreviation)
- Future Gadget No. 4: Moad Snake.
- Future Gadget No. 5: "Once Again, I Made Something Worthless," by Goemon.
- Future Gadget No. 6: Cyalume Saber.
- Future Gadget No. 7: Ghost in the Ball.

...And, as for Future Gadget No. 8, it's been permanently retired.

When you get down to it, these gadgets are pieces of junk with no current practical use. Even so, they've got enough allure to them to pique the interest of a little girl like Nae—or at least, that's what I *would* say, but...

Nae, presented with our varied ensemble, silently picks up the Bamboo Helicam and Ora². She briefly inspects them. Then, she quickly lays them back where they were and wordlessly drops her gaze to the floor.

Damned chipmunk! Sure, they're useless, but those are the *Future Gadgets* you're handling—not mere decorations! Even a critter like you should be able to understand that much!

"Whaaat? C'mon, Nae-chan, Okarin and Daru-kun've worked really hard on those..." Mayuri laments, clearly disappointed. "Well, okay, what about this one? And this one?" She takes the Bit Particle Gun in her left hand, the Bamboo Helicam in her right, and presents both to Nae.

After a moment's pause, Nae takes the Bit Particle Gun from her and picks up one of the other gadgets at her feet: the Cyalume Saber. Then, with a tilt of her head, she shoots a curious glance at Moad Snake.

“...!”

A shiver runs down my spine, and I can't help but gasp. The Bit Particle Gun. The Cyalume Saber. Not to mention the claymore mine-esque Moad Snake. Those three gadgets have only one thing in common... that they're all *weapons*. All at once, the endlessly recurring stench of blood from that nightmare resurfaces in my mind.

Could this mean the chipmunk is attracted to military-type weapons? Is she, at her core, predisposed to becoming a ruthless avenger in the future...?

Right as that possibility races through my mind, there's another knock at the door.

What the hell's with our sudden popularity? Did Black Friday come late this year?

“Door's open. Come in,” I call out.

“Sorry to bother you all...”

The visitor in question quietly opens the door and enters. It's Lukako. He's dressed casually today—a jacket in place of the usual miko garb.

“Good morning, Okabe-san, Hashida-san, Mayuri-chan,” he greets.

“Lukako. Minus one point,” I reply brusquely, slowly wagging an upraised index finger left and right.

“Huh?”

For a moment, Lukako looks stunned. There's a puzzled look on his face.

“How many times must I explain this?! My name is Hououin Kyouma! I am the insane mad scientist with no equal in this world!”

Hououin Kyouma; indeed, that is my true name. It is the name I chose for the purpose of succinctly distinguishing myself from the commoners... Albeit, I've opted to use it less frequently in recent times.

That aside, Lukako's entrance was of perfect timing: it quickly dispelled the chills and dread tormenting me moments ago.

"O-Oh, that's right! I'm sorry, Oka— er, Kyouma-san!" Lukako gasps, bowing his head in apology.

"Insufficient, Lukako! What of the token phrase?!"

"Oh, right! U-Um, El Psy Kongalee..."

"El Psy Kongroo! My word, how many times will I have to correct you before you remember it right?!"

"Hey, Okarin, I've been wondering this for a while now—don't the 'insane' and 'mad' in 'insane mad scientist' kinda mean the same thing? Why so redundant?" Daru questions. It seems he's recovered from his disarmed Phase Shift armor state.

"Shut up. I didn't ask for your input," I snap back. Then, addressing Lukako: "Really, Lukako... I'm genuinely at a loss here. How many attempts must we go through before you can respond effectively? You need to start behaving like a proper disciple."

"O-Oh... I'm sorry... I'll try harder from now on..." With a solitary sniffle, Lukako begins tearing up like he always does—then, he notices Nae, who's standing beside me. "Kyouma-san, who's this?" he asks.

"This is Nae. Tennouji Nae."

"Huh? Tennouji? As in... *that* Tennouji?"

"Indeed. She's the daughter of the Braun Tube Workshop's owner, Mister Braun."

“Oh, I see... So I was right, then,” Lukako says. He meets Nae’s gaze and introduces himself, a soft, characteristic smile on his lips. “It’s nice to meet you, Nae-chan. My name is Urushibara Luka.”

“What, have you never met Lukako before? That’s quite a surprise,” I say to Nae.

“No,” responds Lukako, “I don’t think we have properly met before. I’ve seen her a number of times, though I’ve never had the chance to truly greet her before... But still, it’s really nice to meet you.” Compelled by his conscientious nature, Lukako offers Nae a deep bow, despite the fact that she’s just a little girl.

“It’s nice to meet you... Miss Luka.” Nae returns the gesture with a meek bow of her own.

“H-Huh? ‘Miss’...?” Lukako murmurs, surprised.

I let out a loud laugh. “Muahahaha! You have been deceived, dear chipmunk!” I shout. “Lukako is a full-fledged, hard-and-true man of men!”

Perhaps I was a bit too boisterous in my declaration, because Nae immediately begins shaking. She makes a move to hide behind someone else’s legs... but her own legs betray her instead.

“Ah!” shouts Lukako. Sensing the urgency of the chipmunk’s situation, Lukako reaches out his hand to help... but instead of taking his hand, Nae swiftly wraps her arms around Lukako’s waist. As a result, she is now inadvertently hugging him.

“Wha? U-Umm...” Lukako hesitates. He’s clearly flustered, but he timidly crouches down to pat Nae’s head nonetheless.

“Heehee...” Nae giggles. Of all reactions she could have to the situation, she is smiling. And perhaps her mood is infectious, because Lukako begins to smile, too. The air between them is instantly more affable than before.

What the...? If she's so capable of clicking like this with others, why is she so averse when it comes to myself and Daru?

A phrase crosses my mind: "Only pretty girls and hot guys can pull it off." Now that I think about it... which of those categories does Lukako fall into? Or is the answer both?

Well, that doesn't matter right now. There's a more pressing issue at hand: Nae has practically ensnared young Lukako with her devilish claws. It seems I've underestimated this chipmunk...

Without warning, our gazes suddenly meet. Not a moment passes, however, before Nae averts her eyes.

Wait... Something about the way she looked away from me was... off. Assuming my vision isn't failing me, she did so quite slowly. Supposedly, Nae's frightened of me—yet, judging by that motion, it certainly doesn't *seem* that way. It's almost as though there was something deliberate about how she did that...

A sudden realization comes to mind: when she nearly fell over earlier, did she do so *intentionally*, fully expecting Lukako would catch her?

Might all this be a stratagem she's built, so as to capture the young man she's taken a liking to? That is, of course, if we assume that's her true goal. If such wicked thoughts have already sprouted in her mind, I doubt she's paving a path to mainstream womanhood; what she'll actually become in the future will be far more tragic, indeed.

Well, I'm probably just overthinking this, anyway. As they say, once you jump at one shadow, everything around you starts to look like one...

Nae—who may or may not be aware of my suspicions—suddenly rises, pulls out her state-of-the-art cell phone, and flips it open. "Miss Luka," she says, "you should give me your phone number, and then I can give you mine! ...If that's okay with you?"

“Huh? But I’m just...” Lukako seems taken aback by Nae’s sudden, very assertive proposal—likely because they’ve only just met.

Nae continues to press him. “Come on, come on, let’s do it!”

“O-Okay...”

In a matter of seconds, Lukako exchanges his number with Nae through the convenient avenue of IR communication.

At a glance, Nae appears an innocent child—one who’s allowed to be pushy because of said innocence. And yet... something about her actions feels all too suspicious to me...

“Hehe, looks like Luka-kun and Nae-chan are already good friends!” cheers Mayuri, walking over to the pair. As she approaches, Nae unwraps herself from Lukako’s waist, quickly reaches out her right hand, and grasps Mayuri’s own right hand with it. She’s still holding onto Lukako’s left hand with her left, meaning the result is akin to a paper-people chain between the three of them.

As she stands there, holding Lukako’s and Mayuri’s hands, Nae addresses the two in a sweet tone she rarely uses, even with Mister Braun. “So, umm, I have a favor to ask you two... Can we go out and play?”

“Huh...? You want to go outside?” questions Lukako.

“Mhm. It’s pretty boring in here, don’t you think? So, I wanna go out and look around the city.”

“...I suppose, but... Um, what should we do, Kyouma-san?”

“Okarin, I have an idea!” Mayuri exclaims, her tone happy. “Let’s all go out together!”

Accursed critter... Are you seriously suggesting you consider the *Future Gadget Laboratory*—an establishment *filled to the brim* with all of mankind’s wisdom and future potential—a boring place?!

I feel somewhat embarrassed about Nae’s declaration, but a sudden flash of inspiration blows that feeling away.

“Hmm... Well, if you so wish to, then we shall,” I say in response to Mayuri. I intentionally add a solemn nod to my statement, so as to convey how thoroughly I “considered” my answer.

“Excuse me? You want us to go out in this cold? Seriously? We’ll freeze to death out there, you noob,” Daru protests.

I quickly speak to cut off his complaints. “Just get ready to go. Mayuri and Lukako, you two as well.”

“Mhm, okay!”

“Yes, Kyouma-san!”

Daru appears thoroughly displeased, but he still moves to pick his jacket up, which is draped over the back of his chair. Mayuri, too, removes the hanger lodged in her duffle coat and begins to put it on, a smile on her face. Lukako and I are both already wearing our winter coats, seeing as how we both recently arrived at the lab. All that’s left for me to do is wrap my scarf around my neck again.

Truth be told, the reason I so readily agreed to Mayuri’s suggestion moments prior is because I have concocted a plan. The fact of the matter is, the chipmunk could still pose a risk; and in the event that her terrible other form from *that* worldline resurfaces, we’ll be in great peril. Thus, I need to be able to identify the signs as quickly as possible... and if those signs come to light while we’re outside, I should be able to deal with her accordingly!

Of course, Mister Braun's death hasn't occurred on this worldline; the trigger that led to Nae's transformation hasn't been pulled. Nonetheless, the possibility that she'll go rampant remains. The words "the Butterfly Effect" appear in my mind, one after the other, before fading away. It's a term used to describe how one small event can be the ultimate factor leading to a tragic future.

The situation I'm in calls for experimentation, and subsequently, observation. More specifically, it would be wise to subject this guinea pig-esque chipmunk to various stimuli, as opposed to simply confining her to the lab—that way, I can make note of how she reacts.

Oh, right. Before I forget...

I quickly whip around to make sure no one's paying attention to me. Then, I slip my cell phone out of my pocket and begin to operate it.

"...H-Hm."

Still nothing; my inbox is devoid of new messages. I suppose she *did* say her research was ramping up recently... The tone of her messages and the emojis she used in them told me she was enjoying herself, to say the least. And, well, the busier you are, the more bothersome it can be to receive incessant emails. That's just how it is.

I feel like I should... Yeah, I should just be patient. I'll wait for her to message me first.

Back before she left Tokyo, she was more than happy to chat away with me about what the theme of her next bout of research was, with a smile on her face. When I think back on those moments, I can vividly recall that brilliant smile, the glitter in her eyes, and the sparkle of intelligence residing deep within them.

I give a light shrug, pointed at no one in particular but myself.

All of a sudden, I sense something peculiar. Someone's gazing at me...

I turn around.

It's Nae... and she's just standing there. Staring right at me.

“...”

The smile she had on her face when she was talking to Mayuri and Lukako has disappeared; she's staring at me with the same blank look she had on her face when I spoke to her earlier.

Once again, not a second passes before she mirrors her previous actions and averts her eyes... Wait, what was that? Did she just frown for a split second there? Or am I just seeing things because I'm already suspicious of her?

...Tch. I'm stuck with some pretentious loser, a tub of lard, and two total pushovers.

It's almost as though I can sense her saying that to herself right now. A light chill runs down my spine; I pull my scarf a bit tighter around my neck.

Though the archipelago is entirely blanketed by a cold front today, the weather remains clear across the country; there's a zero-percent chance of precipitation. It's the perfect weather for going outside—assuming you don't mind the freezing wind, that is.

“Jingle Bells” plays from many a store speaker down the street, all while maids hand out an array of different flyers to passers-by. The maids in question are dressed in red clothes adorned with white hems; they're also wearing red hats, each sporting a ball of white fluff attached to the end. Simply put, they're all dressed as Santa Claus. But, on that note... er, those hems are quite short... Are they not cold?

“Wooow, those Santas are super-duper cute! I wanna go say hi to them all!”

Mayuri accepts a flyer from one of the Santa maids, exchanges some small talk with her, and has her take a picture of the both of them. In the picture, Mayuri's wearing

cat ears that essentially function as earmuffs—to the uneducated observer, it'd look like a picture of a catgirl and a Santa maid in a miniskirt.

Lukako watches the pair, looking a little embarrassed. Nae, meanwhile, just has an innocent smile on her face.

“What’s wrong, Daru? Are you not going to ask the maid for a photo as well?”

“Oh, c’mom, man. You know I hate this kind of stuff,” Daru replies. There’s a tinge of annoyance in his voice.

“Oh? Am I not speaking to the same Daru who used to drool over how ‘insanely moe’ Santa cosplays are?”

“Okarin, Okarin... I’ve long since outgrown those juvenile days of mine. I just can’t *stand* people who engage in sexual deeds on a holy day like this—that’s why I despise Christmas songs, and the day itself, too. Every single sect, priest, monk, and nun is my enemy...”

“Why, there’s no need to be so cross, my friend. You still have your 2D world, do you not?” I pat Daru on the shoulder, so as to lighten his mood. However, this seems to have the opposite effect; Daru’s round eyes waver for a moment, then begin to moisten.

“Okarin...” he sobs, “why you gotta be so condescending?! Actually, don’t answer that. I know *exactly* why: it’s ‘cause of that damn superiority complex you normies have! He’s the one, officer! He’s the normie! Shoot him! Shoot him!”

“Normie.” It’s a word that’s become a part of my daily life when it comes to the internet, so I’m definitely used to both seeing and hearing it. But being called one today, of all days, stings particularly.

“...A normie, huh?” I chuckle to myself, then scoff. “Fat chance.”

How *could* I be a normie? I most certainly am not one.

That line of thought brings a familiar tone of voice to mind—one that I miss quite greatly. It's a memory so strong, it stops me right in my tracks.

I find myself lifting my head to look up at the sky; it's begun to cloud over rather faintly. I feel a colorless, dry, and oh-so hollow feeling washing over me.

Normies are people who have a significant other by their side. Yet, all that's by my side... is the empty space where *she* should be. Where a petite woman in a lab coat should be.

I feel a faint pain in my chest. Surely this melancholy isn't *actually* hurting me, right?

...It isn't! It definitely isn't!

Just as I'm beginning to fight back against some unseen force, Mayuri's easygoing voice snaps me back to reality. "Okariin! Okariiiin!" she calls out, waving at me. "Come get your picture taken with us!"

"S-Sure... On my way!" I yell back.

Now it's Lukako, Mayuri, Nae, and a maid—dressed as Santa Claus, needless to say—preparing to take a picture. Together, the group stands out quite a bit; so much so, in fact, that a small crowd of onlookers has already formed around them.

Before I can so much as get a word in, Daru starts attempting to corral these spectators into a single-file line, as though he actually has the authority to. What, does he see himself as some worldly manager for a bunch of idols?

As per usual, Mayuri's smiling in dumbfounded delight, whereas Lukako—who just had his cosplayer career debut a few months back—looks fairly nervous; he still isn't used to being the center of attention, it seems. Nae, meanwhile, has a stiff expression on her face. She's likely anxious, seeing as how she's surrounded by complete strangers.

Suddenly...

“H-Hey, you! You’re really cute... You’ll take a picture with me, won’t ya?”

“Aah...!”

Nae lets out a small scream, shattering the group’s once-peaceful atmosphere. I hurriedly focus in on her direction; an ugly, fat, suspicious-looking man has emerged from the crowd and grabbed Nae by the wrist. His hair is disheveled, unkempt, and partly hidden by a bandana. His belly is as round as a beer barrel; he’s so rotund, in fact, that his winter attire is struggling to contain him—like a valiant warrior fighting a seemingly losing battle.

It’s more than clear that Nae’s uncomfortable with the man, but in spite of that, he’s still trying to force a conversation with her. I’m not sure who he is, nor how old he is, but he’s what anyone would call an otaku freak—a prime example of one, even. I sigh and shake my head.

“Hey, you sick bastar—”

Though I intended to chew him out, I end up stopping in my tracks. A man dressed entirely in red—as Santa Claus—has silently stepped between Nae and the otaku. He’s carrying a large bag, and a tuft of blond hair is poking out from under his red hat. He’s so tall, I actually have to look up to see his face.

Judging by his looks, he appears to be a foreigner that’s been handing out flyers from his bag; the problem with this conclusion, though, is that his bag is a knapsack, not a pouch. Thus, the rationale behind his costume is a little questionable. His round glasses and fake beard make it difficult to see his whole face, but his eyes are emitting a gentle glow.

“Wh-What d’you want...?” The otaku’s now looking up at the man in the Santa costume, a bitter expression on his face.

The costumed man doesn't reply, though. A smile still stretching across his face, he answers with a gesture that speaks louder than words ever could: he raises his index finger and slowly wags it left and right.

A large number of gazes are now pointed at the otaku. Seemingly made uncomfortable by this, he clicks his tongue in annoyance and hurriedly disappears from the scene.

I walk up to the Santa costume-clad man. "I'm sorry you had to intervene. But thank you," I say to him.

In response, he merely waves his hand silently, as if to tell me not to worry about it. Then, he crouches down to pat Nae on the head. After a moment, he's standing again, and he begins to take leaflets out of his bag once more.

The atmosphere around us, which felt like it had frozen over thanks to that otaku's actions, thaws, and time begins to flow anew.

Well, I'll be damned. This Santa sure plays the part well. As a sign of my appreciation, I take one of the flyers he's distributing and glance at what it says.

PureHeart Cosplay Cabaret: 'Dolly Dream Flag' Grand Reopening!

The fairest prices in the business, and the best service, too!

"Tonight, 2D and 3D will become one!"

"..."

As I stare blankly at the flyer, Mayuri and Lukako show up at my sides and fill the silence.

“Umm, Okarin... You’re a student, right? I don’t think you should go to naughty places like that... They’re really expensive, too...” Mayuri says, a worried expression on her face.

“Kyouma-san... Don’t be tempted by wickedness...” Lukako follows up.

“No worries, Okarin, I get you... You’re feeling pretty lonely right now, yeah? Don’t worry, man, I’ve got your back. I’ll be sure to keep Makise-shi in the dark,” Daru teases.

Of course *something* had to go and ruin this perfect Christmas cheer...

After we’ve spent some time wandering the city, Daru insists on taking us to some treasured location of his.

“If Akiba’s the sea, then you can call me Poseidon—just leave the touring to me,” he boasts; perhaps he’s been absorbing the mood of the town, because he looks quite excited. I and the rest of the group closely follow his sizable back down the street.

“So, we’re going *there*, are we?” I remark.

Daru’s end goal seems to be the eight-story-tall building that stands before the entrance of the Electric Town, Akihabara. It’s the building most significantly entangled with my fate; surrounded by the warmth of the city, it towers above me, oblivious to my sour mood. It’s supposedly meant to be temporarily closed for renovations, due to begin next year...

Time moves ever forward, it seems. And as it flows, it carries countless memories and deep-seated emotions with it.

The building’s small elevator is full, so we have no choice but to take the stairs.

“Hey guys, look—doesn’t this one kinda look like Makise-shi?” Daru suddenly points out. His eyes, wide from surprise, are pointed at a figurine displayed in a

storefront's glass display case. There's a note attached to it that reads, "Limited-Time Only."

"Hm..."

My eyes go wide as well. It... *does* resemble her. It's as though someone from outside of this reality peeked into our realm and decided to create a figurine of her—the resemblance is that uncanny.

Without warning, a prickling sensation creeps up the nape of my neck. I sense a very mysterious gaze, watching me...

I hastily turn my head. "What do you think you're looking at, bastard?!"

But there's no one there... or so I think. I feel as though I *might* have just seen a strange shadow retreat behind that pillar... but it must've just been my imagination. I give my head a light shake.

"...What're you doing, Okarin?" Daru inquires. He doesn't waste a breath before quipping, "Wait, lemme guess: you were drooling over the figurine, and to keep yourself from nabbing it right here and now, you forced yourself to look away. Am I right, or am I right?"

"Hehe, it must really remind him of her! He really is in love, isn't he?" Mayuri giggles.

"Okarin, WTF...! I envy you so goddamn much, you normie! I bet you're imagining her saying stuff like, 'Oh, Okabe, don't look at anyone but me!'"

"D-Don't be stupid! I just thought the figurine was... beautifully sculpted is all! Yes, finely crafted, down to the smallest details."

"Oh, wow... You think she's beautiful? You're so sweet, Okarin!"

“So, you gonna take this lil’ one home with you? And then take her clothes off? And of course, the underwear too, while you’re already at it? Oh, man, now you’re speaking my language!”

“Th-That’s enough of this farce! Anyhow, Daru—why did you have us come here? Was there truly no other reason than the otaku merchandise?”

Daru... Facepalm. Did you not consider that this is a place where, uh... *sexually explicit* books and figures—ones with unnaturally large amounts of exposed skin displayed—are showcased willy-nilly? Have you no idea what horrors will lie in store for us if Mister Braun learns we’ve exposed Nae to such scandalous material? This is a transgression so fierce, our rent could very well be doubled entirely.

I glance over at the chipmunk in question. She’s blankly staring at a poster of a cute girl in a school uniform—thankfully, the clothes-to-skin ratio is more than acceptable on this one. Relief washes over me... until I notice the title. I shudder immediately.

If I remember correctly, the girl on the poster is from a game about a group of students who decide to trade ghost stories after school on the day before their school festival. As a result of one little ghost story, the students are suddenly forced to endure an unimaginably horrifying experience... It’s a game that went on sale this winter, and people all over the internet are talking about it, describing it as a “genuinely traumatizing experience”—most cite its insane story and plot twists, as well as its countless gory scenes, which have altogether left its playerbase petrified.

Anyway, the title of the game calls to mind very specific bloody imagery, which is *extremely dangerous* right now! Damn it, I can’t let Nae keep staring at this poster—we need to get out of here, ASAP!

“Well, your reasons aside, this place is bad news. We’re leaving. Now!” I shout. It looks like letting my anger show worked, because Daru gives in immediately.

“U-Understood... All right, let’s head to our next destination.”

“Welcome, Myasters!”

Daru’s next location is MayQueen+Nyan². Damn it, when I said “somewhere else,” I didn’t mean a place like this...!

Christmas songs are playing from every ceiling speaker; though the café’s music selection is usually taken from various video games and anime, this is the one time of the year when they change that.

“Feris-chan! Good afternoon!” Mayuri happily exclaims.

“Mayushii! Good afternoon, nyan!” Faris exclaims back. The two then exchange a light hug. They *are* comrades in furthering part-time service, so it’s no surprise they get along rather well.

After handing our winter coats to the maids who appeared to retrieve them, we deliver our orders to Faris. “My body’s turning to ice, all the way down to its core. I request a hot beverage,” I say.

“Nyanderstood!” Faris offers us a slight bow and retreats to the back of the establishment. The five of us, meanwhile, take our seats. Nae manages to secure a spot between Lukako and Mayuri.

I deliberately clear my throat, so as to attract the others’ attention. Once all eyes are on me, I immediately start the conversation. “Daru,” I begin, “why exactly are we here?”

“Well, it’s cold outside, yeah? I figured if we downed some hot drinks here, we’d feel nice and cozy...?”

“Objection! You’re lying through your teeth. You just wanted to see Faris, didn’t you?”

“W-Well... I choose to remain silent. The truth of this case will remain in the shadows forevermore.”

“Hey, Okarin, let’s think about Daru-kun’s feelings too, okay? Besides, Mayushii’s having a lot of fun here, too,” Mayuri says.

“She’s right, Oka— er, Kyouma-san. It’s nice and warm in here,” Lukako adds.

Faris eventually returns to us, a tray balanced atop her perfectly postured hand. On said tray sits five cups: my strong, bitter black coffee, Daru’s sugary hot chocolate, Lukako’s hot lemon tea, Mayuri’s hot banana milk—she mentioned to Faris earlier that a can of oden also sounded good, but I’m assuming that was just an odd backup plan of hers—and last, but not least, Nae’s... blood orange juice? Why’d she order that? It’s so cold out, we might as well be situated at the North Pole.

Once she’s finished distributing our drinks, Faris tilts her head and glances at me. “By the way, what are mew all doing here today, nya?” she asks. She then shifts her gaze toward Nae, a smile on her lips. “Nyanya? There’s someone here Faris is pawsitive she’s never met! What might your name be, miss?”

Perhaps Faris’s innocent smile lowered her guard, because Nae answers in a low whisper. “...Nae. I’m... Tennouji Nae. Nice to meet you...”

“...What the *nya*?! Tennouji? You mean...!”

“Why, yes, dear Faris—it is as you imagine. This little one is Mister Braun’s daughter.”

Faris’s eyes go wide, and a look of shock crosses her face. “Wow... You’re kitten me!”

“Once this little chipmunk appeared at our doorstep, we decided to go on a tour of Akiba with her in tow,” I explain. “And while I’m on the topic, are you familiar with any interesting spots we might try visiting?”

“Fur sure! I know the purrfect spots!” Faris proclaims. She shoots a wink in my direction, a big grin on her face.

The moment we step inside the building, we are instantly hit with waves of noise and warmth alike. Just ahead of us lies an escalator leading to the second floor of the building, which we move to take. Once we reach its peak, we find ourselves inside a cutting-edge arcade—apparently built relatively recently in the vicinity of MayQueen+Nyan².

I should also mention that Faris suggested a number of other locations in the nearby area, such as the “Naughty Dog Kennel,” or the “BL Bar.” I politely declined these recommendations, given that Nae is still but a child. Were she to learn terminology such as “sub,” “dom,” “smex,” et cetera and repeat them in front of her father... Well, the resulting events would be far more horrific than anything World War III could throw at us, to say the least.

Just next to the arcade’s entrance sits a drum-type rhythm game arcade machine; two Caucasian tourists (who, I might add, are wearing short sleeves despite the horrific cold!) are beating the machine’s drums with its provided sticks. We walk past them and take the next escalator to the third floor, ignoring the shooting game section.

Judging by what I’ve seen, this seems to be quite the popular arcade, built specifically for hardcore gamers. Although we’re smack dab in the middle of winter break, there are many young men and women to be seen here, all enjoying the

numerous arcade games to the fullest extent. Put another way, they've cast themselves into the whirlpool of noise and ardor, presumably to remain from dusk till dawn.

The holy land of otaku-dom, Akihabara, and its arcades. Each and every said arcade is packed to the brim on the daily, and this one is no exception. This land is one that competitors nationwide come pouring into, braving the rough, tumultuous seas laden with potential opponents, all to search for a worthy rival they can call their own.

The standards set by gamers are frighteningly high. People beckon people—their fervor beckoning further fervor—and they all end up stuffing endless troves of coins into the thin slits of these machines; all gas, no brakes.

Lukako, to be frank, isn't very good at video games. Mayuri's skill, too, is pitifully paltry. So, inevitably, Nae's pool of potential opponents boils down to Daru and myself.

A sudden idea crosses my mind.

"Daru," I say, "you play Nae first."

"Huh? Why? You're usually the one who likes to take the lead," Daru replies, confused.

"For a reason I cannot disclose, I must restrain my power for today. Nevertheless, Daru, this is your chance to shine—show the schoolgirl your brilliant plays and steal her heart!"

"Show the schoolgirl... m-my plays...? Steal her heart...? Hell yeah, Okarin! I got this!"

The excitement on Daru's face is plain to see. He crosses his arms over his chest, starts breathing heavily through his nose, and turns to face Nae. "Nae-tan, choose your favorite game! Which one are we gonna play?"

This might be strange to hear considering his enthusiasm, but unless we're talking about eroge, Daru's video game skills aren't exactly competitively viable. Well

aware of this fact myself, my current course of action is, naturally, to observe Nae's each and every move.

"Huh? Oh, okay. Let's see... umm..." As she speaks amid the ambient noise of electronics, Nae's eyes alight upon a particular machine.

"What?! A fighting game?!" I cry in surprise. It's an unexpectedly hardcore choice, after all. The game in question has gained tremendous popularity worldwide, and it's even had a full-on world championship.

Nae goes quiet, and silently slides into the seat provided for said fighting game machine. Then, without warning... a strange phenomenon occurs. It's as though the color of the air around her *morphs* somehow.

There's no mistaking what happens next: the look on her small face transforms into another. The new expression she assumes is one masking both a silent fighting spirit, and an indomitable will. Just moments prior, she was but a regular sixth-grader, yet now... she looks the part of a soldier face-to-face with the battlefield.

A nostalgic voice spontaneously comes to mind.

"*I'm a warrior.*"

Come to think of it, Nae *was* pretty close to the part-time warrior, wasn't she...? Has the time they spent together influenced her in some way? But, no—those past events should have been erased...

I suddenly realize that the chipmunk is staring me down; what's more, there's an intense, enthusiastic fire in her eyes.

"...Huh?"

Surely I haven't just branched into a new heroine route, and surely my popular times haven't arrived... As I wonder what she could want with me, Nae holds out her tiny, pale hand; she's silently pressing me for something.

...Oh, I see.

In response to her wordless plea, I look toward Daru, but the coward looks elsewhere, whistling and pretending he hasn't seen our exchange. Reluctantly, I raise my hand as a sign of surrender. I reach into my wallet, retrieve a 100-yen coin, and flick it in Nae's direction. Without missing a beat, she unflinchingly catches it in midair. Then, all it takes is one speedy, fluid motion on her part, and the coin's disappeared into the slot of the machine.

What's with her...? Has some spirit possessed her, or did she just undergo a sudden change in personality?

I look toward the arcade machine's screen. Up until it swallowed my money, it had been displaying a demo; now, it's switched over to the title screen, and a line of text—"1P CREDIT 1"—has appeared at the bottom. While Daru's busy getting seated next to her, Nae presses the machine's "START" button.

At the character selection screen, Nae chooses a female assassin, whose backstory states that she awoke from cryogenic sleep. There are dozens upon dozens of unique characters lined up to choose from, so why did she pick *that* one?!

I silently shudder. For now, all I can do is watch the match unfold with bated breath. Mayuri and Lukako, too, are closely watching the lead-up to the bout.

"This hand of mine is burning red!" Daru proclaims in a shout. "Nae-tan... I'm gonna make this a match you'll never forget!"

Daru's usually not big on fighting games, but he's gotten *really* into this. He proceeds to select his character, who's...

"Wha? Hey, that character kinda looks like Daru-kun!" Mayuri whispers to us.

“You’re right... Do you think he chose him on purpose...?” Lukako whispers back.

As for the reason they’re whispering, the character in question is a total fatso, which means his body type is quite similar to Daru’s.

“Pfft... What kind of character is *that*? Is he actually a martial artist, or is he just a joke character?” As I point at his character with a grin, Daru lets out an indignant snort.

“Lemme let you in on something, Okarin: in this world, there are the good fatsos and the bad fatsos. This guy’s in the former camp, even if he doesn’t look it. Just you wait—I’ll show you something *really nice*... Oh, you want to show me something similar... with a *female* character? Something *really nice*? Oh, *HELL* yes! I am *SO* fired up right now!”

“Daru. Have some self-respect.”

An announcer’s voice interrupts our short exchange. “*ROUND ONE. READY?*” it announces in mechanical-sounding English.

And then, the match is on. Both Daru and Nae begin by keeping their distance from each other, exchanging a few punches as they measure out and learn the proper spacing.

As I observe their back-and-forth, I notice something: Nae’s handling of her character is particularly skillful. Perhaps it’s just my imagination, but even the way she’s operating the joystick appears somewhat imposing...

Daru, perhaps impatient due to the ongoing stalemate, nudges his character forward slightly. In an instant, Nae pounces, utilizing that small window of opportunity to land a right uppercut with incredibly precise timing. Daru’s character is sent flying, but she doesn’t stop there—she follows up with an aerial, followed by a wall bounce, before finally concluding her onslaught with a beautiful final pursuit attack that drills him into the ground.

“K.O.” proclaims the robotic announcer.

...What? Nae defeated Daru? That... doesn’t make any sense. Was that idiot sandbagging or something?

“Hmph... Beginner’s luck, I suppose. You’re pretty good, Nae-tan. Still, a single loss is nothing to me! The next round will be utter hell for you... It’ll be hell, you hear me?!”

Daru stands. In exaggerated motions, he acts as if to raise his ki and pump himself up. Needless to say, it seems he has yet to understand what he’s truly in for. Now then, what’s going to happen in round two?

The round begins. This time around, it’s a battle of exchanged blows—a game of footsies on full display. Each fighter advances with frame-perfect guards, so as to provide themselves with more time and more frames to attack. Still, with each punch or kick thrown, the other fighter launches a perfectly timed counterattack.

And, despite the intense stalemate, Nae comes out the other side with another win.

Something is wrong. Something is very, *very* wrong. An unbelievable phenomenon is playing out right before my eyes, and I’ve got an awfully bad feeling about it.

Much to my disbelief, Nae completely steamrolls Daru in the third round. She reads all of his attacks perfectly and follows up with an immediate turnaround that utilizes various counterattacks. Whenever Daru attempts to attack, she, without missing a beat, returns a successful hit, and follows up with a command grab. This pattern allows her to quickly deplete Daru’s HP to a pixel away from 0. As for the final blow, she brutally curb stomps Daru while he’s still in knockdown. The win is entirely hers.

But it doesn't end there. It'd be a mercy if it did. Even after the K.O. message appears, Nae continues to kick the absolute crap out of the poor, fat bastard sprawled out on the ground. The violent display I'm witnessing sends a chill down my spine.

"Corpse kicking." Much like teabagging, the act is considered highly unsportsmanlike; a disrespectful breach of fighting game etiquette that's designed to goad the unfortunate player who's fallen victim to it.

Without so much as a hint of remorse, Nae continues the barrage; one kick, two kicks, three kicks—it's almost as though it's some kind of ritual of hers.

At any rate, Daru just got 3-0'd. It's a complete and utter victory for Nae.

"W-Wooow..." Mayuri whispers, awe evident in her tone.

"Where on earth did Nae-chan learn to do all of that...?" Lukako murmurs.

I disagree with his choice of wording—what she's committed is something not easily learned. Is this an innate talent of hers? ...Could it be?

Sapped of all his credits, Daru comes staggering back to us from the other side of the machine. Without sparing a single glance at Daru's bright red face, Nae stands. Her expression shows she's completely unfazed.

"Mayushii's so surprised..."

"I... I'm beyond surprised," Lukako adds. "I'm impressed."

"I-Impossible... I... I lost...? She's way too strong...!" Daru gasps for breath as he delivers this cliché losing line.

As for Nae, the expression she had on her face just moments ago has vanished; she's now giving us the same blank stare from earlier.

"I'm surprised, too... It was like... my body was moving on its own..."

Wh-What did she just say?!

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My attempts to rationalize her brutal display were going poorly, but her words bring to mind a certain, fleeting phrase that just might help: “Everyone has Reading Steiner.”

Back in that worldline, she *did* hack away at my flesh as though she was playing some kind of video game...

Haha, no. There's no way. This has to be some kind of coincidence, right? Yeah. The chipmunk simply went and got her brain fried by video games, which explains her uncanny skill. The poor thing, still so young...

A dry chuckle escapes my lips—however, not a second passes before a certain sensation begins to attack my entire body. Cold sweat drips down my face.

Dammit... this is an omen... An omen of a certain physiological phenomenon.

The two bottles of Dr P I drank this morning, and the coffee I had at MayQueen+Nyan². Simply put, the liquids have come back to haunt me, putting immense pressure on my bladder.

It seems my spectating such a fierce battle made me unreceptive to my bodily urges... What a foolish mistake!

I hastily run to the restroom.

After I've taken care of my business, I prepare to leave the men's restroom. Oh, sweet liberation...

As I finish cleansing my hands and step outside, I suddenly remember something. I pull my phone out... and let out a small, disappointed sigh moments later.

Why do I feel like this? Am I... No, I'm *not* feeling lonely. After all, she sent me a birthday message just days ago.

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Like a child staving off hunger with stale saltine crackers, I reopen said message. In it is a short congratulatory message she wrote for me, as well as a brief paragraph explaining that she was particularly busy with her research. She hasn't sent me any messages since this one—what's the common consensus on what ten days without contact might mean...?

Well, that doesn't matter. I know that when that experiment-loving girl's focused on her research, she tends to forget the world around her... But, nonetheless, I find a strange sense of anxiety rising within me.

Muuuahahaha! laughs the Hououin Kyouma within me. *Perhaps she simply isn't interested in you anymore! Consider this: she's been spending all her time living an endlessly fulfilling life of research—she, a genius scientist with a promising future!*

With a scoff, my mental mad scientist continues to deride me. *With those looks of hers, were she to choose proper clothing over an unalluring lab coat, the men around her just wouldn't be able to leave her unplucked, now would they?*

Shut up! I shout inwardly. *Stop it!*

But it continues to whisper to me nonetheless, interspersing occasional bursts of maniacal laughter. *Take a look at yourself! You're nothing more than an average college freshman living in Akiba, are you not?! When you get down to it, you're just a megalomaniac—one who acts and speaks in a manner that'd make the sourest citrus recoil. What, you claim you want to 'protect her'? Don't make me laugh!* he jeers. *You wish to 'promise her a path filled with light'—a path on which both of you can share a future together? What makes you think you're even good enough to walk the same path as her? Where's your proof? What's your logic? What is the basis that allows you to believe that's even a possibility? Come on then, let's see it!*

Stop, I think, desperately trying to silence the voice. *Stop it... STOP IT...!*

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It takes a massive amount of effort, but eventually, the voice goes quiet, fading away into nothingness.

I exhale deeply and lean against a nearby wall.

I begin to mentally berate myself. *You're such a coward! If you can't endure this, how in the hell are you going to manage in the future?*

Then, I lose even the energy to scold myself.

It hurts... It hurts so much...

“...”

Suddenly, I sense a presence; there is a small shadow visible on the wall, next to my body.

Tennouji Nae.

“...Oh. If it isn’t the chipmunk. Do you wish to use the restroom as well? The women’s room is over there,” I say, pointing to the door.

Nae doesn’t respond. After a moment’s pause, she gently lowers her eyes instead.

“Hm...?”

A strange action to take. After another moment, she lifts her gaze back up to meet mine. I can see my own expression—my suspicion—reflected in her big eyes.

“Hey, Uncle Okarin...?”

The moment I think to correct her—to remind her that she should use “Mister” instead...

“I’LL KILL YOU, OKABE RINTARO.”

Horrifying words, accompanied by a ceaseless stare carried by her large eyes... My heart nearly bursts out of my chest. My memories of that nightmare begin to flash through my mind yet again.

This is impossible... This is completely impossible!

The color is drained from my surroundings, and reality itself distorts before my very eyes.

...Oh. Right. As if that would happen. That was nothing more than a delusion—one my tired brain dreamt up. There's no way that would ever happen here.

The scenery my eyes perceive regains its color. Just as before, I find myself standing in front of the arcade's restrooms. Nae's still here, too. She's still looking right up at me.

I quickly find myself unable to bear the overwhelming, still-present tension in the air.

“Hey, what the he—”

Before I can finish, Nae cuts me off with perfect timing; it's as though she's prepared to throw herself into the deep end.

“Umm... Are... Are you feeling lonely?” she asks.

“...Huh?”

“Uncle Okarin, you've... you've looked really lonely all day today...”

“I... I have?”

I've heard the chipmunk loud and clear, of course, but for a moment, I have trouble making sense of her words. I've looked... *lonely*?

“Your eyes... They look just like Daddy's eyes when he... thinks about my mom.”

Nae averts her gaze again, but only slightly this time. She looks concerned about something. Is she... worried about *me*?

“Oh...”

A hunch comes to mind. I mentally link several facts together, allowing that hunch to become a conviction. I understand it now... I understand what was truly going on.

I was being observed.

I thought /was the one observing her, but this whole time, it was entirely the opposite. Only now does everything make sense; every puzzle piece fits. Nae's been acting somewhat childishly today, having averted her eyes from mine a number of times. And the reason for her suspicious behavior? She was concerned about my wellbeing...

With empathy characteristic of a shy child like herself, she was able to see what was going on in my mind, and she knew exactly when to reach out to me. And if that line of thought is correct, then...

My brain moves on to the next theory. At the beginning of the day, Nae said she found the lab boring and wanted to go outside. Yet, despite that, she never offered a particular place she wanted to go to... Looking back at it now, was all that merely meant to be a distraction for my sake?

“Haha...”

A dry laugh escapes me. That's just pathetic... An innocent *schoolgirl* was worried about me.

“Haha... hahahahaha...”

The built-up tension dissipates, and relief washes over me; spurred on by this, I continue to laugh. For a brief moment, my weak laughter echoes throughout the floor.

“U-Uncle Okarin...?” Nae calls out, concerned. She probably thinks I've completely snapped.

“...I'm all right. Sorry,” I apologize. “Don't worry about me. I'm fine. I'm just furious with myself—with how ridiculous I am.”

Nae smiles at me, visibly relieved. In response, I put a serious expression back on my face and pose a question. “There is one thing I still don’t understand. What in the world happened back there? You know, with the video game?”

Perceptive as she is, Nae immediately realizes I’m talking about when she beat Daru. “Oh, that game... It’s not just an arcade game, and I’ve been playing it a lot recently. My friend at school has a Pippin Dotmark.”

Come to think of it, Nae did specifically choose the game in question when asked to choose a game. And I *do* remember that game getting a port to a relatively minor handheld.

“I think I might’ve been a little too mean to Uncle Daru, though.” She sticks her tongue out slightly.

Now that I think about it, she’ll be entering middle school next year. I had thought she was just a child, but in reality, she’s grown quite a bit. I, on the contrary... heh... still need more training.

“Chipmunk... No, Tennouji Nae.”

I thrust my right hand out in one swift motion.

“Huh?”

“I thank you. My eyes have now been opened—the fog obscuring the truth of it all has been lifted, and the clear air about us has revived me entirely.”

What I’m saying is no lie; I’ve learned quite a bit from this little girl.

There’s no use being stubborn; you’re allowed to admit when you’re feeling lonely. If it becomes too much to bear, it’s okay to talk about it.

Should I follow through on the lessons this little one has taught me, my life will surely change in some way.

“I’ve really caused you a heap of trouble, haven’t I...?” I wistfully remark. I pat Nae on the head, and her pigtails, held together by a few hair ties, sway in response. It seems she’s a little ticklish, but the gesture doesn’t seem to make her unhappy.

I’m thankful to this girl.

“Go ahead and join Mayuri and the others. Also, please tell them I might be a little late.”

“...Okay.”

I glance around myself, and my eyes land on a staircase leading to the rooftop. I climb it.

Sure enough, the area above has good reception. I write a message on my phone, comprised of only two sentences.

How are you? How have things been?

Yes, things are fine this way. The rest is up to the world, and the choice it shall make...

But at that moment, there was something I had yet to fully grasp. I had yet to understand how truly unpredictable the world is, and just how many potential futures it holds.

“Oh! Welcome back,” Lukako says to me. I’ve just returned to the fighting game floor after spending a brief few minutes on the rooftop.

“Where’s Nae?” I ask.

Lukako blinks in surprise. “Huh? What do you mean?”

“...I told her to go back and join up with you guys.”

“Really? But I thought she was still with you, Kyouma-san...”

“...What?!?”

Mayuri and Daru exchange worried glances.

Something stirs in my chest; and with it, a massive, dark cloud of anxiety begins to form.

“Tennouji Nae-san. Tennouji Nae-san. Your guardians are looking for you; please come to the counter located on the second floor.”

An hour has passed, and yet, Nae still hasn’t returned to us. I had Lukako call her, since they exchanged phone numbers at the lab earlier, but to no avail—all we got was an automated message stating her phone either wasn’t turned on or had no signal, followed by a redirection to her voicemail.

Of course, we redialed numerous times, but then we started to worry her phone would run out of power if we kept calling, so we stopped. It’s *possible* that isn’t something we need to worry about, but we have no way of knowing if the phone was fully charged when Mister Braun gave it to her.

On another note, we can’t get in contact with him or Moeka, either. I was afraid of this... If the business he had to take care of was purely menial, he’d certainly be able to answer our calls right about now. But if that *were* the case, he wouldn’t have left his precious little Nae in our care to begin with.

We asked the arcade’s staff to call out for her over the announcement speakers, which they did just moments prior. But, in spite of this, Nae is still nowhere to be seen.

Lukako grimaces, clearly distressed. “This isn’t good... Has something happened to her...? ...Did she—”

Before he can finish, he quickly puts his hands over his mouth. I'm guessing he was about to suggest that she might've fallen victim to some kind of crime.

Lukako aside, I probably look pretty distressed myself right now.

Daru, who's been looking at his phone, suddenly moves to close it in a panic; I manage to catch a glimpse of the screen before it disappears, however. He was reading an article on Taboo News, its sensationalistic headline displayed in a large font size: "Another Kidnapping in Akiba?! Is a Russian Organization Involved?"

"There're these rumors goin' 'round about a kidnapping ring these days, and this neighborhood ain't all that safe."

Mister Braun's words resurface in my mind. Earlier today, I brushed them off like they weren't worth paying any mind, but now...

Ignoring danger is easy—until *you're* the one caught up in it. The society we live in is advanced, and highly information-based. In response to this environment, our senses have been collectively dulled, and as a result, we have become inferior even to wild beasts.

Lukako abruptly shivers.

"What's wrong?" I ask him.

"Um... It looks like someone's calling me..." he says.

"What?!" Lukako, answer! Quick!"

He hurriedly pulls his phone out of his pocket and flips it open. He's so flustered, he nearly drops the phone; admittedly, this only makes me feel all the more impatient with him.

After a few moments spent listening to the other end, Lukako speaks. "...Huh? What do you mean? Nae-chan, where are you right now?"

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My heart begins to race. I have a very bad feeling about this, and more often than not, my premonitions are spot-on...

“Lukako, put it on speaker. That way, we can all hear.”

“O-Okay...!”

Lukako fiddles with his phone, causing the sound of static to resound through the air.

“...elp me! Miss Luka! I passed out earlier, and... I just woke up! My dad isn’t answering his phone, and... and I’m locked up somewhere! Please, help me!”

It sounds like she’s on the verge of tears. We glance at each other, worry in our eyes. Nae, meanwhile, continues to speak from the other end.

“...I think I’m in some kind of hotel! It kinda looks like the place me and Daddy stayed at when we went to Destinyland together!”

“A hotel?! Which hotel?! Do you see their logo anywhere?!” I shout.

“Umm... There’s an ashtray on the desk with some kind of symbol on it... A ‘6’ and a ‘9’? Wait, no, it might be a lowercase ‘b’ and ‘q’ mixed together... Oh, hold on, I can see the room number! It’s 31— *Hey! No, what are you doing?! Give it back! Give it—*”

The sound of a struggle comes from the speaker, followed by an ear-splitting noise. Then, the call goes silent.

“Lukako!” I shout. “Call her again! Hurry!”

He makes another attempt, but without success. “...I-It’s no use. The call won’t go through...!” he says, tears already running down his face.

I grit my teeth. “Dammit...!”

I mentally consider the two numbers she mentioned. “6” and “9.” Or, the letters “b” and “q,” potentially? Are there any places out there related to those characters...?

Daru begins to speak. “Well, there’s a secret act performed between men and women called the ‘sixty-ni—’”

“Shut the hell up, you goddamn degenerate!”

I punch Daru in the stomach, hard—he lets out a wheeze and recoils immediately.

“Is now *really* the time?! This is an emergency, so act like it, goddammit!”

“Right,” Daru says apologetically. “I’m really sorry.”

I continue my line of thought, aloud this time. “‘6’ and ‘9’... Could they refer to a floor number? Perhaps a sixty-ninth or ninety-sixth floor?” Another thought comes to me: “Could ‘b’ and ‘q’ be the hotel’s initials...?”

“There aren’t any buildings in Akihabara with more than sixty-nine floors...” Daru offers.

Lukako tilts his head, presumably considering my words. Then, Daru—who’s rid himself of the joking attitude and is now taking this seriously—offers another opinion.

“I don’t think this has got anything to do with a ‘6’ or ‘9.’ Like you mentioned, ‘b’ and ‘q’ are probably the hotel’s initials. I’m gonna try to look up some info.”

True to his word, Daru begins to operate his phone with incredible precision and speed; his fingers are huge, but fast all the same. Mayuri, Lukako, and I stare at his screen as he hastily begins to research. Yet, a few minutes pass, and...

“...Dammit, nothing’s coming up! There’s no way we’ll find anything with so little info!” Daru crosses his arms over his chest and begins to brood, a sullen look on his face. A low growl escapes his lips.

Despondency threatens to overwhelm me. Yet, just when I’m about to lose hope, Mayuri abruptly speaks up. “Oh! Maybe it’s... umm... um, um, um, *that* thing! Wait, no...” She shakes her head in frustration.

“What do you mean? What are you talking about?” I prod.

“Try thinking outside the box! Don’t think of it like they’re numbers and letters, but like it’s a picture!”

“A picture?”

“Yeah! Um... uh...”

Mayuri starts to fiddle with her phone, too. She’s not as fast as Daru—as a matter of fact, she’s quite slow at using it—but after a minute, she manages to find the page she’s looking for. She turns the screen toward us so that we can see it.

“This is what I’m talking about! Look!”

On her screen is a picture of a long, skinny, frog-like mascot character—the kind that looks like it’d never sell in a million years. There’s a strange symbol on the frog’s belly; it looks like an intertwined fireball, colored black and white.

I recognize the image. “The Yin-Yang Gero Froggy?”

It’s one of the final variants in a mascot character series that used to sell like the hottest of hotcakes on the surface of Uranus. *Used to*, mind you—one day, the froggy fad met its demise.

That aside, what about this symbol has got Mayuri so worked up?

“Oh, I know!” says Lukako, clapping his hands together. “That’s a taijitu, right? Also known as a yin-yang symbol, it serves as the basis for onmyodo, an occult divination system based on the Taoist theory of the Five Elements. It also represents the idea that all things are comprised of two forces: ‘yin’ and ‘yang,’ which are also known as ‘darkness’ and ‘light,’ and ‘negativity’ and ‘positivity’ respectively.”

“So, maybe what Nae-chan thought was actually a ‘6’ and ‘9,’ or a ‘b’ and ‘q,’ was actually...”

Now that they mention it... this intertwining design *does* in fact resemble a combined ‘6’ and ‘9,’ as well as a combined ‘b’ and ‘q.’ Still, this remains one of several

possibilities. Even if what Nae saw was indeed a yin-yang symbol, how would we even manage to look that up efficiently?

Mayuri's line of thought theorizes that the hotel's logo is quite similar to the yin-yang symbol. The issue with this, however, is that it'd be practically impossible to find anything substantial online based on her theory alone; it's nothing more than a vague idea she formed through her personal biases, as well as her boundless imagination.

Let me try to explain this with an example: if one wanted to find pictures of clouds online, and they searched with the keywords "white" and "floating in the sky," they could conceivably manage to get the results they were looking for.

However, if one were to start with the key phrase "floating in the sky," and then tried combining it with the names of objects commonly compared to clouds—such as, say, "bread rolls"—or even concepts loosely related to clouds, such as the mythological "qilin," they might not be able to find the information being sought.

The same issue applies to us here with the term "yin yang," which is already a somewhat niche term as it stands. Anyone who has ever tried to search for something even *slightly* vague on the internet should understand my pain.

We proceed to try all kinds of searches using the keywords "yin yang" and "hotel" online. But, true to my worries, we uncover zero relevant information.

"We don't have any other choice, then..." I say, defeated. My mind made up, I begin to outline our next course of action to the others.

First, we'll call the police. Once we've done that, we'll begin to scour the entire city, checking every single hotel we come across for the symbol—naturally, it'll be faster if we all split up and cover different areas. Meanwhile, Daru will continue to comb the internet, searching for any and all information he can find on the logo and the hotel's appearance.

I'm aware this plan isn't particularly bright or efficient. But right now, this is just about all we can do. Sure, that might just be my excuse to keep everyone busy as this horrible situation continues, but that doesn't matter to me; doing this is a hundred times—no, a *thousand* times better than doing nothing.

A few hours have now passed since Nae's disappearance. Daru is still scouring the net for any and all relevant information; Faris is in the middle of a shift, so she asked her butler, Kuroki-san, to assist in the search in her place; lastly, Mayuri, Lukako, and I have split up, and we've been tirelessly searching our individual sections of the city.

And yet...

"It's no use..." I breathe, my spirit crushed.

Once I manage to reach the Gunbam Café, I double over to catch my breath. Exhaustion, like the Sword of Damocles itself, hangs over my consciousness, threatening to quell it entirely. But even so, I slowly force my body to rise and continue moving.

An idea comes to mind: it'd probably be best to survey the cityscape from a higher vantage point...

Somehow or another, I manage to get myself onto the escalator leading to the bridge in front of Akihabara's UPX. By the time I reach its apex, though, I'm at my physical limit; I lean up against the bridge's railing and sit myself down in defeat.

Beyond the bridge lies the cloudy winter sky of Akihabara. Accompanying that sky are a myriad of lengthy shadows, all protruding from the town's skyscrapers. It's almost as though those very shadows are trying to cut right through the sky above.

"Oh... right. This is where..."

Memories flood back into my mind. Yeah, the sunset was beautiful that day...

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A sudden sensation hits me—it feels as though I'm hearing my cell phone ringing. These memories... They're of a summer past, lost to this worldline.

I sense a presence by my side; one akin to a ghost, or perhaps an illusion. That presence addresses me, her voice familiar...

“What are you doing out here?”

When I raise my head, I see her. She's looking down at me, hands on her hips, a disappointed expression on her face.

“Oh, come on. Don't go looking so sorry for yourself. Get up.”

Her eyes are brimming with sheer will, and her gaze is infused with an equally fierce determination.

Haha... Wow, it's sure been a while. And yet, here she is, as brutal as ever.

But... right now, I...

“Hey...” she starts, her tone now slightly worried. “Just hang in there, all right? You and I both know you can't give up here. You can do it—just keep on trying. If you do, I know you can make it through this.”

Then, after a brief pause, she continues. “...And when you do get through this, next time, *you* can be the one to support *me*... That's only fair, don't you think?”

Her voice is gradually weakening, as though she's about to cry. The sorrow I hear in it calls to mind another memory of mine—one lost to this worldline. A memory of the day we took refuge from a sudden shower of evening rainfall, in that dimly lit stairway.

“...I'll be waiting for you. You hear me, Okabe...?”

Being the coward I am, I have yet to tell her about the resolutions I've made to myself, the convictions I now hold...

...Because, in reality, this is nothing more than an illusion. And I'm completely aware of that fact.

My lips twist into a wry smile. The idea that she'd appear at my side, and *now* of all times... What a ridiculously convenient turn of events that would be.

But... another line of thought begins to take hold. So *what if* this is incredibly convenient? So *what if* this is just an illusion? The fact that she's here, cheering me on, is what *truly* matters right now. Sometimes, imagination can surpass even reality itself. There may not be any facts, any evidence to support this phenomenon, but it's still giving me strength. That's what's most important.

And that's why... I slowly, yet surely... lift my gaze up toward the sky. Both my legs are still of this world. My body *can* still move.

"That's right. Stand tall, and hold your head up high!"

That's why I can't... I can't give up just yet.

I brush the edges of my dirtied winter coat and lab coat with my hands. As I begin to stand, the giant screen attached to UPX enters my field of vision.

"Let's believe in the future."

A cheap catchphrase that's easy on the ears. What, is this ad some kind of PR attempt by the government?

Heh... how ironic. No matter how hard I push myself, I'm helpless in the face of reality. I can't even do as much as find a single lost girl...

"The things we can do in this world... They seem minor to us—insignificant in the face of the universe's immensity..."

What the... A mere advertisement, and yet, it's reading my thoughts? How impressive.

"It is because of this that everything we do feels pointless. No matter what we try, all that comes of our efforts are irritating, meaningless results. And, in truth, ninety-nine percent of such actions are pointless. If everything we wished for became

reality, there would be nothing left in this world to fuel our discontent—nothing left for us to strive for.”

...What's with this bizarre, incredibly perceptive ad?

“Nonetheless, let us dare to believe. Won’t you believe in the future? After all...”

A brief pause. And then...

“We are connected.”

With that concluding line, the ad disappears, replaced with one for some new anime. Apparently, that advertisement was meant to market a new kind of social network.

We’re connected, huh...?

Connected...

A new idea flashes into my head like a lightning bolt, immediately drowning out all the sound around me. Oh, what a fool I’ve been up until this point...

I pull my cell phone out of my pocket; the success of this idea relies entirely on her influence, after all.

The few seconds it takes for the call to connect feels like an eternity, the dial tone ringing incessantly in my ear. But, eventually, the distinctively sweet voice I seek answers my call.

“Faris! I have a favor to ask of you,” I hurriedly convey. “Forgive me, but I’ll need your help for ten minutes.”

And so, the flow of the world around me, which has been stagnant up until this point, begins to stream anew.

Once she received my request, Faris—Akiba’s number one celebrity, importantly—posted a plea for information on Twipo. Even though her account is private, she nonetheless received a massive outpour of replies.

The user who provided the most relevant information was none other than the “Black Absolute Zero,” 4°C. The preface to his message, of course, was overflowing with undisguised hubris: “He who provides salt to his enemy... has proven he possesses true strength. Such is the way that the great general Hannibal carved his legacy into history’s grand fresco.”

...Or something to that effect, anyway. I suppose he was trying to say that he liked to play fair.

That aside, he unreservedly sent us the information he’d gathered about the hotel—all of which he’d likely obtained through his Viral Attacker underlings.

...Now that I think about it, I’m pretty sure that quote he used isn’t even attributed to Hannibal—just some warlord from the Sengoku period.

The four of us, now reunited, find ourselves outside an old, small hotel—the building 4°C’s information pointed us to. It’s located in a back alley just outside Akihabara Station, in the general direction leading to the Kanta district.

We hurriedly enter the building. Based on the fragment of information Nae managed to give us earlier—“Room 31”—we make an educated guess and rush up to the third floor; only moments later, we’ve burst into the room.

Our eyes land on a foreign man. Daru and I don’t waste a second: we rush toward him, and a struggle ensues. Eventually, a combined blow—a rather flimsy punch of mine, as well as a full body slam from Daru—sends the man flying into a wall, rendering

him immobile and defeated. A pathetic noise escapes his lips, and his nose begins to drip blood.

Just as I manage to catch my breath, Lukako and Mayuri—who are carrying the Demon Sword Samidare and the Cyalume Saber respectively—suddenly let out shouts of recognition.

“Oh! This is a Hikari-chan cosplay from RaiNet Kakeru!” Mayuri points out.

Lukako follows up. “That’s the new version, too! It was only released last month!”

“...Huh?” I say, bewildered.

True to their words, there are costumes that look like they’d belong on anime girls scattered all over the floor.

We find Nae standing in the corner of the room. Realizing she’s finally safe, she manages to speak up. “That man... When I spotted him, he covered my face with a towel that smelled funny—it all happened so fast... And when I woke up, he tried to force me to wear those costumes...”

Though she’s wiping tears away from her eyes with a handkerchief Mayuri gave her, Nae’s voice hasn’t wavered once. She’s a strong girl, that’s for sure...

Daru and I exchange looks of dismay. The floor is *littered* with piles upon piles of photos and costumes. On closer inspection, the photos seem to only depict female cosplayers and little girls in cute outfits.

“Could this be...” I begin.

“Yeah, I think so...” affirms Daru.

“Th-This guy isn’t part of a foreign kidnapping ring.”

“He’s just... a severely deranged foreign otaku?”

I take another glance around the room, and my eyes land on the bed. Lying there is a Santa costume, a fake beard, round glasses, a gigantic, knapsack-like bag... and

lastly, several sheets of paper. I pick one of the sheets up—it's a small flyer that I recall seeing before.

“...!”

All at once, the puzzle pieces connect in my mind.

“You’re the guy in the Santa costume from today’s improvised mini photo op,” I say, my accusatory tone pointed at the body against the wall.

“Wait, doesn’t that mean he’s the guy who saved Nae-tan from that otaku freak...?” Daru asks. I nod in response.

“Indeed. Most likely, he already had his eyes on the chipmunk before the other one approached her—that’s why he helped her out,” I explain. “And while I’m at it, right now’s the perfect time of year to put a Santa costume on and converse with little girls. I can’t speak for whether this is a side business of his or not, but he sure thought it through like one.”

I can imagine it in my mind’s eye: the man, dressed up in a convenient costume, throwing Nae into his bag and whisking her away. Then, once all the heat’s off him, he’d ditch the costume and return to his ordinary form: that of a perfectly ordinary foreign man, carrying a knapsack-like bag along with him on his travels.

“...Eek!”

Although I assumed the tall man had lost consciousness, he suddenly emits a peculiar noise. Alarmed, we all hastily turn to look at him again.

A shiver runs down my spine. While we weren’t paying attention, Nae had wiped away her tears and kicked the kidnapper in the crotch. And, without hesitation, she does it again. And again. And again.

Though the man has long since stopped moving, Nae continues to relentlessly kick his privates. The sound—akin to a leather bag full of meat being pummeled—echoes throughout the hotel room.

“All right, then—to Christmas Eve!” I declare, raising my glass high in the air.

“*Cheers!*” shout the lab mems in unison.

We clink our glasses together, which causes the ice cubes within them to clink in turn. A continuous symphony of filled glass, one might call it.

Atop the lab’s table sits a platter of cheese and crackers, bowls of nuts and fruits, champagne and accompanying glasses, a turkey, and for some reason, a plateful of doner kebabs alongside it.

The lab’s walls, meanwhile, are covered with a fancy, colorful wallpaper. Boughs of holly, too, adorn the walls. Alas, all we’re missing is a Christmas tree; still, that is but a trivial matter in my eyes.

Mayuri’s laughing up a storm; Daru’s getting intimately acquainted with the turkey; Lukako’s pouring champagne for everyone; Faris, who joined us once her shift ended, is cutting fruits and the cake; Moeka’s tilting her glass, a faint smile on her face; Mister Braun’s flexing a bicep in good fun while Nae hangs off of it with her arms; and finally, Lab Mem Number 008’s badge—which I retrieved from its storage place prior to the party, having not forgotten it for a second—shines brilliantly on my chest.

“My, my. This has been one fierce trial of a day, indeed...”

As I gaze at the ice in my glass, I begin to recall everything that happened earlier.

After the incident in the hotel room, the kidnapper was dragged to the police station; his interrogation ended in mere minutes, likely due to Faris’s influence—we wouldn’t be having such a peaceful Christmas Eve celebration otherwise. It seems Faris

herself had the incident taken care of, such that it wouldn't become a bigger spectacle than it needed to.

As we were making our way back to the lab, tired to the bone, Mayuri offered up a suggestion: to make up for the rough day, she thought it would be a good idea if we lab members threw our Christmas party a day ahead of schedule. Daru was against the idea at first, but Nae, who was (probably) the biggest victim of the disastrous day, seemed to be particularly excited about the idea. Thus, we—being the enthusiastic, zealous, and energetic assembly that we are—decided to make it happen.

It was almost nightfall at that point, meaning we had to make haste. Mayuri hurriedly decorated the lab herself, while Lukako and Nae went to the Ginza underground mall and bought a cake. Daru and I, meanwhile, were in charge of obtaining the turkey.

As we rushed about to fulfill our respective party duties, Mister Braun and Moeka finally returned. I was tempted to come forward with the truth of the day's events, but Nae stopped me with a look that said more than words could: *It's Christmas Eve. We need to make the most of it.* I found myself rather impressed by her perceptiveness.

Faris, who arrived later on, caught onto our MO immediately and didn't let a word slip.

Mister Braun and Moeka explained that they had forgotten their phones in the shop, which was why they didn't respond to our calls; I couldn't verify that claim, however. It *is* possible that their outing was SERN-related, and that in the midst of it, they had to shift to another communication method for the purposes of their mission...

Regardless, at some point on his way back, it seems Mister Braun noticed that he had several missed calls from Nae and us—thus, he moved to expedite his return to the lab, his strides likely long and quick. The second he spotted me in the distance, I swear I

saw his eyes flash red; much like a minotaur, his expression was overtaken by pure rage, and he nearly charged right at me.

Thankfully, Nae stepped in before he could wring my neck. She calmly explained that there was no cause for concern; the reason he had so many missed calls was simply because she had wanted to hear her father's voice while he was out. We corroborated her statement, explaining that she had seemed awfully lonely at times, despite our best efforts to cheer her up. I went as far as to suggest that our measly company couldn't *possibly* compare to the companionship of her superb father, whom she was ever-so-lucky to have in her life, et cetera, et cetera.

We finally made the grandiose claim that, actually, the reason we were even throwing our party a day early was for both Nae's and his sake—and with that, the hard-boiled muscleman cracked like a farm-fresh egg. Any hesitation left on his face was washed away, leaving only a huge grin behind. Truly, I thank the gods that he keeps those hovering rotor blades of his so sharp.

Back to the present. For some reason, Moeka's currently staring at me, and unblinkingly at that. She seemingly ponders something for a moment before grabbing her cell phone... but, before she can do what I think she's going to do, she lightly shakes her head and puts it away.

My, my. It seems she's finally kicked the habit of communicating by email when direct conversation is available to her. I resist the urge to raise a toast to Shining Finger, in honor of her acquisition of a new ability: "Reading Zimmer."

On another note, we have Mister Braun and Moeka to thank for the chocolate cake and doner kebabs that have graced this celebration. Mister Braun explained to us that their business had ended much earlier than they'd expected it to, allowing them

Holy Day of the Calamitous Birth

the time to bring home some celebratory nourishment—hence why we’re so well-supplied.

In the end, it seems all’s well that ends well.

I look toward Daru and Mayuri; the two are laughing in joy. Time flies when you’re having fun—Einstein’s theory of relativity is surely at work here, in this very lab.

Though the party is now in full swing, I find myself wandering outside on my own anyway. I descend the creaky staircase and pass by the Braun Tube Workshop, with its “Temporarily Closed!” sign affixed to the shutters.

I turn to face the main street. The streets of Akiba are veiled in Christmas spirit, all in preparation for tomorrow.

I look upward; the sky above is now displaying a beautiful gradation, from blue, to cobalt, to indigo. Scattered clouds drift along in the night, colored bluish-violet by the firmament. The dim light peeking out between said clouds shines upon the earth, illuminating it in a faint glow. The night has spread wide its loving arms, prepared to envelop the world below.

I catch sight of a nearby streetlight, off of which hangs a brightly shining, fir-tree-shaped lamp—likely put there by a child, or some other festive soul. A miniature figure of Santa Claus, riding a sleigh pulled by a red-nosed reindeer, can be seen under said lamp, swaying faintly in the light.

I let out a sigh of bliss, and it lingers in the air as a thick, white mist.

This town has allowed the mundane and the fantastic to come together as one, creating this marvelous, magnificent scenery.

Before I know it, my mind’s started to drift; I begin to ruminate about how much I wish to share this sight with someone else.

“...Restrain yourself. Are you not the mighty Hououin Kyouma?” I mutter to myself, a dry smile on my lips.

“Okariin!” I turn to see Mayuri, waving at me from the lab’s window. “We’re done cutting the caaake!”

“Oh, understood. I’ll be right there.”

“Okaaay!” And with that, Mayuri’s face retracts from the window frame.

It seems the fun is about to begin anew, with much, much more excitement to come.

And yet...

A soft sigh escapes my lips.

There’s still one thing... one thing this Christmas is missing. And of course, I don’t mean the typical Christmas carols, nor the must-watch seasonal Hollywood movies...

Without warning, my phone begins to vibrate. I slip it out of my pocket; the light indicating the arrival of a message is flickering on and off without end.

I open it without hesitation.

To: Okabe Rintaro

From: Assistant

Subject: I Wish You a Merry Christmas!

Dear Okabe,

Thanks for the message.

But also, y tho? That's ultra rare from you, lol

Hmm... Was someone feeling a little lonely,

Okabe Rintaro-kun? lel

Holy Day of the Calamitous Birth

I'm doing well, and I'm almost done with what I'm working on over here. TTYL!

P.S.

So... about that letter I sent...

Did you get it?

Warmth spreads through my chest, and before long, my whole body is embraced by it. I rush over to the mailbox, which is still filled to the brim with mail I've allowed to accumulate.

A beautiful, white shape travels past the edge of my vision. Carried along by the wind, it daintily falls toward the earth and meets with the asphalt; then, only a moment later, it melts away, leaving nothing behind but a tiny, colorless stain.

“Snow...”

I once again look to the sky. Indeed, the forecast did say there was no chance of precipitation today—and all it took was a single speck of white to overturn that prediction entirely. It really is that easy to change the world; after all, this world is ruled by fortuity, and fortuity goes hand in hand with infinity—in other words, infinite possibilities.

This will, most probably, be the last snow of the year, and it's unlikely to stick. But, even so... this soft flurry is, at this very moment, enveloping me.

Although war may continue to rage somewhere in this world, our everyday lives—the lives of each and every lab member—continue to flow in relative peace.



To Mr. Rintaro Okabe

Oohiyama Building 2F

3-6-0X, Sotokanda Chiyoda-ku

Tokyo, 101-201X, Japan

From Kurisu Makise

Amebasweets Phoenix North - 303

68000X North 25th Avenue,

Phoenix, AZ, 85034, USA

Dear Okabe,

Hi there! It's been awhile, huh? How have you been?

At the moment, I'm located at a research facility in one of Arizona's deserts; I came here to carry out a bit of research I'd been interested in doing, as well as a few experiments. It's always freezing cold over here, but the air's crystal clear.

Last night, I stepped outside for a bit to get some fresh air, and when I looked up, I found the entire sky filled with stars. When I gazed at those glimmering specks of light scattered all around me, I felt as though I was drifting through space itself. Honestly, it made me feel dizzy, but at the same time, it made me feel... lonely.

When those thoughts ran through my mind, I felt my chest tighten; my eyes closed reflexively—and in that darkness, only one thought came to mind...

...Got whiplash yet? Truth is, I'm writing like a mainstream woman on purpose right now. ^(^o^)-

You know, Okabe, I've been thinking lately. Ever since the day I first met you, we've never been able to stop talking to each other. In the beginning, my rational side kept on bugging me about how crazy it all was—about how everything you were telling me couldn't possibly be true... But despite all that, I kept talking to you, and eventually, I managed to get a handle on what you were actually saying.

The time came for me to leave that day. And even though I was sitting in a taxi, on the way back to my hotel, we were still talking to each other—albeit via our phones. (Honestly? I've never talked to someone for so long in my entire life!)

Anyway, what I'm trying to say is: I think I should start trying to believe. Even if no one out there can prove it.

There's something else I've had on my mind, too: a phrase. And whenever I think of it, I can't help but smile.

"We are all absolutely isolated, but at the same time, we are connected."

Even though it seems like we're walking different paths at different times... we share something. Something immaterial. What exactly that "something" is, I'm not quite sure myself, but... I know it exists.

Did you know? Later on in his life, even Einstein — a man who repudiated all existing religions — hypothesized that an existence transcending mankind's understanding was truly out there somewhere.

...Okay, I think I'll stop there for today. No matter how you slice it, all this poetic stuff is painful to read, thank you very much orz

By the way, this isn't really anything you have to worry about right now, but I figured I'd give you a heads-up: I'm gonna have some vacation time at the end of the year. And I guess that means I won't have much choice but to come over and visit.

But don't get the wrong idea, okay?! It's not like I'll be coming over just to see you or anything like that! Obviously, I just want to see Mayuri... and the other lab members, too. That's all. That's ALL there is to it. You're a low priority.

The lowest of low priorities

All right, then. Bye!

1(^o^)/ its cold, so u better not catch one!

Sincerely,
Kurisu Makise

Presented by:

NS2C

(Name Subject to Change)

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